

Keywords: Raymond Williams and Others

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THE WORD “KEYWORD” itself does not appear in Dr Johnson’s *Dictionary*, and it did not enter the vocabulary until the mid-nineteenth century, where it stood, broadly, for that which is central or essential. Increasingly associated with the sciences and with computerized access to knowledge, it was first promoted to philosophical significance by Raymond Williams, whose *Keywords* was first published in 1975. In that brilliant little book, which was a spin-off from his *Culture and Society* published nearly twenty years earlier, Williams completed an intellectual task which he had found necessary for his own cultural survival in Britain after World War II; that is to say, relating his grasp of the rapidly evolving world to which he returned after military service to his understanding of the big words deployed in and by that society; their history *as* words, or philological evolution; their history as words in social time, whose meanings had changed because the world around them changed; and their political history, a subject in which Williams was particularly invested.

Raymond Williams deserves to be remembered as a totality, not merely as the author of *Keywords*. Born into a working-class family in Wales, Williams got as far as an M.A. at Cambridge before going to war, in an anti-tank regiment, in 1941. After the war he spent 20 years as an extra-mural

teacher at Oxford, learning about the value of education the hard way, by delivering it to working adults who had for class reasons been excluded from it. In the 1950s he began to publish, and by the time he died in 1988 his resume included 650 publications, including 27 academic books, 5 novels, 3 plays, and more than 500 articles and reviews. He was one of the first to appreciate the opportunities and perils of television. He was one of the first of the so-called cultural historians, or cultural critics, or cultural materialists (each shades into the other), and was enormously influential in the new discipline of cultural studies that developed in Birmingham under Richard Hoggart, followed by Stuart Hall. Nowadays “cultural studies” itself has become a key-phrase for things going on the academy that not everyone approves of. What Williams accomplished was to reunite some vague conceptual terms (“creativity,” “culture,” “individual” and “society”) and some clearly material facts (education, literacy, the press, television, drama) in a loose family of social and historical relationships that gave added meaning to both. For Williams, **democracy**, a crucial keyword for both of us, is indissolubly connected to public education and hence to literacy in the broadest sense. Williams was an educational socialist. By the late 1960s, he might have become a little too much of a Marxist for his own theoretical longevity, though he consistently critiqued vulgar Marxism for its overemphasis on mere economic causation. By 1975, when he published *Keywords*, William had arrived at the doctrine that language itself is causative, that the active meanings and values expressed in language exert a formative social force. When I say language itself, I do not imply an impersonal force independent of human speakers and writers. Williams’s theory was in fact a reaction against the notion of a sealed-off world of language, whether belletrist or Derridean. But you cannot fully understand the subtle engineering of men, by men, that words enable and, more importantly, you cannot yourself become an engineer, unless you know the *social* etymology of words, their function over historical time. Because he was an optimist, for Williams this formative social force, if widely understood, might eventually lead us to a better kind of democracy.

In his disarmingly modest introduction to *Keywords*, as modest as Johnson’s but without the melancholy, Williams told his audience in 1975 that it all began with his dissatisfaction with the big word **culture**, with the way in which it bore several quite distinct meanings in ordinary conversation, meanings which didn’t seem to be cognate with each other. The first was likely to be used in “teashops and places like that,” a very English environment, where it “seemed the preferred word for a kind of social supe-

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riority.” The second had to do with the arts, and people who knew about or practised them. The third was a specialized use of the term imported from anthropology, meaning a distinctive (and usually pre-industrial) set of customs, a sense which was gradually spreading, as he puts it, under American influence, gradually defeating the other two senses of gentility and artistic cognisance to become a general term for a Way of Life, a modern way of life, its signs immediately recognizable by non-scientists, and often connected to national stereotypes: French culture, American culture, bourgeois culture, college culture, and so forth. Then one day, says Williams demurely, “I looked up **culture**, almost casually, in ... the *OED*.... It was like a shock of recognition. The changes of sense [he] had been trying to understand had begun in English ... in the early nineteenth century [and hence] took on, in the language, not only an intellectual but an historical shape” (*Keywords*, 13). From that moment of recognition came not only *Culture and Society* in 1956, but the later *Keywords*, which had originally been intended as an appendix to the more argumentative work, but under the duress of the publisher’s word limits had been dropped into a file drawer, there to remain for twenty years.

