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(Re)shaping Cultures: The Politics of Lexicography with Reference to Ambrose Bierce's *the Devil's Dictionary*

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Abstract:
The paper focuses on how lexicography acts as a hegemonic practice in propagating and devaluing distinct ideologies. This process of compilation or in other words, the process of "meaning-making" involves a wide range of ideological manipulation. A scan through the canonical lexicons reveals a desire in the compiler to "control" language and consequently incorporate the biases and prejudices of the times. Lexicons by and large tend to fix and standardize meanings and hegemonise society by establishing itself as an unquestionable canon. The paper attempts to position Ambrose Bierce's the Devil's Dictionary as a counter-text in the genre of lexicography. The Dictionary deconstructs the canon by subverting meanings that prompt a re-reading of the dominant cultural values. Bierce's definition of dictionary itself presents the inherent playfulness of language which got cramped by the existing canon of lexicography: "a malevolent literary device for cramping the growth of language and making it hard and inelastic" ("Dictionary" def.1).
The paper further investigates the politics of dictionary-making with reference to ideologies of class, race, religion, etc which pave way for power dynamics to function. By ratifying The Devil's Dictionary as a counter-hegemonic text, the paper will throw light on the various processes of manipulating cultural ideologies and the politics involved in meaning and canon making. Meanings constructed in relation to race, class, gender, and religion will be analysed deploying the theoretical inputs from Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, Michel Foucault and Terry Eagleton.

Keywords: lexicography, canon, meaning, ideology, hegemony, discourse

1. Introduction
Every linguistic construct in social, cultural, and religious scheme constantly shapes and reshapes our perspectives. All these fields in which we constantly mingle are under the ongoing process of meaning making. The politics involved in the process is of great concern among the cultural theorists of the time. The desire to observe the world out there just as it is sets us on the pursuit towards "true" reality. However, the postmodern understanding of language suggests that every such pursuit is only a process of construction rather than mirroring reality. Narratives are used for this very purpose and the discourse thus formed assumes subject position. They are moulded to achieve definite ends according to the needs and demands of the scripter or the authorial institution. They seek to systematically construct and preserve a sense of "reality" through systems of meaning-making and social practices. Among these numerous narrative practices or discourses of meaning construction and power, lexicography is least analyzed critically and hence more suitable for the present study. The paper attempts to position Ambrose Bierce's *the Devil's Dictionary* as a counter-text in the genre of lexicography in deconstructing the canon of meaning making by subverting meanings and prompting a re-reading of the dominant cultural values and notions.

2. Hegemonic and Counter-hegemonic Narratives
In the propagation of a particular discourse, narratives perform a pivotal role. They fashion self and identity that can be designed, altered, modified, and redefined. They interfere and subtly operate in the realm of the mundane, everyday interactions and promote and degrade specific ideologies. Antonio Gramsci contributing to the theories of twentieth century Marxism, argues thus:

- the dominant class cannot maintain control simply through the use of violence or force. . . The intellectuals sympathetic to the ruling class will therefore work to present the ideas and justifications of the class's domination coherently and persuasively. This work will inform the presentation of ideas through such institutions as the mass media, the church, school and family. . . the subordinate classes will not accept [this] hegemony passively. The ideas of the dominant class will have to be negotiated and modified, in order to make them fit the everyday experience of the subordinate classes. (Edgar, 1999, p. 110)

This practice of hegemonising the subordinate classes is done through the various narratives like religious rituals, socio-cultural codes of living, graffiti, biographies, family histories and also through lexicons. Dictionaries play a major role in fixing meanings and ideas that govern our perspectives on society and life as a whole. They reproduce meanings that generations imbibe as the standard and only

way of understanding a word or concept. As a result, we tend to fix our attitudes and standards from this ultimate repository of "meaning."

