

«THE CONSPIRACY OF WORDS»

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Once upon a time there was a huge edifice called *Dictionary of the Spanish Language*. It was a structure of such colossal size, so far beyond any measure, that according to the chroniclers, it spread over almost one-fourth of a table, just the ordinary kind one might see in somebody's house.

If we are to believe an ancient document found in an even more ancient writing-case, an attempt was once made to place this edifice on its owner's bookshelf; the result was that the shelf threatened to collapse, endangering everything else on it. The thing had two boxboard walls, covered in speckled calf leather. On its façade—leather also—one could observe a large poster, whose gilded letters proclaimed to the world and to posterity the name and significance of the great monument.

Its interior was a wondrous labyrinth, more splendid than the one in ancient Crete. The inner structure was partitioned off by some six hundred *walls*. Each wall was a *page* with a number. Each page was subdivided into three long *corridors* or *hallways*. In each corridor were an endless number of *cells*, occupied by the eight- or nine hundred thousand inhabitants of the vast enclosure. They were *Words*.

One morning there arose a great hubbub of voices, foot-stampings, clashes of weapons, rustling of clothes, calls to arms and whinnings, as if a grand army were being raised, making ready with great haste to engage in a dreadful battle. And to tell the truth, it *was* to be a war, for after a short time all, or nearly all the words in the Dictionary carne forward, arrayed in sturdy, shining armor. They formed such a huge phalanx that they wouldn't have fit inside the Biblioteca Nacional. This army offered a surprising and magnificent spectacle, according to what I have been told by an eyewitness who watched the whole thing from his hiding place nearby. This eyewitness was an ancient *Flos sanctorum*, bound in parchment and sitting on the bookshelf at that very moment.

The column moved forward until all the words had come out of the building. I shall now attempt a description of the marching order and trappings of the army,

faithfully following the truthful, scrupulous, authentic narrative of my friend the *Flos sanctorum*.

In the advance column marched some heralds called *Articles*, dressed in magnificent dalmatics and chain-mail doublets. They bore no weapons, but carried the escutcheons of their lords the *Nouns*, who followed a little behind. These latter, in almost infinite number, were so splendid and showy that they were a feast for the eye. Some of them were carrying gleaming weapons of the purest metal, and wore helmets crowned with fluttering plumes and festoons. Other Nouns wore cuirasses of the finest leather, worked with gold and silver; still others were garbed in long, flowing garments in the style of Venetian senators. Some were mounted on richly adorned ponies, and others proceeded on foot. There were those who didn't seem as rich or ostentatious as the others. As a matter of fact, there were plenty who were quite poorly attired indeed, even though one couldn't see them very well, outshone as they were by the glitter and elegance of the rest.

Together with the *Nouns* marched the *Pronouns*, who were walking just ahead—grasping the horses' bridles—or behind, holding the trains of their lieges' garments. They guided them, as if leading the blind, and sustained their arms as a support for their weakened bodies, for among the Nouns it was obvious that some were advanced in years and decrepit, and even some who seemed near death. One could also see more than a few Pronouns standing in for their masters who had remained in bed, ill or lazy. These Pronouns walked right alongside the Nouns, as if they held equal rank. Obviously, there were Pronouns of both sexes; the ladies strode along just as stylishly as the gentlemen, and even brandished their weapons with equal ease and confidence.

Next came the *Adjectives*, all on foot, as if they were servants or satellites of the Nouns, in ranks beside them and awaiting orders. Everyone knows that no Sir Noun can do anything right without the ready assistance of a good squire from the honorable family of the Adjectives. But these latter, in spite of the strength and meaning they lend their masters, are not worth anything by themselves, and are dead when left alone. Their ornaments and attire were brilliant, whimsical, brightly colored and clearly outlined. One may say that when one of them carne near his master, the master would take on an adjective-like color and form, transformed on the outside but essentially the same.

About ten yards to the rear carne the *Verbs*, who were the strangest, most marvelous creatures the imagination can conceive. There is no way to discern their sex or to give any idea of their stature. You can't tell their age, or describe them at all with any accuracy or precision. Suffice it to say that they are in constant motion, moving in all directions. First they go backward and then forward, and two of them can join up and walk as a pair. What *is* true, as I am assured by the *Flos sanctorum*, is that not a thing gets done in that Republic without the participation of these characters, and even though the Nouns of both sexes are very useful indeed, they can achieve nothing on their own, and would be blind forces if not directed by some Lord Verb.

