Measuring a Bird:
The Dictionary and the Mode of Defining

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Abstract

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In this essay, I describe some of the basic tools that non-dictionary genres use to define objects and words. To show how description of the natural world relates to definition-making, I closely examine passages from the journals of Meriwether Lewis and a letter by John Clare, and point out the procedures that they share with the dictionary for creating an identifiable description of an object. To show how writers have implemented the dictionary's form into poetry, I closely examine poems by Dan Beachy-Quick, Emily Dickinson, and A. Van Jordan, each poet providing a different method of integrating elements of the dictionary into verse. I also briefly discuss why the imagination influences how we talk about the dictionary.

MEASURING A BIRD:
THE DICTIONARY AND THE MODE OF DEFINING

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Introduction

My interest in the dictionary comes from its investment, shared with poetry, in word and in the world in which a body of words represent.

To make bridges within language, to form definitions, we lean on words like BELONGING TO, PERTAINING TO, RESEMBLING, CONSISTING OF, COMPOSED OF, COMPOSING, ONE WHO, ADHERENT OF, AS, OF, WITH, CALLED, and KIN TO. Dictionaries take these as part of their formal vocabulary: think of all the -ER entries that might begin with "one who". We lean on these words as formal stitchings in our dictionaries. But here, in this paper, I will look at some non-dictionary writing that defines words and objects. I am interested in the sort of language writers and poets lean on while forming definitions.

In a dictionary the approach is systematic, with list and procedure. How does the natural tongue approach the word as an object? A young, homesick Emily Dickinson in writing to her brother Austin, creates a definition around HOME:

> *Home was always dear to me & dearer still the friends around it, but never did it seem so dear as now. All, all are kind to me but their tones fall strangely on my ears & their countenances meet mine not like home faces, I can assure you, most sincerely. Then when tempted to feel sad, I think of the blazing fire, & the cheerful meal & the chair empty now I am gone. I can hear the cheerful voices & merry laugh & a desolate feeling comes home to my heart, to think I am alone. But my good angel only waits to see the tears coming & then whispers, only this year!! Only 22. weeks more & home again you will be to stay.*[1]

Already in Dickinson's early writing, one can see how she wanders from a subject into the language. She approaches the word HOME itself—not just the idea or the place. "Home was always dear to me." This first use of HOME is as a noun, in its primary sense, nothing too interesting. "All, all are kind to me but their tones fall strangely on my ears & their countenances meet mine not like home faces." HOME here is used as an attributive, put in contrast with *strangely*, and she moves the word from a place to a state. "A desolate feeling comes home to my heart." Now a directional adverb, it is used casually, not referring to the place of HOME but as an emphatic to "to my heart".

[1] South Hadley, 17 February 1848

"Only 22, weeks more & home again you will be to stay." A locative adverb, in the same sense of HOME when we say "I'm home". The interesting approach here is her marching around the word HOME's parts of speech and senses: subject, attribute, direction, location. Lightly, the speaker walks home, and demonstrates quietly the complexity of this common word.

Defining the Natural World

First, I would like to explore definition-making as it relates to describing the natural world. I want to understand what sort of details people need in order to create a definition sufficient for identifying a natural phenomenon. For the naturalist writer, what rhetorical tools and attention in language are natural objects given? For this portion of the paper, I will focus on descriptions of birds.

I find the journals of Lewis and Clark—especially those of Meriwether Lewis—have both the utility of definition-making and a relaxed method to description. This writing represents a natural mode of definition. Their notes are thoughtful and to the point, although scrawled out quickly with little concern for form and order. The expeditioner views the objects around him (a bird, a river, or something of that sort), without the headword (the name of the object) being a primary concern. Sometimes that headword comes, sometimes it is invented, and sometimes it does not come at all and we are left with a bit of a riddle.

In 1805 Meriwether Lewis wrote at Fort Clatsop (Oreg.) about a new bird:

> *This day one of the men shot a bird of the Corvus genus,*
> *which was feeding on some fragments of meat near the camp.*
> *this bird is about the size of the kingbird or bee martin,*
> *and not unlike that bird in form…*[2]

Lewis begins through hypernym and likeness. His first words match this new bird to former knowledge: "of the Corvus genus" links the new bird to the crow, the jackdaw, the rook. The taxonomical grouping of the Corvus genus is a hypernym, and Lewis is using this as a means to place the new bird within the old system. Similarly, dictionaries have established, formal classifications—such as parts of speech, languages of origin, etc.—that place words into a larger, older world of words and abbreviate their function.

