Introduction

I believe that almost everyone who uses the book finds it more convenient to have recourse to the Index first.


Dear Alexander Valkner,

... It was a relief to come across your long, brilliant piece in a recent issue of Comment, namely: The History of Dictionaries.

... From intimacy you travelled to grandeur, then back and forth, like a marvellously controlled metronome. I admired the way your essay builds on itself so meticulously, and the way it is anecdotal, accessible, and, finally, shading toward the confessional. I recognized only too well the moment in which you were tempted to approach some of our great writers to see whether or not they 'indulge,' keeping a thesaurus hidden in their desk drawer.

(Reta Winters, in Shields (2002) 163–4)

More or less every publication on Latin literature today practises citation from Isidore. Through the twentieth century, this was a matter of itemic consultation via a modern Index. Until 1991, the closest that many, perhaps most, scholars ever came to reading Isidore’s magnum opus was, for sure, recourse to the Index Verborum of Wallace Lindsay’s OCT (1911a) Vol. 2: 371–442: Latin, and 443: Greek (with ibid. 444–50: Loci Citati).1 Then, at a stroke, Francis Cairns’ publication of Robert Maltby’s invaluable Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies (1991) finessed this reflex from the Latinist’s apparatus of automatic procedures:

1 Lindsay’s text (reproduced in Oroz Reta and Marcos Casquero (2000); see Díaz y Díaz (2000) 233–4) has incurred (foreseen) criticism for cavalier (classicizing) orthography (e.g. Wright (2002) 39, 246. In particular, Greek script is unwarranted; e.g. Marshall (1983), Introduction 12. Maltby (1999) catalogues (the many) Isidorian etymologies affected by changes in [post-classical] spelling/ pronunciation. See Appendix for Lindsay and for scholarship on Isidore.
(M.) has assembled all the explicitly attested etymologies of Latin antiquity, from the predecessors of Varro to Isidore of Seville; he has covered glossaries and scholia as well as the standard ancient etymological source-works.2

So, why would you bother further with Isidore, neat?3

First, who is Isidore? Dante knew he’s in Paradiso (10.130), but the saint’s earthly remains were (must have been) removed from Seville to

2 Jacket blurb.

3 By my reckoning, something like 40% of the Maltby entries (excluding cross-references) include Isidore’s testimony; perhaps 1 in 8 of the words etymologized, and around 1⁄4 of the etymologies compiled, are given by Isidore alone.
keep them from 'the Moors', whose invasion ended the world he knew – traditionally dated to the 711 débâcle of Visigoth King Roderick, less than a century after Isidore’s death. The shrine up-river was later destroyed, but the recently celebrated monastery-cum- castle of San Isidoro del Campo marks the site. Down in today’s totally Hispanicized city, he and his brother San Leandro (no. 41 of 46 or 28 of 33 in the two redactions of Isidore’s De uiris illustribus) represent a strong parochial hold on their home town and Andalucian region’s command of Spain’s Atlantic seaways to the treasure and trade of the Latin American empire. Granted, San Pablo and San Pedro are grand national and ecumenical custodians of Santa Maria de la Sede inside and outside this thirteenth-century Cathedral (the largest Gothic building anywhere). Yet the two local heroes have their share: matching chapels set into the width of the walls on either side of the western entrance, Leandro’s to right home to a fine painting of his Council of Toledo starring sister Florentina (the revered Virgin), and Isidoro’s to left, aptly dedicated to keeping the choir books (Leandro’s, however, dates to 1734; Isidore’s was finished in 1661). The newly fashioned ‘Museum’ area (at tourist reception) draws visitors to a 1650–55 canvas by Ignacio de Ries, where San Leandro’s gesture of benediction matches with San Isidoro’s quill and book clutched under arm. But what absolutely guarantees the brothers’ visibility, beyond a doubt, is the dominant display of 1655 twin portraits by Seville’s favourite native artist Murillo (1617–82), which span the former Cathedral ‘museum’, safe in the niches they were commissioned for, on the facing side walls of the Sacristía Mayor. Here, since 25 August 1655, Bp Leandro’s scroll exorcizes Arian heresy: ‘CREDITE O GOTHI CONSUBSTANTIALEM PATRI’; whereas this Bp Isidoro cons Scripture, while beside him sit his own writings: ‘DE SUMMO BO(NO)’ fittingly tops the...
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saintly pile;’9 beneath it, the other legible spine on view fades into its shadow: ‘ETYMOLO(GIAE)’ – truth showing, word half-obscured; the compounded truthofword’s com-posite-ness intact . . . [frontispiece].10

