

Medicine and Destiny

THE ADVANCING FRONT OF MEDICINE. By George W. Gray. New York: Whittlesey House. 1941. 408 pp., and index. \$3.

Reviewed by MABEL S. ULRICH

ABOUT a century ago little man created a new god and named him Modern Science. Here was surely the last word in gods—the God of Progress, no less. But today little man is frightened. For this nineteenth century god turns out to be a twin of the Roman Janus—the deity with the two heads, either of which he could put on at will to bring war and destruction or peace and “beginning.” Today the gates are wide open, Janus wears his war head and horrors rise at a fantastic rate. What price science now? That question is one reason for reading Mr. Gray’s book; for most of us sorely need the comfort of his vivid reminder that the other head has an army too, an army that fights to prolong life not destroy it, to conquer pain not countries, to wipe out pestilence not little children.

“The Advancing Front of Medicine” is another book on health and disease, but don’t think for a minute it is “just another.” A glance at the chapter heads may lead you to suspect that you have heard all this before. High blood pressure, influenza, allergy, sleep—have not popularizers galore explained them to us? Yes, but not as Mr. Gray does. Even when the facts are familiar—and most of them aren’t—his presentation gives them new significance, weaves them into a coherent whole that suggests a fresh and stimulating conception of the body and its potentialities. Throughout his discussion he holds to the modern hypothesis that the health of the human being is determined by his chemical reactions plus the kind of a person he is—his aptitude, as Galen called it; that disease is not an entity, but rather a phenomenon of life, no more unnatural than health itself. In his first two chapters he develops this hypothesis. And thereafter the drama lies in the body’s unrelaxing struggle to maintain an orderly chemistry, and modern medicine’s search for a method or a drug to help it overcome disorganizing agents. “The role of medicine becomes clear. Its function is to restore the reciprocal relationship of organism and internal environment to a state of chemical equilibrium.”

The medical front is a long one and it covers a wide area. Obviously it could not all be embraced in one book. In selecting his specific subjects Mr. Gray tells us that he had two aims. One was to include a few of the prob-

lems most representative of present-day medicine, the other to bring to the everyday man the latest news from the researchers of those common complaints and indulgences that concern almost all of us. Thus we find up-to-the-minute discussions of such matters as the role of the antianaemia factor in the rare blood diseases, the chemistry and action of sulphanilamide, and the manner in which the synthetic chemist rearranges the atom to make other sulphur drugs, the controversies regarding influenza and the viruses, the new and dramatic treatment of epilepsy and schizophrenia. But we are given, too, the latest views

on blood pressure, smoking, drinking, sleeping, aging. In all there are twenty-seven chapters, each complete in itself, (nine have appeared in *Harper’s Magazine*) each objective, lucid, and freshly interesting enough to hold the concentrated attention of informed readers no less than those who are usually content to leave health and disease to the doctors.

That a writer, not a scientist himself, can so successfully assemble, analyze, and relate scientific facts and theories is amazing enough. When this sort of reporting has the added virtue of clean, persuasive writing it becomes an art. Mr. Gray has no equal in this field. Read “The Advancing Front of Medicine.” It may even restore your faith in little man’s destiny.

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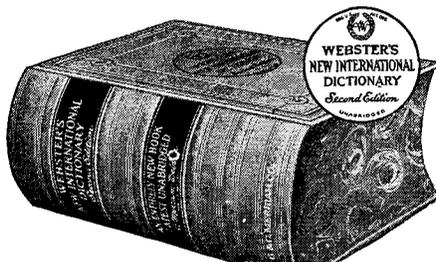
EVEN among the ancient Greeks there were two kinds of stories—those given out publicly and those known only privately. The latter kind was called *anekdotos*, literally meaning “not published.” The word was formed by combining a, an, “not,” and *ekdotos*, “given out.” From this source comes our English *anecdote* which originally retained the Greek meaning “unpublished narrative.” But tales of interesting things or people are so much sought after that now they are frequently given out for publication and the word *anecdote* has lost its original meaning.

This is but one of the thousands of interesting word origins given in “the Supreme Authority”—

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HOW TO READ A DICTIONARY

(Continued from page 3)

lexicographer as self-appointed arbiter and his function as historian can be regarded as a side-issue, for the dictionary, however constructed, is primarily an educational instrument. And the problem is whether that instrument is currently well used.