[2] sense lines added

This introduction continues with likenesses when Lewis writes "about the size of" and "not unlike". Simile here gives us the rough slab of clay to further sculpt the bird. He calls out the likeness of the kingbird or bee martin, offering a rough measurement and connecting the new bird with his own understanding of other birdlife in that area. There are several references to the kingbird or bee martin while he was in Oregon, and even a few months earlier he had written "the bee martin or Kingbird is common to this country".

Dictionaries use simile quite often to establish form, size, and behavior. For example, the OED's definition of JERBOA includes "A small rodent quadruped, *Dipus sagitta*, found in the deserts of Africa; it is of the size of a rat, …". A dictionary will use simile so long as the object of reference would be common to the place and culture wherein the dictionary was published.

The kingbird is part of Lewis's vocabulary for defining birds: a standard, easy-to-conjure size and form. Lewis again and again refers to the kingbird because we are primed by its abundance. For him, its form is an available tool to measure other birds when quickly writing down notes.

He continues his description:

> *the beak is ¾ of an inch long, wide at the base, of a convex, and cultrated figure,*
> *beset with some small black hairs near its base.*
> *the chaps are of nearly equal lengths tho' the upper exceeds the under one a little,*
> *and has a small nich in the upper chap near the extremity scarcely perceptible*
> *only by close examineation.*
> *the colour of the beak is black.*

The description is straightforward, but he is also justifying his simile and genus-grouping. The detail of a "convex and cultrated" beak with "small black hairs near its base" and "the upper [chap that] exceeds the under one a little" corresponds with the *Corvus* genus. Lewis then focuses-in beyond that group's features to notice the small "nich" (assumedly "nick" or a bend) on the upper beak. Lewis's description of the beak begins to distinguish the bird. The shape and form generally fit with a typical corvine, but "only by close examineation" do distinguishing details and peculiarities become apparent. The color of the beak seems like an afterthought because all corvine birds have black beaks.

> *the eye is large and prominent, the puple black, and iris of a dark yellowish brown.*
> *the legs and feet are black and imbricated.*
> *has four toes on each foot armed with long sharp tallons;*

the hinder toe is nearly as long as the middle toe in front
and longer than the two remaining toes.

Lewis gives detail after detail to distinguish this bird. But he also speaks in relative measurements, where a part of the bird is described in its relation to another part, "the hinder toe is nearly as long as the middle toe in front". This is a mode of symmetry. Symmetry here is not just in the sense of equal, reflected proportions but in the sense of using relative proportions whether equal or not. This is the earliest sense listed in the OED, "Mutual relation of the parts of something in respect of magnitude and position; relative measurement and arrangement of parts; proportion." Lewis uses part of the bird to measure another part of the bird, similar to how we use "feet" to describe a human's height.

The reflexive description doesn't always need to be used in describing the physical proportions of an object, but it can be used to expand on a word and how its meaning is developed. Consider how the definition of the word BUTTER uses itself "butter" to expand on definitions 2 and 3 in *Webster's Second*:

> **but′ter** (bŭt′ĕr), *n.* [ME. *butter, butere,* fr. AS. *butere, buttor-,* fr. L. *butyrum,* fr. Gr. *boutyron,* fr. (perh. under Scythian influence) Gr. *bous*ox, cow + *tyros* cheese. See cow.] **1.** The solidified fat of milk, obtained from cream or milk as a whitish or yellow unctuous substance containing water and small amounts of the nonfatty constituents of milk, as proteins, sugar, ash, and lactic acid….
> **2.** Any substance resembling butter, as in consistency; as: **a** In old chemistry, an anhydrous chloride, as *butter* of antimony or zinc. **b** Any of certain concrete fatty oils remaining nearly solid at ordinary temperatures, as *butter* of cacao, vegetable *butter,* shea *butter.* **c** A smooth food paste made from fruits, nuts, fish, etc., as a spread for bread. A product such as *apple* or *plum butter* is made by stewing the fruit with sugar, spices, etc., till of a butterlike consistency; *peanut butter,* by grinding the nuts to a paste. **d** Dairy butter mixed with a savory food product, as parsley *butter,* pimento *butter.*
> **3.** A small dish or saucer for butter….