In contrast to these hegemonising narrative structures, in the wake of postmodern theories and concepts, a set of counter-hegemonic narratives emerged that critiqued these existing canonical narratives. The very same forms of narratives that once hegemonised people to believe specific standards/ideas transformed as weapons that strike at the very root of manipulative strategies of the dominant power structures. Counter-hegemonic narratives work by first analysing the master narratives. Just as master narratives work through the mundane and most private conversations, counter-narratives also work in the similar vein, in the most unexpected situations and also in carefully manipulated ways. Raymond Williams in his *Marxism and Literature* connects hegemony and counter-hegemony. Williams (1977) regards hegemony as a form of culture, "a culture which has to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of a particular class." (p. 112) He states it as an ongoing process:

- In practice, then, hegemony can never be singular. Its internal structures are highly complex, as can readily be seen in any concrete analysis. … It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own. We have then to add to the concept of hegemony the concepts of counter-hegemony and alternative hegemony, which are real and persistent elements of practice. (p. 112-113)

In the course of time, these counter-hegemonic narratives could become hegemonic. In a way, the fluidity of language also affects narratives, discourses, and power structures to a remarkable extent. In this context, the analysis of the narrative of lexicon is relevant as it supposes to place itself as an unquestionable medium of "meaning" and "truth" while dealing with the highly fluid medium of language.

3. The Politics of Dictionary Making

All dictionaries of a given language are usually considered under the impersonal rubric of 'the dictionary' serving as a sacred text for language users. 'Look it up in the dictionary,' 'What does the dictionary say,' 'Have you checked the dictionary' are some of the common idioms in English that suggest a certainty about the identity of a dictionary. The very familiarity of dictionaries implies that the dictionary as a text is often strikingly taken for granted. Most people regard dictionaries as an impassive and neutral repository of information. Particular aspects of a word—spelling, pronunciation, part of speech—are explicated with great detail in a dictionary, ensuring that different strands of information are presented as clearly as possible. Gradually they attain the status of a canon that stands unquestioned and stable.

Here, what get often sidelined are the countless acts of selection and choice by which any dictionary is brought into being. Dictionaries are human products, able to reflect the social and cultural assumptions of the time in which they are written, and telling, as a result, their own stories of society, culture, and ideals. Who writes a dictionary, when and where, are factors which in significant ways change and influence the kind of dictionary that is produced. The ways in which meanings are repeated and grounded also matter in studying lexicography. Catherine Belsey (2002) in *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* states that "to reproduce existing meanings exactly is also to reaffirm the knowledge our culture takes for granted" (p. 4). This is how ideologies are formed and thrive in society. Ideologies have been used through the ages as a means to legalize and situate certain norms in society. Terry Eagleton (2007) in his *Ideology: An Introduction* argues that "a dominant power may legitimate itself by *promoting* beliefs and values congenial to it; *naturalizing* and *universalizing* such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; *denigrating* ideas which might challenge it; *excluding* rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and *obscuring* social reality in ways convenient to itself" (p. 5). Dictionaries while defining socio-political and religious words are subject to *promotion, naturalization, universalization* of certain systems and forms of thought and *denigration, exclusion, and obscuration* of certain other. Such selection and categorization that is ingrained in the process of dictionary making deny them their manifested label of objectivity and subject itself as a medium of hegemony.

Further, lexicographers confront questions of truth and untruth. The definitions provided in dictionaries are manifested as "truths." However, the lexicographer will be in trouble if the "truths" of political or moral authorities differ from his. Lynda Mugglestone (2011) in her *Dictionaries: A Very Short Introduction* remarks on John Cowell's definition of words like *king, parliament* and *prerogative* which were "viewed as . . . lexicographical—and political—heresy rather than 'true meaning' his title page had promised. [His work] was not only banned but burned. . .. Truth here was divided; Cowell's truth did not accord with the truths preferred by the government" (p. 94). Similarly, what is "true" in one nation may not be so in another. This is especially evident in the differences found in British and American dictionaries. "Imperial truths" also found way in dictionaries. Westernized and colonial perspectives propagated through dictionaries shaped the understanding of the non-West. Dictionaries thus serve to foreground several ideologically loaded meanings. Thus, the dictionary-maker performs the role of both a critic as well as a historian.