Which must amount to the truest, as well as the most graphic, portrait there could be of the role of this encyclopedic learning as cultural support for a militant ministry.11

Twentieth-century Sevillanos’ modest tribute to a Roman past amounts to celebration of Trajan and Hadrian’s birthplace at nearby Italica, marooned by the river’s vagaries, within the Museo Arqueológico, blessed by Franco.12 But San Isidoro has the honour of having his head star in the row of 52 heroes of Spanish history medallioned along the baking frontage of the 1929 Ibero-american exhibition showcase of the Plaza de España, that shimmering esplanade inset into the superb Parque de Infanta María-Luisa [Figure 3, p. 26].13 He left his mark on time, too. For 1960 was Isidore’s Year in Andalucía, and every 4th April is still St Isidore’s Day across the Catholic world, the anniversary of his death. Now, though, for the virtual spatiotemporality of the twenty-first century, Isidore has netted a new role – as the officially designated patron saint of computer users and programmers, and of the internet: recommended for prayer by whichever site seeker, world wide.14

9 This is Isidore’s Sententiae, also known as De summo bono from the first words: Summum bonum deus est, quia incommutabilis est, . . . (MPL 81: 537–758 [cf. 81: 177]), ‘The highest boon is God, for that He is non-subject to change, . . .’: see Cazier (1998), Campos Ruiz and Roca Meliá (1971).


10 Martinez Montiel and Morales (1999) 97: the story is that Murillo gave Leandro the face of Alonso de Herrera, Isidoro that of Juan López de Tabalán (Cathedral choirmaster, deceased 1655, and a licentiate cleric in the Cathedral admin.). Murillo includes the two brothers in a ‘Conception’ theme set of medallion heads in the vault of the Sala Capitular (1667–8); Ángulo-Íñiguez (1981) II: Cat. 48–9, plates 210–11. They are also carved on the doors of the Great Vestry, and La Antigua chapel includes another Isidoro painting (by Domingo Martinez).


12 The exhibition room dedicated to Visigoth culture contains one label referring to Isidore: as author- ity on scents and perfumes. For fragments of Roman Seville: Campos Carrusco (1986).

13 In this swansong for Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship, Isidoro is beside the North Tower, second after Seneca (they blatantly turn away from each other), before De Pelayo, El Cid, . . ., Sorolla (‘Exposición Iberoamericana de Sevilla’; Braujos, Parias, Álvarez (1990)) 2: 66–80).

14 www.schorrromeo.org/saints/isidores.htm. Bulletin from the Vatican, 14.06.99. San Isidoro saved Spain by politely warning Mohammed off in a dream (MPL 82: 136–7; for his full legend, see ibid. 15–162; cult: de Gaiffier (1961), Domínguez del Val III: 36–8). He is not to be confused with his
And the *Etymologiae*? The prolific and polymathic seventh-century Bishop of Seville was a vastly influential conduit for classical antiquity into the medieval world, but, sorry to say, his encyclopedic storehouse of Latin commands attention from Latinists strictly as a putative witness to earlier etymological ‘lore’, otherwise lost to us. For, while it is possible to write an outline history of ancient etymological scholarship, spanning from ‘cosmogonic’ theorizing to ebullient bullshit, we have only Isidore extant as anything like a complete text. Because of his date, however, he is virtually absent from classical scholarship. *Chuckle* is typical (i.e. CHCL: *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*): Isidore appears here in just the one tralatician sentence that begins with Varro, then runs through the list of names down to Isidore, in order to gesture towards his ‘all-pervasive’, if ‘not always at first-hand’, subsequent ‘influence’.15 Publications and reviews on Isidore scarcely figure at all in *classical journals*.16

Yet contemporary logophilia and, in general, the graphematic turn in criticism have emphasized the semiotic prevalence of etymologizing mentalities in Roman culture,17 so that this particular titan of taxonomic knowledge is coming under the sort of pressure to deliver bona fide goods to the marketplace that Isidore has not known for a millennium. While (truth to tell) it has proved enough for most purposes to back up a proposed ‘word-truth’ with a bare reference culled from *any place* within the curtilage of ‘the ancient world’, it has been necessary to repress interest in the genesis (the origins) of Isidore’s materials, and in particular recognition of Isidore’s agenda. In fact, the shock that awaits anyone prepared to *read* the *Etymologiae* is closely analogous to the shock that hits the user of *Roget’s Thesaurus* when it dawns that *that* monumental word-store represents the bastardization of a determined attempt to systematize a forceful ideology. Mediated through successive revisions of the original Roget’s original scheme, the teleology of the classification led (leads) from abstract concepts through the material universe, to humanity, and, for climax, the apex of significance: morality and religion: ‘the imperfect forerunner of that

catachresis, the peasant hero San Isidro (Labrador) of Madrid – that centrepoint capital fantasized into existence by Philip II in the distant future. Cf. de Gaiffier (1961) 277; showing that Isidore’s traditional date of canonization stems from just such confusion.


