

Let's erudite: Verbification

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 24, 2004](#) issue

"Sue them!" my wife joked. Harriet offered her succinct suggestion as we read a sentence in a review that appeared over my name. Within it was a word I was sure I could not have used—or at least could not have intended—since it doesn't exist. Something must have happened in transmission, I thought, something that the editors did not catch.

The Spring 2004 issue of the *Evangelical Studies Bulletin*, the vital newsletter of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College in Illinois, published my sentence: "*Lutherans Today* delivers on the promise of its main title in eruditing a glimpse of the many faces [of Lutherans today]."

"Eruditing a glimpse"? Before I would complain to the editors I thought it best to check my laptop to see what word they had misread, miscast or mistyped. Shock! There was that word "eruditing," staring from my screen. I cannot remember what verb I must have had in mind. How could this strange neologism have crept in? I picture *ESB* editor Larry Eskridge and his colleagues puzzling about the sentence. Perhaps their dialogue went like this: "Well, you know Marty. He likes to play around with words and must have thought this one would be fun—even if it doesn't make much sense. Let it go."

Having written thousands of articles and columns, I have come to stand in awe of editors' work. When I was young and Paul Tillich was old, I once told him that readers were commenting on how clear and clean his recent article in the *Christian Century* was. I was expecting him to compliment our copy editors, experts who could make Reinhold Niebuhr's dashed-off articles acquire style, and who edited Martin Luther King's classic "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which King had sent to us for first publication. Tillich had not noticed how skillfully he had been translated from Teutonic into English: "Well, that article should have been clear. I wrote it in A-ca-pooooo-co!" he said.

So I am forced to take responsibility for the coinage "to erudite." Maybe some day it will make it into the *Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. I covet such

inclusion, having tried to get it to note my “descript” to counter “nondescript” or to list “ert” and “ept” over against “inert” and “inept.” So what shall we make of this new term? The dictionary includes “erudite, adj.” and “erudition, n,” but not “erudite, vt.” Maybe something in the lexicographical neighborhood of both could provide a clue for an etymological rationale for the word, I thought. However, just before “erudite” is “eruct,” which means “belch.” According to the *O.E.D. Supplement*, it can now mean “vomit,” which I was tempted to do when I found that the mistake had been mine. And just after “erudition” was “erumpent,” which means “bursting forth,” which I would have done had the mistake not been mine.

The abysses of etymology say that the root of what would be my new verb is *e + rudis*, which means getting out of the rough, the rude, the ignorant. Armed with this new knowledge, I was ready to ask: “So what is wrong with turning ‘erudite’ into a verb?” The dictionary had erudited me.

Start thinking of “to erudite” as a useful verb for helping someone get out of ignorance or rudeness. We may some day succeed in wedging it into the *O.E.D.* That lexicographical location would not, however, throw light on what “eruditing a glimpse” of anything could mean. Please, readers, erudite me, before I eruct in shame.