4. Dictionary Making: A Brief History

The origins of English dictionaries may be traced to the Anglo-Saxon period of the seventh and eighth centuries. Priests and scholars glossing Latin manuscripts compiled lists of difficult words to help those readers who were unfamiliar with Latin. In course of time, glossaries grew longer and the word lists were eventually recopied by scribes in an alphabetical order based on the initial letter of the word. The predominant understanding about dictionaries in its early years can be summed up as "a collection of all the most proper and significant English Words, that are now commonly used either in Speech or in the familiar way of Writing Letters . . . omitting at the same time, such as are obsolete, barbarous, foreign or peculiar" (Wells, 1973, p. 19). The words "proper" and "commonly used" in the definition deserve special attention for this study. Wells assumes a singular mode of perceiving and characterizing "proper" words. He even classifies some words out of the collection branding them as "obsolete", "barbarous", "foreign" and "peculiar." This

categorization and selection has continued through the ages in the making of lexicons that attained canonical status implying the problem of determinacy intrinsic to lexicography.

As Haussman (2014) says, "[t]he words a culture use, and how it uses them, tell much about its nature and the makeup of those participating in it" (p. 2). The definitions and illustrations in the famous *Dictionary of the English Language* by Samuel Johnson, are mostly prejudiced observations on mid-eighteenth century society, politics, and religion; the words themselves and how Johnson decided to define and use them reflect how he and those like him perceived their universe. For example, Johnson's definition of oats is "a grain which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people." Johnson himself was by no means anti-Scottish yet the society in which he lived still retained some manner of paranoia from the Jacobite rebellions of the 1740s. DeMaria, in his work, *Johnson's Dictionary and the Language of Learning* argues that the illustrative quotations can be grouped under a few subject lines, within which he endeavored to educate his readers on his particular courses of knowledge and morality.

Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* projects a desire to distinguish America culturally from England. He wrote that "a national language is a bond of national union" (1789, as cited in Rollins, 1976, p. 418). Moreover, he endorsed the idea of an institution to fix the language but thought that "such an Institution would be of little or no use, until the American public should have a dictionary which should be received as a standard work" (Sonpal, 2015, p. 2186). Webster's conversion to evangelical Protestantism in 1808 shaped his ideology. Rollins observes that in everything that Webster wrote after 1808, he proclaimed that fearful worship of God was the first step to civil order and that the government should be run by the elderly, pious, and wealthy.

5. *The Devil's Dictionary* as a Case Study

Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary* was a linguistic revolution in lexicography that took place some hundred years before the poststructuralists concepts of Barthes, Derrida and Foucault came about. First published in 1881, *The Devil's Dictionary* provides a set of words with new and startling meanings that sought to criticize and overturn the existing social constructs on diverse issues. Bierce was branded as the devil's agent as his "bitter, savage satire," Richard O'Connor (1967) argues, was directed at predictable targets especially the clergy and social reformers, then the government and all those who administer it (p. 104). In the light of postmodernism, Bierce's narrative can be read as a counter-hegemonic text. His extensive vocabulary, weighted with a multitude of odd connotations demands close reading. Published during the turn of the nineteenth century, the turbulence of the changing sensibilities of the Victorian to the Modern age also reflects in his dictionary. The changing episteme and its doubts and challenges also might have prompted Bierce to question the existing canonical socio-cultural and religious institutions.