When it was eventually published in its own right, *Keywords* was, Williams also tells us, difficult to classify, a headache for library cataloguers. It has been classified as cultural history, historical semantics, history of ideas, social criticism, literary history and sociology. That is to say, it cannot itself be securely claimed by or for any specialized discipline, and to a certain extent, a point that Williams does not make, it celebrates the permeability of disciplinary boundaries. But, significantly, Williams’s introduction distinguishes between two *kinds* of keywords, quite different, in fact, in the terrain in which they operate. Keywords, Sense 1: “strong, difficult and persuasive words in everyday usage”; Keywords, Sense 2: “words which, beginning in particular specialized contexts, have become quite common in descriptions of wider areas of thought and experience” (14), but are still by no means used by the man on the street. In his final version of *Keywords*, Williams included 131 words, most of which, it seems to me, fall into the second category—words like “aesthetic,” “alienation,” “anarchism,” to take three of the five A’s, or “hegemony,” “history” and “humanity,” to take all of the H’s. Few of these words are likely to be used in the British tea-shop or the North American coffee equivalent, unless it is sited on a college campus. None of them is likely to be heard in McDonald’s. None of them is a strong, difficult and *persuasive* word, that is, a word that carries with it a certain clout to which we may or may not wish to defer. Thus the primary audience for Williams’s *Keywords* must have been college students

or teachers wishing to get up to speed on some of the more fashionable words in academic conversation and writing. In his first category, however, of “strong, difficult and persuasive words in everyday usage,” I can find, of the one hundred and three terms he selected, only the following: “class,” “democracy,” “family,” “imperialism” (a doubtful inclusion on my part), “labour,” “liberal,” “masses” (maybe), “monopoly,” “private,” “racial,” “revolution,” “science,” “unemployment,” “wealth” and “welfare,” and, for somewhat different reasons, “sex,” a word that Williams felt he had to add for the second edition of 1983. With the possible exception of “imperialism” (which smacks a bit of academic argument) and “masses” (which has suffered the obsolescence of popular Marxism) all of these words might be heard in McDonald’s; and all of them carry some degree of their meaning with them. Those who use them have an attitude towards them, positive or negative or confused, as the case may be. They are persuasive simply by being uttered. They are to some extent normative. They are, to use another overused academic word, ideologically inflected. They are words which both invite argument and suppress it, simply by the convenience of their shorthand.

To better understand his project, we need a closer analysis of the choices that Raymond Williams made when he selected the vocabulary that educated people like himself (and “educated” is of course one of his keywords) should think about more carefully. It is surprising what happens when you count. Of his one hundred and thirty-one words, twenty might be said to belong to the second sense of culture as having to do with knowledge of the arts, or aesthetics, including the word **aesthetics** itself. Thus **art, creative, criticism, dramatic, fiction, formalist, genius, idealism, image, literature, media, myth, naturalism, originality, realism, Romantic** (with a capital R), **sensibility**, perhaps **structural** and definitely **taste**. The man, woman or child on the street can mostly live without these words altogether. Approximately forty of Williams’s keywords are big words in another sense, the largely abstract words we need to operate an advanced structural approach to knowledge: **anthropology, bureaucracy, civilization, commercialism, consensus, consumer, development, dialect, doctrinaire, ecology, empirical, evolution, existential, generation, genetic, hegemony, institution, intellectual, man, management, mechanical, medieval, modern, organic, philosophy, positivist, pragmatic, progressive, psychological, rational, regional, representative, society, sociology, socialist, status, subjective, technology, theory, utilitarian** and **Western**. And then there is another category, of words that carry special meaning in left-wing politics, the