16 They concentrate in Iberian *Helmantica*.

Universal Language to which Roget and his fellow reformists aspired’.18 The editions we use today ring-fence the Thesaurus with dense paratextual assurances that stylistics and crosswords dwell here, so as to tuck the distracting creationist programming just out of our eyeline. But Roget once had a theoretical tendency — was an agenda.19

What, then, of the Etymologiae? When editors such as Lindsay preface Isidore, to the contrary, with a run of his letters followed by an agglomerated index plus scheme of chapter-headings through the 20 books ahead, the sloganized value-system of the Etymologiae is loudly advertised up-front, and heavily underscored for attention. These praemissa waymark and type the main principles, categories and hierarchies of Isidore’s taxonomy, on the path that leads from Grammatica and Rhetorica through to a finale of instrumenta hortorum and equorum. To read, you need one eye trained on the difference brought to his Varronian inheritance by Isidore’s position as a Latinate Christian authority who had no Hebrew, and little Greek,20 but who posited revelation of the creator’s design through these 3 sacred tongues;21 and the other eye upon the textuality and writing that shape this vast icon of conceptual order. As the great Curtius outlined in his foundational book on the entire Middle Ages, in this pangram, it’s downhill all the way:22

the great Isidore of Seville, who in his great compilation of all human knowledge chose the road from designation to essence, from uerba to res, and accordingly named his work Etymologiarum libri . . . . The importance of this work . . . can hardly be overestimated; it may be called the basic book of the entire Middle Ages (Grundbuch des ganzen Mittelalters). It not only established the canonical stock of knowledge for eight centuries but also moulded their thought categories.

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20 Next-to-no Greek: this is strenuously argued by Fontaine, esp. (1988) essay iv: 535 (pace e.g. Courcelle (1939)). Besides operating at the most basic of levels (perhaps considerably), Isidore does make astonishing mistakes with Greek (cf. Lindsay (1911b) 44), but when did the question ‘What is it to know ancient Greek?’ ever sustain a simple answer? (Ditto Hebrew – and Latin.)

21 Cf. McNally (1959) 92–2 for this sacred chain of truth in words.

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Where Lindsay could only disqualify his text – ‘this encyclopedia is not a literary work of art’ – Curtius invokes the requisite category of ‘powerbook’. For sure, this mighty spree of articulated knowledge plays across the world visible to etymology while enacting creating a world from etymology. In relays of feedback loops, what can and cannot be learned about the universe from its dividends for etymology feeds into and on what can and cannot be learned about etymology from its stocktake of Creation. All the while, his writing models the belief system it subtends, as the monumental text morphs through its taxonomers’ paradise of totalization through system, dramatizing power as power over knowledge. Performative display of the power/knowledge nexus takes a scholastic turn to cosmogonic enumeration as interpretation builds its shrine to interpretation. Here mapping inculcates an unfolding world of values, as exegetic modality delivers its particular blend of protreptic regimes: pedagogic, devotional, ecumenical, revelatory – classical/post-classical, through early medieval, to pre-modern. The clerical authority valorizes his schedule of the known, affixes limits to the knowable; but this clerk of words writes with appreciation and awe, warms or boils as he records and preaches. He discriminates for and against, as well as between the items and grids he chooses to love or list; favours his favourites, scolds the demonized, recommends this tool or that technology, plots his narrative to beguile the reader no less than shape nature.

One constant dimension is, happily-cum-necessarily, language consciousness, a textualizing semiotic of book culture – a cult of the book that lines up a ‘liberal arts’ manual as flagship and bearer of a mission to educate. Isidore profiles civilization as inherent within the structures he avers: fixing origins for a permanence glossed as eternity; placing, contextualizing, opening out traditional schooling as conduit to the one-world superpower ideology of universal Rome – Rome pegged to Christ as the continuous present realm of Latinitas wherein ‘we’ (nostri – ‘our lot’) dwell. Language-centred, language-obsessed, but not necessarily blind or bound, Isidore’s lexicographical, indexical, signified world nevertheless serves a specific Iberian catholicizing politics within a durable Mediterranean cultural habitus.

