LEXICAL LOSSES IN METAPHORICAL MIRRORS

Paulette DELLIOS[1]

Abstract

This discussion explores philological arguments on the status of obsolete words in the English language, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The focus is not the substance of these debates but, rather, the style of language which was employed in these spirited disputes. It was a style in which the full range of the rhetorical repertoire was reflected in metaphorical mirrors.

Keywords: obsolete, dictionary, lexicography, philology, metaphor

Introduction: Metaphorical magic

This discussion investigates philological arguments on obsolete words in the English language, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The focus is not the content of these debates, which could be summed up on a continuum: from those advocating the re-installation of obsolete words to those set on sequestering these lexemes in their state of obsolescence. Also unscrutinised is the imagined correlation between lexical loss and national character or civilisation. Rather, under examination is the style of language which was employed by lexicographers, philologists, amateur scholars, and essayists in these debates, for it was language laced with metaphors, analogies, and allusive imagery.

Metaphorical mirrors provided myriad reflections on obsolete and obsolescent words, since writers traversed diverse fields of knowledge: biology, botany, geology, agriculture, numismatics, and law, among others. Perhaps, not coincidentally, these echo the classification schemes of early dictionaries, manifest in subject labels such as Agriculture, Botany, Gardening, Geology, Law, Metallurgy, and Mineralogy (e.g. Ogilvie 1859: iv; Smart 1836: ii).

Frederic William Farrar, a theological writer, who was elected a fellow of the Royal Society for his studies in philology, wrote extensively on metaphors. Farrar (1865: 228) stressed:

> In fact a style abounding in metaphors is now generally accepted as a proof of weakness, since for an advanced stage of thought it is necessary as far as

[1] Muzeul Național Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Australia

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possible to attach to each word one clear meaning, as little mingled as possible with mere external analogies.

Conversely, Ezra Gallup (1866: 20), an American professor of language and literature, perceived a kind of magic in metaphorical transactions generating transformations:

> Under its spell, how they [words] glide from meaning to meaning, till their final resting place is a wide remove from the original starting point; or perchance, at once, they are clothed upon anew, and, henceforth, we know them only in their borrowed dress.

An apposite example of a magical, metaphorical operation applied to obsolete words reverberates in Alexander Pope's lines (1826: 73): "In downright charity revive the dead" and "Command old words that long have slept, to wake" – invocations which summon the vision of a conjuror or sorcerer raising 'dead' words. Moreover, magic may also be detected in the meaning of the word 'mirrour' (in its obsolete orthography) which is defined by Leslie (1806: 110) firstly as 'speculum' and, secondly, as 'divination by looking in a mirrour'. Divination through the mirror-metaphor exposes kaleidoscopic images of obsolete words.

Gradations of obsolescence

Some writers not only laboured in metaphorical mazes, but also announced their orientation in the title of their dictionaries or treatises. One such wordsmith was Charles Mackay, who called his 1874 lexicon of archaic words *Lost Beauties of the English Language: An Appeal to Authors, Poets, Clergymen, and Public Speakers* (and see his introduction for a profusion of metaphors).

Other writers, foregrounding their impartiality, nevertheless, passed judgement on words which had fallen into obsolescence by a sleight of hand: the close proximity technique. Bysshe's *Art of English Poetry* (1718: iii) contains a dictionary which emphatically excludes "all obsolete, spurious, and miscompounded Words, which are unworthy the Dignity of Style requir'd". In a like manner, in Buchanan's *New English Dictionary* (1757: v), one learns of the abject status of obsolete words through the bad company they keep: "I have likewise rejected all obsolete, bad, low, and despicable words". Martin (1749: iv), in his *Lingua Britannica Reformata: A New English Dictionary*, adopts the same approach, by avoiding the "Redundancy of useless and obsolete Words".

The renowned American lexicographer, Noah Webster, was accused of "high treason against the majesty of letters" by one reviewer (Anon. 1809: 260) for the crime of 'stigmatising' words as obsolete. A subtler value judgement is discerned in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (1805: n.p.) wherein John Dryden (1631-1700) is quoted for the entry on 'obsolete': "Obsolete words may be laudably revived, when they are more sounding or significant than those in practice" (a quotation which appears thrice in the dictionary). A

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value judgement in a more humorous vein is made by Ambrose Bierce, who published his satirical lexicon, *The Devil's Dictionary*, in 1911 (though its origins date to 1881 in a weekly paper). He defines 'obsolete' in the following manner (1925: 233):

> No longer used by the timid. Said chiefly of words. A word which some lexicographer has marked obsolete is ever thereafter an object of dread and loathing to the fool writer, but if it is a good word and has no exact modern equivalent equally good, it is good enough for the good writer.

