Logorrhea or The Dangers of Unprotected Lex: Confessions of a Word Junkie

by

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Long before Baltimore had its National Aquarium or Harbor Place or Camden Yards ball park with its statue of Babe Ruth sporting a right-hander’s glove, I was born on Carroll Street, just a few minutes’ walk from these illustrious sites, via Pratt Street west and Washington Boulevard angling toward the southwest. Carroll Street, named after a signatory of the Declaration of Independence, is a narrow, canyon-like array of three-story, red-brick row houses typical of Baltimore. Just a few hundred feet down and across the street from my front steps on the southwest corner of Barrie and Carroll Streets stands a ponderous, old, burnt-brown brick structure that used to house a branch of the Enoch Pratt Free Library. My proximity in childhood to this venerable structure and later to its even more hallowed sister on Hollins Street was probably the master stroke of fate in my life. For better or worse, I was to become an imbibor of books and an obsessive wielder of words. At best, the library and literacy saved me from the straits of the streets — I was to become paroler instead of a parolee. At worst, I became afflicted with chronic — at times acute — logorrhea. Its milder forms manifested no more than occasional, innocuous, erudite exorbitances, but its potentially fatal, febrile stages were capable of producing vile suppurations of purulent and prurient puns, ailing alliteratives, and asinine assonances.

My mother, father, two older sisters and older brother had known stable and prosperous times, but my birth inaugurated a precipitous decline in the family fortunes as three more baby girls came in quick succession. My father lost his laundry business, severe and violent hostilities erupted between my parents, the crisis exacerbated by their abuse of alcohol and my father’s gambling at the horse tracks. My two older sisters escaped into marriage, and we younger children were neglected and abused in turn, especially me, since my dad, through some recondite reasoning of his own, reckoned me the cause of the catastrophe. Such a dysfunctional family setting was bound to predispose me to neurotic, addictive behavior, and I so became a verbal and substantive abuser.

That little library on the corner became my refuge and my solace and initiated me into weighty words. I don’t recall ever being taken there, though I probably accompanied my older sisters at first and then found my way in my meanderings well before matriculating into elementary school. I can still see vividly the children’s corner with its low shelves of large, thin picture books, the wide, low, dirty-blond tables and diminutive chairs. I can see precisely where the dinosaur books were and those on the heavens, for these were my first great loves. Rapturously, I pored over the artists’ renderings of great beasts lumbering
through their primeval landscapes, rending each other
in titanic conflicts; and swirling galaxies, and planets,
and worlds being fractured or pulverized by comets
and colossal meteors. I reveled in this imaginary
chaos all the more that a real chaos fermented just on
the other side of those monumental walls. This was
sanctuary: safe, quiet, orderly, predictable, and the
rules were clear. This little universe of books and
words became my real world. (And to boot, it was
always cooler in the oppressive Baltimore summers!)

During these preschool years, I made a pest of myself,
asking librarians or older children to read the words
to me, practicing over and over the pronunciation of
the tremendous names of creatures and celestial bod-
ies. "Brontosaurus" was an early favorite: I felt the full
"bront" of this beast's fulminations before I learned
that it was "thunder lizard!" "Andromeda Nebula"
tripped on my tongue, reverberated in the mind's ear,
and I would go off nibbling "nebulae."

Of course, my verbal education was not confined to
the library; I learned the inevitable lessons of the
streets. One day some boys—they seemed adults to
me, but they may have been in their early teens or
even prepubescent—asked me to repeat some par-
ticularly choice words and phrases. Each time I ut-
tered one, they were seized with paroxysms of laug-
ther. I found myself center stage and my little soliloquy
the whole bill, and I was happy, the ham in me
manifesting. On the way home, I performed for ev-
everyone I met, with perplexing results. Some laughed,
shaking their heads; some frowned.

One man with a disquieting tone and expression said,
"Okay, sure kid, ca'meer."

I hurried on. The next man threatened me with a good
thrashing. I sensed that something was amiss, so I
went directly home and asked my mother what a
certain word meant. Without warning, she whacked
me across my mazard, knocking me to the
floor, bawling, "Don't you ever let me hear you say that word again!"

Through my tears I insisted on an expla-
nation, but none was proffered, only her
repeated admonition. Clearly, this was a
powerful word, indeed! I gleaned a few
more strong verbs from the streets and
many more nouns unmentionable here
—but I learned to be more discriminating
in their use.

I began really to read at George Wash-
ington Elementary, School Number 22, just
around the corner. I relished sitting on the
little square chairs before the big flip charts, enunci-
ating the words as the teacher methodically flapped
the rubber tip of her pointer against each one. I espe-
cially delighted in stories, one particularly about a happy
little bayside village with blithe little boys and girls
perennially rolling hoops down Gay Street, which
descended steeply to the blue bay with a few jauntily
tacking white sails far on the horizon and white gulls
flecking bluewashed skies. All was bright and fresh,
breezy and pure. When we got to regular books, my
favorite was the adventures of little Toot, that brave
little tugboat (with whom I deeply empathized) who
seemed always called upon to heave gargantuan black-
hulled, seagoing behemoths against monstrous, glow-
ering waves. As my reading skills advanced, my
interest in the afternoon story hour at the library intensified as I anticipated reading on my own the fairy tales I heard. I sat on the floor hanging on every word and gesture of the reader, captivated not quite so much by the machinations of Rumpelstiltskin and the plight of Rapunzel as by their wondrous names (which I began to assign to my friends and pets). But oh, how I grieved when I went to the shelf from whence these golden nuggets were mined and took down one of these embossed tomes only to find that I could decipher as yet very little of the densely-packed ranks of minuscule words.