The definitions 2 and 3 refer back to the headword with "any substance resembling butter" and "a small dish or saucer for butter", relying on the first definition to solidify their definitions. You may not get a full picture of what butter means without the first definition, but there are many identifiable aspects of the word without it: we know that other texturally similar foods and materials remind us of BUTTER, we know it has its own sort dish, and we know that people sometimes mix it with certain herbs and spices in order to flavor it. The reflexivity is not a problem

so long as it helps us to understand how the word has been expanded. Likewise, Lewis's bird can be described in relation to its own features. Outside, standardized measurements of inches or ounces can be used but may not be needed for identification.

> *the tale is composed of twelve feathers*
> *the longest of which are five inches, being six in number placed in the center.*
> *the remaining six are placed 3 on either side and graduly diminish*
> *to four inches which is the shortest and outer feathers.*
> *the tail is half the length of the bird,*
> *the whole length from the extremity of the beak to the extremity of the tale being 10 Inches.*

The tail is the most detailed feature described, perhaps because the shape and size are defined with proportions, dimensions, measurements, and enumeration. This is also where we get a better picture of the whole bird and the first description of the whole bird's size and the shape beyond comparing it to the *Corvus* group and the kingbird. Lewis's enumeration of the tail feathers further breaks down the composition of the bird. No longer is it a general description of the bird's shape and dimensions, but its features also have their parts, and each of those are measurable and possibly useful in identifying this bird.

> *the head from it's joining the nect forward as far as the eyes nearly to the base of the beak and on each side as low as the center of the eye is black.*
> *arround the base of the beak the throat jaws, neck, brest and belley are of a pale bluish white.*
> *the wings back and tale are of a bluish black with a small shade of brown.*

Lewis lists the colors and their placements, mapping out the coat of the bird. I find it interesting that the colors are given after the form is defined. This may be an ornithological convention or Lewis's tendency, but it seems that after we shape the form of the bird, we are provided here with how to paint it.

The lists tend to follow a path on the body. In the second sentence "throat" and "jaws" are beside each other as they are on the body, then Lewis traces down the body from "neck" to "brest" to "belly". We already know that a bird has those anatomical features, but in listing them, he breaks-down the composition of the bird into more and more parts.

> *this bird is common to this piny country*
> *are also found in the rockey mountains on the waters of the columbia river*
> *or woody side of those mountains,*
> *appear to frequent the highest sumits of those mountains*

as far as they are covered with timber.

Lewis makes only a few descriptions of the bird beyond its physical appearance. His gesture here puts the bird back in the wild, into specific geographical areas, "the rockey mountains" "the columbia river", as well as loosely-defined terrain, "highest sumits… as far as they are covered with timber", the "woody side of those mountains", and "piny country". Lewis's bird is now interacting with other objects in the real world, and this begins to draw an image for the reader of how the bird might look in the world, not just in a taxidermy museum.

their note is que, quit-it, que-hoo; and tâh, tâh, &—

There is certainly no way of identifying this bird or its song from just this notation. Lewis is writing this for himself. The dead thing that Lewis is looking at is no longer the thing being described. It can sing! The song and the description of the bird's habitat recognize that the description of the stationary object alone cannot provide a full definition of the bird, although the static description may allow one to identify it.

The bird he is describing is likely the gray jay or Canada jay[3]. Lewis ends this journal entry with quick observations of two similar, recently-spotted fowl:

there is another bird of reather larger size
which I saw on the woddy parts of the rockey mountains
and on the waters of the Missouri,
this bird I could never kill tho' I made several attempts,
the predominate colour is a dark blue the tale is long and they are not crested;
I believe them to be of the corvus genus also.
their note is châr, châr, char,-ar, char;

the large blue crested corvus of the Columbia river is also

Lewis's mind wanders off to these somewhat-similar birds that he also puts in the *Corvus* genus. This reminds me of the message in indices or reference books, "SEE ALSO". It is a gesture to learn more about the primary subject by connecting it to its related subjects. We get a compressed description of this "larger" bird, which is only a blur of what we can see without "close examineation". The "larger" bird cannot be accurately identified from the current description; however, the "large blue crested corvus" is described elsewhere in his journals, making it easy to

3 *Perisoreus canadensis*, now classified under the Corvidae family but not the *Corvus* genus.

identify as a Stellar's jay. Including a reference to these two other birds is another gesture to connect the gray jay to its environment by giving it a larger, familial context to live in. And it ties it back to the genus grouping of *Corvus* given at the beginning of the entry.

Lewis's description provides enough information to identify the gray jay, and he creates a brief image of the bird in our mind. His descriptions tend to focus on measurement, proportions, color. Usually we are able to still identify these birds from these descriptions. But his is simply one approach to creating an identifiable definition. Documenting and describing behavior, habitat, and habits alone may also be enough to distinguish species.

