KICKSHAWS

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For more than six decades I’ve had the joy of writing about language — from puns to punctuation, pronouns to pronunciation, diction to dictionaries, palaver to palindromes. From the time I began pouring my words about words into textbooks, journals, and books, I have always felt that I was writing about the most deeply human of inventions — language. Words and people are inextricably bound together. Whether the ground of your being is religion or science, you find that language is the hallmark, the defining characteristic that distinguishes humankind from the other creatures that walk and run and crawl and swim and fly and burrow in our world.

In the Genesis creation story that so majestically begins the Bible (Genesis 1:1-31; 2:1-6), we note the frequency and importance of verbs of speaking: “And God said, Let there be light; and there was light. . . . And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. . . . And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters. . . . And God called the firmament Heaven. . . . And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth”; and the gathering together of the waters called the Seas; And God saw that it was good.[Emphasis mine.]

Note those verbs of speaking and naming. God doesn’t just snap his fingers to bring the things of the universe into existence. He speaks them into being and then names each one.

And what happens when God creates Adam?: “And out of the ground the lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof” (Genesis 2:19-22). In other words, Adam (Hebrew for “humankind”) does what God has done: He names things; he names voraciously; he names everything. Perhaps this is what the Bible means in Genesis 1:26-27: “And God said, Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness. . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him, male and female created he them.” Like God, man is a speaker and a namer.

If your mythos is science, you believe that many early hominid species, some of them co-existing, preceded the tenure of Homo sapiens. Today we take for granted that we are the only hominids on Earth, yet for at least four million years many hominid creatures shared the planet, including Homo habilis, Homo erectus, and, of course, Homo neanderthalensis.
What made us different? What allowed us to survive while our precursors disappeared? The answer is on the tip of our tongues. While some of these other species possessed the physical apparatus to talk, only with *Homo sapiens* did speech tremble into birth, did speech join forces with thought, did speech become creative and generative, did speech inflame us to name everything.

The birth of language is the dawn of humanity, and each is as old as the other. The appearance of language made us human, and our humanity ensured the survival of language. We human beings have always had language because before we had it, we were not fully human and the sounds that escaped from the holes in hominid faces were not fully language. Not only do we possess language; we *are* language.

*A Word About Words*

Loop the s from the back to the front and your words become your sword. The day we put away our sword and use words instead will be the day we become truly civilized.

The word word is an autological word, one that expresses a property that it also possesses itself. That is, word is itself a word. Most words aren’t what they signify. For example, book isn’t a book, and there isn’t anything especially happy about happy. Preposition isn’t a preposition, and sentence isn’t a sentence. Words such as big and monosyllabic turn out to look the opposite of what they mean.

Here’s a line-up of my favorite autological words. Can you identify why each one is self-referential?:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>boldface</th>
<th>grandiloquent</th>
<th>sesquipedalian</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CAPITALIZED</td>
<td><em>italics</em></td>
<td><em>trochee</em></td>
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<td>English</td>
<td><em>lowercased</em></td>
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<td>esoteric</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>unhyphenated</td>
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<td>euphonious</td>
<td>oxymoron</td>
<td>visible</td>
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<tr>
<td>four</td>
<td>pentasyllabic</td>
<td>wee</td>
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*Our Letter-Perfect Language*

The word alphabet is a joining of the first two letters of the Greek alphabet, *alpha* and *beta*. The Greeks inherited their letters from the Phoenicians, who probably took their alpha from the Hebrew *aleph*, “ox.”

From alpha to omega,
    You can bet the alphabet,
Like a painting done by Degas,
    Will leap and pirouette.

See dancing words, entrancing words,
Sterling words unfurling.
Watch prancing words, enhancing words,
Whirling, twirling, swirling.

A Crossword Centennial

The word crossword is the reverse of its original form. The first such puzzle was concocted by one Arthur S. Wynne, a journalist from Liverpool and games section editor of the New York World. On December 21, 1913, Wynne’s poser appeared in the Sunday edition of the New York World, radiating into a diamond and containing no black squares. He modeled the puzzle after the traditional British word square, a group of words whose letters are arranged so they will read the same horizontally and vertically. No surprise, then, that Wynne christened his creation word-cross.

