

## Orthographic Confessions

For nearly forty years I was by profession a teacher, and for more than fifty years I have been by avocation an orthographer. Orthographers study the structure of written words, which is to say that we study spelling. For a grown man to have to confess to studying spelling may seem strange. But I think the confessional tone comes from an episode over thirty-five years ago, during my sabbatical year of 1981, which got me away from my profession so that I could spend my days with my avocation, writing about orthography.

We were, oddly enough, on the tropical island of Rarotonga in the Cook Islands of the South Pacific. A lovely place: blue skies, plumeria in the air, gentle and smiling people, warm and empty beaches, psychedelic sunsets, lagoons clear as gin, rugged volcanic peaks in the center. All of this on an island no more than twenty miles in circumference. We were renting a small cabin near the beach in the backyard of a young American who had escaped the television sound stages of Los Angeles for paradise, married a Rarotongan girl, bought some beach property, and started raising babies. All the rest of our neighbors were native Rarotongans. Some of them were made curious by the strange sight of a bearded American sitting on the front porch under the palm trees with a portable typewriter in his lap and a rum and tonic on the side, writing away between sips, day after day. Finally one of them asked our landlord, "What is that man doing?" "He is writing a book," Richard replied. "What is his book about?" "It is about spelling." There was, I'm told, a long, puzzled pause. "How," the Rarotongan finally asked, "can anyone write a whole book about spelling?" That unknown Rarotongan touched the obsessiveness of it, or perhaps the enchantment, and the felt need for a confessional tone.

It gets worse. We spent much of that sabbatical year in Hawaii, in New Zealand, in Tahiti, for heaven's sake; and what did I do in those places? Why, I sat and wrote about spelling. In Hawaii, to be sure, we were in Waipahu on the island of Oahu, and Waipahu is not so much paradise as paradise lost. It was easy to spend all day and well into the night sitting in an apartment there with no television and to all intents and purposes no telephone, writing – with time out only for meals, an afternoon excursion to the pool, an afternoon popsicle run – but mainly writing about things orthographic.

But what of Tahiti? What a place to write about spelling! I remember one of our first mornings at the Hotel Bel Air on Tahiti's west coast. It was perhaps 6:00 or 7:00, and I was sitting out on the patio editing some manuscript. The distinctive green and rugged peaks of Tahiti were rising up off to my left; the air was cool and moist and rich with the unbelievably intense aroma of tiny white flowers that grew on a large bush beside our patio. A native girl, perhaps in her teens, perhaps her early twenties, came

up and began picking the flowers. She was a dancer from the hotel and she was gathering the flowers for the costumes for that day's show. Off to the right the lagoon was blue and just beginning to come to life. And a few miles out to sea were the rugged, cloud-shrouded peaks of Moorea. Ah, paradise regained! And what did I do? Why, I sat and wrote about spelling!

And it continues. Now, more than thirty-five years later, friends ask, "What are you doing lately?" And I say, "Oh, just writing." "About what?" they ask, and we're suddenly back to that puzzled Rarotongan. However you explain such behavior, confession seems at least the proper tone. How, indeed, **can** anyone write a whole book, and even whole books, about spelling? What follows is an attempt to answer that puzzled and tropical question.

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A good standard desk dictionary lists three words spelled <spell>. One of them really does not concern us here today. It has to do with time. As a noun it refers either to a short, indefinite period, as in "Come in and sit a spell," or a period of certain weather conditions, as in "It looks like we're in for a sunny spell." As a verb it means "to take someone else's place, to give him a rest or break," as in "Fred asked me to spell him at the wheel for a bit." This *spell* comes from the Old English word *spelian*, which meant "to be substitute for, represent." We don't know for sure where the Old English word came from. We can forget about this <spell> for now, which is to say, for a spell.