"But what makes a word obsolete more than general agreement to forbear it?" intones Johnson (1792: n.p.) in the preface to his *Dictionary*, first published in 1755. However, 'general agreement' was a nebulous notion and the compilation of the voluminous *Oxford English Dictionary* bears witness to the complexities involved, for it was not uncommon for a contributor to the *OED* to define a lexeme with a word which another contributor had designated as obsolete (see Mugglestone 2000: 200-201).

The temporal dimension of language usage was not easily resolved: some lexicographers addressed the issue with temporal markers such as 'obsolete', 'obsolescent' and 'archaic'; others recognised that the boundaries of the term 'obsolete' were blurred, if not permeable. Consequently, labels within the same dictionary could span an entire spectrum of possibilities: 'long obsolete', 'now obsolete', 'quite obsolete', 'wholly obsolete', 'entirely obsolete', 'almost obsolete', 'nearly obsolete', 'not wholly obsolete', 'not quite obsolete', 'not yet obsolete', 'not obsolete' (see Cotton 1832; Halliwell 1847; Mackay 1874; Ogilvie 1859; Webster 1830).

Ironically, it appears that compilers of dictionaries found it almost as difficult to pin down the parameters of 'obsolete' as to fix the meaning of the lexeme to which it was attached. Another irony is that dictionaries registered and codified literal meanings, that is, their scope did not extend to metaphorical usage, and it may seem that many a lexicographer – defined by Johnson (1792: n.p.) as "a writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge" – escaped drudgery through metaphoricity, when debating the merits of disused words. However, this impression of frivolity or whimsicality is mistaken, for the intent was very serious, indeed.

From the cradle to beyond the grave

The highly emotive vocabulary of personification was a rich rhetorical resource for the articulation of ideas on obsolete and obsolescent words. The famous linguist Max Müller (1888: 5) declared:

> Each word has its biography, beginning with its birth, or at least with its baptism. We may speak of its childhood, its youth, its manhood, and old age, nay, and even of its death, and of its heirs and successors.

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The philologist and biblical scholar, Richard Chevenix Trench (1860: 41), proposed that these rites of passage should be recorded in dictionaries "to give in the case of each obsolete word, the latest instance of its employment; that so, as we hailed it in the cradle, we may also follow it, where dead, to the grave", an enterprise which would rewrite dictionaries as a sort of register of births and deaths. Similarly, the theologian R.W. Dale in 1878 informed: "A dictionary is not merely a home for living words; it is a hospital for the sick; it is a cemetery for the dead" (quoted in Matthews 1921: 83).

The American author and educator, Brander Matthews, inspired by Dale's convictions, appended that a dictionary should also "serve as an asylum for aged and decayed words" which are "too enfeebled to defend themselves in the struggle for existence" (1921: 83, 85). Matthews (1921: 84) is worth quoting at length for, although he composed this passage in the 1920s, he drew heavily on stylistic devices of the previous century:

> But we do not always remember that an inventory of the language must be hospitable also to the dead and dying words, to the decrepit terms pushed out of popular favor by the onrushing throng of sturdy newcomers. ... They know they are the shock troops which are essential to advance; and they have no pity for the invalid vocables who cannot even hold the line, no longer fit for service and certain to be superannuated sooner or later.

Obsolete words were often considered in conjunction with neologisms (e.g. Campbell 1808: 315; D'Israeli 1824: 407-409; Gallup 1866: 19-20; Graham 1857: 159-161; Hare 1832: 643; Irving 1803: ch. 2; Johnson 1792: n.p.). The American philologist George Perkins Marsh (1861: 176) compares neologisms to "aliens" and archaisms to "trusty friends". These 'trusty friends' could meet lexical death in a variety of forms: old age, disability, or decrepitude. Phelps (1883: 21), a clergyman and educationist, simply concluded: "Words usually die, as men do, because of some infirmity." Alternatively, one could take a more fatalistic view: certain words were not "destined to live" (Graham 1869: 62).

The 'biography' of obsolete words did not always follow the scripted narrative sequence, for words might be only seemingly dead, as Marsh (1861: 179) suggests:

> Words are constantly passing temporarily out of use, and resuming their place in literature again, and this occasional suspended animation of words, followed by a revival and restoration to full activity, is one of the most curious facts in their history.

The revival of obsolete and obsolescent words is described as "a second life" by Trench (1852: 135) and thus the re-appearance of words as 'revenants' marks one more stage on the trajectory from 'life' to 'afterlife'. "This word, though for ages obsolete ... seems to have risen from the dead" is the explanatory note on an entry in Walker's

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dictionary (1806: 524). The British author Isaac D'Israeli (1824: 407) finds the revival of dead words an "authentic miracle" and Matthews (1921: 149) speaks of the "magic wand of poetry" enabling the "resuscitation of departed words". However, George Lillie Craik, a professor of English literature and history, was of the opinion that once a word had "lost its hold of life", it was almost impossible "to raise the dead" (1861: 524). Curiously, several influential scholars in Britain and North America were clerical philologists (e.g. Farrar, Gurnhill, Phelps, and Trench), yet metaphorical forays into the metaphysical realm of religion are scarcely perceptible.