The naturalist-poet John Clare wrote hundreds of descriptions of birds, now noted for their accuracy, despite his lack of technical training. He tends to describe birds by their behavior, particularly their nesting behavior. Consider his prose description of the wood lark[4]:

> *builds its nest in the woods on the ground under a stoven[5] with long dead grass*
> *& lines it with horse hair & roots*
> *lays 6 eggs of a dirty white thickly swarmed all over the dusky spots*
> *it has an odd way of singing as it flyes from tree to tree dropping down a little way*
> *& then rising up with a jerk*
> *& when they fly up they are silent*
> *singing every time they drop trembling their wings till they jerk up agen*
> *& when they are weary they either stuntly drop on the ground or settle on a tree*
> *where their song ceases till they are agen on the wing[6]*

In this description, not much is given to the appearance, shape, or features of the bird. The physical details of the nest are not described with proportion, measurement, or counting, except in the number of eggs in a lark's clutch. Clare instead describes the composition, location, materials and design of the nest, which could identify it as belonging to this bird.

After the description of the nest we get a detailed account of the lark's flying behavior. The wood lark will only sing when it flies between trees and rarely sings when flying up onto its perch. Instead of an image, as Lewis would depict, we are given a miniature narrative of the flight of the bird and its song while "on the wing".

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[4] *anthus trivialis* or tree-pipet; what Clare is describing here is not now referred to as a lark, but for the purposes of this paper, I will be consistent with Clare's name.
[5] STOVEN *(a)* A stem or trunk of a tree. *(b)* A sapling, shoot from the stump of a tree. [OED]
[6] sense lines added

In describing the natural world, the emphasis tends to fall on the objects of nature, birds, leaves, stones, weather. A description based on nature as a collection of nouns is useful in identifying natural phenomena, but such a description is static and incomplete. Clare's approach marks the birds by their actions and attitudes. He adds a greater syntax to the language we use to describe the natural world. Nearly every sentence in Meriwether Lewis's description contains a passive construction "are also found in the rockey mountains" or a copular "the tail is half the length of the bird". Clare's verbs and participles are much more lively, BUILD, LINE, LAY, SWARM, FLY, RISE, SING, DROP, TREMBLE, and SETTLE. And when he does use a copular, it is to describe the actions or behavior "when they fly up they are silent", "when they are weary", "till they are agen on the wing".

Both the object-focused description of Lewis and the behavior-focused description of Clare can provide enough information to identify the birds, and most dictionaries tend to have a combination of the two:

> **jack′daw′** (jăk′dô′; *formerly* jăk′dô′), *n.* [*Jack* + *daw*, n.] **1.** A common crowlike bird (*Corvus monedula*) of Europe, smaller than the common crow and somewhat similar to the American grackles. The adult is glossy black with the back of the head and neck silvery gray. It nests about buildings and is noted for pilfering small articles. It is often tamed and may be taught to imitate the human voice. Called also *daw*.[7]

Redefining Words and Compiling Definitions

Now, I would like to take a close look at a few poems that have a dictionary-like form. A poem can look and sound as if it is a dictionary-entry, or a poem might work in developing new definitions or associations for words. Emily Dickinson has many poems formed as a definition and many more poems that have definitions lyrically interjected within.

These "dictionary poems" have the topic as the assumed headword, placed at the beginning, and the body of the poem as a definition. Dickinson's "dictionary" is invested more in metaphor and the function of the word, than in identifying the object that the word represents. In this aspect, these poems are in opposition to the definition making of Meriwether Lewis and John Clare. The

[7] From *Webster's Second*

object that the word represents, however, may be attended to, but its description is inflated beyond the object into the word's relationship with humans and language.

> Flowers — Well — if anybody
> Can the ecstasy define —
> Half a transport — half a trouble —
> With which flowers humble men:
> Anybody find the fountain
> From which floods so contra flow —
> I will give him all the Daisies
> Which upon the hillside blow.

The only physical description of flowers is "the Daisies / Which upon the hillside blow". Not any identifiable description there. The majority of the poem focuses on the relationships that can develop between humans through flowers. Even the objects are gestural words, flowers are more of a token than just an object. Or,

> The Definition of Beauty is
> That Definition is none —
> Of Heaven, easing Analysis,
> Since Heaven and He are one.

