TRIBUTE TO A LOGOPHILE


His interest in words came from his lawyer father, Jacob W. Silverman, who

"... awakened me to the beautiful vagaries of our language even before I learned to read. His ear was finely tuned to puns, spoonerisms (many of them clean), and malapropisms, of which his store was enormous... Said an insurance claim adjustor: 'I'm afraid that matter's out of my Jewish diction!... I recall how Dad's eyebrows rose as we listened to a talk-show moderator: 'Frankly, I think he's barking up his sleeve.'"

Dave, too, had an uncommon sensitivity to the nuances of sound and meaning. He frequently reported choice tid-bits in Kickshaws: "I'm inclined to knock music"; "Engineers... uncovered the skeleton of a massive saurian that must have passed away 3,000,000 years ago last Thursday". In several early Kickshaws, he described the pitfalls of foreign-language translation and the shift of word-meanings over the centuries, emphasizing that this process continues today despite the tut-tuts of language pedants. Even spelling errors did not escape his keen eye: Silverman's Rule states that you can always find an error or inconsistency on a restaurant menu, no matter how elegant the establishment.

A mathematician by profession, Dave was also aware of the ambiguities of language. Unaware of Beyond Language, he introduced the concepts of self-descriptive words ("sesquipedalian" is sesquipedalian) and truthful numbers ("four" has four letters); later, he suggested that dictionary definitions, relying as they must on other dictionary words, must sooner or later chase their own tail (a particularly glaring example in an early printing of Webster's Second is RAFTMAN; a raftman, later corrected to raftman). But he was, perhaps, most charmed by real-life examples of ambiguous meaning like "desk-size computer", "a rather suspicious policeman" (filled with or inspiring suspicion?), and "left turn from this lane only" (two opposing interpretations were upheld in court cases in California and Arizona).

Dave was a fecund inventor and promoter of word games, most notably Crash and Sinko which were featured in Logomachy, a game-by-mail column among Word Ways readers in 1971 and 1972. Several of his games are based on mathematical or logical principles: Totter and Spoiler are disguised versions of tic-tac-toe, and The Forehead Game is reminiscent of logical problems in which a person must in-
fer the color of his hat from the hats of other players and their reac-
tions. Word Poker, introduced to Kickshaws readers by Dave in May
1971, spawned a host of investigations on five-letter words in alpha-
betical and reverse-alphabetical order (straight words), from the
first or last half of the alphabet (flush words), and both (straight
flushes).

Dave was much intrigued by cryptography, several times challeng-
ning readers with oddball ciphers such as a maddeningly difficult mes-
sage of 17 words in which one knew (1) the word-lengths, (2) the syl-
labication, (3) the dictionary order of the words, and (4) their parts
of speech. Deciphering his mini-crypts (for example, 12312114 324)
was a somewhat easier task.

He liked word lists, too. After I called his attention to Levine's
pattern word dictionary, he wrote

"I can't thank you enough for getting Jack Levine to send me that
isomorph catalog. As I wrote him, had I seen it in a bookstore,
I'd have paid the same price for it as for big Web III with no hesi-
tation. I love that book ... The only other book that I would go
even to Newark, N.J. to get my mitts on is a good anagram dic-
tionary ... If it has ANOINT-NATION, it gets a G. If it also has
AMERICAN-CINERAMA, it gets a B. If it also has BANALITIES-
INSATIABLE, it gets an A ... My theory is that no A-anagram
dictionary has ever existed."

It does now, Dave, at least in computer printout -- the Bell Telephone
Laboratories anagrammization of the big Web II on computer tape has
all three of these pairs. As a spoof, Dave several times referred to
the ultimate logological reference work, Chadwick's Guide for the
Wordsmith, consisting of alphabetical, reverse-alphabetical, isomorph-
ic, anagrammatic, syllabalarly, rhyming and other convenient listings
for English words, subdivided by word lengths from one letter to twen-
ty. (One reader wrote me to say that he had been unable to locate this
marvelous work in Books in Print.)

When I took over Word Ways from Greenwood in the fall of 1969,
Dave was the first to cheer me on.

"... who needs these big city philistines, who probably couldn't
care less about philomania, I beg your pardon, logophilia. All
we need is an iron man to continue it under the old title ... It
would be lovely if we could make a success of Word Ways on our
own. And I believe we can do it."

Most writers are too narcissistic (myself included) to give the follow-
ing permission to a new acquaintance:

"... I think enough of your taste to give you carte blanche on inser-
tions into K. If an item comes to you that you think appropriate
for K and you are pressed for time to check it out with me first,
by all means insert it on your own hook."
But Dave did have one fault that was exasperating to an editor: he could not deliver Kickshaws on time. Apparently he worked best under pressure ("I like to feel the tug of life -- without it I feel a human being is nowhere").

It was not for want of raw material, as the following excerpts from various letters show:

"...given time to write them (Kickshaws ideas) up, I could easily fill the next three years of WW... The backlog of K material I have is staggering... My objective will be to keep you 2 or more issues ahead with K stock, which will be supplemented with reader responses promptly... If I took 3 days vac. & pulled all the phones out of their jacks, I could retire to my home office, where I can't hear the doorbell when my tape deck is playing, & get off over 800 pages of unpadded K contribs... if I add my own stuff, more than 800 pages. I have boxes and legal size letter fileboxes crammed full of notes on K."

Dave was full of ideas for increasing Word Ways circulation to the point where a hired staff would be necessary. One, involving running an ad in a fair-to-large circulation magazine (such as Saturday Review) featuring a contest with a substantial prize, open only to readers who took out a Word Ways subscription, seemed unlikely to pay for itself with long-term subscribers. His idea that we should ask big foundations for financial support seemed equally visionary. His most practical suggestion was a "plant" (a logistical germ, such as an anagram of a presidential name) in a national magazine.

In 1976, Dave asked to be relieved of his Kickshaws responsibilities, commenting "...when the stuff fails to flow and must be squeezed a little, that's a good time to make a change." True enough -- but why did this failure occur? Were new interests crowding out old ones? (Dave had his fingers in many pies.) Was he disappointed that Word Ways had not expanded as rapidly as he had hoped? Was mental fatigue brought on by overwork, from juggling too many projects at once? (He once wrote that he couldn't remember the last day he spent just goofing off.) Or did he, God forbid, foresee his death, and wish to ease the transition for the rest of us? (In his last year, he also reduced or ceased activity in the National Puzzlers' League and the Journal of Recreational Mathematics.) We shall never know.