The other two *spell*'s are our concern here: The first is the *spell* of "<i>-before-<e>" fame, the one we associate with memorizing Monday's list of words for Friday's test. Even this *spell* has some interesting extended meanings. For instance, in the phrase "spell out," it can be used to mean "to make perfectly clear" or "to puzzle out, to understand after some study" – as in "Spell out your needs clearly" or "It took him a few hours to spell out the implications of his theory."

The second of our two *spell*'s has to do with magic. As a noun it can refer to an incantation, as in "The witch spoke her magic spell." Or it can refer to the trance-like state induced by the incantation, as in "After that, the handsome prince was under the witch's evil spell forevermore." In a milder sense it can also refer to a fascination, as in "The glamorous cheerleader held the poor popcorn peddler in her spell." Magic again.

This magic *spell* comes from an Old English word, while the "<i>-before-<e>" *spell* comes from Old French. But although it might at first appear that we have here two separate and distinct words – one domestic English, the other imported French – in things orthographic, the roots can run long and deep, finally to tie together spellings and ideas that at first sight would appear not to have much to do with one another. For instance, the magic

*spell* comes from an Old English word that meant “fable, story,” and although it has over time lost an <l>, it's the same *spel* in the old compound word *gospel*, which meant in Old English “good news, glad tidings.” So both *spell*'s have finally to do with words.

The historical link between these two *spell*'s is this: Old English and Old French both descended from a parent language, Proto-Indo-European, from which dozens and dozens of languages descended – from Sanskrit in the southeast, through Persian, Greek, Latin, French, Gaelic, German, Danish, Norwegian, Latvian, Czech, Russian . . . and, in northwest Europe, English. Proto-Indo-European appears to have contained a word-root that in our modern alphabet would have been spelled <spel> and that meant something like “to recite, to say aloud.” The Old English word that gave us the magic *spell* and the Old French word that gave us the *spell* that has to do with the <abc>'s both came from this Proto-Indo-European root. So at the most radical level of our root system, our two *spell*'s – one magic, the other usually taken to be far from it – though apparently quite different, have in fact grown from the same source.

It's a surprise, perhaps, to learn that the *spell* that has to do with spelling tests is historically the same as the *spell* that has to do with magic and enchantment. But then, knowing the letters, knowing the words, has always been seen as a source of power, even magical power. Think of the magic of secret names, the entire mystery of codes and ciphers and cryptography, of spies and their decryption devices, Captain Midnight and his magic decoder ring. Yours for only one Ovaltine label and 25 cents.

The ancient Greeks called the study of letters *grammar*. The *gram* in *grammar* is also in words like *telegram* and comes from a Greek word that meant “letter.” But to the Greeks the study of letters covered more than just the alphabet. To them grammar was the study of letters in the same sense that the word *letters* has in such phrases as “man of letters” and “College of Arts and Letters.” To the Greeks, grammar was the study of written texts in the very broadest sense, including what we would today call textual and literary criticism.

The Greeks, at least later in their traditions, emphasized a group of basic studies called the seven liberal arts. Three of these liberal arts, the most basic, came in Medieval universities to be called the trivium: rhetoric, logic, and grammar. Grammar, as we've seen, was the study of letters in the broadest sense, including orthography, or spelling. The original meaning of the word *trivium* was “three ways, three roads,” from *tri* + *via*. Its adjective form is *trivial*. In time *trivial* came to mean “common, everyday,” and then in time it took on the sense it has today: “unimportant, trifling.” In a way the history of the study of spelling reflects perfectly the history of the word *trivial*: Just as the trivium became trivial, so, too, all too often in our schools, has the study of spelling.

Since grammar was one of the most basic forms of knowledge and since knowledge is power, it is not too surprising that the word *grammar* in time began to take on a sense of power, even mysterious power. In the Middle Ages grammar consisted pretty much of the study of Latin and Greek texts, and since at that time those were the languages of nearly all western knowledge, *grammar* came to mean “knowledge in general.” Since there was, especially among the unlettered religiously devout, widespread distrust of knowledge, which included astrology, alchemy, and other occult areas, *grammar* came to mean “magic.” In Scotland the word *grammar* turned magically into the word *glamor* and as *glamor* it, too, began to resonate with special meanings: “magic, enchantment, spell.” In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Bobby Burns could write:

Ye gipsy-gang that deal in glamor,  
And deep read in Hell's black grammar,  
Warlocks and witches.

