

Changing Vocabularies in Cultural and Postcolonial Studies

Raymond Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976), 349 pp.

Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris, eds., *New Keywords. A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Malden, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell, 2005), 427 pp.

Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris, eds., *Nuove parole chiave. Dizionario di cultura e società*, Italian edition by Carlo Pagetti and Oriana Palusci, with an Introduction by Carlo Pagetti, Italian translation by Massimo Vizzaccaro (Milano: il Saggiatore, 2008), 596 pp.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., *Post-Colonial Studies. The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 275 pp.

In his 1949 dystopia, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell deplored the traumatic metastasis suffered by language when obliged to perform abrupt semantic changes. Among the most sinister achievements of Big Brother's totalitarian power was the imposition of brand-new political meanings upon deeply rooted, slowly evolving linguistic traditions. A significant aspect of the totalitarian nightmare lived through by the protagonist in the novel is the double-edged nature of the "newspeak", the linguistic system imposed by decree in that dystopic society, and its disquieting capacity of erasing commonly shared structures of meaning to accommodate sudden and ideologically manipulated semantic shifts. Such a drastic and abrupt disruption was, of course, a fictional expedient. Deep transformations do take place, however, in the linguistic habits of a community over time, at a pace which accelerates in times of crisis.

In his Introduction to *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams recalls the sense of bewilderment he experienced when, in 1945, he resumed his university life in Cambridge, after serving for four and a half years in the war. What disconcerted him most was that people "just [didn't] speak the same language" any longer. An accelerated metamorphosis of the cultural use of language had inevitably happened alongside and in connection with the trauma of war. It was then, he tells us, that he started to elaborate the seminal cluster of ideas, which developed into his groundbreaking *Culture and Society*.¹

¹ *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958).

This important book, first published in 1958, and soon to become one of the cornerstones of the disciplinary field of Cultural Studies then in the making, draws its main intellectual force from a deep interrogation of the cultural meaning – or, rather, the semantic transformation over time – of five keywords: industry, democracy, class, art and culture. Through his arresting exercise in historical semantics he retraced the transformations which had taken place in both material and spiritual life alongside linguistic – and indeed lexical – evolution over a span of time he considered crucial for the formation of twentieth-century society. As a matter of fact these five keywords – which loom large in capital letters on the cover of the Penguin edition – are the nodal points of a richer and more complex network of meanings, potentially liable to widen up to cover the entire map of cultural existence. If one looks at the index of *Culture and Society*, one finds it is divided into two sections: “A. Works and Authors” and “B. Words, Themes, and Persons” – though the persons included in the latter list are just a handful, while the great majority is constituted by words or themes which are keywords in their own right, and none of which may be thought *per se*. Not only are such fundamental notions as “culture” and “civilization” shown in a process of vital reciprocal confrontation (consisting in an incessant practice of mutual chasing, mutual substitution, and mutual hybridization), but also the whole constellation of other notions – he mentions 48 in the Introduction – are caught up in an endless movement of discursive transformation in relation with all the others.

Many years later, in 1976, he prefaced his *Keywords* with the reconstruction of the genesis of the book from that original list of words, or notions he had intended to publish in *Culture and Society* as an appendix, but had been obliged to cut out for reasons of space:

But the file of the appendix stayed on my shelf. For over twenty years I have been adding to it: collecting more examples, finding new points of analysis, including other words. I began to feel that this might make a book of its own. I went through the whole file again, rewrote all the notes and short essays, excluded some words and again added others. The present volume is the result. (14-15)

Predictably, the process of development of this book could not stop here, because Williams’s list of words represented the “elements of an active vocabulary – a way of recording, investigating and presenting problems of meaning in the area in which the meanings of *culture* and *society* have formed.” (15) In the following years, in the course of researches which gave rise to a dozen or so seminal books in the field of English Cultural Studies, Williams became involved in many other problematic areas of meaning, and felt the need further to modify his list or edit his “notes and short essays”. I am repeating his own wording from the above quotation,

because it is important to remember that he never referred to his entries as definitions. As he insisted in his Introduction, the book

is not a dictionary or glossary of a particular academic subject. It is not a series of footnotes to dictionary histories or definitions of a number of words. It is, rather, the record of an inquiry into a *vocabulary*: a shared body of words and meanings in our most general discussions, in English, of the practices and institutions which we group as *culture* and *society*. (15)

It is perfectly in line with the spirit of his project that he introduced twenty-one new entries in the 1983 edition, and expanded and edited the original ones.

It is this spirit that was recalled by Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris when, in 2005, they edited an updating of Williams's work (*New Keywords. A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*). It is equally in line with the same spirit that Carlo Pagetti and Oriana Palusci, the editors of the 2008 Italian translation of this updating (*Nuove parole chiave. Dizionario di cultura e società*), felt it necessary to add their own comments to 26 out of the 142 entries dealt with in *New Keywords*.