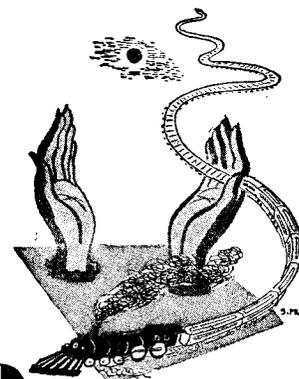
Our own Noah Webster is in a sense the hero of the story. Alarmed by the state into which learning had fallen after the Revolutionary War, Webster sought to make a one volume dictionary which would serve in the self-education of the semi-literate masses. He was concerned with the masses, not the elite, and with self-education, at a time when this country had not yet become democratic enough to regard the public education of all its children as a primary obligation of the state. The Webster dictionary was probably one of the first self-help books to become a popular best-seller. And the paradox is that now, with public education widely established in this country, with “literacy” as universal as suffrage, the self-help potentialities of a dictionary are seldom realized by the millions who own one. I am not thinking merely of children from progressive schools who cannot use a dictionary because they do not know the alphabet. I am thinking of all the products of contemporary education who, not being taught or inspired to read the great and difficult books, have little use for the dictionary. *How much better educated was the self-read man whom Webster helped!*

THIS brief history of dictionaries is relevant to the rules for reading and using them well. One of the first rules as to how to read a book is to know what sort of book it is. That means knowing what the author's intention was and what sort of thing you can expect to find in his work. If you look upon a dictionary merely as a spelling book or a guide to pronunciation, you will use it accordingly. If you realize that it contains a wealth of historical information, crystallized in the growth of language, you will pay attention, not merely to the variety of meanings which are listed under each word, but to their order.

And above all if you are interested in advancing your own education, you will use a dictionary according to its primary intention—as a help in reading books that might otherwise be too difficult because their vocabulary in-

cludes technical words, archaic words, literary allusions, or even familiar words used in now obsolete senses. The number of words in a man's vocabulary is as definite as the number of dollars he has in the bank; equally definite is the number of senses in which a man is able to use any given word. But there is this difference: a man cannot draw upon the public treasury when his bank-balance is overdrawn, but we can all draw upon the dictionary to get the coin we need to carry on the transaction of reading anything we want to read.

Let me be sure that I am not misunderstood. I am not saying that a dictionary is all you need in order to move anywhere in the realms of literature. There are many problems to be solved, in reading a book well, other than those arising from the author's vocabulary. And even with respect to vocabulary, the dictionary's primary service is on those occasions when you are confronted with a technical word or with a word that is wholly new to you—such as “costard” (an apple), or “hoatzin” (a South American bird), or “rabato” (a kind of flaring collar). More frequently the problem of interpretation arises because a relatively familiar word seems to be used in a strange sense. Here the dictionary will help, but it will not solve the problem. The dictionary may suggest



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the variety of senses in which the troublesome word can be used, but it can never determine how the author you are reading used it. That you must decide by wrestling with the context. More often than not, especially with distinguished writers, the word may be given a special, an almost unique, shade of meaning. The growth of your own vocabulary, in the important dimension of multiple meanings as well as in mere quantity of words, will depend, first of all, upon the character of the books you read, and secondly, upon the use you make of the dictionary as a guide. You will misuse it—you will stultify rather than enlighten yourself—if you substitute the dictionary for the exercise of your own interpretative judgment in reading.

This suggests several other rules as to how *not* to read a dictionary. There is no more irritating fellow than the man who tries to settle an argument about communism, or justice, or liberty, by quoting from Webster. Webster and all his fellow lexicographers may be respected as authorities on word-usage, but they are not the ultimate founts of wisdom. They are no Supreme Court to which we can appeal for a decision of those fundamental controversies which, despite the warnings of semanticists, get us involved with abstract words. It is well to remember that the dictionary's authority can, for obvious reasons, be surer in the field of concrete words, and even in the field of the abstract technical words of science, than it ever can be with respect to philosophical words. Yet these words are indispensable if we are going to talk, read, or write about the things that matter most.