Out of this earlier, somewhat sterner stuff came the less threatening sense of glamor as “a magic, fictitious beauty, an alluring charm,” which is the way we normally think of glamor today. Which gets us back to our glamorous cheerleader and her poor, spellbound popcorn peddler. Grammar and glamor, then, are tied together, by virtue of the notions of magic and enchantment . . . and spells.

So maybe there, in words like *spell* and *grammar*, lies part of the attraction with which the spelling of words holds me. In view of the magic lying beneath the surface of words such as *spell* and *grammar*, what a contrast it is to encounter that great lurching polysyllable *orthography*, the study of correct writing, or as the Elizabethans said, “right writing.” Correctness, or rightness, is what orthography is all about. The *orth* in *orthography* is the same *orth* that you find in words like *orthopedic* and *orthodontic*, very medicinal and remedial.

What we have here is a dichotomy: Spelling vs. Orthography. The first, Spelling, reflects the unruly magic and enchantment of our Old English heritage. The second, Orthography, reflects the concern for correctness, restraint, and ruliness of our Greco-Latin heritage. It is very much like the contrast between the Romantic and the Classical. What I am trying to do in my work is to help students and teachers bring these two together, Orthography and Spelling, to help them combine the Greco-Latin concern for correctness and ruliness with the Anglo-Saxon sense of magic and enchantment.

But a quest for that synthesis can only be part of why anyone would sit on a porch in Rarotonga and write about spelling – or worse yet, on a fragrant patio in Tahiti. More of the answer, I believe, is that the human mind desires pattern, demands it. We want to discover pattern. And we want to create pattern. We enjoy the patterns we have discovered and created,

and we enjoy talking and writing about them.

In his poem “The Idea of Order at Key West” Wallace Stevens muses on the sight of a woman singing as she walks along a different tropical seashore. “She sang,” he says, “beyond the genius of the sea.”

It may be that in all her phrases stirred  
The grinding water and the gasping wind;  
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

For she was the maker of the song she sang,  
The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea  
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.

The poem goes on to consider that the song could in fact be a song of nature, “the dark voice of the sea,” or “the outer voice of the sky and cloud,” or “the heaving speech of air.” The poem finally rejects that idea: “But it was more than that,” Stevens says:

More even than her voice, and ours, among  
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,

. . . . .

She was the single artificer of the world  
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,  
Whatever self it had, became the self  
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,  
As we beheld her striding there alone,  
Knew that there never was a world for her  
Except for the one she sang and, singing, made.

And the poem ends with the exclamation, “Oh! Blessed rage for order”:

The maker's rage to order words of the sea,  
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
And of ourselves and of our origins . . . .

“There never was a world for her / Except for the one she sang and, singing, made.” There in that scene of the singing woman walking beside the noisy and meaningless sea, Stevens presents the creative human spirit and its insistence, its rage to order and pattern and meaning – its quest for organization. The novelist and critic William Gass speaks of the work of the artist and scientist and philosopher as being not so much a quest for truth as a quest for sublimity, which he defines as “a vision of absolute organization.” I hope it is not overreaching to claim something like that in the motives of that very modest kind of scholarship called orthography. Probably there can be no vision of absolute organization in orthography – or in much of anything else, for that matter. The sublimity comes from the quest for the vision. The work of the orthographer is a series of interim reports, relative visions of relative organization. And this is only as it

should and must be: The language of which the orthography is a part is changing. It is an open cultural system, and thus it is constantly leaking, or losing, organization here while it is absorbing, or gaining, organization there. The vision must change; it can never be absolute.