Both works are the expression of a deep appreciation of the contribution of Williams to the area of Cultural Studies, of which all the editors are well-established practitioners and supporters. It is also worth noting that both are part of a revived interest for this very innovative and influential thinker; an interest witnessed by some recent publications devoted to him. I would have liked to refer to at least two among them which, for different reasons, would have been worth discussing.² But limits of space make it impossible.

As Pagetti remarks in his Introduction to the Italian edition (26), Williams's *Keywords* was not translated into Italian when it came out (unlike the rest of his production, which is widely available in Italian). The translation of this updating might be taken therefore as a sort of making amends for that overlooking, and a tribute to the original strength of the initial publication. Pagetti never spells out this implication. It can be inferred, however, from his determination to publish the book in spite of the faults he himself finds with the selection of keywords operated by Bennett, Grossberg and Morris. Among these he mentions the lack of such concepts as "translation", "myth" (and/or "mythology") and "anthropology", which are no doubt essential to any understanding of cultural theory. I should also add to Pagetti's observation (24) that the word "myth", actually present in *Keywords*, was eliminated by the editors of *New Keywords*.

Unfortunately the very fact that Pagetti is perfectly right in lamenting the lack of these crucial words – and, even more important, that many other terms might be pointed out as unduly overlooked – opens up serious doubts about the credibility of Bennett, Grossberg and Morris's operation.

² Monika Seidle, Roman Horak and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *About Raymond Williams* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), contains some brilliant essays, like John Higging's "Even the Dead Will not Be Safe": on Dis(re)membering Williams", 116-128. The other is a very interesting full-length study by Mauro Pala (*The Social Text. Letteratura e prassi culturale in Raymond Williams*, Cagliari: CUEC, 2005).

Once the hunt for missing words is opened, quite a few crop up: some of which quite pivotal, like “agency” or, even more crucially, “hegemony”. This last omission is frankly surprising if one thinks of the importance of Gramsci’s philosophy in the present configuration of Cultural Studies and also in the development of Williams’s critical theory, especially in its most mature phases. Suffice it to think that Williams devoted an entire and fascinating chapter of *Marxism and Literature* to this notion.³ This omission becomes even more surprising when one realizes that Williams had in fact included the word in his second edition of *Keywords* and that it was Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris who eliminated it from their updating.

³ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

Still, the real problem – with both the selection and the book – is probably not the omission of this or that term, but rather the theoretical justification implicitly at the basis of this publishing enterprise; a justification thoroughly different from Williams’s methodological urge to investigate his subjects of study – always conceived as produced – through the full understanding of the very terms (and the notions behind them) which constituted the cultural phenomena and processes he was studying. He felt that in order to understand cultural change – be it the transformation of the structures of feeling of a certain social group at the time of the Industrial Revolution, or the impact of TV on some other social group in urban England in the 1970s – he had to reconstruct the discursive processes through which that change had come about, starting from the terms which had been used to fight for and against it, which had contributed to defining it, and acquired, in the process, new meanings that would stick to them, albeit in attenuated or contradictory forms. The thick aura surrounding these terms – or keywords, as he called them – preserved contrasting meanings and even almost (but never completely) discarded overtones. Grasping these meanings and overtones was essential to him if he wanted to accomplish any cultural analysis, and reconstruct the cultural history of the phenomena he wanted to study, since he conceived them as parts of a cultural field “structured in dominance”, as the cultural critics of his generation would have put it (following Gramsci). This is why his reconstructions of the complex, almost palimpsestical nature of some of his terms were never an end in themselves, and he did not offer them as mere (though sophisticated) lexical weapons to be exchanged in academic discussions. Although his *Keywords* was a book in its own right, and he spent more years writing and updating this book than any other in his wide and inspiring bibliography, it was inextricably intertwined with the rest of his production, and offered itself as a useful tool for a better understanding of the critical idiom which was in the making during the early stages of the life of Cultural Studies as a field of research that he himself had powerfully contributed to shape and enhance.

Though always maintaining its interdisciplinary and potentially intercultural character, the critical movement of Cultural Studies also began very soon to develop into different strands, privileging one or another of the critical theories contributing to its general framework: feminist and gender studies, media studies, postcolonial studies. The compact, almost idiosyncratic, corpus of critical notions elaborated and made available by Williams, testifies to the initial phase of construction of both a critical theory and a critical idiom at a time when the very notion of 'theory' was felt as a form of violent trespassing into the native pragmatism of the 'English' frame of mind. Suffice it to mention the very authoritative (and very theoretically inspired) attacks on theory launched by E.P. Thompson in such forcefully polemical essays as *The Peculiarities of the English* (1965) and *The Poverty of Theory* (1978).