Four weeks later, typesetters at the newspaper inadvertently switched the two halves of word-cross, and —presto! change-o! — the crossword puzzle was born.

In 1924, in an era of mah-jongg, goldfish swallowing, and bicycle racing, among other fads, Richard L. Simon and M. Lincoln Schuster published three thousand copies of a book of fifty crossword puzzles titled The Cross Word Puzzle Book. The two men chose the imprint “The Plaza Publishing Company” (Plaza was their telephone exchange) in order to deflect the unfavorable feedback they were anticipating. Instead, the book sold forty thousand copies right off. Publishing giant Simon & Schuster was launched.

Crosswords became the biggest puzzle craze ever, and the publishing company of Simon & Schuster was born. The rage for crossword puzzles continued full blast into and through the Great Depression; and even today, they remain the most popular word game in the world.

The Rise of the House of Usher

Like humanity, usher has a long history, going all the way back to the Latin ostium, “door,” related to os, “mouth,” because a door was likened to the mouth of a building. Usher, then, turns out to be a body metaphor for a person who stands at a door.

Has there ever been another word as human as usher? In sound and meaning it is not a paragon among words, but it accommodates the full spectrum of humankind. Living in the house of usher, within its brief compass of five letters, we find, with the order of letters preserved, the pronouns us, she, he, and her.

Usher winkingly reminds us that all words are created by people and that language unfailingly reflects the thrilling contradictions of our kind. Thus, even though writers write, bakers bake, hunters hunt, preachers preach, and teachers teach, grocers don’t groce, butchers don’t butch, carpenters don’t carpent, milliners don’t millin, haberdashers don’t haberdash — and ushers don’t ush.
Brand New Letter Play

Brand names spring from the practice of branding animals — and human beings — to indicate ownership. A product that is *brand new* is as fresh as a newly branded calf. A number of trademarked items lend themselves to letter play:

- *Wal-Mart* spoonerized becomes a *Mall Wart*.

- *Tylenol*, *Pepsi*, and *Yamaha* are among the product names that cry out to be palindromed: *lonely Tylenol, Pepsi is pep*, and *Ah, May, a Yamaha*.

- Reversing another brand name, we wonder are the purveyors of *Evian* bottled water trying to put something over on us? No? Then why is the *Evian* brand name *naive* spelled backwards?

- Even more infelicitous are the reversals of the products *Tums, Dial*, and *Tulsa* (gasoline).

- If you chew a *Tic Tac*, switching the two halves of the pellet, that could be a wise social *TacTic*.

- If you tack an *s* onto the end of *Saltines*, you get *saltiness*.

- *Advil* anagrams into *valid* and *Spandex* into *expands*.

- *Camry* yields, with letters in order, *my* and then, from what’s left, *car*. The name of the manufacturer of the Camry is Toyota. Capitalized, A *TOYOTA* is not just a palindrome; every letter therein features left-right symmetry and is itself palindromic. *Civic* automobile is a palindrome composed of Roman numerals.

Here are a dozen more palindromic brand names:

- **Aviva** (insurance)    **Mum** (deodorant)    **S.O.S.** (scouring pads)
- **Aziza** (cosmetics)    **Noxon** (silver polish)    **TNT** (TV channel)
- **Elle** (magazine)      **Pep** (cereal)       **Tat** (insect repellent)
- **Eve** (cigarettes)    **See’s** (candies)          **Xanax** (sedative)

How sweet it is: Rearrange every letter in *Episcopal*, and you end up with *a Popsicle* and *Pepsi-Cola*. That’s not as accidental as you might think.

Pepsi-Cola was invented in 1893 in New Bern, North Carolina, by a pharmacist
named Caleb Bradham, who owned a drugstore just across the street from the town's Episcopal church. According to town lore, the concoction went by the name "Brad's Drink" for several years, but the inventor wasn't completely happy with that. One day, according to the story, he glanced across the street and looked at the sign in front of the Episcopal church in a whole new way.

