

1000 MOST OBSCURE WORDS

NORMAN W. SCHUR

A COMPENDIUM OF INIMITABLE AND
ECCENTRIC LOCUTIONS THAT TOTTER
DELIGHTFULLY ON THE MARGINS OF
OUR LINGUISTIC INHERITANCE

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A COLLECTION OF UNSUNG, UN-
RENOUNDED AND UNFAMILIAR TERMS IN
ENGLISH, INCLUDING DEFINITIONS,
ETYMOLOGIES AND SAMPLE USAGE

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A HIGHLY ENTERTAINING AND
ENLIGHTENING WORD BOOK FOR
THOSE WHO HAVE ALWAYS WANTED TO
STAND UP AND CHEER FOR THE
LEXICOGRAPHICAL UNDERDOG

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Norman W. Schur



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For Marjorie, as always

Acknowledgments

(Written on my 81st birthday)

This is my fourth “1000 Word” book. In my previous works in this series (*1000 Most Important Words, 1000 Most Practical Words, 1000 Most Challenging Words*) I expressed my gratitude to kind and helpful friends. This time, I must add my thanks to three who have supported me throughout: Laurence Urdang, unarguably the best lexicographer I have had the good fortune to know; Paul S. Falla, a man of catholic knowledge, a genius in the world of words (I am deeply grateful not only for their help but for the friendships that have grown out of our common interest); and my son-in-law Eric Weber, a word expert in his own right, who many years ago urged me to enter the field. Without his help and encouragement I might have remained mute. I owe to Eric an unrepayable debt of gratitude for my enjoyment of a second career after a lifetime in the law. Thank you, Larry, Paul and Eric.

From time to time I have resorted to quotations given in various dictionaries, principally the *O.E.D.* and *Webster's Third*, as examples of the meaning and proper use of a headword. I am deeply conscious of the debt owed to those who have labored to uncover and amass those quotations, which might otherwise have been beyond the reach of one who toils alone.

Preface

I don't favor the use of complex words when simple ones will do. The main purpose of language is to communicate. Then why a book of obscure words? Mainly because they are fun and incidentally enlightening. I quote from a recent article by Joe D. Thomas, Professor Emeritus of English at Rice University: "One always refers to language as a tool; but after playing around with it for more years than there legitimately are, I tell you that it is also, in a vulgar phrase, *something else*. More precious than pearls of any price, it is a marvelous toy, a plaything of the mind."

The words in this collection are hardly ones you will run into, let alone use. But they are legitimate words, blessed by the cachet of established dictionaries that celebrate the wealth of our language, and the etymological material they evoke demonstrates our debt to the so-called dead languages, particularly those of Greece and Rome (though words from other sources appear as well). You may occasionally be surprised to find a familiar word among the entries, e.g., *aftermath, copy, dudgeon, ell, patriarch, relief, thesis*; they have been included only because they have certain unfamiliar, "obscure" applications.

I have written books that help in the expansion of vocabulary, books that aid, encourage and even challenge people to improve their verbal equipment. This book is different. It may have an incidental educational effect, but its main purpose is entertainment.

I take the liberty of quoting from the frontispiece of my *1000 Most Challenging Words*. First, the opening lines of a poem by Dryden:

Latine is now of equal use become
To Englishmen, as was the Greek to Rome;
It guides our language, nothing is exprest
Gracefull or true but by the Roman test.

Next, some lines from Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*:

Beside, 'tis known he could speak Greek
As naturally as pigs squeak:
That Latin was no more difficile,
Than to a black-bird 'tis to whistle.

(Obviously, *difficile* has to be pronounced di FIS il to conform to *whistle*.)

Finally, from the *Panegyric on Tom Coriate* by Lionel Cranfield, Earl of Middlesex:

He Greek and Latin speaks with greater ease
Than hogs eat acorns, and tame pigeons peas.

(Cranfield's couplet preceded Butler's *Hudibras* by a good many years. Would we could match the facility of Tom Coriate!)

That's the way it was once upon a time. Can we ever hope for a classical revival? (I am sure the reader understands that wherever the word *Greek* appears in the etymological discussion, I am referring to the Greek tongue of ancient times and that, to meet the needs of most contemporary readers, Greek words and combining forms are set forth in transliteration: the spelling of the words of one language in the more or less corresponding letters of the alphabet of another. Of the 24 letters of the Greek alphabet, only a few would be recognizable to those not versed in the classics, as the forerunners of their contemporary English equivalents.) Might a book like this spark some interest in those old, time-honored ancient tongues? If so, it would go to show that fun's not only fun but may sometimes produce unexpected results. I hope so.