From treasures to trash

Imagery of the life cycle – birth, growth, decay, and a renewal of life – also flourished in the botanical metaphor. In his 'Language as One of the Sciences' (1869) Farrar devotes much of his article to botanical analogies and these were frequently extended to obsolete words. For instance, the essayist Jonathon Swift (1712: 34, 35), buttresses his appeal that "no Word which a Society shall give a Sanction to, be afterwards antiquated and exploded" by affixing Horace's vivid metaphor of "Words going off and perishing like Leaves, and new ones coming in their Place".

D'Israeli (1841: 154) enlists a luxuriant botanical metaphor in his appraisal of lexicographers:

> Every one of them pretends to prune away the vocabulary of his predecessors... In the great tome of his record of archaisms and neologisms, the gray moss hangs about the oak, and the graft shoots forth with fresh verdure.

Often, botanical metaphors slip into the neighbouring domains of agriculture or gardening: "Old words are often like old plows. They must give way if the national civilization has outlived them" (Phelps 1883: 19). One practice commonly advocated is "weeding" language of obsolete and provincial terms (e.g. Anon. 1869: 81). A commentator (Anon. 1858: 93) on English dictionaries urges philologists to be more vigorous in "winnowing" words, so as to obtain "the grain without the chaff", and Sayce (1874: 287) dismisses antiquated words as "worn-out husks". Johnson (1792: n.p.) maintains that "no dictionary of a living tongue ever can be perfect, since while it is hastening to publication, some words are budding, and some falling away".

The field of geology was also richly mined (on the elaboration of language as 'fossil poetry', see Trench 1852: 13-14). Words which have become "extinct", notes Farrar (1869: 52), naturally suggest "the analogy of fossils" and, moreover, the earliest lexicons were thought to preserve the philological fossils of language (see Fry 1859: 262). MacMillan (1868: 754) referring to the 'geology of language', declares: "Philologists have been diligently at work with their hammers splitting open dull and unpromising-looking blocks of words, and finding many curious fossils within them". Fossil imagery was

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diligently pursued by the amateur philologist Henry Samuel Chapman in his *Specimens of Fossilised Words* (1876).

Obsolete and newly-coined words, as previously mentioned, were sometimes interrogated as a single subject and, not unexpectedly, the language of numismatics was another medium for contemplating the vicissitudes of words (e.g. Mackay, 1874: xxi). One reviewer (Anon. 1868: 29) disapprovingly remarks that Trench and the Philological Society "would include every word, ... the base utterances of notorious word-coiners, as well as the rarer and partially obsolete but sterling issues of the national mint".

Interestingly, Trench (1859: 25) endorses his gloss on the word 'bullion' with a telling choice by selecting a verse by Joshua Sylvester (1563-1618):

> Words, whilom flourishing,
> Pass now no more, but, banished from the court,
> Dwell with disgrace among the vulgar sort;
> And those which eld's strict doom did disallow
> And damn for bullion, go for current now.

At times, both obsolete and new-coined words were lumped together as undesirable or tainted, for they were "inconsistent with purity of style" (Irving 1803: 6; see also Campbell 1808: 360-362; Graham 1857: 159-161). In *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, first published in 1776, Campbell (1808: 360) denounces obsolete words as 'barbarisms', for they "have no more title than foreign words".

However, perhaps the ultimate ignominy for obsolete words, cast as 'treasures' by some (e.g. Dwight 1859: 338; Trench 1852: 135), was to be consigned to the metaphorical scrapheap. One eighteenth-century commentator (Anon. 1777: 279) dismisses poems buried under "the rubbish of obsolete words". In Gallup's (1866: 30) perspective, words which fall into disuse are "gathered to the waste and rubbish of the past".

The lexicographer Henry Watson Fowler (1926: 503) surmised that obsolete words should not be retrieved from the detritus:

> Is it absurdly optimistic to suppose that what the stream of language leaves stranded as it flows along consists mainly of what can be done without, and that going back to rake among the debris, except for very special needs, is unprofitable?

Whilst most commentators confined themselves to a single analogy or metaphor as a rhetorical device, several writers exhibited unparalleled metaphorical ardour.

An onslaught of metaphors

Farrar, who identified 'weakness' in a style teeming with metaphors, would have been nonplussed by some of his fellow philologists who recognised the exact opposite:

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potency of style. These individuals crammed their texts with multi-layered or mixed metaphors or a surfeit of allusive imagery. Such strategies marshalled a multitude of metaphors to strengthen the force of the author's contention, even if the outcome was metaphorical overkill.