already mentioned **alienation, bourgeois, capitalism, class, collective, communism, dialectic, elite, exploitation, hegemony, ideology, labour, liberal, liberation, masses, materialism, mediation, monopoly, peasant, popular, radical, reactionary, revolution, socialist, unconscious** (that's a very interesting one, as in Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*), **underprivileged, unemployment, wealth, welfare** and the highly interesting if seemingly innocuous **work**. If you like word games, and have a good memory, you will have discerned that several of this last large group—30 or so words that share a certain very localised marxist frisson when grouped like this—nevertheless made it into the first rather small group that fulfill the first of Williams's own principles of selection: strong, difficult and persuasive words in everyday usage. Naturally, one can't squeeze all of the final one hundred and thirty one words into one of these three categories, aesthetic, institutional, left-wing political. Where should one place, for instance, the late arrival as a keyword, **sex**? Or **jargon**, which was also added for the second edition?

Now, the point of the preceding analysis is definitely not to be critical of Raymond Williams, who knew exactly what he was doing and to whom it would be useful. The point is partly to show that anyone deeply interested in the work that words do in our society is likely to have certain biases—unusually clear in the case of Williams himself, but as he pointed out, bias can also be found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which reflects British culture of the 1880s to the 1920s. It is also to show that language is always in flux, and certain words which were once keywords—**charity**, for instance, which Williams includes—gradually lose their keyword status and become archeological relics. Dr Johnson's **tyranny** would be another instance of keyword obsolescence. If Williams were alive to revise his book once more for the beginning of the new millennium he would have to add **gender** alongside **sex**, poor man, but by my standards the new word is only a keyword in the second, academic sense, and with any luck only temporarily so.

Not all of Williams's keywords, evidently, are abstract nouns. Several of them are adjectives. None of them, with the possible exception of **sex**, is a verb. This is peculiar, given our commonsense, grammar-school belief that it is verbs that supply the action in a sentence, that make something happen. Every one of the six American keywords in my *Rusty Keywords*, the book from which this article is excerpted, is an abstraction, in both the grammatical and philosophical sense: Evil, Crime-and-Punishment, Innocence, Democracy, Success and Death; though the last is an abstraction of a slightly different character.

What is an abstraction? Here are a series of definitions, of which the first, amusingly, comes from the new field of computer semantics. Abstraction is “the process of picking out common features of objects and procedures.... Abstraction is one of the most important techniques in software engineering and is closely related to two other important techniques, encapsulation and information hiding. All three techniques are used to reduce complexity” (see <webopedia.com?term/a/abstraction>). The second comes from the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, one of the best sources of information on the world wide web:

Abstraction is a process ... by which the mind selects for consideration some one of the attributes of things to the exclusion of the rest.... From the dawn of intelligence [the writer is speaking of individual cognitive development, rather than intellectual history] the activity progresses rapidly, as all of our generalizations depend upon the abstraction from different objects of some phase, or phases, which they have in common. A further and most important step is taken when the mind reaches the stage where it can handle its abstractions, such as extension, motion, species, being, cause, as a basis for science and philosophy, in which, to a certain extent at least, the abstracted concepts are manipulated like the symbols in algebra, without immediate reference to the concrete. This process is not without its dangers of fallacy, but human knowledge would not progress far without it. <newadvent.org/cathen/01074a>

Note that this definition is almost exclusively contained within the philosophical discipline we call epistemology, and deeply indebted to John Locke.

But there is another approach to abstraction, which has social and political implications, implications which will loop back to the slightly sinister language of the computer science abstractionist. *Rusty Keywords* makes much of Alexis de Tocqueville, author of *Democracy in America*. The second volume of Tocqueville’s extraordinary book contains a chapter which would have been dear to Raymond Williams, a chapter entitled “How American Democracy has modified the English Language.” After a brilliant excursion into the way that democratic peoples expand and distort their vocabulary to suit their needs, Tocqueville makes a quite original and humorous assertion:

Democratic peoples passionately love generic terms and abstract words because these expressions enlarge thought, and, by permitting the inclusion of many objects in a small space, they aid the work of the intellect.

A democratic writer will willingly say in an abstract manner *capacities* for capable men, without entering into the details of the things to which this capacity applies. He will speak of *actualities* to paint in a single stroke things that pass before his eyes in the moment, and he will comprehend under the word *eventualities* all that can happen in the universe starting from the moment in which he speaks.