Ambidexterity

*Ambidextrous*, from Latin roots meaning "using both the left and right hands with equal ease," is a twelve-letter word in which the first six letters — *ambide* — are drawn from the left-hand side of the alphabet and the second six letters — *xtrous* — are from the right side. *Ambidextrous* is also a twelve-letter isogram, meaning that no letter is repeated. The word features all five major vowels, almost in order, and remains an isogram with a sixth vowel in *ambidextrously*.

The opposite of *ambidextrous* is *ambisinister*: "clumsy, as if possessing two left hands."

A Circus of Words

When you say or write a *three-ring circus*, you are actually repeating yourself because *circus* echoes *kirkos*, the Greek word for "ring, circle."

"Hey, First-of-May! Tell the butcher in the back yard to stay away from the bulls, humps, stripes, and painted ponies. We have some cherry pie for him before doors and spec.” Sound like doubletalk? Actually, it’s circus talk — or, more technically, circus argot, argot being a specialized vocabulary used by a particular group for mutual bonding and private communication. Communities are most likely to develop a colorful argot when they have limited contact with the world outside of their group. The circus community is a perfect example of the almost monastic self-containment in which argot flourishes. Big top people travel in very close quarters, and because they usually go into a town, set up, do a show, tear down, and leave, they have little contact with the locals. They socialize with each other, they intermarry, and their children acquire the argot from the time they start to talk.

*First-of-May* designates anyone who is brand-new to circus work. That’s because circuses used to start their tours around the first day in May. A *candy butcher* is a concessionaire who sells cotton candy (*floss*) and other food, along with drinks and souvenirs, to the audience during the show. The *backyard* is the place just behind the circus entrance where performers wait to do their acts. A *bull* is a circus elephant, even though most of them are female. Among other circus beasts, *humps, stripes, and painted ponies* are, respectively, camels, tigers, and zebras. *Cherry pie* is extra work, probably from *chairy pie*, the setting up of extra chairs around the arena. *Doors!* is the cry that tells circus folk that the audience is coming in to take their seats, and *spec* is short for *spectacle*, the big parade of all the performers.

Trust me: This topic ain’t no *dog and pony show* — the designation for a small circus with just a few acts, also known as a *mud show*. 
What we call the toilet circus folk call the *donniker*, the hot dog or grill concession trailer where the circus can snag a snack is a *grease joint*, and a circus performer is a *kinker*. The townspeople are *towners or rubes*. In the old days, when large groups of towners who believed (sometimes accurately) that they had been fleeced by dishonest circus people, they would come back in a mob to seek retribution. The cry *Hey rube!* went out, and everyone knew that the fight was on.

During a fund drive for WNYC public radio, I fielded questions from New York’s finest listeners. At some point, host Leonard Lopate pitched this line: “It costs this station almost $700,000 a year to buy all the national programs you hear each weekend. That’s a really big nut to make.”

Sure enough, a listener called in to ask the origin of *making the nut*. I love questions like that because I get my audio radiance from my radio audience, and I explained to the listener that when a circus came to town, the sheriff would often remove the nut from the wheel of the main wagon. Because in bygone days these nuts were elaborately and individually crafted, they were well-nigh impossible to replace. Thus, the circus couldn’t leave town until the costs of land and utilities rental, easements, and security were paid. It’s but a short metaphorical leap to the modern meaning of *making the nut*, “meeting one’s expenses.”

In circus argot, a full house is called a *straw house* from the days when straw would be laid down in front of the seats to accommodate more people than the seats could hold. Distances between engagements were called *jumps*. Thus, an old circus toast rings out: “May your lots be grassy, your jumps short, and your houses straw.”

Nothing now to mark the spot
   But a littered vacant lot.
Sawdust in a heap, and where
   The center ring stood, grass worn bare.