Behind the Verbs came the *Adverbs*, who had the look of rascally scullions, as if their job were to prepare meals for the Verbs and wait on them hand and foot. It's common knowledge that they are relatives of the Adjectives, a fact attested in ancient genealogical manuscripts. Some Adverbs have even been commissioned to take the place of Adjectives, for which function they put on a tail or skirt: —*ly*.

The *Prepositions* were tiny, and seemed more like things than persons, to judge by the way they moved around automatically; they stayed close to the Nouns, for the purpose of carrying a message to some Verb (or the other way round.)

The *Conjunctions* were all over the place, causing a great uproar. Two of them, especially, a pair known as *which* and *that*, were the very devil, and had all the rest in a state of confusion and agitation: they had picked a fight between a Noun and a Verb, and at times overturned what the Verb said, entirely changing its intent.

Behind all of them marched the *Interjections*, who had no bodies, but only heads with big mouths, always open. They didn't meddle with anyone, and got along by themselves; though few in number, they knew their own worth.

Some of the words were noble, and bore on their escutcheons handsome symbols certifying their Latin or Arabic heritage. Others, having no ancient lineage to boast of, were newly coined, slangy, or really of little value. The nobility treated them scornfully. And then there were some, immigrants from France, who were waiting for the time when they might acquire Spanish nationality. Yet there were others, of rock-ribbed national ancestry, who were collapsing from old age. They had been sidelined, though the rest continued to hold them in a decent regard, wrinkled though they were. Finally, there were the petulant, conceited ones who scorned all the others with a dismissive sneer.

They all arrived at Bookshelf Square and filled every corner of it. The Verb *Be* set up a sort of platform or tribune, supported on two exclamation points and a few commas who were wandering around. *Be* ascended the platform, intending to begin a harangue, but he was upstaged by a very talkative Noun, a prankster known as *Man*. This fellow climbed up on the shoulders of his aides de camp, the genial Adjectives *Rational* and *Free*. He saluted the crowd, doffing his M, which served him for a hat, and began uttering these words, or some such:

«Ladies and gentlemen: the cheekiness of Spanish writers has offended us deeply, and now we must deliver to them a swift and well-earned punishment. It is not enough that they put French contraband into their books. to the great depletion of our national wealth! More than this, when they use one of us they overturn our meanings and make us say the opposite of what we intend.» (*Hear, hear!*) «Our noble Latin origins give us no protection against their disregard for our real meanings. They disfigure us so badly that we are left in disgust and grief. My own sadness is so great that I must beg your indulgence— I'm unable to hold back my own sobs.» (*Warm applause.*) The speaker wiped away his tears with the final stroke of his n, which served him as a coat-tail; he

was just ready to proceed with his speech when he was distracted by the uproar surrounding a fight which had broken out not far away.

It was the Noun *Sense*, punching the Adjective *Common* in the face, and shouting, «You rotten, lazy, filthy word, you are the reason I get chased all over, and used as a safe-conduct pass against all sorts of foolishness. The moment some writer goes beyond his depth in any area, he shields himself with *Common Sense*, and from then on believes himself to be the wisest fellow on earth. Get away from me, you evil, pestiferous Adjective, or I swear I'll thrash the life out of you.»

And as he said it, *Sense* hoisted his final e and struck such a firm blow that the Adjective was left reeling. They had to bind up his *o*'s and put a poultice on his *m*'s, which were bleeding freely.

«Calm yourselves, gentlemen,» said a Feminine Noun named *Philosophy*, who appeared at the scene of the commotion, dressed in a white coif, duenna-style. But another word whose name was *Music*, attacked *Philosophy* and started to kick her and pull at her hair, screaming all the while: «Look at this vicious, stupid, crazy woman — she's trying to chain me to a Preposition, claiming that I have to have a Philosophy! All I have is myself, sister dear. Let me be; for all I care you can rot away in your old age tied to *German*, who's a crazy old woman like you.»

«Leave me alone, you troublemaker,» said *Philosophy*, yanking off the dot on *Music*'s *i*, which she wore like a topknot; «get away, you're nothing but a childish game.»