Most dictionaries try making language and words more defined. Not here. Dickinson abandons the assumption that all words can have definitions. The first two lines, an aphorism of abandoning definition, shows how she experiences this word BEAUTY more clearly than a description would. The last two lines offer up an explanation toward the failure to define, where she uses the divine nature of beauty to shield any requirement of defining the word, as HEAVEN and HE (God) are also words whose definitions are "none". Dickinson uses metaphors and distant comparisons to divert attention away from the object and toward the word itself.

Dickinson would have been very familiar with Webster's dictionary. He lived about 10 years at Amherst, Dickinson's hometown, and published his first dictionary in 1829, a year before she was born. Many of her definitions echo or expound on the 1841 Webster's. The Emily Dickinson scholar Cynthia Hallen briefly summarizes the relationship and friction between the two lexicographers:

> Dickinson plays with the thin line between definition and metaphor, while Webster walks the strait and narrow way between explication and evangelism. Webster defines GOD as "The

> Supreme Being; Jehovah . . . ," while Dickinson says that "Home is the definition of God" (Todd 322). Webster's FAME is "Public report or rumor," but for Dickinson "Fame is the tint that Scholars leave/ Upon their Setting Names" (P866). Webster says that RENUNCIATION is "a disowning; rejection," while Dickinson calls renunciation "a piercing Virtue" (P745). For his sub-definition of EVANGELICAL, "justifying or saving faith," Webster gives a direct quotation of 2 Corinthians 5:7, "For we walk by *faith*, and not by sight"; Dickinson's definition of faith is a figurative exegesis of the scriptural allusion: "Faith -- is the Pierless Bridge/ Supporting what We see/ Unto the Scene that We do not" (P915). Webster says that EXHILARATION is "The state of being enlivened or cheerful," but Dickinson's metaphor shows exhilaration as a "Breeze/ That lifts us from the Ground" (P1118). LIGHTNING is "A sudden discharge of electricity from a cloud to the earth" in Webster's scientific definition, but "Lightning is a yellow Fork/ From Tables in the sky" in Dickinson's metaphor (P1173).[8]

It is interesting to see Dickinson's definitions in conversation with Webster's dictionary. Her definitions work to show what the denotative cannot. As she is famously quoted "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry."[9] For her, the dictionary form of word and explanation had the potential to be poetry, but in order to harness that, she had to divert the attention from language of word-and-world to language of word-and-body. To her, the dictionary or the lexicon form was a powerful tool, able to elicit a physical response. It can pull the human or divine undertones out from under the word. The lexicon is not restricted to the denotatively precise approach of Noah Webster.

However, that "precision" of a Websterian dictionary is not necessarily excluded from dictionary poems. A. Van Jordan's poem "*from*" from his 2004 book *M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A* operates in that mode, but uses the space of example sentences in order to construct a loose narrative and to attach certain emotions and images to the grammatical word FROM.

> **from** (→) *prep*. **1.** Starting at (a particular place or time): As in, John was *from* Chicago, but he played guitar straight *from* the Delta; he wore a blue suit *from* Robert Hall's; his hair smelled like coconut; his breath, like mint and bourbon; his hands felt like they were *from* slave times when he touched me—hungry, stealthy, trembling. **2.** Out of: He pulled a knot of bills *from* his pocket, paid the man and we went upstairs. **3.** Not near to or in contact with: He smoked the weed, but, surprisingly, he kept it

[8] *Philology as Rhetoric in Emily Dickinson's Poems*.
[9] Selected Letters 208

> *from* me. He said it would make me too self-conscious, and he wanted those feelings as far away *from* us as possible; he said a good part of my beauty was that I wasn't conscious of my beauty. Isn't that funny? So we drank Bloody Mothers (Hennessey and tomato juice), which was hard to keep *from* him—he always did like to drink. **4·** Out of the control or authority of: I was released *from* my mama's house, *from* dreams of hands holding me down, *from* the threat of hands not pulling me up, *from* the man that knew me, but of whom I did not know; released *from* the dimming of twilight, *from* the brightness of morning; *from* the love I thought had to look like love; *from* the love I thought had to taste like love, *from* the love I thought I had to love like love. **5.** Out of the totality of: I came *from* a family full of women; I came *from* a family full of believers; I came *from* a pack of witches—I'm just waiting to conjure my powers; I came *from* a legacy of lovers—I'm just waiting to seduce my seducer; I came *from* a pride of proud women, and we take good care of our young. **6.** As being other or another than: He couldn't tell me *from his mother*; he couldn't tell me *from* his sister; he couldn't tell me *from* the last woman he had before me, and why should he—we're all the same woman. **7.** With (some person, place, or thing) as the instrument, maker, or source: Here's a note *from* my mother, and you can take it as advice *from* me: A weak lover is more dangerous than a strong enemy; if you're going to love someone, make sure you know where they're coming *from*. **8.** Because of: Becoming an alcoholic, learning to walk away, being a good speller, being good in bed, falling in love—they all come *from* practice. **9.** Outside or beyond the possibility of: In the room, he kept me *from* leaving by keeping me curious; he kept me *from* drowning by holding my breath in his mouth; yes, he kept me *from* leaving till the next day when he said *Leave*. Then, he couldn't keep me *from* coming back.

