

Max Décharné, *Vulgar Tongues. An Alternative History of English Slang*, New York, Pegasus Books, 2017, 352 p.

George VOLCEANOV

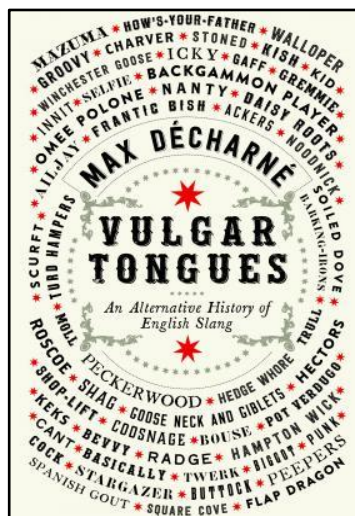
*Spiru Haret University, Bucharest (Romania), Faculty of Letters
CeCArg (Slang Research Centre) of University of Craiova (Romania)*

geovolceanov@yahoo.com



THE BIBLIOGRAPHY of Max Décharné's recent *Vulgar Tongues. An Alternative History of English Slang* (2017) lists about 250 book titles from a wide range of fields including, of course, lexicography, with numberless references to the glossaries and dictionaries of Thomas Harman (1567), John Florio (1598), Samuel Johnson (1755), Francis Grosse (1785, 1788, 1796, 1811, 1823), Eric Partridge (heavily represented by a selection of five fundamental works including *Shakespeare's Bawdy* and *A Dictionary of Historical Slang*), great classical authors, starting with Geoffrey Chaucer and continuing with William Shakespeare and half a dozen of his Elizabethan and Jacobean contemporaries – Robert Greene, Thomas Dekker, Ben Jonson, John Ford, Philip Massinger; among other copiously cited great fiction writers a prominent place is held by Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, Thomas de Quincey, James Joyce, George Orwell, J. D. Salinger, Anthony Burgess, and Irvine Welsh; the big guns of British and American crime fiction (Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Leslie Charteris, Dorothy L. Sayers, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Ross MacDonald) and masters of espionage novels (John Buchan, Ian Fleming, John Le Carré) are also cited as important contributors to the evolution of the British and American slang.

More than 280 articles from prestigious periodicals (*The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Spectator*, *Life*, etc.), some of them authored by celebrated writers (Peter Ackroyd, Kingsley Amis and Frederick Forsyth among others) complement the aforementioned bibliography. As such, Décharné's book is a good read, both *dulce et utile*, pleasant and



profitable or entertaining and instructive at the same time. It clearly addresses a general readership and its very subtitle, with emphasis on its being an *alternative* (why not *indie*, for that matter?) approach rather than a comprehensive, diachronic, or systematic one, suggests that it should be regarded as a *sui generis* contribution to popular culture rather than a groundbreaking scientific monograph.

There are two introductory chapters, the first of which foreshadows the method the author will employ throughout his book, namely a complete lack of any method aimed at coherence. It starts with a 'scientific', dictionary definition of slang, followed by several instances of slang usage from various historical ages and conflicting opinions regarding it. Dozens of brief sub-chapters (devised as anecdotes rather than scientific arguments or findings) follow one another in a hotchpotch of colourful and kaleidoscopic information.

The second introductory chapter is a rather well-documented history of slang, enumerating the main contributors to slang lexicography, from Thomas Harman on. Given Décharné's claim that he has prepared his book for 35 years, it is quite baffling to notice his utter disregard for important slang lexicographers like Stuart Berg Flexner, Richard A. Spears, Robert Chapman, John Ayto, Tony Thorne and, especially, Jonathon Green. It is hard to explain Green's absence, with no mention whatsoever. The more so if we regard Décharné's book as an obvious echo of Jonathon Green's *The Vulgar Tongue: Green's History of Slang*, Oxford University Press, 2014, 430 pp. (For more details, see my review in *Argotica*, No. 4, 2015).

The structuring of the next (numbered) chapters is reminiscent of some slang dictionaries like, for instance, Jonathon Green's *Slang Thesaurus* (Penguin, 1986, 1988) or John Ayto and John Simpson's several *Oxford Dictionaries of Slang* (1991, 1999) in that they use thematic criteria. In Chapter I, 'The Beast with Two Backs' (a famous quote from Shakespeare's *Othello*), dealing with slang terms for male and female genitalia, and sexual activities, the author keeps moving erratically back and forth on the timeline, providing his readers with a dazzling amount of information which is hardly systematized. The second chapter deals with terms about 'The Oldest Profession', a kind of sequel to the previous chapter.

The third chapter, 'A Bag of Bones', is dedicated to parts of the human body, while the fourth chapter, titled 'Polari Missiles', deals with *polari* and queer issues.

Chapters five, six, and seven, respectively, ingeniously titled 'Here's to Crime', 'Tails You Booze', and 'High as a Kite', include comments on criminal activities (drawing heavily especially on Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler), intoxication, drinking habits and all sorts of 'booze' and on

a different, more addictive type of intoxication, produced by the consumption of 'drugs', with excursions in the writings of Thomas de Quincey, Conan Doyle and Timothy Leary among many others.

The next three chapters are devoted to Décharné's personal lifetime hobby, music: all sorts of music, from early jazz and blues to rock and roll and other genres, including punk, for instance, and the slang they generated. I must confess I cannot see why the author has chosen to discuss basically one and the same thing in three chapters with three different titles that only deepen the labyrinthian method at work in this book; moreover, these titles seem to be as misleading and hazy as possible: 'Dig That Sound', 'It Takes A Record Company with Millions to Push Us Forward', and 'Burn Baby Burn'. And this makes me wonder if the author wants to capitalize on his (once) celebrity status or, on the contrary, to just do anything to regain a celebrity's status by all means...

Décharné takes a great pleasure in ambushing his readers with pieces of information that might be construed as answers to the question 'Did you know that...?' For instance, he discusses terms like *cunt* and *arse*, which many centuries ago were not perceived as offensive, taboo words. Or, he indulges in informing his readers that words of a seemingly young age, like *hip-hop* and *rap*, were already listed by Dr. Samuel Johnson in his 1755 dictionary; or, that the same Dr. Johnson was a rather prudish person, who avoided the inclusion of allegedly taboo words in his dictionary.

Much of the stuff presented especially in the final chapter, dedicated to the latest evolution in computer science-generated terminology and jargons (including Facebook and blogs) was first recorded in John Ayto's dictionaries of the English language issued in the early 1990s (Longman and O. U. P.), and I guess it is difficult to draw a clear line between new words and slang. This could constitute food for thought, an issue of debate and, why not (?) the topic of a future issue of *Argotica*.

All in all, *Vulgar Tongues. An Alternative History of English Slang* is an enjoyable book (at times spiced with typo errors like Thomas Harmon, p. 150, or Ben Johnson, p. 344) addressing a wide range of readers, even if not, first and foremost, the experts on slang.

