

16. The Dictionary as an Aid in Belles Lettres

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1. Introductory Remarks

A language dictionary is, above all, a means of “first aid” to fill the gaps of our direct language competence — the direct competence of an individual, that is, his particular linguistic heritage, not being able to match the vastness of a language as a collective heritage. Whoever consults the dictionary to this aim is building up a vaster linguistic competence which we will call reflective. The dictionary, then — although it is a reference work which is consulted punctually — constitutes a source of individual linguistic enrichment certainly more modest and less frequent than a book read in continuity; this, however, does not mean that the dictionary is insignificant. As opposed to the book, it can reply to punctual questions the reader may

have. When the dictionary no longer functions as a simple reference book but supplies its headwords with contextual examples drawn from documents and authors and placed in chronological order, it becomes a mirror of the history of the language; and in language history is reflected, here and there, the history of ideas, of culture, of customs. But such a dictionary can assume even more important tasks in the hands of its consultors. If the user is a literary historian and critic, the dictionary will give him useful — sometimes necessary — information in judging the language and style of an author, i.e. in expressing well-founded and adequate stylistic criticism. If the user is himself an author, i.e. a poet or storywriter, the dictionary can furnish him with examples of original usage of words or phrases, and suggest rare and effective combinations (Horace’s *callidae iuncturae*), figurative senses and even thematic stimuli. Such is the situation in all nations, in which, parallel to literary production, a lexicography has developed as testimony and consciousness of a national language and has exercised a guiding, normative or stimulative influence on writers. Because of limited

space, this will be exemplified here for only two European languages, which, however, have quite differing traditions.

2. The Example of France

It can be said that in France the first specialized monolingual dictionaries were conceived for writers (for example, *Les Epithètes de M. de La Porte. Livre non seulement utile à ceux qui font profession de la poésie, mais fort propre aussi pour illustrer tout autre sorte de composition française*, Paris 1571; it is not necessary to list the rhyming dictionaries here, nor, for humanist poetry, the famous Parisian *Regia Parnassi*, 1679). And it is known that Molière made use of the *Nouveau dictionnaire françois-italien, italien-françois*, Anon. Geneva 1677, which was valuable for its recording of neologisms missing in the other dictionaries. But it is only with the affirmation of the concept of a "classical" French, created by the authors of the *Grand siècle*, that French monolingual dictionaries began recording examples from authors and thus became sources of literary language and strongly deliberate tools of linguistic orientation. The keen interest of the Age of Enlightenment in technical vocabulary and of the Romantic Age in the national linguistic tradition are embodied in two great monuments: Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (1751–72) and Littré's *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1863–72). In the authors of the nineteenth century, from Romantics to Symbolists, the appeal of archaic and modern lexis and the contrasting of inhorn terms with familiar and trivial words become a veritable *lexicomania*: prose writers and poets such as Balzac, Chateaubriand, Gautier and Baudelaire possessed numerous dictionaries and consulted them assiduously; Baudelaire even declared having been a "lexicomaniac" since his youth.

3. The Example of Italy

Amongst the European languages, Italian has, in this respect, a unique and complex situation because of its particular historical development. The literary language is never a conventionalized tool which is uniform and highly predictable; rather it is remodelled progressively by the authors, so that the reader must rediscover it again and again, thus acquiring a reflective competence in it. This is especially true in Italy where literature