This poem is a thorough list of the meanings of FROM. Some dictionaries will list more definitions for this preposition, like the OED (lists 28 definitions), or fewer, like *Webster's Second* (lists 7) and *Wiktionary* (lists 4). From what I can tell, these are his own definitions. But the dictionary form still restrains how Jordan is able to navigate the poem, because the definition dictates how he can use FROM in that section.

This dictionary entry reveals itself as a poem because it plays with two major allowances of the denotative dictionary form: the example usages and the ordering of the definitions. In his example sentences, he uses a lyrical and consistent I, which is in a self-portrait mode, sectioned by the definitions. The definitions soon become ancillary to the examples.

Most dictionaries organize a word's definitions from its primary sense to its lesser-used meanings. Common to uncommon. The OED will organize an entry to show the historical semantic development of the word. Some obsolete meanings may be listed before the better-known meanings as long as there are evidence and examples to show that those obsolete meanings were used before a modern sense. But Jordan is organizing the definitions for the story. Although the definitions do not have the narrative "I", they by themselves can outline the narrative of the poem:

1. Starting at (a particular place or time): …
2. Out of: …
3. Not near to or in contact with: …
4· Out of the control or authority of: …
5. Out of the totality of: …
6. As being other or another than: …
7. With (some person, place, or thing) as the instrument, maker, or source: …
8. Because of: …
9. Outside or beyond the possibility of: …

The dictionary entry like any strict form can provide generative obstructions, and Jordan is able to bend the few pliable parts of a dictionary entry in order to fit the narrative and create a poem.

Another adaptation of the dictionary form does not just mimic the dictionary's headword-plus-definition, but experiments with how a dictionary can behave internally. Dictionaries think, or at least carry some internal logic. In a comprehensive dictionary, for example, all the words that are used in definitions are also defined. In a smaller dictionary, cross-referencing the entries can add another element to show how the language is working. The philosopher Brand Blanshard shares on the topic of cohesion in how we piece together knowledge:

> *We think to solve problems; and our method of solving problems is to build a bridge of intelligible relation from the continent of our knowledge to the island we wish to include in it. Sometimes this bridge is causal, as when we try to explain a disease; sometimes teleological, as when we try to fathom the move of an opponent over the chess board; sometimes geometrical, as in Euclid. But it is always systematic; thought in its very nature is the attempt to bring something*

> *unknown or imperfectly known into a sub-system of knowledge, and thus also into that larger system that forms the world of accepted beliefs.*

The lexicographer forges these connections of knowledge between words. The poet bends, disrupts, and challenges the way we create those connections. The poem "overtakelessness" in Dan Beachy-Quick's 2015 book *gentlessness* creates much of its tension by how common words and uncommon words are defined and redefined. This 330-line poem is divided into 26 sections. I'll share just a few of those sections that redefine or clarify other parts of the poem. The first lines of the third section read:

> *gentlessness* is a word
> to describe that
> which must deny itself
> to exist.

The word 'gentlessness' is styled as if it could be a headword, uncapitalized and emphasized. The phrase "a word to describe that which" is a nominalizer, indicating that the word is a noun ("n."). The definition reads as something that "denies itself to exist". If we consider the form of the word itself: GENTLESSNESS, we might break it up as GENTLE-LESS-NESS. This segmentation is confirmed later on in the poem by the phrase "less gentle", an inversion of GENTLE-LESS. But on close examination, the word itself looks like an implausible formation: it reads as if it were originally spelled GENTLELESSNESS, then the "-LELE-" compressed or de-telescoped to "-LE-".