Key to Abbreviations

Throughout the text abbreviations are used to refer to the following seven dictionaries:

- CH* *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*
- C.O.D.* *Concise Oxford Dictionary*
- LS* *Liddell and Scott Greek English Lexicon*
- O.E.D.* *Oxford English Dictionary*
- RH* *Random House Dictionary, Unabridged*
- W II* *Webster's Second New International Dictionary*
- W III* *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*

Key to Pronunciation

"a"	for "a" as in "hat"
"ay" or "a—e"	for "a" as in "hate"
"ah"	for "a" as in "bah," "o" as in gone
"air"	for "a" as in "dare," "ai" as in "air"
"a(r)"	for "a" as in "art"
"aw"	for "a" as in "awe," "ou" as in "ought"
"e" or "eh"	f or "e" as in "met"
"ee"	for "e" as in "meet"
"i" or "ih"	for "i" as in "bit"
"(e)ye" or "i—e"	for "i" as in "bite"
"o"	for "o" as in "got"
"oh" or "o—e"	for "o" as in "go" or "note"
"oo"	for "oo" as in "look"
"ooh"	for "oo" as in "boot," "u" as in "lute"
"o(r)"	for "o" as in "or"
"oy"	for "o" as in "boy" or "void"
"ou"	for "ou" as in "out"
"u" or "uh"	for "u" as in "but" and for schwa (an indefinite "uh" sound of an unaccented syllable, like the "a" in "woman," the "i" in "pencil," the "u" in "focus," etc.
"u(r)"	for "u" as in "fur"
"th"	hard, as in "thing," "thistle," or "third"
"thi"	soft, as in "this" or "that"

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acatalectic See **prosodion**.

acephalous See **dolichocephal**.

acosmism, also **akosmism** (uh KOZ mis' m) *n.* From the Greek negative prefix *a-* (the *alpha privative*, equivalent to our *un-* and its variants) plus *kosmos* (cosmos, universe), the Greeks formed the term *akosmismos* to denote the theory that denies to the universe any absolute reality or any existence apart from God. It is the opposite of *pantheism* (PAN thee iz' m)—from the Greek prefix *pan-*, the combining form of *pan*, neuter of *pas* (all), plus *theos* (god)—the doctrine that identifies God with the universe or claims that God is only the combined forces of the universe as they manifest themselves. *Pantheism* has another distinct meaning—the worship of gods of various beliefs without distinction, as opposed to *theism*, belief in the existence of a god or gods, or *monotheism*, the doctrine that there is one God, the creator of mankind and the world, who transcends yet remains within the world. We are familiar with *atheism*, which opposes all the foregoing doctrines, denying the existence of any god. We must not omit mention of *polytheism*—from the Greek *polys* (many) plus *theos*—which denotes the worship of several gods, as practiced in ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and many other early cultures. *Polytheism*, in some cultures, also involved the creation of a family relationship among these various gods through a kind of anthropomorphism, attributing quite human emotions and behavior to them, resulting in a rather cozy relationship between mankind and its pantheon. The same goes for *allotheism*, the worship of foreign, strange or unsanctioned gods, which is forbidden by the First Commandment.

acuate See **acuminate**.

acuminate (uh KYOOH muh nuht) *adj.*; (uh KYOOH muh nate) *vb.* Note the difference in the pronunciations of the adjective and the noun. The noun *acumen* is familiar; it can be pronounced uh KYOOH muhn, a KYOOH muhn, AK yuh muhn or AK yuh men and is commonly understood to mean “keen perception” or “discernment” or “shrewdness,” especially in matters of business. It has other technical meanings in botany and crustaceology, not relevant here. But *acuminate* is another matter. As an adjective, it means “pointed,” and applies to anything that tapers to a fine point. As a transitive verb, it means “to sharpen”; as an intransitive verb, “to taper,” i.e., “to come to a point.” *Acuminous* (uh KYOOH muh nuhs) can be either the adjectival form of *acumen*, meaning “possessing (or characterized by) *acumen*” or can serve as a synonym of *acuminate* in the adjectival sense. *Acumination* (uh kyooH muh NAY shuhn) means either “sharpening” or “tapering point,” depending on the context. *Acuminulate* (uh kyooH MIN yuh luht) is another adjectival form, as you might expect from the inclusion of the syllable *-ul-*, from the Latin diminutive suffix *-ulus*, *-a*, *-um*, meaning “slightly pointed” or “tapering to a minute degree.”