But remains the alphabet,
   Ready to leap and pirouette.
May the spangled letters soar
   In your head forevemore.

*Daniel: the Ditty*

Often, the more demanding the restrictions, the more fun I have making a poem. The last time Dave Morice and I got together in person, his word-besotted, word-bethumped presence inspired me to create this little ditty, in which each of the eleven lines is composed of just the six letters in the name *Daniel*:

An idle
Lead-in
Ad line:
DANIEL,
Nailed
In deal
(i.e., land
In dale),
Led in a
Denial
And lie.

Elizabethan Onomastics


More Fun with Names

Have you heard about . . .

• the Irish botanist Phil O'Dendron;
• the Irish theater owner Nick O'Lodeon;
• the Irish cigarette manufacturer Nick O'Teen;
• the Irish marksman Rick O'Shay;
• the Irish meteorologist Barry O'Metric;
• the Irish manufacturer of flooring Lynn O'Leum;
• the Irish printer Mimi O'Graph;
• the Irish playwright Mel O'Drama;
• the Irish poet Ann O'Nymous;
• the Irish linguist Phil O'Logical;
• the Irish ornithologist Bob O'Link;
the Irish singers Mary O'Lanza and Carrie O'Key; 

and the Irish designer for outdoor living Patty O'Furniture?

It's About Time

William Shakespeare spoke of people who “run before the clock,” as if the hands of the clock would sweep them away if they did not hustle their bustles. In the English-speaking world so many of us seem to be working harder and taking fewer and shorter vacations. The Oxford English Corpus list of word frequencies confirms that obsession with time and productivity by revealing that time is the most frequently used noun in our language. Year is ranked third, day fifth, work sixteenth, and week seventeenth.

In his poem “To His Coy Mistress,” the English poet Andrew Marvell wrote, “But at my back I always hear/Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near.” According to the Oxford English Corpus frequency list, time’s wingèd chariot is running us over.

Time is also a perfect anagram: “Now is the time to emit information about an item that may help you a mite.” Have you ever noted how ambiguous are statements that involve time?:

- “Let’s push up [or back] that appointment by two days.” Does that mean that the appointment will now be two days earlier or later?
- “I’ll see you next Wednesday.” Is that the Wednesday coming up, or the one after that?
- “Our biannual meeting is very important.” Does that meeting take place twice a year or every other year?
- “The boss will see you momentarily.” Will the boss see you in a moment or for a moment?
- “When are the boss and her staff convening?” “Presently.” Does presently mean “now” or “soon”?
- “Since 1988, the company has been in the forefront of technological creativity.” Does that innovativeness include 1988?
- “The train arrives at 12 A.M.” Is that noon or midnight?

It’s amazing that we English speakers ever get any place on time.

Punderful Etymologies
Scoffing at puns is a conditioned reflex, and through the centuries groan-ups have aimed a steady barrage of libel and slander at pun ladies and pun gents. Three hundred years ago, the playwright and critic John Dennis sneered, “A pun is the lowest form of wit.” Many of you know me as an incorrigible punster – please don’t incorrig! – who agrees with the witty Henry Erskine that a pun is indeed the lowest form of wit because it is the foundation of all wit. For me and my many pun pals, punning is a rewording experience that, like a good steak, can be a rare medium well done.

Whatever your opinion about puns, the art of crafty punnery has played a part in the formation of a number of compounds and expressions. Take funny bone. Technically the so-called funny bone is the ulnar nerve that causes that tingly sensation when we strike our arm. But the source of that feeling is the knob on the end of the bone running from the shoulder to the elbow. The medical name for that bone is the humerus, and back in 1840 some wag seized upon the homophonic similarity of humerus and humorous and dubbed the humerus the funny bone, a learned pun that has become part of our language.