This ties back to the definition that Beachy-Quick gives, "denies itself to exist" because the spelling itself denies how we might initially read it. The word enacts its own definition: the spelling denies itself to exist as we first want it to exist. Dictionaries have this sort of mimesis of the word—enacting the definition—such as onomatopoeia:

> **cluck** (klŭk), *n.* **1.** The call of a hen to her chickens. **2.** *Phonet*. = 1st CLICK, n., 5. **3.** A hen, esp. one with chickens. *Dial*.[10]

The first definition of the word CLUCK is a description of what the word does—it sounds like a hen calling to her chicks. So, by giving the definition, it describes something that the word already does without explanation. Part of the role of the dictionary is to evoke a latent property within a word.

[10] from *Webster's Second*.

That section of "overtakelessness" ends with its second stanza:

> It is a word I made up
> to describe
> to myself
> myself and other fields

This second stanza works as etymology for GENTLESSNESS, the source of the word itself. The puzzling phrase "myself and other fields" groups the reflexive first-person pronoun "myself" with the landscape; that is, the word MYSELF is redefined as a field or landscape. Beachy-Quick does this to build up a metaphor around MYSELF, which in turn affects how we read the "field" imagery throughout the poem. We see this again further on in the twentieth section of the poem when another definition is given:

> *Myself* is a word to describe
> this field that I cannot see
> the end of, this field I tend,
> burying the dead in rows,
>
> burying the sea, burying seeds.
> If there is another horizon
> I have not seen it. I have not learned
> to see it. This pebble? It's a point.

Through this redefinition, the images of fields in the poem change metaphor to fit with this new definition, and the reflexive pronoun is now permitted to be used to describe a field. It gets muddy. And as in Dickinson's "dictionaries", the definition escapes description, so we must rely on metaphor to understand how words are being described. Returning to the earlier phrase "myself and other fields" now suddenly seems less odd. This poem is filled with such self-references. SEA, SEED, and PEBBLE also are words that are reformed and redefined throughout the poem.

Some poems may only slightly alter our experience with a word, or, as with some of Dickinson's poems, focus on refining the definition and effect of a single word. Beachy-Quick's *overtakelessness*, is an example of compounding these redefinitions. It recasts the semantic range of the word, that is, widens how a specific word can and will be used in the poem. This redefining works non-linearly, just as the definition of MYSELF came after its use, or how in *Webster's Second* HEN comes after CLUCK even though we need to understand HEN in order to define CLUCK. The poem imitates the complexities of how we interact with language. We jump between tenses, idioms,

and description in order to communicate. Beachy-Quick writes “The poem is a hermetic / delight.” Like a comprehensive dictionary, this poem is meant as an independent system of language, defined and coherent when taken as a whole.

The last 3 lines of that twentieth section “If there is another horizon / I have not seen it. I have not learned / to see it. This pebble? It’s a point.” get at what the poem is doing as it defines the coined word of its title, OVERTAKELESSNESS. The root of this word seems to be a nominal use of the verb OVERTAKE. It must be taken as a noun, meaning something like “an instance of something being overtaken or caught”. The -LESS suffix is an attributive modifier, indicating an absence of an OVERTAKE, then -NESS nominalizes the word. The root OVERTAKE can also be read as OVER-TAKE, as in “taking too much”.

The mind has to work out several steps in order to process this word. The speed of our language-processing slows down, just like when our mind will take more resources to process newfangled compounds, even though we may be very familiar with each segment of the compound. The word only appears once in the poem, in the sixth section (and without the -NESS suffix):

> The sun rises twice—
> less gentle in the other
> field, overtakeless
>
> in mine. The pansies sing
> their nursery rhyme:
> *a fact is a fact,*
> roots dig, tendrils twine,
>
> this sun is the sun
> we call ours, I call mine—
> *the corn grows at night*
> but where is the night?—
>
> a song the sun sings to dull
> itself down—gentle
>
> other, right here is where—
> the day begins, and then:

Those first emphasized lines “a fact is a fact” show how language can display OVERTAKELESSNESS. Saying “X is X” makes a statement (like “rose is a rose” “love is love”), but this statement is unable

to "overtake" the essence of the word or to make a secure definition. This overtakelessness of the reflexive, copular definition is echoed in the phrase two lines below, "this sun is the sun". OVERTAKELESSNESS is the unstoppable repetition of "the sun", "a fact", or words. The daily appearance of the sun is a natural analog for overtakelessness and for defining a word with itself, emphasized by the first and last lines "*The sun rises twice*—" and "*the day begins, and then:*". The notion is better shown in the poem than told here, but I want to emphasize the poem depicts the meaning of its title OVERTAKELESSNESS through its performance and its language, and not through a description.