In the following decades the full-fledged development of Cultural Studies as an interdisciplinary field and the planetary reach of its travelling created such a rich and variegated vocabulary that it could not easily be contained in any general glossary. On the other hand, the lexicon used in critical discourse has achieved such a specificity and complexity that sometimes it is quite difficult to dominate it unless one is a specialist. Invaluable help is offered by a few handbooks devoted to defining the terminology of the various strands of Cultural and Postcolonial Studies that have been published in the last few years.⁴ I will only mention Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's *Post-Colonial Studies. The Key Concepts*, which has the great merit, I think, of supplying well documented definitions of an enormous number of terms which have been invented or appropriated by contemporary thinkers in an effort to elaborate very new concepts which could not be accommodated in any available lexicon. However strange it might seem (sitting down to browse a Dictionary might normally appear a rather crazy activity), I personally find reading this book a fascinating intellectual experience for reasons I will try to explain, seeking, at the same time, to trace the fundamental difference between this kind of handbook and both Williams's *Keywords* and its updating proposed by Bennett, Grossberg and Morris.

Post-Colonial Studies. The Key Concepts is very concentrated in focus: it offers a vast number of entries strictly related to notions associated with Postcolonial Studies, a field ridden with heated debates and controversies which have loaded, in recent years, the terms used in contemporary scholarly activity with such a weight of stratified meanings comparable to that of the words "culture" and "civilization" in the heat of the Romantics vs. Utilitarians controversy, so magisterially reconstructed by Williams. As the editors write in their short introduction,

Post-colonial analysis draws upon a wide variety of theoretical positions and their associated strategies and techniques. Moreover, the field seeks to develop

⁴ In Italy alone, two such enterprises have been undertaken in the last decade: a group of scholars in the field of non-European literatures written in European languages (what came to be defined Homeoglottal Literatures) produced an *Abbecedario Postcoloniale* (ed. by Silvia Albertazzi and Roberto Vecchi, Macerta: Quodlibet, 2004, 2 voll.) including twenty basic terms, while Michele Cometa supervised as general editor a monumental and very useful *Dizionario degli studi culturali* (ed. by Roberta Coglitore and Federica Mazzara, Roma: Meltemi, 2004) which dedicates fifty-nine essays (571 pages) to the different branches of Cultural and Postcolonial Studies.

adequate and appropriate approaches to material that is itself diverse, hybrid, diasporic. Its terminology, then, functions in a highly charged and contestatory atmosphere of intellectual exchange and cultural negotiation. (1)

Putting together their book in 2000, more than half a century since the inception of Cultural Studies, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin were in a position to take the currency of some of its basic vocabulary as generally accepted in the field. That is why one does not find a specific entry for “culture” as such in their book, though one finds this notion in association with twenty-one other terms, from the “cultural cringe” evoked in discussions of the difficult process of decolonisation in some settler colonies, to “transculturation” and “world systems theory”. On the other hand, they felt the necessity to provide the reader (the common reader as well as the educated one, and even perhaps the specialist in cultural and postcolonial studies) with information not only about the meaning of certain terms but also about their use in specific instances and connections and about the ‘familiarity’ which is unmistakably stamped on them, revealing which school of thought originally introduced them. Some of these words, like “mimicry”, or “diaspora”, have become universally authoritative. Still, it is quite important to be able to locate their origin and be aware of the history of their use in postcolonial criticism and literatures. Some other terms, though evoking notions that are quite important in the construction of critical thought, remain very idiosyncratic and characteristic of the critical idiolect of specific thinkers. This is the case for example of a notion like “catachresis”, which has an unambiguous meaning of ‘misuse’ in philosophical language, but came to denote ‘appropriation’ following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s discussion of certain processes of adoption and adaptation of traditionally Western notions and institutions by non-Western cultures and societies. This is also the case of such a term as “palimpsest” which has migrated from palaeographical lexicon to postcolonial discourse thanks to Paul Carter’s *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987), to be picked up by subsequent critics, who share Carter’s awareness of the “layering’ effect of history” which creates the “‘text’ of culture, giving it its particular density and character”, and endorse his idea that,

‘empty’ uncolonized space becomes place through the process of textuality. Mapping, naming, fictional and non-fictional narratives create multiple and sometimes conflicting accretions which become the dense text that constitutes place. Place itself, in the experience of the post-colonial subject, is a palimpsest of a process in language: the naming by which imperial discourse brings the colonized space ‘into being’, the subsequent rewritings and overwritings, the imaging of the place in the consciousness of its occupants, all of which constitute the contemporary place observed by the subject and contested among them. (174-5)

In spite of the very specific postcolonial context of this reasoning, I think that it resonates with the same belief in the discursive nature of

cultural processes that animated Williams's insights and descriptions of cultural processes taking place in nineteenth or twentieth century Great Britain, as the prosecution of the argument further proves:

The most challenging aspect of this thesis is that the ordinary social subject, when looking at the surrounding environment, does not simply take in what is there as purely visual data, but is located with that place in a cultural horizon, that is, the simply observed place is a cultural palimpsest built up over centuries and retaining the traces of previous engagements and inscriptions. (175)

This also resonates, I think, with Williams's genial intuition of the process of formation and transformation of what he called "structures of feeling", though he is never mentioned in the book. Which, I think, is ungenerous, in spite of Williams's undeniable deafness to, or silence about, discourses connected with the construction of colonialism and Empire.