Even more, to render the discourse more rapid, they personify the object of these abstract words and make it act like a real individual. They will say that *the force of things wants capacities to govern...*

These abstract words that fill democratic languages ... enlarge and veil a thought; they render the expression more rapid and the idea less clear. But in the case of language, democratic peoples prefer obscurity to workmanship.

Besides, I do not know whether the vogue does not have a secret charm for those who speak and write among those people.

At first I thought Tocqueville must have been thinking here about Emerson's *Essays*, but, alas, the second volume of *Democracy in America*, which was published in 1840, preceded the first volume of Emerson's *Essays* by one year. The most we can hazard, then, is that Tocqueville *anticipated* the Emersonian rhetoric and essay titles, one of which, by the way, was *Success*.

Tocqueville attributes this secret charm of abstract words in part to the fact that democratic societies are always in flux, always developing:

Men who inhabit democratic countries therefore often have vacillating thoughts; they must have very large expressions to contain them. As they never know if the idea they are expressing today will suit the new situation they will have tomorrow, they naturally conceive a taste for abstract terms. An abstract word is like a box with a false bottom: one puts in it the ideas one desires and one takes them out without anyone's seeing it. (456–57; Volume 2, Part 1, Chapter 16)

However you assess the linguistic psychology here, it is interesting to see how approaching language from a cultural and historical perspective, as Tocqueville, working with a language not his own, must necessarily

do, produces a skepticism similar to that of the computer programmer forced to describe the completely new language that is being created for technological purposes. All of my six American keywords may be subject to Tocqueville's devastating critique: an abstract word is like a box with a false bottom; one puts in it the ideas one desires, particularly the ideas one desires that others shall take for granted.

Raymond Williams was not the first lexicographer to identify the ideological force of words, though he was, perhaps, the first to provide a theory of that force. This article will conclude with a survey of some of the more tendentious contributors to lexicography who preceded him. The first of these was contemporary with Dr Samuel Johnson, but someone on the opposite side of English opinion in the burning years of the American Revolution and the subsequent French Revolution, an enthusiast for both Revolutions, Charles Pigott by name. He died in 1794; and in 1794 there was published, necessarily posthumously, his *Political Dictionary*. In 1796 it was published in a New York edition, so that people on this side of the water could see what a skeptical view of language could do for them.

Starting in the A's, naturally, Pigott defined **America** thus: "A brilliant and immortal example to all colonial groanings under a foreign yoke, proving the invincible energy and virtue of freedom" (2–3). This was one of the very few Pigott definitions that was, as it were, straight, as distinct from ironic, back to front; though it is hard not to see it as having been ironized and re-ironized in subsequent political history. Another straight definition was that of **democrat**: "one who maintains the right of the people, an enemy to privileged orders, and all monarchical encroachments, the advocate of peace, œconomy and reform. Aristotle affirms that liberty can never flourish out[side] of a democracy" (14). Apart from the fact that that is a bare-faced lie, since Aristotle reserves the term **democracy** for the most debased form of a republic, this is one of Pigott's simplest manifestos. Few other definitions are so optimistic. Pigott is temperamentally, ideologically, suspicious of abstractions. Thus **faith** is glossed as "Credulity, Superstition" (23), abstraction attacking abstraction. **Metaphysics** is glossed as "A confusion of the brain," (77). **Opposition** is a joke of another kind. "It is said that in England," wrote Pigott, "there is opposition to everything except Shakespeare; but shortly we may likewise except the Government" (93). His point is that in the heated climate of anti-Jacobin propaganda, i.e., English paranoia about the possible spread of French Revolution principles, political opposition is absolutely forbidden, whereas Raymond Williams, two centuries later, would regard it as essential to progress. Thus the Pigott definition of **Sedition, a sower of,**

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reads “One who tells honest truths, and is above the reach of ministerial influence and corruption,” (129). The abstraction **Justice**, Pigott tells us curtly, is defined as “obsolete” (65).

