

Forster. One wants to believe her, though Forster emerges from this book a figure at once more complete and somewhat diminished—the price of full-to-overflowing disclosure. Though he may have chosen to record them, there are things about him that we never needed to know. For instance: “Riding in a carriage one afternoon, the mere thought that his wrist might brush the arm of the young Indian beside him made Morgan ejaculate into his trousers.” (The squeamish may here wince less at Morgan’s hair-trigger sensibilities than at the failure of Moffat’s introductory participle to brush its intended noun.) A diary entry at age 82 assures an afterlife for the day’s erection and orgasm: “The worm that never dies must have given its last wriggle this morning.” Perhaps. The man did live till 91. And oh, that worm in its salad days. When he was close to 70, on a visit to America, Forster was taken to Central Park for, in Moffat’s words, “a glorious night of casual sex.” Only connect, indeed.

JAMES MORRIS is an editor at large of *The Wilson Quarterly*.

## A Word by Any Other Name

Reviewed by Sarah L. Courteau

CONFESS THAT YOU REGULARLY consult a thesaurus, and you call your writing skills and even your intelligence into question, such is the ill repute into which this worthy reference has fallen. In a diatribe published in *The Atlantic* some years ago, Simon Winchester, author of *The Professor and the Madman* (about the making of *The Oxford English Dictionary*), lambasted Peter Mark Roget, the compiler of the granddaddy that spawned today’s myriad online and school-bag versions. Many writers

**HISTORICAL  
THESAURUS OF  
THE OXFORD  
ENGLISH  
DICTIONARY.**

*Edited by Christian Kay,  
Jane Roberts, Michael  
Samuels, and Irené  
Wotherspoon.  
Oxford Univ. Press.  
3892 pp. \$395*

I know scoff when asked whether they ever crack one. Of course, using a thesaurus—in its basic form, a book that groups words with similar or related meanings—can result in travesties against the language, and even common sense, when a novice plucks a word he doesn’t understand from an entry and substitutes it for thought. But to blame Roget for these crude mash-ups (the improvement of the phrase “his earthly fingers” into “his chthonic digits” is but one of Winchester’s amusing examples) is like blaming Henry Ford when a blind man takes a Taurus for a spin.

A thesaurus can extract that word that’s on the tip of your tongue but can’t quite reach your lips. It reacquaints you with words you’ve forgotten and presents ones you don’t know. It suggests relationships but usually doesn’t spell them out—like a hostess who invites you to a party of well-connected guests where you’re expected to circulate and make your own introductions. In our hyper-searchable world, in which shelf browsing and even book skimming are on the wane, the thesaurus reminds us that precision isn’t always a matter of predestined calibration. It can still be an informed choice.

The *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (HTOED)—which contains almost every word from the days of *Beowulf* to the present, some 920,000 words and expressions in all—seems the sort of resource that has been sitting on reference shelves for decades. Yet it is the first historical thesaurus produced for any language, and made its debut only late last year. Based on the magnificent edifice that is *The Oxford English Dictionary*, and also drawing on *A Thesaurus of Old English*, the HTOED has been in the works since 1964, when University of Glasgow English professor Michael Samuels began plugging away at it.

The HTOED’s editors boast that it provides the context other thesauruses lack. It is arranged into three major sections devoted to

the external, mental, and social worlds, which are in turn divided into 354 categories (*Food and drink, Thought, etc.*), and then further categories and subcategories, from the most general to the most specific. (Roget divided his thesaurus into six broad classes, though most casual users simply flip to the index, unaware of his taxonomy.) Each word is listed with the corresponding year of first and, if applicable, last recorded use. Under the word *piety*, for instance, you'll find a list of words that have meant *piety* over the centuries, and then sub-entries for words that have to do with, but are not the same as, *piety*. *Sanctimoniousness*, a subcategory, lists words including *hiwung* (Old English), *lipholiness* (1591), and *mawwormism* (1850).

Wordsmiths have known all along that the variety and coloration of the language make a precision-engineered thesaurus impossible.

The *HTOED* is only two volumes—one consists of entries, the other is an index—to the 20 that compose the *OED*'s second edition. Missing are all those quotations that make the *OED* such a wealth of, well, context; it

won't offer enough linguistic handholding to stop the abuse that has given thesauruses a bad name. (Thesaurus abusers flock to *Thesaurus.com* anyway, and likely aren't interested in Old English words for *love*.) The *HTOED*'s lists, no matter how finely tuned, confirm what wordsmiths have known all along: The variety and coloration of the language make a precision-engineered thesaurus impossible. Reading the *HTOED* is a fascinating journey through 1,300 years of linguistic history, each entry a series of signposts to not-yet-scrutable destinations. It will send you straight to the dictionary, which is as it should be.

SARAH L. COURTEAU is literary editor of *The Wilson Quarterly*.

## Intellectual Horsepower

Reviewed by Nikolai Slivka

"STOP IF YOU FIND YOURSELF becoming absorbed, at even the first paragraph." So advised Ralph Waldo Emerson on the perils of reading. As Robert D. Richardson eloquently shows in *First We Read, Then We Write*,

this admonition is of a piece with Emerson's awareness, articulated in mordant comments throughout his life, that while reading is essential to good writing, it also insistently threatens to subdue the creative impulse. "Each of the books I read invades me, displaces me," he once complained.

The author of *Nature* (1836) and such seminal essays as "The American Scholar" and "Self-Reliance," Emerson (1803–82) believed that reading should be a vigorous culling of facts and ideas, directly in the service of one's own intellectual production. Too often, he observed, we read as sluggards, "drugged with books." Thus, he encouraged what we would call speed-reading: Turn "page after page, keeping your writer's thought before you, but not tarrying with him, until he has brought you the thing you are in search of." Most important, don't forget that "you only read to start your own team."

The comparison is between a team of horses getting under way and the mysterious process by which external stimulation leads to original work. In his comprehensive 1995 biography *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, Richardson portrayed a thinker fascinated by this process. Shaken by the skepticism of 18th-century philosopher David Hume, Emerson was animated by the question of what independent creative force an individual could unassailably lay claim to: "My heart's inquiry is, whence is your power?" In the narrower ambit of *First We Read, Then We Write*, Richardson focuses on the practical dimension of literary creation, devoting chapters to Emerson's reading, word choice, attitude toward his audience, and sentence construction.

**FIRST WE READ, THEN WE WRITE:** Emerson on the Creative Process.

By Robert D. Richardson.  
Univ. of Iowa Press.  
101 pp. \$19.95