Some etymological puns are a lot older. “Dead as a doornail” has been wheezed for more than six hundred years. In 1350 an anonymous poet, describing the hunting of a deer, wrote: “And happened that I hitt him be-hynde the left sholdire./Ded as a dore nail was he fallen.” A doornail was a large-headed nail or bolt with which long-ago carpenters studded doors to strengthen and decorate them. Because metal nails were precious then, the carpenters would hook the tip of the nail back to “clinch” the nail (as we clinch a deal), making it hold fast. The nail was “dead,” meaning “fixed, rigid, immovable,” as in deadline and deadlock. Carpenters today still use the term “dead-nailing.”

This meaning of “fixed, rigid, immovable” cried out to be punned with the older (A.D. 939) and more common meaning of “not alive.” The association became clinched in our language, and many of us first learned this simile in the opening of Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol, in which Scrooge himself cogitates about the deadness of doornails:

Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it. And Scrooge’s name was good upon ‘Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to.

Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

Mind! I don’t mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb it, or the Country’s done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

The same kind of wordplay occurs in the simile “smart as a whip.” What’s so smart about a whip? Delving into the history of smart, we find that the word first meant “inflicting or causing pain” (1023). Gradually the adjective took on additional meanings, including “having a certain degree of integrity, force, and strength” (1184) as in “look smart!” and, by extension,
“clever in thought or argument” (1639). *Smart as a whip* punderfully unites the original signification and the most pervasive (at least in the U.S.) meaning of *smart.*

Much newer is *couch potato,* which made its debut in U.S. slang in the 1970s. The compound compares lumpish watchers of television to lumpy potatoes: The longer couch potatoes sit, the deeper they put down their roots and the more they come to resemble potatoes. But there’s more than just a vegetable image here. *The Real McCoy* (Georgia Hole, ed.; Oxford University Press, 2005) explains:

The origins of the phrase are much cleverer than simply an image however, since it actually relies on a pun with the word ‘tuber.’ A potato is the tuber of a plant, while *boob tube* was an earlier term for someone watching the *boob tube* or television.

In some instances of semantic development, Samuel Beckett’s proclamation that “In the beginning was the pun” turns out to be true. Whether or not the pun is the foundation of all wit, the device is the foundation of some of the most sprightly word histories in the English language.

**No Zoo in Zoology**

Being both a bird watcher and a word botcher, I recently took my three granddaughters to the San Diego Wild Animal Park, where we attended “Frequent Flyers,” the famous bird show. Our family enjoyed various avians strutting their stuff on the ground, hawks swooping down from the sky, and a gray parrot squawking and squeaking all sorts of sound effects.

In their ongoing narrative, two of the Wild Animal Park’s trainers kept pronouncing the name of the San Diego Zoological Society as *ZOO-uh-LAHJ-i-kul society.* After the performance, I mentioned to the two young women in private that there are two, not three, o’s in *zoological* so the proper sounding is *ZOH-uh-LAHJ-i-kul.* They told me they knew that but had been instructed by their bosses to say *ZOO-uh-LAHJ-i-kul* because people wouldn’t understand the proper pronunciation. Glug. Talk about the dumbing down of America.