Another negative rule is: Don't swallow the dictionary. Don't try to get word-rich quick, by memorizing a lot of fancy words whose meanings are unconnected with any actual experience. Merely verbal knowledge is almost worse than no knowledge at all. If learning consisted in nothing but knowing the meanings of words, we could abolish all our courses of study, and substitute the dictionary for every other sort of book. But no one except a pedant or a fool would regard it as profitable or wise to read the dictionary from cover to cover.

In short, don't forget that the dictionary is a book about words, not about things. It can tell you how men have used words, but it does not define the nature of the things the words name. A Scandinavian university undertook a "linguistic experiment" to prove that human arguments always reduce to verbal dif-

ferences. Seven lawyers were given seven dictionary definitions of truth and asked to defend them. They soon forgot to stick to the "verbal meanings" they had been assigned, and became vehemently involved in defending or opposing certain fundamental views about the nature of truth. The experiment showed that discussions may start about the meanings of words, but that, when interest in the problem is aroused, they seldom end there. Men pass from words to things, from names to natures. The dictionary can start an argument, but only thought or research can end it.

IF we remember that a dictionary is a book about words, we can derive from that fact all the rules for reading a dictionary intelligently. Words can be looked at in four ways.

(1) *Words are physical things*—writable marks and speakable sounds. There must, therefore, be uniform ways of spelling and pronouncing them, though the uniformity is often spoiled by variations.

(2) *Words are parts of speech*. Each single word plays a grammatical role in the more complicated structure of a phrase or a sentence. According to

the part it plays, we classify it as a certain part of speech—noun or verb, adjective or adverb, article or preposition. The same word can vary in different usages, shifting from one part of speech to another, as when we say "Man the boat" or "Take the jump." Another sort of grammatical variation in words arises from their inflection, but in a relatively uninflected language like English, we need pay attention only to the conjugation of the verb (infinitive, participle, past tense, etc.), the case of the noun (singular and plural), and the degree of the adjective (especially the comparative and superlative).

(3) *Words are signs*. They have meanings, not one but many. These meanings are related in various ways. Sometimes they shade from one into another; sometimes one word will have two or more sets of totally unrelated meanings. Through their meanings words are related to one another—as synonyms sharing in the same meaning even though they differ in its shading; or as antonyms through opposition or contrast of meanings. Furthermore, it is in their capacity as signs that we distinguish words as proper or common names (according as they name just one thing or many which



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are alike in some respect); and as concrete or abstract names (according as they point to some thing which we can sense, or refer to some aspect of things which we can understand by thought but not observe through our senses).

Finally, (4) *words are conventional*. They mean or signify natural things, but they themselves are not natural. They are man-made signs. That is why every word has a history, just as everything else man makes has a time and place of origin, and a cultural career, in which it goes through certain transformations. The history of words is given by their etymological derivation from original word-roots, prefixes, and suffixes; it includes the account of their physical change, both

in spelling and pronunciation; it tells of their shifting meanings, and which among them are archaic and obsolete, which are current and regular, which are idiomatic, colloquial, or slang.

A good dictionary will answer all your questions about words under these four heads. The art of reading a dictionary (as any other book) consists in knowing what questions to ask about words and how to find the answers. I have suggested the questions. The dictionary itself tells you how to find the answers. In this respect, it is a perfect self-help book, because it tells you what to pay attention to and how to interpret the various abbreviations and symbols it uses in giving you the four varieties of information about words. Anyone who fails to consult the explanatory notes and the list of abbreviations at the beginning of a dictionary can blame only himself for not being able to read the dictionary well. Unfortunately, many people fail here, as in the case of other books, because they insist upon neglecting the prefatory matter—as if the author were just amusing himself by including it.

I think these suggestions about how to read, and how not to misuse, a dictionary are easy to follow. But like all other rules they will be followed well only by the man who is rightly

motivated in the first place. And, in the last place, they will be wisely applied only by the man who remembers that we are both *free* and *bound* in all our dealing with language, whether as writers or readers.

"When I use a word," Humpty-Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty-Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

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ENVOIOUS CASCA <i>Georgette Heyer</i> (Crime Club: \$2.)	English Christmas party of ravening relatives results in death and a job for detective Hemingway.	Too-ready-to-talk suspects give detective tough but interesting job for sleuth. Good writing, considerable erudition, and workable plot.	Good stuff
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