is not based on common contemporary and living national usage, and not even — as in France — on a cultivated language of conversation, but on the language of three great authors of one and the same epoch (Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio) and one and the same city (Florence); it is a language learned from books by the authors from other Italian cities and which has strong local and individual variants as well as such dictated by literary genre and taste. The Italian language has thus been a solely written language for over five centuries — a language which, outside of Tuscany, is only written and is therefore not subject to collective control by speakers; it is thus considered by the authors as a means of personal experimentation; neither has there been in Italy, divided as it was in many small states speaking widely varying dialects, a central political and administrative power which could impose uniform usage by law as is the case in France. Under such conditions (modified only after the political union of Italy [1861], when the need for a common written and spoken language of communication arose as a political and politico-cultural problem) a historical dictionary rich in material and examples drawn from a canon of good writers could constitute a useful source of reference to the reader and the writer as well as a factor of linguistic unification. As a matter of fact, the dictionary compiled in Florence by the Accademia della Crusca and published in 1612 (it has since been revised and reedited four times) was for three centuries a precious hoard of the words and expressions used by the best Florentine writers or those writing in Florentine from the 14th to the 16th centuries, and an authoritative guide to pure and correct writing; a guide which — because it was based on the illustrious models of the past rather than on the living speech of Florence's inhabitants — was necessarily purist and archaistic. With its limitations, this dictionary, which became a model to the other great European dictionaries, formed all non-Tuscan authors taking refuge from their own dialect; and it was sometimes admired and blindly obeyed, sometimes challenged for its errors and above all for its lacunae, especially by writers desirous of a language which kept up with cultural development and was receptive to linguistic contributions from the new cultural centers outside of Tuscany. Without a paragon of a common and living national language, such were the linguistic labours to

which all Italian authors from the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries were condemned. If then, in reading these authors, we wish to gain an impression of the painstaking formation of their individual language and style, that is, of their linguistic consciousness and historicity, we should read them with the aid of the *Crusca* dictionary; and almost the same applies to the authors of the sixteenth century, inasmuch as this century, too, had dictionaries based on a restricted canon of excellent authors; and it applies even to Dante Alighieri, himself the creator of a potentially national literary language: he enriched his own Florentine vernacular — not only by having recourse to the texts of the Latin classics — but to a large medieval etymological dictionary, Uguccione da Pisa's *Derivationes*. Here are two examples from Dante: in *Purg.* 31, 4 Dante presents a hapax in *sanza cunta* ('senza indugio' 'without delay'); here *cunta* is not, as has been supposed, a deverbative from the Latin *cunctari* 'delay', and coined by the poet; it can be found already in Uguccione's dictionary: "*cuncta, -ae, id est mora*" under the false etymon *eo . . . ire*; and in *Par.* 33, 94 we find — apparently for the first time in the vernacular — the word *letargo* in the sense of "*oppressio cerebri cum oblivione et somno iugi*" which, stemming from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, has passed into Uguccione's dictionary with the same meaning.

Turning back to the *Crusca*'s dictionary, we must say that two great modern Italian authors have maintained inevitable relations of attraction and aversion to it; whether they wanted to or not, they were forced to pass under its yoke.

One of them is Giacomo Leopardi, who in the notes to ten of his *Canzoni* printed in Bologna in 1824 indicates the grave lacunae of the dictionary, closing them at the same time with elements drawn from his own reading and from Latin, thus exalting his own personal linguistic wealth and his own right to linguistic creativity. In his *Zibaldone di pensieri* he puts the *Crusca* dictionary continuously to the test for its values and shortcomings, and uses it as an indispensable philological tool in commenting Petrarca's *canzoniere*. The other author is Alessandro Manzoni, who, in his search of a national language truly common to the writer and the speaker, suitable for his historic romance *I promessi sposi*, and especially to his protagonists, two humble country workers from the

environs of Milan, studied at length the *Crusca* dictionary; he glossed it with examples drawn from his own reading and with numerous comparisons with French and dialectal usage of Lombardy. Evidently, Manzoni considered this dictionary — this treasure trove of the Florentine literary language — as a necessary, yet insufficient point of departure for a modern Italian author.

