THE SOUL OF LOGOLOGY

What is logology, otherwise known as recreational linguistics? There appear to be two ways to define it: subjectively, as an intellectual quest that stimulates and beguiles its devotees, and objectively, as a body of organized knowledge. The advent of the computer has sharpened this debate. Consider this example: in the old days, a fourteen-letter pair isogram (each letter appears exactly twice in the word) such as TAENIODONTIDAE could be found only by lengthy dictionary-searching, and its publication in Word Ways in August 1971 was a celebration of human persistence. However, since the publication of Levine's computer-generated pattern word lists, one can look this word up in a minute or so. Is, therefore, TAENIODONTIDAE still a word of high interest to the logologist? The answer is yes if recreational linguistics is a body of knowledge, but no if it is regarded as an intellectual quest. If the objective view is held, the computer is merely a tool useful for enlarging the corpus of interesting word discoveries. On the other hand, if the subjective view is maintained, one can say that the computer has shifted the field of recreational linguistics; new topics of interest arise in which the human no longer undertakes laborious dictionary searches for logological gold, but collaborates with the computer on the solution of previously-impossible problems. An example: the November 1978 Word Ways presented a set of six words, HORNY HATED WIRES WOULD FITLY FAUNS, in which each pair of words contains exactly one crash (the same letter in the same position, as hOrny wOuld), and all letters participate in crashes; the problem of finding an analogous set of eight seven-letter words appears feasible only by the clever programming of a computer to juggle seven-letter word lists. Another example: the discovery of pangrammatic windows (short sections of text containing all letters of the alphabet) or alphabetic windows (short sections of text containing all letters of the alphabet in alphabetic order) becomes much more feasible as long bodies of text are put into computer files.

This dichotomy is, of course, not unique to logology. Perhaps its analogue in a very different field may prove illuminating, replacing a collection of facts with a collection of views (the scenic kind instead of the mental). Mount Washington in New Hampshire has a cog railway and motor road enabling the sedentary tourist to enjoy the view from the summit, yet thousands of hikers each year prefer to toil up steep rocky paths to the same spot. To them, the view is important, but how they achieve it is much more important – the posing and overcoming of a challenge takes priority. This analogy is imperfect, because in logology each researcher does not rediscover TAENIODONTIDAE by dictionary-searching merely for the sake of the challenge. A better analogy is found by noting that the development of the rocket and the means for precisely gui-

ding and controlling it has resulted in the creation of new and more spectacular views from earth orbit.

In any event, the subjectivist has no reason to fear that the computer will destroy his pleasure in creating logological structures – it will be a long time, if ever, before all word-sources and literary texts are placed in computer memory. (Similarly, no one will ever build roads to the top of every mountain.) Even if this should happen, there still exist fields of logology which the computer may never do well, such as the creation of poems and stories under linguistic constraint – long palindromes, pangrammatic sentences, and the like.

TRAFFIC

Long-time Word Ways readers may recall three poems by Tom Smith in the May, August and November 1977 issues, entitled Traffic: Complaints II, III and IV. These have now been incorporated in a longer work, composed of 125 statements, each one followed by five rearrangements of its letters, arrayed in five major sections entitled Complaints, Blessings, Speculations, Alphabets and Fables. Statements range from bits of homespun philosophy (Capitalism and Communism are the matched sandals of Mammon's two right feet) to twists on proverbs (great oafs from little fornications grow) to pop culture (Jean Harlow and Marilyn Monroe rot happily in the holy wood. Joe the Magus follows a falling star). The Alphabets section features each letter in turn (Opus Opossum: Orpheus ogles Ophelia – opal and opulent OPERA), making anagramming somewhat more difficult; short statements (WATS in a name?) also prove challenging. Smith, a professor of literature at Castleton State College in Vermont, loves to play with language in the spirit of Carroll and Nabokov. This zany poem, like Carroll's "Jabberwocky" or Sid Caesar's double talk, seems to have a deeper meaning underlying its nonsensical façade. Traffic is available for four dollars in a 92-page paperback from The Smith Publishers, 5 Beekman St., New York, NY 10038.