All of these words stem from the Latin *acumen* (point), related to the verb *acuere* (to sharpen). It is well to note, too, that Latin *acus* means “needle,” and *acutus*, from which we get *acute*, is the past participle of *acuere*. English also has the adjective *acuate* (AK yuh wate), meaning “sharply pointed” or “needle-shaped,” derived from an assumed Middle Latin *acuatus*. *Acuity* (“acuteness,” “keenness” or “sharpness,” whether applying to a physical object or the mind, the understanding or the senses) is dealt with in my *1000 Most Challenging Words*, while *acumen* is fully discussed in my *1000 Most Practical Words*. They, too, go back to our old friends *acus* and *acuere*. Don’t credit them, however, with *accurate*; that is from the Latin *accuratus*, the past participle of *accurare* (“to take care of,” “do carefully,” “prepare with care”), which is derived from the Latin prefix *ad-* (to, toward) plus *curare* (to take care of). Be acute, proceed with *acumen* and *acuity* and you’ll be *accurate*, especially with words.

acumination See **acuminate**.

acuminous See **acuminate**.

acuminulate See **acuminate**.

adscititious (ad sit ISH uhs) *adj.* Anything worthy of this impressive adjective is “added, supplemental, originating or acquired from something extrinsic, adventitious,” the opposite of *inherent*. The word is derived from the Latin *adscitus* or *ascitus* (derived, foreign), the past participle of the verb *a(d)scisere* (to approve, appropriate), built of the preposition *ad-* (toward—indicating tendency or addition) plus *sciscere* (to seek, to find out). This brings up a point quite incidental to the main entry, but let’s have it out now. We just mentioned *sciscere*. That word is the inchoative of *scire* (to know). But what is an *inchoative*? *Inc(h)oare* means “to begin” or “to begin to treat of” something. Its past participle is *inc(h)oatus*, and that gave us *inchoate*, which is discussed in my earlier *1000 Most Important Words* and is described as denoting “things just begun, undeveloped . . .” The lengthened form, *inchoative* (in KOH uh tive), is the name given to verbs in Latin and Greek that express the concept of “beginning an action” rather than performing one. Their first person singular forms end in *-sco* in Latin and *-sko* in Greek. Thus, to swipe some examples from Fowler, in Greek, *gignosko* means “to learn,” i.e., “begin to know,” while in Latin, *calesco* means “to grow warm” rather than “be warm.” So—at long last—*sciscere*, whose first-person singular is *scisco* (there’s the *-sco* ending), means “to seek to know” rather than “to know.” (Incidental moral: Seek and ye shall find.) Getting back to our headword: John Evelyn, in *Numismata; a Discourse on Medals Ancient and Modern* (1697)—*numisma* is Latin for “money, coin,” from the Greek *nomisma* (custom, usage, currency, coin, akin to *nomizein*, to observe, recognize, and *numismatics* is our word for “the study of coins and

medals")—writes of "... such *adscititious* Habits as may be contracted by Institution, Discipline and custom." After all this, the simplest definition of *adscititious* is "additional," in the sense of "supplemental." Forgive the anticlimax.

adytum (AD ih tuh m) *n.* The Greek word *adyton* (not to be entered), composed of the negative prefix *a-* (the "alpha privative," as in *amorphous*, *amoral*, *apolitical*, etc., meaning "not") plus *dytos*, a verbal adjective from the verb *dyein* (to enter), was Latinized to *adytum*, denoting the innermost section of a temple, the secret shrine whence oracles were uttered, and later, the chancel of a church. It acquired the figurative meaning of "sanctum." Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in *Essays on His Own Times* (1800), criticized a politician as one who carried with him "the habits of a disputing club into the *adyta* of the Cabinet." Everyone should have his own *adytum*, for solitary contemplation and search for the truth. Think of all those poor souls who don't have a roof, let alone an *adytum*!

aftermath See **rowen**.

akratisma See **chittering-bite**.