After researching this poem, I found that the word OVERTAKELESSNESS, unlike GENTLESSNESS, was not coined by Beachy-Quick. It was written by Emily Dickinson in at least two poems. Cynthia Hallen defines OVERTAKELESSNESS in the first following poem as "Inaccessibility; unapproachability; unavailability; [fig.] aloofness; remoteness; distance from mortality." and in the second poem's use as "Superiority; transcendence; invincibility."[11]:

> The overtakelessness of those
> Who have accomplished Death
> Majestic is to me beyond
> The majesties of Earth.
>
> The soul her "Not at Home"
> Inscribes upon the flesh —
> And takes her fair aerial gait
> Beyond the hope of touch.[12]

and,

> It will not harm her magic pace
> That we so far behind
> Her distances propitiate
> As forests touch the wind,

[11] *Emily Dickinson Lexicon*. Ed. Cynthia Hallen. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University. 2020.
[12] *Emily Dickinson Archive*, J1691

Not hoping for his notice far,
But vainer to adore
'Tis Glory's overtakelessness
That makes our running poor.[13]

*****

For many people, it seems a dictionary is a piece furniture, but *the* dictionary is some holy spirit whose fire fills the bones of the more-literate. "That word isn't in the dictionary!" "The dictionary needs to have a word for …" But what dictionary? What mysterious creature is this that guides the tongue? No one claims to know every word in the dictionary, so it cannot be defined by human capacity. It cannot be a general consensus because opinions on language differ too much. The most natural answer, I find, is that the dictionary is a part of the imagination, the part that conceives of what language is: its shape, manners, and contents. In the imagination, the yet-to-be-learned can be grafted to our current knowledge. The imagination allows us to already know what the dictionary is but still discover more and more about it. The dictionary is a creature that we project into the real world to give our chaotic, morphing world of words some semblance of order. A person saying "the dictionary" is the same as saying "my dictionary".

The dictionary is not just a list of words and their definitions, but an attempt to stitch language to itself and to the world. In a practical sense, we use dictionaries to identify and learn of ways to describe the world around us. In a literary and creative sense, dictionaries texture our words and try to rebuild the world around us.

All dictionaries use some of the same basic tools to form their worlds: simile, symmetry, description, metaphor, metonymy, and so on. Dickinson's method of definition-making seems primarily concerned with the world and mechanics within words as she turns the word inside-out to walk around. The naturalist's writing tends to take the opposite direction: walking around the world, then adapting what they observe of the natural world into corresponding words. Beachy-Quick in *overtakelessness* creates a world between definitions, redefinitions, and self-reference. But in my own work, I want to get at a world that is distant from the nuclear, denotative meaning of the word, a world not outside but at the far perimeters of the word's domain. I am content with the failure to fully define and am more interested in what is hiding beneath the word. The only

[13] *Emily Dickinson Archive*, F1183 C

way I know to access those nooks and crannies is through the imagination and the basic faculties of language and poetry: metaphor, metonym, simile, syntax, sound, and mimicry.

While making a dictionary, a lexicographer decides to write the definition of FROM. It may be useful to write 4 or 9 or 28 definitions for FROM, depending on the level of specificity that the lexicographer wants. Although the skilled lexicographer could draw divisions and distinctions into more and more definitions, he doesn't. He truncates the list at some point because the additional definition could be subsumed within another or is obscure or obsolete, or it rubs up against the imagination or the impossible, something improbable like "FROM, (onomat.) the sound of a bugle or trumpet". We leave out the truly impossible definitions in the dictionaries, we do not even consider them. This place between the possible meaning and the utterly impossible is the space I want to write in. The odd, untrimmed tendrils of a word's meaning, association, and sound can be fashioned through the craft of poetry to form a new definition, although that definition may be improbable.

Think of it this way: every entry in the dictionary is like an apartment building, each word with a few occupant-meanings who pay the rent of "currency". Time allows renters to come and go; however, many lived before Queen Victoria's reign and many are older than that. Occasionally, by close examination, you can discover some old and useless tenants that have been kept around through Shakespearean, Chaucerian, or other like inheritances. Still, there are more details that can only be discovered by more and more interrogation: What is the tenant's job in the sentence? How does the word look from different parts of the world? We move from the readily observable to the historical: Was this word once the same as one across town? Who built the foundation? The ancient Scythians or some Semitic tribe? And from the historical to the imagination: What did this word use to sound like? What roots from outside have grown into the crawlspace? When was the word first uttered? Who is hiding in the attic?

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