Pronunciation maven Charles Harrington Elster points out that there is no *zoo* in *zoology,* no *noun* in *pronunciation,* no *point* in *poinsettia,* no *sick* in *psychiatrist,* no *spear* in *experiment,* no *wine* in *genuine* or *sanguine,* no *berry* in *library,* no *shoe* in *eschew,* no *art* in *arctic,* no *ant* in *defendant,* no *foe* in *forward* and *foreword,* no *pair* in *comparable,* no *day* in *deity,* no *sea* in *oceanic,* no *she* in *controversial,* no *punk* in *pumpkin,* no *eve* in *evolution,* no *pen* in *penalize,* no *pitch* in *picture,* no *pole* in *police,* no *pot* in *potpourri,* no *ex* in *espresso,* no *Arthur* in *arthritis,* no *Bert* in *sherbet,* no *sees* in *species,* no *deer* in *idea,* no *ram* in *ignoramus,* no *tang* in *orangutan,* no *mitten* in *badminton,* no *tie* in *tyrannical,* no *lock* in *lilac,* no *port* in *rapport,* no *beast* in *bestial,* no *doe* in *docile,* no *beau* in *boutique,* no *owner* is *onerous,* no *spite* in *respite,* no *oh* in *myopic,* no *brew* in *brooch,* no *over* in *hover,* no *reek* in *recluse,* no *sewer* in *connoisseur,* no *sees* in *processes,* no *nix* in *larynx,* no *home* in *homicide,* no *gal* in *gala,* no *mire* in *admirable,* no *chick* in *chic,* no *click* in *clique,* no *me* or *Lee* in *melee,* no *ray* in *lingerie,* no *dye* in *dais,* no *oral* in *pastoral,* *peculiar,* *electoral,* and *mayoral,* no *air* in *err,* no *restaurant* in *restaurateur,* no *stray* in *illustrative* and *menstruation,* no *spar* in *disparate,* no
rounded in drowned, no vice in vice versa, no nominee in ignominy, no mash in machination, no spire in respiratory, no late in prelate, no pray in prelude, no magnet in magnate, no dare in modernity, no eye in Iran and Iraq, no you in jaguar and February, no pew in Pulitzer, no clue in Ku Klux Klan, no Poe in impotent, no cane in Spokane, no cue in coupon and nuclear, and no anus in Uranus (which reminds me of a famous headline blooper in the Boston Globe: IS THERE A RING OF DEBRIS AROUND URANUS?).

**Our Intoxicating English Language**

Tireless researcher Paul Dickson has uncovered 2,964 synonyms for *drunk*. The entries range from the euphemistic *tired* to the comical *plastered*, from the nautical *afloat* to the erudite *Bacchi-plemus*, from the elegant *inebriated* to the scatological *shit-faced*, from the rhyming *whiskey frisky* to the time-bound *Boris Yeltsinned*, and from the terminal *stiff* to the uncategorizable *zoozled*. Surely a world record for synonyms.

Another fancy synonym for *drunk* is *intoxicated*. The Greek word *toxon* meant “bow” (as in “arrow launcher”). The poison Greek warriors used to tip their arrows took on the name *toxikon*. Ultimately that poison became embedded in our word *intoxicate*, having traveled from the Greek military through late Latin *intoxicatus* to the drunken fellow who slurs, "Name your poison."

I’ve always thought that English is a truly intoxicating language, so I’m not surprised at the findings of scientists in India who discovered a way to convert old newspapers into alcohol. The cellulose in the newsprint is broken down by a fungus into glucose and then fermented with yeast. Although they can’t explain why, the inventors of the process have discovered that old copies of the upscale English-language daily *Hindustan Times* yield the most intoxicating results, more mind-spinning than the Indian-language newspapers.

Language holds the great power to intoxicate us, as Emily Dickinson proclaimed so vividly:

I taste a liquor never brewed —
From Tankards scooped in Pearl —
Not all the vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of Air — am I —
And Debauchee of Dew —
Reeling — thro endless summer days —
From inns of Molten Blue.

**A Concluding Toast**

In the days of Queen Elizabeth I and William Shakespeare, people would place slices of spiced toast into their tankards of ale or glasses of wine to improve the flavor and remove the
impurities. The drink itself became a “toast,” as did the gesture of drinking to another’s good health.

Centuries later, an eastern farmer in the United States who had decided to move west would stop by the local tavern to say good-bye to friends and neighbors. They would toast him with Here’s mud in your eye, which meant “May you find soft, rich, dark, and moist soil that will be thrown up as specks of mud as you plow it.”

Playing with our glorious, uproarious, notorious, outrageous, courageous, contagious, tremendous, stupendous, end-over-endous language can only improve the flavor of our lives, diminish the impurities, and cultivate the fertile mind.

So I close with this chiasmic toast: “Here’s champagne to our real friends, and real pain to our sham friends.”

AN ANCIENT FRENCH PUZZLE

By Anon

— On m’a pris mon baudet, mon cher Aliboron!
— Calmez-vous, père Jean, j’ai pincé le larron
   Et ramène la bête
Dont ici l’on peut déjà voir la tête.