

Etymology

by Steven J. Kolbe

In every word there is both music and history. Music from the way sounds come into union with each other, and history in how they get there. There is form too, sure, but I am not a calligrapher. I'm a scribbler if anything. And so my sentences look more like the ship-in-a-bottle before it's raised when everything is lying down almost flat, than the many-sailed carrack it becomes after you pull that little stick out the bottle's mouth. This is all to say, I am *not* the person most qualified to appreciate form and typography.

But music, yes. And history. Take for instance the word *hemp*. You can trace that word all the way back to the Sumerians, the first writers of all, whose *qunnapu* was a source of fiber, oil, and medicine. Then you can follow it to the Greek and Latin's *(c/k)annabis*, and to Old German's *hannapiz*--the germanic wanderers dropping the hard "c" somewhere along the way. The Anglo-Saxons later rendered it *haenep*, just a short tonal shift away from our *hemp*. You can travel all that way until you find yourself in the middle of a college sophomore's argument, to the young man who is speaking economics but wearing a Grateful Dead t-shirt and reeking of hemp's close cousin. It's almost too much to tackle all at once.

Or consider the utterance, "This I cannot forgive," which appears almost idiomatically these days. The speaker and his audience are most likely unaware that "for" actually meant "not" in Old English.

Nor do they understand that forgiveness is not an action but a restraint from action--to *not* give someone what they deserve. What the speaker says then is actually, "This I cannot *not* give back to that person. I am driven madly by a compulsion to settle his debts for him!" There is irony like this on nearly every page of every book, and this is because language evolves in primarily one way: by being misused. *Literally.*

I get hung up on words like these all the time, which is what I explain to my niece Anna who, though she's only eight-years-old, already reads faster than I do.

"Uncle Steven, read faster," she groans when she reaches the end of the next page of the book we are silently reading together.

"I read like an editor," I tell her.

What I don't tell her is that I've always read this slowly, distracted by the discoloration of a page or a question mark in a font I've never seen before or even the falling of autumn leaves just outside our school house's window when I was just beginning to read all those years ago. I have always been a "fits and starts" kind of person.

Even now, as I try to bring this day dream of mine to its logical conclusion, I am day dreaming still more. Day dreaming about the mercurial past, the unknowable future, and about all the little things I forgot (literally "did not get") to do today.