«Not so fast, ladies,» shouted a tall Noun, slender, lean, and phthisic-looking: her name was *Sentiment*. «Have a care not to address my sister in that kind of language, or we'll end up in a real face-to-face, you and I. Just hold your peace and mind your own business. We all have dirty laundry to wash, and anybody who does yours will *never* get it clean.»

«What a snivelling, ill-bred brat,» said *Reason*, who was walking nearby, dressed only in his underwear, and looking quite dishevelled, «without me all these dunderheads wouldn't amount to a thing. Stop all this arguing, and get back in your places, all of you! If I *really* lose my patience with all of you...!»

«No chance of that happening,» said the Noun *Evil*, who always got into everything.

«And just who let you into this discussion, Grandpa Evil? Go straight to Hell — the world has no need of you any more.»

«Please excuse me, your Ladyships, but I'm doing very well indeed now; for a while I was a bit off my game, but then I hired this lackey, and I'm doing much better since he's been my servant.» And he pointed to his retainer, the Adjective *Necessary*.

«Away with him, I'll kill him,» screamed *Religion*, who was already in a fist fight with *Politics*; «he's stolen my good name, just to keep people from seeing his frauds and deceits.»

«No more insults! I call you all to order,» said the Noun *Government*, who had stepped forward in an effort to calm things down.

«Oh, just let them go after each other, dear colleague,» was the counsel of *Justice*. «Let them claw away—you know that they go into a rage whenever they get close to each other. Let's *you* and *me* not bicker; perhaps then things will work out all right.»

As all this was going on, a very gallant Noun carne forward, clad in shining armor and bearing a shield embossed with splendid designs and a gold-and-silver emblem. His name was *Honor*. He had come to lodge a complaint about the endless foolishness that people said and did in his name, using it as a sort of shibboleth they would invoke in any convenient circumstance and for any purpose that they might have in mind. But the Noun known as *Morality* appeared in a corner, tying up a loose end of her —y, which had come unravelled in the course of the brawl just mentioned; at this moment everyone was looking in her direction. She complained of being disrespected by certain upstart Adjectives, and rounded out her remarks by saying that she was not at all fond of certain companions and really preferred to go it alone. This observation drew laughter from a number of pretentious Nouns, no one of which ever appeared in public without a retinue of at least six Adjectives to act as servants.

Meanwhile, *Inquisition*, a scrawny old woman who couldn't stand up by herself, was lighting a huge bonfire she had piled up, using as tinder some worn-out question-marks, vertical strokes of *t*'s and cracked parentheses. It was rumored that she wanted to burn *Liberty*, who was cavorting around, all test and brazenness. Across the way was the Verb *Kill*, shouting and clenching his fist in rage. He kept repeating, «If only I could become active...!»

When she heard this, the Noun *Peace* carne running so fast that she tripped on her own —ce (a shoe of sorts), and fell down flat with a loud thud.

«I'm right here,» shouted the Noun *Art*, who had taken on the profession of cobbler. «I'll repair your shoe—that's what I do.»

And now with her —ce re-attached with a few commas, *Peace* took flight and performed somersaults in front of the Noun *Cannon*. (They say she was head over heels in love with him.)

Since the Verb *Be* and the Noun *Man* and the Adjective *Rational* were all unable to bring those creatures into harmony, the three of them decided to go back to their homes. By now it was clear to them that they would be defeated in an obviously ill-matched battle with Spanish writers.

So they decreed that all the Words should return to their cells. All complied, though it took great effort to rein in some hooligans who wouldn't stop making faces and acting rowdy.

A number of Words were injured during the fray, and they are still to be found in the field hospital known as the Dictionary's *Errata*.

It has been agreed that another conference will take place, with a view toward achieving compliance on the part of the writers. The protocols are now being written, in order to establish the ground rules for the debates. The pronunciamiento that was issued has remained without effect however, since the conspirators frittered away their time in fruitless discussions and selfish disputes, instead of coming to some agreement about how to combat the common enemy. So the whole business ended up in total confusion.

The *Flos sanctorum* assures me that the *Grammar Book* has despatched to the *Dictionary* a delegation of genders, numbers and cases, to see whether by some free act of good will, and without bloodshed, the jumbled affairs of the *Spanish Language* might be settled.

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