The free play of words that opposes the standardization is made possible through Bierce's *Dictionary* which in the process subverts the static ideologies of the time. He overturns the traditional Western perspective of language that is grounded on binaries. Recognizing the hierarchy inherent in the binaries, Bierce proved that these terms can never sustain the antithesis on which they depend. The meaning of each signifier depends on the trace of its 'other' that inhabits its definition. Therefore, he presents words in the *Dictionary* in its true nature, its playfulness rather than attempting the impossible task of fixing meanings. A comparative analysis of Dr. Johnson' s *Dictionary of the English Language* (18th century), Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* (19th century), and *Oxford advance Learner's Dictionary* (*OALD*) (20th century) with Bierce's The Devil's Dictionary attempts to position *The Devil's Dictionary* as a counter-hegemonic text that seek to overthrow the "stable" and "fixed" meanings in culture. For this purpose, a random set of specimen words are chosen:

5.1. Freedom

While the canonical lexicons assume that the word implies a complete exemption from control and attribute the status of the real to it, Bierce breaks the aura of abstraction that surrounds the word freedom by defining it thus:

- Exemption from the stress of authority in a beggarly half dozen of restraint's infinite multitude of methods. A political condition that every nation supposes itself to enjoy in virtual monopoly. Liberty. The distinction between freedom and liberty is not accurately known; naturalists have never been able to find a living specimen of either.

Bierce's use of the word "supposes" in the definition dismantles the hegemonic lexicographical concept of fixity in meaning. Freedom is a supposition, a mere illusion under a "virtual monopoly" that refuses to grant full freedom. In other words, complete freedom is an impossibility. Bierce does not try to fix the signified as he understands the inherent playfulness of language. The statement that there could be difference between freedom and liberty suggests the poststructuralist idea that one signifier contains the traces of another but does not exactly point to another signifier. The political text of the time was also being rewritten as Bierce dared to point at the virtual monopoly of the ruling government that professed an illusory idea of freedom.

5.2. African

A scan through Webster's definition and *OALD* reveals a closure to the word "African" along the basis of geography: a native of Africa. Bierce defines African as "a nigger that votes our way." On one hand, he presents the typical American attitude towards the Blacks—referring to them as "niggers." At the same time, the definition implies the politics involved in Black-White relationship. If a "nigger" votes for "them" (Whites) they ought to call him 'African' with a sense of respect for their humanity and not as "nigger." He does not limit the word within the geography instead opens up the cultural and racial prejudices of his time.

5.3. Occident

The occident became a topic of discussion in literary circles with the onset of postcolonial studies. Gayatri Spivak (2010) in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" remarks on the "epistemic violence" that most intellectuals commit in the "constitution of the Other as the

Self's shadow" (p. 2114). Occident has for a long time been considered as an autonomous entity that defines itself as the "Self." With the onset of postcolonial theories, the taken-for-granted position of the occident as the all-powerful and only significant part of the world was questioned and rejected. The assumed "Other" in western epistemology in a way reveals the arrogance and feudalistic attitude of the Occident towards the rest of the world which it classifies as the Orient. Johnson's and Webster's *Dictionary* defines "Occident' as "the West." *OALD* though published during the heyday of postcolonial debates, does not only define the Occident as "the western part of the world" but also adds "especially Europe and America." Bierce does not limit the sense of the word within an essentialist agenda. He defines Occident thus:

- the part of the world lying west (or east) of the Orient. It is largely inhabited by Christians, a powerful subtribe of the Hypocrites, whose principal industries are murder and cheating, which they are pleased to call "war" and "commerce." These, also, are the principal industries of the Orient.

Bierce clearly subverts the Western binary logic of the east and the west by defining the Occident as the part lying west "or" east of the Orient, and destroys the privileged status the first in the binary. Moreover, Bierce does not privilege the Orient by referring to murder and cheating as the principal industries of the Occident. He adds that the Orient is no different in their interests. Bierce's definition stands out as a key poststructuralist statement whereby the Occident is rid of its illusory self-sufficiency and unveils the traces of the Orient in the signifier Occident.