Between Pigott and Raymond Williams comes the somewhat bizarre figure of Ambrose Bierce, a late nineteenth-century San Francisco journalist. His *Devil's Dictionary* was conceived and assembled slowly in many of his columns during the early 1880s, and now exists as a compilation courtesy of modern editors. As these same editors point out, the career and objectives of Ambrose Bierce can be summed up by a single one of his own definitions:

Cynic, n. A blackguard whose faulty vision sees things as they are, not as they ought to be. (47)

Unlike Pigott, Bierce does not appear to be attached to any political party, so that his ironies are more equally distributed. There is a certain arbitrariness to his selections—a devil can choose which words are worth messing with—and some of them are selected just for the relish. One of my favorites: “**Mayonnaise, n.** One of the sauces which serve the French in place of a state religion” (162). Others are just plain quirky. Thus Bierce, who does include verbs in his sights, takes flight on the subject of **Embalm, v.t.:**

To cheate vegetation by locking up the gases upon which it feeds. By embalming their dead and thereby deranging the natural balance between animal and vegetable life, the Egyptians made their once populous country barren and incapable of supporting more than a meagre crew. The modern metallic burial casket is a step in the same direction, and many a dead man who could hope now to be ornamenting his neighbour's lawn as a tree, or enriching his table as a bunch of radishes, is doomed to a long inutility. (65)

Others, however, make it clear that Bierce is an American who has lost the naive belief in the American revolution that stood for Pigott as the visionary norm against which eighteenth-century England stood condemned. Bierce, by the way, is writing at just about the same moment that Henry Adams was producing his sardonic novel *Democracy*, and has much the same view of politics as did Adams in 1800. Thus we find:

Conservative, n. A statesman who is enamored of existing evils.

As distinguished from the

Liberal, n. who wishes to replace them with others. (41)

Equality, n. In politics, an imaginary condition in which skulls are counted instead of brains, and merit is determined by lot and punishment by preferment. Pushed to its logical conclusion, the principle requires rotation in office and in the penitentiary. (70)

Impunity, n. Wealth. (121)

The curtness of this resembles Pigott's one-word definition of justice as "obsolete."

Patriotism, on the other hand, is richly defined as "Combustible rubbish ready to the torch of anyone ambitious to illuminate his name." Bierce adds, "In Dr Johnson's famous dictionary patriotism is defined as the last resort of a scoundrel. With all due respect to an enlightened but inferior lexicographer I beg to submit that it is the first" (179). (A small note: this famous definition is not to be found in Johnson's *Dictionary*, but in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, under the date 7 April 1775.)

Revolution is brilliantly conceived, in absolute opposition to Pigott's enthusiasm for the American Revolution, as follows: "In Politics, an abrupt change in the form of misgovernment. Specifically, in American history, the substitution of the rule of an Administration for that of a Ministry, whereby the welfare and happiness of the people were advanced a full half-inch" (200–01). Bierce likes abstractions precisely *because* they are vulnerable to being turned upside down, and, in Tocqueville's terms, showing their false bottoms.

But he also likes plain, seemingly no-nonsense words like **Riches**, which is defined by three quotations:

"A gift from Heaven signifying, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." (John D. Rockefeller)

"The reward of toil and virtue." (J. P. Morgan)

"The savings of many in the hands of one." (Eugene Debs)

And Bierce adds: "To these excellent definitions the inspired lexicographer feels that he can add nothing of value" (201).

If you think back for a moment, you will see that the words that I have *selected* from Pigott and Bierce could easily, most of them, be counted as keywords. Pigott: Democrat, Faith, Metaphysics, Opposition, Justice, and especially America; Bierce: Justice, Conservative (and we should include Liberal), Equality, Patriotism, Revolution, Riches. Of these, only **democrat** (in its abstract form) and **revolution** appeared in Raymond Williams's list, and that was because they were still in active social force in the 1970s. **Riches**, significantly, showed up there in the modernized form of **Wealth**,

and in my list it reappears as **Success. Seditio**n, on the other hand, though it was once a keyword of extraordinary power during the presidency of John Adams, and still haunts the office of the Attorney General, has long lost its keyword status. **Metaphysics** might easily have been included in Williams's longer category of academic terms, but not in mine. Though certain metaphysical arguments may take place even in McDonald's, I doubt that they occur over whether Metaphysics, as an abstraction, is good or bad for us. Neither Pigott nor Bierce has selected these words deliberately as keywords: that is to say, they have no special status among the ordinary company they keep, company such as "mayonnaise" and "impunity." Their ideological character is, if anything, somewhat defused by the subversive character of the dictionaries in which they appear. But those words did in fact have special status in 1796, in 1881, in 1975, and, it would seem, in 2003. They carried a higher voltage than the words that surrounded them.

