WEBSTER'S FOURTH: A REVIEW

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Editor's Note: 1909, 1934, 1961 ... from this series, one might predict that the fourth edition of the Merriam-Webster Unabridged will appear in 1990. Alas, this is no Halley's comet. According to the August 1985 issue of Games magazine, the Merriam-Webster editorial director flatly states "there are no plans for such a work", and a noted lexicographer and editor doubts that there ever will be: "uneconomical ... an unabridged simply doesn't sell enough copies". This article and the following one present two wistful (or, perhaps, wishful?) views of this unlikely work.

My copy of Stanislaw Lem's unusual book, A Perfect Vacuum, seems to be even more bizarre than the text to which the average reader is exposed. Written in Polish in 1971, it was first translated to English in 1978. I read this series of reviews with detached amusement - the exploits of escaped Nazi Siegfried Taudlitz, in Alfred Zellermann's Gruppenfuhrer Louis XVI, Patrick Hannahan's pedantic Gigamesh, and even Alfred Testa's overweight The New Cosmogony. A series of reviews, then, of imaginary works, most cleverly done, even to the strange and self-referential Introduction by the author, talking in the third person about himself. But at the very end, pencil-written into the last five blank pages (which are always to be found in such books) is yet another review, which I can only assume comes from the same hand, and yet, since erasable, I presume to be unique. And what is here reviewed is the yet unpublished Fourth Edition of Webster's New International Dictionary.

I cannot quote it at length (who knows what copyright laws apply?), and in parts the scrawl is unreadable. The scribbler complains a great deal. He seems put off by the fact that this new benchmark of the English language is published in two large-format paperbacks, and not in hardcover. He is even critical of the place where the first volume ends and the second begins, namely, halfway through the etymology of LINTWHITE, between "perh." and "akin". It seems to me that the need on the part of the reading public to seek this specific etymology is minuscule, so that virtually no one will be inconvenienced.

Because, no doubt, of the flap over the disappearance of capital letters for entries in the Third Edition, the editors have, it appears, reverted to the system used in the earliest Merriam-Webster dictionaries, namely, all entries are fully capitalized (all letters) and no further advice is given in the text which follows regarding capitalization. Much of our modern computer-written material is
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