alieniloquy (ay lee en IL uh kwee) *n.* The *O.E.D.* quotes the definition "a talking wide from the purpose, or not to the matter at hand" from the early British lexicographer Nathan Bailey's *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (1731 edition—first edition 1721; they preceded the publication of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755); the 1731 edition was published as *Dictionarium Britannicum: or a More Compleat Universal Etymological English Dictionary*; Bailey's definition was adopted by John Ash in his *New and Complete Dictionary of the English Language*, 1775, trailing Johnson by 20 years). The word is characterized as "obsolete" by the *O.E.D.*, but its Latin ancestor, *alieniloquium*, shows up in Professor Elizabeth Dipple's exhaustive study of the novels of Iris Murdoch (*Iris Murdoch, Work for the Spirit*). In a discussion of Murdoch's *The Sea*, *The Sea* Dipple points out that Charles Arrowby is the ostensible protagonist, "but, as in the case of the medieval idea of the *alieniloquium* (a speaking of things other than those it purports to do...) there is a sustained questioning of the spiritual life ... a profound psychic landscape whose symbolic quality very slowly, in small, subtle steps unfolds. James [Arrowby, the protagonist's brother] is its vehicle, and on him rests the deep infrastructure of the book." Dipple's definition varies somewhat from Bailey's, but the underlying meaning is the same in both. Profound stuff, in both Murdoch's novel (as in all her novels) and Dipple's analysis. In a recent letter, Professor Dipple tells me that "... *alieniloquium* seems to me a splendid way of talking about the secret agenda of many texts, and I much prefer it to coarser and more simplistic words like *allegory*." So do I.

allele (uh LEEL) *n.* This word is a shortened form of *allelomorph* (uh LEE luh morf, uh LEL uh-), a term in Mendelian genetics for any of several forms of a gene responsible for hereditary variation. The longer form, *allelomorph*, is formed from the Greek *allelo-*, the stem of *allelon* (of one another) plus *morphe* (form). Gregor Johann Mendel was an Austrian monk (1822–84) who pioneered in experimental studies of heredity, carrying out independent scientific investigations on plants, mainly garden peas, by means of controlled pollination and statistical analysis of the results, especially hybridization. Mendel's basic conclusion was that an inherited characteristic is determined by the combination of two hereditary units (now known as *genes*), one from each of the parental reproductive cells. These genes are known as *alleles* or *allelomorphs*. If you want to investigate further, see K. R. Lewis's book entitled *The Matter of Mendelian Heredity* (1964) and R. C. Olby's *Origins of Mendelism* (1966), and if they disagree with what I have said on the subject, better side with them.

allelomorph See **allele**.

alloch(e)iria (ah loh KEYE ree uh, -KIH-) *n.* Since *allo-* is the combining form of the Greek adjective *allos*, meaning "other," and *cheiro-* the combining form of *cheir*, meaning "hand," one might jump to the (as usual, erroneous) conclusion that *alloch(e)iria* had something to do with "on the other hand," as in "on the one hand, on the other hand." Actually, *alloch(e)iria* is the name for the attribution of a sensation to the wrong part of the body. How often have you been surprised to hear from your dentist that it isn't your canine but your first premolar that has the abscess? You've been suffering not only from the abscess, my dear, but also from a case of *alloch(e)iria*. My dentist tells me it happens all the time and that the confusion can involve not just two neighboring teeth but often neck and even shoulder pains. Even with a supply of Greek combining forms at your command, be careful.

al(l)odium (ul LOH de uhm) also **al(l)od** (AL od) *n.* This word, in any of its forms, was used in feudal times to denote an estate in which the holder had absolute possession and control free of any subjection by way of rent, service or acknowledgment to a superior. The term was applied particularly in Anglo-Saxon society of the 11th century. It was the antithesis of a *feod* or *feud* (pronounced FOOHD—and this *feud* is not the Montague and Capulet type), the name then applied to an estate held of a lord or other superior on condition of the rendering of certain services by the tenant or vassal to the superior. This type of fiddlededee has long been obsolete, but if you settle down with one of those interminable historical novels set in that distant era, you'd better be acquainted with it. *Al(l)odium* is a Middle Latin term, derived from two Old High German words: *al* (all) and *od* (property).

allotheism See **acosmism**.