Of all the products of that creative human spirit, language has to be the most astonishing. As you study our language – either its grammar or the most marvelous things fashioned in it, like Stevens' poem – as you study our language, you feel that spirit at work. You find joy in the knowledge that you are part of that language and that it is part of you. And you begin to see more and more of the organization, the order and design and meaning. And that is enough to catch anyone in its spell – orthographer and teacher.

Where before you felt an irritating confusion and disorder, you come to know meaning and pattern. Where once you saw only the complexity bred of confusion, now you see new unities and thus you see the wonderful articulated simplicities that those unities provide. That sense of wonder for those articulated unities and simplicities must be part of Gass' sense of the sublime.

Let me give you an example of the orthographic order that is at work beneath the apparent confusion of English spelling, and that can suggest something of the magic of beginning to find that order: When we were tykes in elementary school, most of us learned, somehow, the difference between VCV and VCCV letter strings – that is, we learned that in a vowel-consonant-vowel string (VCV), the first vowel will be long, as in words like *moping* and *icy*, but in a vowel-consonant-consonant-vowel string (VCCV), the first vowel will be short, as in *mopping* and *icky*. Somehow we learned that contrast, and we have come to rely on it when we read words like *twining* and *twinning* or *later* and *latter*.

So far, so good – and so simple. However, then we begin to notice complications: For instance, the word *national* has a short [ă] sound even though the string <ati> is a VCV string, and even though its immediate source word *nation*, with that same <ati> string, **does** have the long [ā] we'd expect it to have. It's *nation* but *national*. And the more we look, the more problems we see: How come the short [ă] in *sanity*, with its <ani> VCV string, even though its source word *sane* has the long [ā]? How come *model* has short [ö], but *yodel* has long [ō]? How come *athlete* with a long [ē], but *athletic* with a short [ě]? How come *grave* but *gravid*? *Pose* but *posit*? It all begins to seem as if the VCV string idea is unraveling into confusion, into something approaching Stevens' "meaningless plungings of water and the wind." And we can feel betrayed: The so-called VCV rule we learned seems to have more exceptions than instances, which is no kind of rule at all. Betrayed we feel, and rush to agreement with those who for centuries have argued that English spelling is a fine madness, irrational,

without order and sense. And thus, we feel, spelling must be unteachable, unless your students are lucky or divinely blessed.

But as you sit and look at it – either on a porch in Rarotonga or a patio in Tahiti or a study in Ellensburg, Washington – you begin to see another level of order and pattern down there under the apparent disorder. There is a set of what might be called “shortening rules” that can preempt the VCV rule so that in certain contexts vowels will be short **even if they head a VCV string**. Here are some examples: One shortening rule states that if the vowel in the third syllable back from the end of a word is stressed, it will be short, even if it heads a VCV string. That is why *national* has that short [ă] even though *nation* has a long [ā]. The short [ă] in *national* is in the third syllable back; the long [ā] in *nation* is not. That is also why *natural* has a short [ă], three syllables back, while *nature* has a long [ā], only two syllables back. Thus, too, such pairs as *solitude* but *solo* and *vinegar* but *vine*, *holiday* but *holy*. This rule – called the Third Syllable Rule – explains a lot of those only apparent exceptions, and helps to bring a bit of order to where before there appeared to be at best imminent confusion and noise.

Another shortening rule applies to two-syllable words that were adopted from the French: The first vowels in these words will regularly be short, even if they head VCV strings. That's why *model* has short [ŏ] while *yodel* has long [ō]: *model* is from French; *yodel* is from German. In each of the following contrasting pairs, the first word, with a short vowel, was borrowed from French, while the second, with a long vowel, was not: *gravel* but *navel*, *bunion* but *union*, *lemon* but *demon*, *scholar* but *molar*, *river* but *driver*, *precious* but *specious*.