For the purpose of this article, then, the first definition of keywords that Raymond Williams gave us in 1975, "strong, difficult and persuasive words in everyday usage," seems to hold up pretty well, so long as we extend the force of "everyday" to mean "today," that is, still current, still at work in our social and ideological system, though their precise inflections may have changed considerably since the day that they were coined. Not only must they not be obsolescent, keywords must have a history, and at least some longevity. But of course they are still being coined. **Terrorism** is clearly a new keyword in international use; its users are usually extremely vague as to what precisely it connotes, while precise as to what it entails militarily, legislatively, budgetarily. Let us hope it eventually goes the way of **seditio**n.

But one must not think that keywords are primarily political in import. That would be to forget the important interdisciplinary thrust of Raymond Williams's seminal work. **Family**, a word I originally intended to have included, and on which Williams is excellent, is as powerful as any of them, even though the social unit it used to point to for at least the last century is dissolving. In fact, precisely because the nuclear family is dissolving, the keyword **family** has acquired a new resonance and urgency. It may be that **cancer** has acquired the keyword status that was once possessed by the **King's Evil**, and that, one hopes, will never be occupied by **Mad Cow Disease**.

Now here's a question. Must a keyword function as such in different languages? Yes, if we are thinking internationally, no, if we are limiting the conversation to one country, like the United States. But even if we

do so limit it, the power and interest of an American keyword will be increased if it has a matching, or for that matter conflicting, lexical history elsewhere. **Democracy** has the special force of having descended to us from ancient Greece, and is therefore unusually panlinguistic. It was a Frenchman, however, Alexis de Tocqueville, who made it the American keyword it has been for nearly three centuries. The case of **evil** is a different matter, since for the French **le mal** is an infinitely more multitasking word. **Death**, on the other hand, is exactly translatable and untranslatable as **le Mort**. It is a powerful lexical and semantic fact that the twinning of **crime-and-punishment** was effected long ago, in Italy, by Cesare Beccaria, whose essay *Dei Delitti e dei Pene* (“About Crimes and Punishments”) was published in 1764, a full century before Dostoevsky turned the icy blast of his intelligence on the phrase, and by rendering the plurals singular transformed them into abstractions. Now their inseparability is confirmed and complicated by years of ideological dispute about penal theory, and manifest disparities between the way the terms are hooked together in practice, in different jurisdictions and countries.

When is a potential keyword not a keyword? When it is merely a catchword. And here we can turn to the most recent American political dictionary, that of William Safire. The first edition of this work, entitled *The New Language of Politics*, which appeared in 1968, actually preceded Raymond Williams’s *Keywords*, though there is no sign that either was aware of the other. Safire’s dictionary is specifically, as its subtitle reads, of “Catchwords, Slogans and Political Usage,” and thus is much narrower in its intellectual reach than is *Keywords*, though fascinating from an American historical perspective, since it traces our most catching coinages to specific political speakers and writers.

William Safire served as White House advisor and speechwriter during the Nixon administration. *The New Language of Politics* appeared just before he took that job, and for the last twenty years he has been a *New York Times* columnist of avowedly extreme conservative views. Nevertheless, the *New Language of Politics* and its successor, the *New Political Dictionary*, are remarkably disinterested, far more disinterested than Pigott, as clever as Bierce but much more instructive. Here are some sentences from Safire’s Introduction:

The new, old, and constantly changing language of politics is a lexicon of conflict and drama, of ridicule and reproach, of pleading and persuasion. Color and bite permeate a language designed to rally many men, to destroy some, and to change

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the minds of others.... This is a dictionary of the words and phrases that have misled millions, blackened reputations, held out false hopes, oversimplified ideas to appeal to the lowest common denominator, shouted down inquiry, and replaced searching debate with stereotypes that trigger approval or hatred. (*New*, vii; *Political*, ix)

It is only the word “politics” in that first sentence that prevents us from attaching it, as a darker shadow, to Raymond Williams’s hopeful theory of the keyword.

