

## 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 And what is here reviewed is the yet unpublished Fourth Edition of Webster's New International Dictionary.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 "a-kin". 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

all upper-case; it seems the editors have been far-sighted in predicting that we are headed toward a one-case written language, like Hebrew. The writer is even more critical of the decision (saving a great deal of space) to eliminate indications of pronunciation. This is no more than a logical extension of the permissiveness of pronunciation seen in the Third Edition, allowing, for example, eighteen acceptable varieties of YES, and implying even more. Mr. Lem (or whomever) must understand that in the West we value individual freedoms, and the choice to eliminate dogmatic pronunciation is a natural and logical outflow of the aspirations (so to speak) of our citizens.

The unusual treatment of place names in the Third Edition provoked spirited comment. It is true that we found it strange at first to see the entry for a certain city in Poland: lodz, "adj, usu cap". Why not "n, alw cap"? We now know better, and are quite comfortable with it. Our pencil-reviewer not only carps at this now well-established practice, but even more vehemently denounces the innovation in the Fourth Edition of entering other proper names in the same fashion. He singles out the following entries:

ECKLER: adj, of or pert to the style or actions of a person  
surnamed Eckler

MARVIN: adj, of or pert to the style or actions of a person  
forenamed Marvin.

One presumes that for names like Thomas, there would be separate entries to indicate the possibility of first or last names. Although we do not have the text to help us, I would wager that the Fourth Edition omits the forename Stanislaw, and the surname Lem, and the reviewer is simply tasting sour grapes. Altogether, I cannot imagine how a Pole could tackle so advanced a work of English scholarship as the Fourth Edition of Webster's New International Dictionary.