alnage (OL nij) *n.* The practice of *alnage* and the office of *alnager* have long since faded from the scene, but you might bump into these terms if you were reading fact or fiction involving life in England in days of yore. *Alnage* and the office of *alnager* were introduced into English law in 1320 during the reign of Edward III. *Alnage* was the official inspection and measurement of woolen cloth by an *alnager* appointed by the court, who also declared its quality and value. The practice and office were abolished during the reign of King William III (1689–1702). *Alnage* was also the official name of the fee paid the *alnager*. Geoffrey Chaucer must have had something to do with this function since he was the comptroller of the customs on wool and hides at the port of London from 1374 to 1386. (Geoffrey held lots of important jobs and did all kinds of things besides writing *The Canterbury Tales* and other notable works that set the course of English literature.) *Alnage* and *alnager* owe their names to the fact that the measurement of the cloth was by the *ell*, which in turn got its name from Old French *aulnage*, from *aulner* (to measure by the *ell*), and which can ultimately be traced back to Latin *ulna* (elbow, and by transference, a measure of length). *Ell* has had a great diversity of meanings as a measurement, including the distance from the elbow to the wrist, from the shoulder to the wrist, from either to the fingertips—usually the middle finger—and so forth. Some Latin poets used *ulna*, for instance, to mean “as much as a man can span with both arms,” others to mean “a fathom” (which is etymologically the same thing). *Ell* finally crystallized, in England, as a unit of length (chiefly for cloth) equal to 45 inches and is now no longer in use. It designated different lengths in different countries: in Holland, approximately 27 inches, in Scotland, about 37—all very confusing in earlier days, nowadays happily obsolete. It reminds one of the *cubit*, from Latin *cubitum* (elbow), which was used in olden times as a unit of length equal to the span from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger—anywhere from 18 inches to 21 or even more, based on natural variations in the length of forearms. Midgets and giants were undoubtedly omitted from consideration. Just imagine, if *ells* and *cubits* were still current in the age of basketball players. Good riddance, I say: So long to *alnage*, *alnagers*, *ells* and *cubits*!

alnager See **alnage**.

alphonsin (al FON sin) *n.* Named after its inventor, Alphonsus Ferrier of Naples, Italy, in 1552, an *alphonsin* was a surgical instrument consisting of a forceps equipped with three elastic branches closed together by means of a ring. The purpose of this ingenious apparatus was the extraction of bullets from the body. Any follower of the Korean War television series “M.A.S.H.” has watched Hawkeye and his colleagues extract bullets from wounds countless times. These excellent surgeons weren’t using *alphonsins*, however. There are many different types of forceps in use these days for the extraction of foreign objects from bodies, among them the Allison and the Crile. Do not

confuse *alphonsin* with the adjective *Alphonsine*, pronounced the same way but descriptive of certain astronomical tables prepared by a group of Jewish, Arabian and Christian astronomers in 1252 under the patronage of Alfonso X (the Wise), King of Castile and León. The result of such confusion in a hospital operating room would be too horrible to contemplate.

altricial See **nidicolous**.

altrigenderism (al truh JEN duh riz'm) *n.* *Alter*, in Latin, means "other of two," as opposed to *alius*, "other of more than two." The distinction was not always maintained by the Roman writers, but that is the general rule. From *alter* we get the prefix *altri-*; from *gener-*, the stem of *genus* (class, kind—especially as applied to living beings), we get *gender*. Add the suffix *-ism* and we have *altrigenderism*, which has naught to do with change of sex but rather the happy, if often unnerving, state of development when one becomes interested in, nay, attracted to members of the opposite sex. This is an experience shared by most of us and the subject of a good deal of literature—whether poetry, short story, novel or drama. It leads to romance, elation, perplexity, suffering; but this is a book about obscure words, not psychiatry, so we'd best end the discussion right now.

alveary (AL vee uhr ee) *n.* An *alvearium*, in Latin, is a "beehive." The historian Pliny used the words *alvus* and *alveus* as synonyms of *alvearium*. *Alveary* is also the name, in anatomy, for the hollow of the external ear—a kind of pun, because that, as well as a beehive, is where wax collects. Strangely, the word has an altogether distinct meaning: an early dictionary of English, French, Greek and Latin. This is another sort of pun, as indicated by an early (1580) scholar named John Baret, who wrote: "Within a yeere, or two, they had gathered together a great volume, which (for the apt similitude between the good Scholers and diligent Bees in gathering their waxe and honie into their Hiue) I called then their Alvearie." In Latin, an *alveus* is any hollow or socket, and in English, *alveated* means "vaulted," like a beehive.

amathophobia (am uh thuh FOH bee uh) *n.* Since *amathos* is Greek for "sand," and we all know the meaning of *phobia*, one would suppose that *amathophobia* was a learned term for "fear of sand," like the dread of sandstorms that must beset denizens of desert lands. But no: It is defined by *W III* as "fear of dust," like the obsession that beset Craig's wife in the play of that name and ruined her marriage. Strangely, the word is missing from *W II* and is not to be found in any of my other dictionaries, including the *O.E.D.* and its Supplement. Lexicographers move in mysterious ways. I suppose that just about everything in the world is subject to somebody's phobia, even something as seemingly benign as health. How about hypochondriacs, who obviously suffer from *sanitaphobia*? (*Sanitas* is Latin for "health.") What about *divitiphobia* (*divitiae* is Latin for "wealth"), the fear of wealth by those devout readers of