One day at school I told my teacher that I had put some brushes in the "zink." She corrected me, and I struggled with "sszirk," then "zzzirk," momentarily getting "sssink," then lapsing again to "zink," the usage of my family. I began to be self-conscious about my ordinary speech, seeing that it was not as good as my teacher’s. My mother had only a sixth-grade education, and I dimly began to understand that she spoke a local patois, saying, besides "zink," "pockeybook" for "pocketbook," "valcircm" for "vacuum," and more besides. My father, having a private high school education, spoke with more precision. I consciously began to imitate him, though he too had his linguistic peculiarities.

He would say, "Take this fin and get me a pack of Camels and some soup herbs for your mother." (I was quite surprised later to find what my "sooburbs" were).

One evening he came home with a few beers in him, made the round of the table poking us kids in the ribs, eyeing my mother impishly, saying, "Mudders eat fodders."

I was vaguely uneasy with what sounded like some crudity from the street, and my mother scolded him for using such language before the children. With mock indignation, my father protested he said nothing wrong.

Years later, I understood that a "mudder" is a horse that runs well on a wet track, and that "fin," and much else of his diction came from the language of race tracks and gambling. But often my father seemed to mean more than he said, and my mother frequently remarked, with an air of disgust, that my father could talk himself out of any difficulty. So I began to consciously imitate much of his language and style.

His favorite term of contempt was "jerk," and he elucidated it with a ferocity that seared it and sealed it into my brain, and I saved it for special occasions. (Recently, while riding my bike, I had a confrontation with a car over the right-of-way. The case called for my prudently acceding, but I fatuously maintained my course. Horn blowing and the usual obscenities I would have disdained, but the driver’s short, sharp "Jerk!" deflated and withered me utterly.)

Another peculiarity of my father’s was his refusal to use the family’s proper names. I was usually "Chum," my older brother by a year-and-a-half was "Buzzard." My sisters were "Sis" or "Gal"; my mother he usually just called "Woman." I enjoyed using my father’s names and became adept at striking the right tone, especially to call my brother "Buzzard," as it always got his dander up. He would retort with, not "Chum," but "You Chump!" as if trying to give this feeble riposte more force.

For him, "Chump" had a potency that was lost on me, and his unavailing devotion to it bemused and amused me, to his greater frustration. I considered myself to have administered the coup de grace in our disputes with my final, acerbic "JERK!"
This growing addiction to my father’s style of word play led to dangerous behavior. I dared to call my mother “Woman” a time or two, to her irritation. I tested this risky behavior to the brink once after latching onto the word “wench” from a movie (I think it was spoken by Wallace Beery of Long John Silver fame). In a linguistically flippant mood, I came home from the Eureka Theatre, just around the corner, and sprawled insouciantly on a chair at the kitchen table behind my mother as she prepared dinner.

Merging my new word with a typical expression of my father’s, I scowled, “Whip me up some grub, wench. I’m hungry.”

I thought I was being witty and expected no more than a snort, maybe a begrudging shrug, or any mild acknowledgment, but my mother whirled upon me, raging.

“Who do you think you are talking to, you little snot?”

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Taken off-guard by the vehemence of her response — I was usually more wary at such a venture in the volatility of my home — I failed to move before she grabbed me by the hair, her favorite hold. In desperation I yanked free (leaving tufts of hair in her clenched fist), scrabbled frantically around the table and bolted out the door and down the corridor.

She wailed after me, “Yoooo wait till your father comes home, boy! You’ll get a whipping, all right, you rip!”

I doubt that anyone facing imminent hanging or electrocution and unreconciled to his fate could be in more terror than I was, as in extrems, I awaited the arrival of my father. I considered whether I should just wet my pants then and there and get that over with at least or hold on and release at the first sound or sight of him, as was usual when I expected a beating.

He appeared, and I held my bladder (I was growing up). My mother, with my eldest sister in attendance for the looming spectacle, complained of my outrage. To my horror, my father just laughed and passed it off. I say “horror” because his most insidious stratagem was to feign indifference to an affront, lure the offender into complacency, and then strike with sudden impact the unprepared soul. But after inquiring about the state of dinner preparations, he went off to his easy chair chuckling softly to himself and — and this was significant — unfolding his paper. I sensed the matter was at an end.

Nevertheless, I unclenched only gradually, and the enormity of what had happened began grow upon me. For the first time ever that I was aware of, I had said something in the way of purposely being funny that made my father laugh. It was usually far otherwise. I had used a word he could appreciate, spoke his idiom, and incensed my mother. (Did he see a chip off the old block?) It seemed to me at this time the ultimate verbal act, and I was already, at this early age, forming the megalomaniacal notion that I could do anything with words.

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