Another set of shortening rules involves certain suffixes that are regularly preceded by a short vowel, again even if that vowel is at the head of a VCV string. The suffixes *-ity*, *-ic*, *-id*, and *-it* are examples: The vowel in front of them is regularly stressed and short. That's why we have *sanity* but *sane*: *sanity* contains the suffix *-ity*; *sane* doesn't. That's also why we have *athletic*, with a short [ĕ] and the suffix *-ic*, but *athlete* with a long [ē] and no *-ic*. The presence of the suffixes *-id* and *-it* explains the short vowels in *gravid* and *posit*, in contrast with *grave* and *pose*.

These and other shortening rules account for thousands of short vowels that at first glance seem to be exceptions to the VCV rule. The point here is that we have a very broad and general rule – the VCV rule – that calls for a long vowel. But we also have a number of local, less broad rules – the shortening rules – that preempt the more general rule. We have rules within rules, a hierarchy of rules. And we have, too, an interesting instance of an important analytic principle: When a more general and a more local rule contend, the more local rule will regularly prevail.

The existence of these shortening rules represents pattern and order amidst what could seem to be confusion and disorder. Here is another

example of that hidden order. It is called “mixed convergence” and offers an understandable simplicity where before there seemed to be only senseless complication.

In mixed convergence two spellings, once distinct, collapse into one. An old distinction gets lost. For instance, <ache> seems an odd way to spell [āk]. We used to have two words here, a noun [äch] spelled <ache>, and a verb [āk] spelled, logically enough, <ake>. This pairing of nouns and verbs is not unusual in English; similar pairs are *batch* and *bake*, *watch* and *wake*, *wretch* and *wreak*, and *speech* and *speak*. But in the case of [äch] and [āk], the noun pronunciation, [äch], disappeared, together with the verb spelling, <ake>. The old verb pronunciation converged with the old noun spelling. And thus we end up with the oddity in which [āk] is spelled as if it were [äch], which it once was. Mixed convergence can help us understand a number of seemingly odd spellings in words like *plaid* in which <ai> spells [a], *heifer* in which <ei> spells [ě], *one* and *once* with their initial [w] sounds, *choir* with its [w] sound and its long [ī] spelled <oi>, the military rank *colonel* in which the letter <l> spells [r], *build* with short [ī] spelled <ui>, and all those words with initial <wh> which is pronounced either [w] or [hw] and which inverts the common Old English spelling, <hw>.

Since I am confessing, let me admit to being a bit of a romantic evolutionist. I believe that the general movement of things is from disorder to order. From a purely physical point of view, if our cosmologists are not completely wrong again, our universe started with chaos, inconceivable confusion and disorder after that great primordial bang. And in spite of pessimistic appearances to the contrary, there remains the simple and irrefutable fact that the development of our physical universe has been away from primal chaos and towards increasing order and pattern – almost as if towards William Gass' sublime vision of absolute organization. Consider the progress from the chaos of that primal bang to the order and design of the human brain, and who knows what even more complexly organized structures are yet to be discovered out there?

Now this may seem heady stuff to find in an ex-schoolteacher's orthographic confessions. But it draws and holds me, that evolution toward pattern, that universal rage for order. And to find echoes of it, or at least to be convinced that I am finding echoes of it, in the daily and everyday stuff of our English spelling – it leaves me, literally and in both senses, spell-bound.

Perhaps such thoughts begin to explain the spell of orthography. And they also happen to go far to explain the spell of teaching: The teacher, too, is involved in the quest for order within disorder. The teacher, when all is going at its very best, knows the joy of helping a student to that sense of order. Sometimes you have to disrupt a preexisting order there in the student's mind, an order that limits the student's powers and vision, but

that disruption is only to make possible the discovery of a new order, one that is more powerful and more fully articulated. I can't help but feel that this is particularly true of teachers of language, that most astonishing of human creations. The sublimity possible to the orthographer is very much the sublimity possible to the teacher.

So, both as teacher and as orthographer, I study the spells that bind us, wherever we are: amidst the windswept fields of the Kittitas Valley in Washington state, or on a sandy and weather-greyed porch in the sun of Rarotonga, or on a patio fragrant with jasmine and frangipani and flowers even more exotic in a cool and gentle Tahitian morning.

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