Given the great and lasting influence of humanism on Italian culture — by far greater than on other Romance cultures —, recourse to Latin and sometimes to Greek dictionaries was to be useful even to modern authors. Ugo Foscolo's predilection, for example, for the epithetic use of the past participle, especially in forms with a privative prefix, as in the combinations *illacrimata sepoltura* from the sonnet *A Zacinto* 14 and *Troade inseminata* from *Sepolcri* 235, leads to suggesting a Greek model which recurs in Homer: ἄκλαυτον καὶ ἄθραπτον from *Od.* 11, 54 or παρὰ θῖν' ἄλως ἀτρυγέτοιο from *Il.* 1,327. The reader lacking in reflective competence and who encounters the word *sonito* in Manzoni's *Cinque Maggio* ("di mille voci al sonito", 17, used already by Vincenzo Monti in the *Mascheroniana*, 2, 255), could interpret this extremely rare latinism as a variant of *suono* ('sound'), used by the poet as a convenient completion of the proparoxytone line, while it is in fact a "marked" form meaning 'din, clamor', as the "mille voci" ('thousand voices') in the context suggest.

4. The Dictionary as an Aid to Reading Authors

Reading the authors of any literature with the aid of the dictionary or dictionaries on which they most likely relied for their composition and with the added aid of more recent historical dictionaries based on citations from authors, permits us to ascertain many things: the extent of their dependence on literary tradition, their linguistic creativity, their influence on literary tradition and the formation of lexical currents particular to certain genres; it also permits us to reconstruct the times and paths of diffusion of many words and phrases, their occurrence and recurrence, conceptual and stylistic values, as well as changes in these values; for such reconstructions the literary text will sometimes not only be the point of departure but the point of arrival, too. Such a method is especially

appropriate and fruitful when applied to the Italian authors, although Italian lexicography has up to the present important yet imperfect tools at its disposal: firstly, the *Crusca* dictionary in its 5 editions (the last one incomplete at this point) with its archaistic and puristic limitations — it is therefore more important as a prototype and model of language and style rather than for documentation; and secondly, the dictionaries which, in spite of expansions and modernization, largely depend on the former: that of Niccolò Tommaseo and Bernardo Bellini (1861—79) and the one begun by Salvatore Battaglia which is still in compilation (1961 ff.). The fact that commentaries of the Italian classics have limited themselves — as far as the language is concerned — to an explanation of the meanings of words which are archaic, rare, or difficult in any respect, has prevented the reader from appreciating the linguistic creativity of individual authors and from situating these words in precise currents of the literary language. It is known, for example, that Dante made his own Florentine dialect into a language endowed with all the colors and values of a rich palet ranging from vulgar to courtly and scholarly; and an attentive examination of his innovations and of their linguistic fate opens important perspectives on the history of the Italian language. According to what can be lexicographically ascertained, he coined the verb *infuturarsi* ('extend into the future') (*Par.* 17, 98: *s'infutura la tua vita*), which remained a hapax (that is, an unaccepted proposal) up to the eighteen hundreds, when Vincenzo Gioberti, Alessandro Poerio, Francesco De Sanctis and Pietro Cossa used it again, and, by the intermediary of Arturo Graf, Gabriele D'Annunzio and Arturo Onofri, it reappears in recent times in the work of Eugenio Montale and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Gioberti even created the derivatives *infuturamento* and *infuturizione* (cf. *Crusca* 1612, *Crusca* 1863—1923, Battaglia, s.v.). Two verbs referring to the perception of color, *trascolorare* and *discolorare*, were introduced into the vernacular by Dante; the origin of the first is unknown, the roots of the second reach back as far as Classical and Postclassical Latin. While the first went into century-long hibernation, reappearing only in modern literature, the second was used by Petrarch and has been transmitted without interruption especially through poetic channels, up to Montale (cf. Battaglia, s.v.). In contrast, the fa-