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23 (1911b) 50.
Isidore of Seville.' Surely everyone knows what it can mean to be told at an impressionable age where the name of your home town comes from? It is one of the surefire ways to awaken a sense of place and history in pupils and people. In the case of Isidore – he was born to etymologize the universe! Start from ultimate Seville (14.4.28, cf. 14.4.70), and you will embark on a review that moves from Atlantic margin to Mediterranean centre to engross the whole of post-Graeco-Roman culture. For Seville is originary eponym of all Romanized Spain (9.2.109):26

_Hispanis_ ab Ibero amne primam Iberi, postea ab _Hispolo Hispani_ cognominati sunt.

Hispanics were first called Iberians from the River Ebro, but afterwards got the nickname Hispanics from Hispalus.

There's more to say yet, and think, with Seville. Symbolically, or as Isidore would realize, naturally, Seville had been first-born child of nascent imperial Rome (15.1.71):

_Hispalim Caesar Iulius condidit, quam ex suo et Romae urbis uocabulo Iuliam Romulam nuncupavit._

Seville was founded by Julius Caesar. He entitled it Julia Romula after the words for himself and for the City of Rome.

Still more instructively and inspirationally, the call to world destiny did not obliterate, but immortalized, the truth-in-the-word of His-palis (ibid.):

_Hispalis autem a situ cognominata est, eo quod in solo palustri suffixis in profundo palis locata sit, ne lubrico atque instabili fundamento cederet._

Seville is nicknamed for its location. How so? Because it was sited on soil with marshy pools; beneath Hispalian Seville, pole pallets were stuck down in the deep, so it would not fail to bear up to having foundations that were unsure and unstable.

Piledriving allegory or sustaining myth of origin, this tale of the town makes the perfect platform for the project of envisioning our world as worked in words. Isidore's origins tell us about our own marmalade. For every home town marks that [space] where the primeval slipperiness of unstable swamp did enter upon localized identity through cultural effort reified in nominalization. The foundations of our habitus are always stakes driven deep into the unplumbable bed of unnamable ooze, sunk into the

Footnote 25 (cont.)
(2001). For continuity from late Roman imperial rule through to the Visigoth eras, see Kulikowski (2004). 26 From Justin, _Epitome_ 44.1.2.
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pre-semiotic [gloop] – the ‘chora’ beyond the pale of language. The whole Story of Man is staked out in this tale of graphic underpinning, from foundering to founding. There was a pool, and so it called for a pole: palus → pâlus (palustris → palis). These mere poles beneath Visigothic Spalis were the basis for Isidore’s polis,27 so his pallet palisade props up re-founded Hispania for the imperial Roman orbis grounded on the underlying subsumption of every ville in the Latin dictionary within the mould of the originary urbs. What’s at stake in fathoming these Origins? To this ‘pun-ceptual’ way of thinking, the truths in Latinity subtend a panoramic synthesis of mainstream experience since we emerged from the slime (lubricus meant ‘slippery’, and so came to mean ‘ungraspable’, ‘hazardous’, ‘tricky, unstable, unreliable’). Where we all were born, and are borne again by Thesaurus Rex.

More sinned against than sinning? Epic – titanic – scholarship recovers, traces, and appraises Isidore’s intertextual work and performance of extraction and absorption (see Appendix, pp. 212–13); and several of the stalwarts and heroes will take a bow or two in the pages ahead: Varro, Pliny, Jerome, Augustine, Cassiodorus . . . 28 Truth to tell, the long and short of it is that Etymologiae knows full well that it makes a very grand introduction to classics.29 But this book, The medieval world of Isidore of Seville, is trained on the intratextual production and reticulation of its world from, and in, words that bespeak and realize theurgy.

27 The requisite traces of pine stakes have duly been located along the banks of Rio Guadalquivir (esp. beneath Calle de Tetuán): Blanco Freijeiro (1979) 1.1: 105–7, esp. 106.


29 Conte (1994) 721 hits the mark (in translationese): ‘the ensemble of his works should be considered, not as an aseptic product of the study, but as an organic proposal (and a functional proposal, as his fortune throughout the Middle Ages would demonstrate) to systematize culture for the purpose of training new generations and new ruling classes’.