

WHERE IS THE POETRY OF MUSHROOMS?

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Consider the following list of words: and, doubly, down, dying, dust, from, go, he, shall, sprung, the, to, unhonoured, unsung, unwept, vile, whence, wretched. Apart from being arranged alphabetically, they seem to be a rather random collection. At best, the reader might infer a vague unwholesome feeling from words like “vile,” “wretch” and three negative prefixes, but any deeper meaning remains elusive. A grammarian, applying study and understanding of language, might come up with a classification as in Table 1, making this list more meaningful. Arranging words according to their function opens up an understanding of the role of different parts of speech and how they work together to produce language. Thus, ranking gives greater insights into how language works. A lexicographer can take it further by writing a dictionary where each

word is arranged alphabetically, its part of speech function given, as well as the pronunciation, etymology, use, synonyms and meaning. Anyone in love with language can derive lot of pleasure from an increasingly deeper pursuit of the meaning, derivation and function of words, and serious scholars will gladly devote their lives to this study

The parallel of linguistics and mycology is quite apt. Language is a living thing. Linguists do not create language, words or rules of grammar, but merely try to capture their usage as accurately as possible. As usage evolves, so do the meanings of words, their function and the rules of grammar. It is not the linguist who makes speech possible by listing words from which a speaker may choose. Quite the opposite, the speaker uses words to communicate; from this the linguist gleans words, their meaning and the rules that govern their use. Similarly, mycologists do not create species or their interrelation to each other or other organisms. They merely try to set down what they find in nature.

As nature changes, so does mycology.

Because our understanding of nature is incomplete, adjustments to mycological interpretations also come about to reflect better understanding. Perhaps genetic sequencing becomes the equivalent of etymology, providing insights into development and evolution, but in the end we are still left with a list. A seminal difference between words and mushrooms is that words were created by man and mushrooms were not. The primary purpose of words is not to provide a furrow for inquiring linguists to plow, but to serve as tools of communication. Being the creator of words, it is their user, not their student, who is their master. No amount of philology in the world can deduce a higher meaning from the words in the opening list, but the poet, without needing recourse to any dictionary, can select the same words and set them in an order that predicts a fate most damnable:

The wretch,... doubly dying
shall go down
To the vile dust from
whence he sprung,
Unwept, unhonoured and unsung.
(Walter Scott—a few phrases left
out to accommodate contemporary
attention spans)

Perhaps not the most sublime of poetry, certainly not the most subtle, Sir Walter’s disparaging diagnosis of *Animus mortuus* and prediction of ignoble demise for those who do not share his ideology or means of expressing it, would certainly not be considered politically correct today. However, not only in the context of its era, but also by today’s standards, those lines remain without a doubt as forceful and emotional a vilification of one’s fellow man as can be found. The reason for the negative connotation of the list is now clear, the

| VERB | NOUN | ADJECTIVE | ADVERB | PREPOSITION | PRONOUN | ARTICLE | CONJUNCTION |
|--------|--------|------------|--------|-------------|---------|---------|-------------|
| dying | dust | unhonoured | doubly | from | he | the | and |
| go | wretch | unsung | down | to | | | |
| shall | | unwept | whence | | | | |
| sprung | | vile | | | | | |

list which itself gave no true hint of the powerful feelings hidden within its words.

As with words, the purpose of mushrooms is not to provide a fertile field of inquiry for mycologists. However, because we did not create mushrooms, we can only guess at their *raison d'être*. Not knowing their purpose and not being their creators, we are not their masters. We can pursue them with scholarly enquiry, creating more complete lists, discovering increasing details about their function and interconnectedness. No matter the depth of mycology we plumb, our discoveries will not yield up the secrets they contain if viewed from another level.

Wordsworth, contemporary to the earlier quoted Walter Scott, was wrong when he wrote (also with some helpful omissions):

How exquisitely the individual
Mind..... to the external World
is fitted:—and how exquisitely,
too,... The external World is fitted
to the Mind.

Study of the external World, mycology in our case, is hard work, far from an automatic fit. If the requisite time and energy were spent conscientiously, the diligent student may indeed be rewarded with a semblance of rudimentary fit. However, the most learned of mycologists willingly admits how woefully awkward this fit is—both ways. A fit, yes, but exquisite? Hardly. What a Wordsworth or Scott can do with language can be exquisite. The best all we students of mycology can produce is the equivalent of an exquisite dictionary. It is true that a complete dictionary has all the words of all the great books in it. That does not make it any of these great books. Not for us, the metalevel where

the poetry of mushrooms takes place.

Or is it? What about the artist? Consider a chef. A Philistine from the scientist's vantage point, the chef ignores every room in the carefully erected edifice of mycological knowledge. The mushroom's scientific name, its genus or family, its phylogenetic lineage, the electrophoretic gel pattern of its nLSU site, how far its cuticle peels, the transferases in its cell wall, its ranking, its habitat, its substrate, the color of its scabers, its clade position or bootstrap status, whether it is a parasite, saprobe or a mycorrhizal mutualist, the clamps in its septa, the workings of its mitochondria, its way of sporulation, whether it is hygrophanous, the size of its spores or the nature of its gill attachment, even the translucency of its cap—all this and more is like Hecuba to the cook, because none of this knowledge will shed any light on how this mushroom will taste, whether it will spice up more pacific fare or bring a pastoral calm to a piquant dish, whether it will enhance or compete with its victual partners, whether the flavor will be revealed best if quickly fried in butter or gently sautéed in cream, whether its texture will complement other textures or whether flavor is best revealed through a duxelle, whether adding onion will bring out or overpower its flavor, and the many other nuances of savor and bouquet that a master must select with precision to produce exquisite table delicacies.

The cook is as ignorant of the science of mushrooms as the speaker is of the science of words, yet both use their respective material to effect, depending on their ability. The master poet can create exquisite poetry using words, without knowing their parsing, much as the master chef can create an exquisite repast using mushrooms, without knowing their parsimony. The

mechanism used by the artist to achieve this is simple: assume mastery over mushrooms. Ignore that you did not create them and treat them as if you did, for your very own discretionary use. Approach them for what they are, regardless of what they are thought to be in an ever-evolving and imperfect discipline. This is as true for the master chef at one level, as it is for the more pedestrian of us, getting an uplifting aesthetic experience just from enjoying their beauty at another level. The use of mushrooms as tools to create is perhaps the closest we shall get to the poetry of mushrooms.

I went to the foray, picked a mushroom and spent considerable time identifying it. With expert help I finally learned what it was. I looked it up and marveled at the intricate way it lived in partnership with some green algae. What a system, what an arrangement! I saw Rob with his cheerful, ruddy face and rushed off to share my discovery with him. "Don't bother me with them foreign names, bye," he said to me. "All I wants to know is what to cook with me moose steak." Thinking on this, I realized that Rob was the poet, the master of mushrooms, using them to create, while I tried to emulate a scientist, delving deeper and deeper into the mystery of fungi, destined never to master them. Rob could create a moose steak with mushrooms and onions. All I could ever hope to achieve was a small contribution toward an ever-increasing and complicated dictionary. That's the beauty of a good mushroom foray. It has room for scientist, photographer, artist and poet. Everyone's goals and expectations are legitimate and all can share their fulfillment in good fellowship. The foray is where the scientist can enjoy the privileged company of the poets, the true masters of mushrooms. ♣