mous *concolore* from *Par.* 12, 11 ("*due archi paralleli e concolori*"), which Dante drew from Virgil and was the first to introduce into the vernacular, did not have any luck: already the fourteenth century commentators of the *Divina Commedia* had difficulties understanding such an apparently neologistic verb, and it remained a hapax up to the time when it was unearthed again in the late nineteenth century by a capricious and learned writer, the bohemian Carlo Dossi (cf. Battaglia, s.v.). Looking now at a latinism from another semantic field, *plenilunio*, it was Dante who introduced it into the vernacular, but only in *Paradise* (23, 25), after having had Virgil, in *Inferno* (20, 127), use the popular Florentine expression, *luna tonda* ("*e già ieri notte fu la luna tonda*"). Dante's learned proposal (insofar learned, as the fourteenth century commentator of the *Commedia*, Francesco da Buti, sensed the need to annotate it), by its mere presence in our dictionaries, was to leave the field of poetry (except for its appearance in the seventeenth century *Fiera* by Michelangelo Buonarroti the younger) and enter the fields of technical and astronomical language; only modern literature was to recover it. Finally, in a quite different register, the reader of the popular and mocking metaphor, *zucca* ('gourd; pumpkin') for *testa* ('head') in *Inf.* 18, 124 ("*ed elli allor, battendosi la zucca*") who then consults the article for this headword in Tommaseo/Bellini, can see that Dante's 'comic' initiative could have given the impulse for a continuous burlesque thread through the eye of this metaphor, from Giovanni Boccaccio to Franco Sacchetti and Domenico Burchiello to Luigi Pulci's *Morgante* and on to Giovan Battista Fagiuoli. The few lexical extracts from the *Commedia* presented above and their comparison with the Italian lexicographical tools at our disposal provide sufficient evidence to suggest that Dante's linguistic popularity was limited up to and throughout the entire eighteenth century, experiencing a strong comeback in the nineteenth century thanks to a renewed interest in medieval literature, in archaic language and subsequently in Dante's work.

5. The Dictionary as an Aid to the Author: the Case of d'Annunzio

Let us now look at the reverse case: that of a modern Italian poet who profited from the aid of dictionaries to extract from them not

only words and lexical combinations, but themes and motifs as well. Gabriele D'Annunzio was not the only one, but certainly the most significant in this respect. He is noted for his linguistic panchronism — for his ability to enrich his own artistic language with words from all epochs and style registers, thus presenting us with a sumptuous linguistic medley. One aspect of this lexical voracity of his can be seen in his way of forming technical words: in *Laudi*, and in other poetic compositions, we find a profusion of modern and obsolete nautical terms stemming largely from Alberto Guglielmotti's *Vocabolario marino e militare* (1889). He also made full use of the Crusca dictionary and that of Tommaseo/Bellini to enrich and flavor the lexis which he drew directly from his readings of old texts. The poem, *L'otre* from his book *Alcyone* (1904) is a veritable catalogue of rare and choice samples, always suggested or enhanced by rhyme: for example, the rustical *fortigno* ('of a strong and acrid flavor') coupled with the rare *caprigno*, ('caprino', 'caprine') (29/32), the naturalistic latinism, *bisulco* (used already by the 16th century authors, Iacopo Sannazaro and Benedetto Varchi and meaning 'having a cloven, forked foot') coupled with the Virgilian and Columellian *petulco* ('aggressive'), (1/4), and the archaic *albori* ('trees') rhyming with *falbo* ('dark yellow') from the equine and bovine realm (126/127). Apart from the strikingly direct latinisms such as *sulfure*, *lapidoso*, *insanire*, *viride*, *ubero*, *alvo*, *ficulno*, a particular fondness for those rusticisms becomes evident, in which the archaism of the literary level is always connected with popularity, that is, with their survival in dialect: this is the case with *argnone* ("rognone" — 'kidney'), as with *téttola* ("poppa, mammella" — 'breast', 'teat'), and *febricoso* as applied by D'Annunzio to the marshes, but whose active sense Tommaseo/Bellini says to be current in Tuscany and Corsica to describe fruit. D'Annunzio's incessant consultation of the dictionary, especially that of Tommaseo/Bellini can be demonstrated by a more general fact: this dictionary has a penchant for the more archaic or rarer variant of individual headwords always listing it in second position or cross-referencing to it, and sometimes marking with a cross the obsolete or antiquated form: *spiga* and † *spica*; *dea* and † *iddia*; *dei* and † *iddii*; *rovello* and *rovella*; *riempiere* and † *rempiere*; *salire* and † *saglire*; *otre* and *otro*. Accordingly D'Annunzio almost always