Samuel Pegge, a barrister at law and amateur philologist, advanced his argument with the terminological directory of his profession. Pegge (1844: 4, italics in original) commences his critique of Johnson's *Dictionary* with the allegation that ancient dialect words were treated "as *out-laws*, who have lost the protection of the commonwealth". The barrister then proposes to defend discarded words and expressions – labelled the "injured parties" – and to prove that his "clients are not mere *Certificate-men*, but that they have *whilom* gained *legal settlements* by long service, though now ousted by usurpers" (1844: 17, italics in original). Further episodes of personification occur in Pegge's 'defence' of obsolete words which are pictured as "decayed Gentlefolks that have known better days" and, without protection, have been "turned out to the world at large" (1844: 17).

Elsewhere, in his loquacious style, Pegge (1844: 262) literally clothes his metaphorical counsel in garments:

> When we lay aside an old Word ... on account of its cut and fashion (as we would a half-worn coat), the new one that succeeds should be made to fit well; otherwise, the old one, which sat well ... should not have been discarded.

George Lillie Craik, in his *Compendious History of English Literature, and of the English Language, from the Norman Conquest*, makes conquests of metaphors. As indicated earlier, Craik doubted the possibility of 'raising the dead' and, though he deemed it impossible to predict which words would 'live' and which would 'die' (1861: 523), he was certain of the inevitability of lexical mortality: "It would almost seem as if words too as well as we who use them were doomed to wither and decay with age ... to lie down and fall asleep in death" (1861: 524).

Craik (1861: 523) parades his metaphors in another field in order to outline the process of language change, a process which was no different to "any change which might be introduced in the composition of the bronze employed in statuary, or of the stone or other material employed in architecture". In addition, he (1861: 524) harnesses an agricultural metaphor, claiming that antiquated terms "have no power of taking root anew in the soil of the language". He (1861: 524-525) then deploys a mixed martial metaphor in which obsolete and obsolescent words are "the veterans or emeriti of the language, whose regular term of active service is over, but ... as a reserve force or retired list ... may always be called out on special occasions".

To complete his catalogue of inventive correspondences, Craik (1861: 525) posits that expired words may be imagined as "the spirits of words departed, which sometimes, when solemnly invoked, revisit the scene in the affairs of which they once bore an active part". The invocation of 'the spirits of words departed' recalls Pope's imagery of the

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magical revivification of dead words and Matthews' magic wand resuscitating departed words.

Gurnhill in *English Retraced* (1862: 39) also musters a cluster of metaphors, the first of which is:

> The [obsolete] word is, perhaps, worthy of a better place, like many others, which have retired to drag out the remainder of their days in the humble cottage of the peasant, previous to their total extinction, as members of the living tongue.

After Gurnhill likens obsolete words to antiquated museum specimens (1862: 84), he pronounces that these words have no influence, having "passed away from this earthly stage" (1862: 84), but he concedes there might be some value in 'digging up' these "old fossils" (1862: 84), since it is only by "casting the log, while our ship [language] is in motion, that we can obtain a true estimate of her progress" (1862: 84). Indeed, Gurnhill (1862: 158) notes that since Chaucer's time, large numbers of words had passed into desuetude and those remaining:

> ... still retained pretty much of their primitive costume, but, nevertheless, a silent agency was at work; first it thinned the bed of seedlings; then, when this was done, it set to work at training, and trimming the remainder.

Looking at obsolete words in the looking-glass – a device for 'divination' – one divines a great deal about lexical loss in language, but also about language itself as it passes through the enchanted mirror of metaphor.

Conclusion: Reflections

Both Bierce's devilish definition of lexicographer as "a pestilent fellow" (1925: 190) and Johnson's playful interpretation as "a harmless drudge" (1792: n.p.) fail to capture the creativity, imagination and fervour which permeated the process of chronicling the 'biography' of words. The debate on the status of obsolete words in the English language provoked animated discussions, roused philological passions, and crafted lexicographical poetic licence. The metaphorical mirrors reflected their times and the effusive (and often prolix) style in which arguments were couched is, in itself, now obsolete.

Metaphorical saturation appears to function, as Gallup postulated, as a type of magical 'spell'. Approaches to lexical loss in the English language followed a certain pattern of wonder-working metaphors and, intriguingly, some early dictionary definitions of 'mirror' include the figurative meaning of 'pattern' (see 'mirrour' entry in Phillips, 1720) and dictionaries could also furnish the etymological sense of mirror as 'something wonderful' (see Donald 1867: 323). According to Johnson (1792: n.p.), 'mirror' denotes

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'any thing exhibiting representations by reflection', but it is equally justified to look at the reverse process: as lexicographers, philologists and essayists pondered words, they exhibited their reflections by metaphorical representations.

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