5.4. Saint

Sainthood is often associated with virtue and holiness. Once declared a saint, s/he is not regarded as someone who once was alive with all human weaknesses. Sainthood partakes the assumption that the person lived a whole life without frailty or blemish. The definitions of 'saint' in all the three above mentioned canonical lexicons are based on certain grounding principles like "piety," "virtue," and "holiness." Johnson defines a saint as "a person eminent for piety and virtue." *OALD* adds an adverb "very" to these qualifications to emphasize the saint's holiness thus: "a person that the Christian Church recognizes as being very holy, because of the way they have lived or died." Bierce does not fall a prey to any of these forms of logocentrism. His definition encapsulates the past, conversion and the present state of a "saint":

- A dead sinner revised and edited.

The Duchess of Orleans relates that the irreverent old calumniator, Marshal Villeroi, who in his youth had known St. Francis de Sales, said, on hearing him called saint: 'I am delighted to hear Monsieur de Sales is a saint. He was fond of saying indelicate things, and used to cheat at cards. In other respects, he was a perfect gentleman, though a fool.'

This is a clear indication of Derridean *supplementarity* where the search for a fixed meaning is constantly deferred making possible a chain of signification. The example of St. Francis de Sales reveals the saint's contradicting past and present. The fact that he is a saint does not erase his past life as it happens often in the usual understanding and definitions of saints. Even when a saint is regarded as holy, it can only be defined and valued in the threshold of his/her past and present. Further, the word that Bierce uses in defining saint, "revised and edited," lucidly indicates the textual construction of sanctity and sainthood.

5.5. Historian

History for ages has been granted the label of accuracy and "truth." Traditional history is particularly about kings and great heroes and their victories. The numerous innocent lives lost in battles and the lives of the marginalized seldom find niche in these histories. Johnson, Webster, and *OALD* regard 'historian' as a compiler of facts and events. These definitions assume "truth" and objectivity of historiography. Bierce dismantles this aura that shrouds history by defining it as a "broad-gauge gossip." Donald Brenneis (1992), a modern critic in his essay "Gossip" observes thus:

- Many . . . have considered [gossip] primarily as a means of transmitting and manipulating information. Some . . . have gone further in arguing its role in creating knowledge. Gossip . . . is primarily a device used strategically by individuals or groups to advance their own interests. (p. 151)

Bierce satirizes the exaggerated fiction that a historian crafts to make history interesting. The absolutism claimed by the historian is nothing but a manipulative strategy by which he makes his "gossip" believable. History is a kind of gossip that has gained acceptance ad validity through time. Bierce's definition also opens up a New Historicist reading of the word "history." Engaged in the process of selection and edition, history becomes a narrative with a narrative voice that holds specific prejudices and perceptions. Affirmed by American critic Louis Montrose, New Historicism foregrounds a combined interest in "the textuality of history, the historicity of texts" (1986, as cited in Barry, 2010, p. 166).

6. Conclusion

Dictionaries are far more than works that list the words and meanings of a language as its making inevitably involves partial and selective processes. Language being a fluid medium can be twisted and turned according to the user's purpose and intentions. However, the scan through standard dictionaries from three distinct centuries betrays a futile urge to fix meaning to a single signifier for personal and political reasons. Reflecting the prejudices of the Age of Reason, Johnson's *Dictionary* is founded on human reason which was the grounding principle of humanism. Webster, who was a devoted Christian believer, was not free from his religious biases in the crafting of his *American Dictionary of the English Language*. Although the *OALD* appears to be objective, it is also subject to the logocentric perception of language in mediating reality. All these lexicons reflect a need to fix language and consequently affix certain ideologies as standard and proper. Bierce on the other hand, was keenly aware about the inherent play of language and leaves the text open to multiple readings and interpretations. Engaged in a constant play of signification, the words in

Bierce's *Dictionary* do not fix to a specific signified, instead constitutes an infinite chain of signifiers where meaning is constantly differed and deferred. In the process, Bierce effectively subverts the Western binary logic that governs predominant societal institutions like religion and nationhood. Put differently, Bierce unveils the hidden masters in "proper" meanings, the politics of dictionary-making, and challenges the very logic of dictionary making in arresting the fluidity of language.

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