prefers *spica* to *spiga*, *rempiere* to *riempiere*, *diaccio* to *ghiaccio*, *saglire* (*sagliente*) to *salire*, *capegli* to *capelli*, *plori* to *piangi*, *rovella* to *rovello*, *licore* to *liquore*, *iddii* and *iddia* to *dei* and *dea*, and alternates the form *otre* with *otro*. Under *otre/otro*, Tommaseo/Bellini cites the bloody episode between *Ciro* and *Tomiri* as told in Franco Sacchetti's poem in tercets (CXCVII of *Libro delle rime* ed. by A. Chiari): "La testa gli tagliò in tal delitto/met-tendola in un otro pien di sangue/dicendo: Béi, se sete t'ha trafitto." ('He cut off his head in such a criminal act/placing it in a wineskin full of blood/saying: drink, when thirst has pierced you'). The connection between Sacchetti's episode and the corresponding one in *L'otre* is obvious; in D'Annunzio's poem the archaic variant *otro* appears out of rhyme in the Tomirian episode (lines 96 and 132), to later abruptly yield way to *otre*. A remarkable example of the stimulus to linguistic creativity which D'Annunzio received from the dictionary is line 15 of the lyric poem *Gli indizii* in *Alcyone*, in which we read that in the water of the canal "s'infracida la dolce carne erbale"; an expression which dates back to a 14th century vernacularization of Pietro de' Crescenzi's medieval treatise on agriculture in Latin. The exquisite lexicographical operation carried out by the poet is worthy of note: in the Crusca's dictionary of 1612 under the headword *erbale* we read: «Di qualità d'erba. Il Cresc. Lat. dice *herbalis*. Cr(escenzio) 2.4.16 "Per la qual cagione spesse volte si seccano, quando i pedali, dattorno attorno, si partono dalla corteccia infino alla carne lignea, o vero erbale della pianta", e cap. 5.1 "Sono nelle piante parti lignee, overo erbali"». Here we see that *carne erbale* was a botanical term and therefore scientific. The citation remains unchanged up to the third edition of the Crusca dictionary, but in the 4th (II, 1731) it is supplemented by the citation of yet another passage from Crescenzi, 3, 15, 5: «Se l'acqua non sia corrotta, si dee tenere infino a sette, accioché infracidi la carne erbale»; this passage makes its way into Tommaseo/Bellini. This very punctual lexicographical deduction then becomes the object of lexicological intervention by the poet: the addition of *dolce* lends a new and sensual metaphoricity to the henceforward forgotten botanical 'technicity' of the archaic metaphor *carne erbale*.

6. Conclusion

The civilization and subsequently the literature of each culture is monumental in its own way. It would therefore not be absurd to class its dictionaries amongst the monuments of a literature. And this applies to Italian literature in a special way: it would be a grave error to banish the old dictionaries to paleo-lexicographic junk and replace them with new ones. On the contrary, they should be totally rehabilitated by placing them side by side with, indeed by matching them up with the literary works as equal partners, granting them their active part in literary periodization. This should be done not for the Crusca in general, but for the one or the other edition, the one or the other regional reworking of the Crusca dictionary; not for the dialect dictionary today at hand, but that which was contemporary to the author; not for the Georges or the Lewis and Short or the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, but Stephanus's *Thesaurus* or for Forcellini and for any of the Latin dictionaries which the authors presumably used — just as we no longer venture to normalize, in modern critical editions, Latin or vernacular passages cited in a classical text, but respect the reading of the editions which served as the author's source — whether they be creditable or not. And so, in conclusion, a requirement for philological reading should henceforward become lexicographical reading, especially for those authors who, as all Italian authors, have been “vocabulists”.

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