This deafness, by the way, is highlighted also by the editors of *New Keywords* who integrate their vocabulary with a few terms like "colonialism", "diaspora", "multiculturalism", "Orientalism", "other", "postcolonialism", which had been completely overlooked by Williams. They also edit and specialise terms that Williams had included, like "ethnic" (which becomes "ethnicity"), and "Western" (which becomes "the West"), while, surprisingly, they cancel such words as "imperialism" and "native", which, though rather superficial in presentation, represented at least a signal of a new start in the development of Williams's cultural theory, which had been, so far, almost totally engrossed with problems of cultural struggle at home, with the social and geographical barriers besieging British society from the inside, more than addressing the larger issues of the so called "white man's burden" and his planetary "civilizing mission". Rightly enough, in his Introduction to *Nuove Parole Chiave*, Pagetti discusses Williams's failure to move from the local to the global, connecting it to the general inward-lookingness of British culture – even in its left-wing and culturalist quarters – still too preoccupied, at the time, with deciphering and solving its home problems and still shaped by too parochial a workerism to be able to elaborate a wider conception of planetary cultural processes. (15 ff)

However true this certainly is, and however right the unwritten rule applied by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin not to include among their sources those authors who have never shown preoccupations or sensitivity as to the responsibility of Western cultural and literary traditions in the construction of the colonialist frame of mind, I think there is also some, more academic and ideological, reason behind this exclusion, since it is not limited to Raymond Williams – whose position can easily be aligned with a two-century long tradition of "culture and society" criticism which has largely contributed to the establishment of the notion of "Englishness" as a pointer of civilization. Some other exclusions (like those of Paul Gilroy and Iain

Chambers, just to mention the names of two very influential thinkers in the international field of Postcolonial Studies) or the very cursory mention of Stuart Hall – whose work was certainly enormously significant not only in the affirmation of Cultural Studies but, more specifically, of Postcolonial Studies – can only be interpreted as a decision to seek an interruption with Western traditions of criticism, to think and write ‘anew’ more than to think and write ‘back’ (as suggested by the title of a very powerful book, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, written in 1989 by this formidable trio).⁵ In this perspective it may have seemed a necessary step to avoid the influence of a School like the one which originated in Birmingham, as yet another European school of thought, albeit under the powerful aegis of a non-European founding figure like the Jamaican British thinker Stuart Hall. Still, it seems a loss to renounce for this reason so crucial a notion as Paul Gilroy’s dense conception of the Black Atlantic, just to mention one omission that I consider a blemish in an otherwise fascinating and indispensable text.

I would like to finish on a personal, even partisan, note. The three recent books I have reviewed (*New Keywords*, *Nuove Parole Chiave*, and *Key Concepts*) can boast very extensive bibliographies: for all their occasional omissions, they all list hundreds of titles, while Williams’s *Keywords* is based on a very selective list of only twenty references – including dictionaries – and thirty-five articles and books. Looking at this scanty bibliography, I am deeply impressed by the presence of an essay by the late Fernando Ferrara, former director of the first series of *Anglistica*.⁶ Although I could not trace exactly the title he mentions on the “Anglistica” section of *Annali*, I do remember the inspiring discussions which took place at the University “L’Orientale” (Naples), with both students and staff, on the occasion of the few momentous visits Williams paid to Naples in the years most crucial for the definition of his cultural theory. He himself mentions the importance of these contacts in the acknowledgements to various works of his, including *Marxism and Literature*: a book where Williams shows at his best his capacity of creatively appropriating the most vital elements of Gramscian cultural theory. Looking back on the half-century long story of Cultural Studies as a rich and expanding field of research – of which the subsequent editions, updatings, or re-incarnations, of *Keywords* are milestones – I cannot but recall the process of active translation that critical vocabularies undergo when they travel through time and place, reacting to the specific interpretations of the different locations of culture and short-circuiting into existence specific critical crises. I cannot but be proud that Naples, “L’Orientale” and the people working with its *Anglistica* journal have been part of this planetary travel.

⁵ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁶ In his bibliography Williams reports it as Fernando Ferrara, “The Origin and Decline of the Concept of ‘Literature’”, in *Annali* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1973), but he was probably referring to a draft of one of Ferrara’s works which he must have read.