Though Safire does not include “keyword” in his dictionary, he does give a definition of “catchword,” in its social sense, as distinct from its meanings in the theatre or the history of printing. A catchword today, in Safire’s own definition, is “a word that crystallizes an issue, sparks a response; a technique condemned by those not imaginative enough to master it” (*New*, 68; *Political*, 102). Bigger, then, than a buzzword, which is here today, gone tomorrow. Inherently, then, a catchword is a more than temporary lexical success. Safire witnesses Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “day of infamy,” as a way of understanding Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. Do ordinary Americans now know what the “day of infamy” was? Could the phrase ever be effectively reused in another context? Another comparable catchword, not yet included, would be Weapons of Mass Destruction, a phrase unlikely to be used again in the near future for fear of outright ridicule.

FDR was one of America’s greatest catchword coiners. “New Deal” appeared in his acceptance speech at the 1932 Democratic Convention. But catchwords, because they are context specific, have a way of going silly on us, as genuine keywords usually do not. Thus, Safire tells us, in 1967, Michigan’s Republican Governor George Romney made not irony but parody of this one: “There was the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt, the Fair Deal of Harry Truman, and the ordeal of Lyndon Johnson” (*New*, 137; *Political*, 218). (See also “Fair Deal.”)

Nevertheless, there are a few entries in Safire’s dictionary of catchwords that seem to me to have acquired the dignity and difficulty of keywords, by a process that deserves more thoughtful investigation than it can receive here. Indeed, there is a paragraph in his definition of the catchword that seems to verge on my definition of the keyword:

The greatness of a catchword or catchphrase is often its ambivalence, leaving it open to controversy and interpretations for years. “A good catchword,” said Wendell L. Wilkie in

a 1938 Town Hall debate, “can obscure analysis for fifty years.”
(*New*, 69; *Political*, 102)

Catchwords that might have become keywords include: Civil Rights, Crusade (an extremely interesting entry), Grassroots, Law and Order (“regarded by strong civil rights supporters since 1964,” Safire tells us, “as the ‘code words’ for repression of Negro rights” [*New*, 228; *Political*, 367]), Living Wage, Manifest Destiny (earliest use attributed to Andrew Jackson), Medicare (which will shortly need a new entry in Safire’s next edition), Open Society, Quality of Life, Segregation, Totalitarianism, and finally Workfare, which incorporates a brief history of the increasing stigmatization in America of the word “Welfare,” and concludes with the seemingly offhand comment:

“Work,” on the other hand, is doing better all the time, despite the efforts to change “workers” into “employees” and ultimately to bloodless “personnel.” However, demonstration organizer Abbie Hoffman called work “the only truly four-letter word in the English language.” (*Political*, 800)

No doubt the effort to engage with the words that do the work will continue, as it should, since nothing is more subject to obsolescence than spectrum of the language we use in its real usage. It took me a while to discover a slightly more direct precedent than Raymond Williams’s *Keywords* for what I have tried to accomplish here—direct in the sense that it is addressed to specifically American language use. Well after my lectures were given, my book written, I discovered *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics Since Independence* (Basic Books, 1987), whose author is Daniel T. Rodgers of Princeton University. An early footnote acknowledges that the term “keyword” is borrowed from Raymond Williams. This book is pure politico-cultural history, and the keywords or key-phrases are, correspondingly, **utility, natural rights, The People, Government, The State, Interests** and, significantly in last place, **freedom**. Thus the entire selection of keywords could be said to come under the heading of my central keyword **democracy**. But if, as I must claim, Rodgers’s view of the scope of the keyword is more narrowly focused than mine on American political history, that the interdisciplinary approach to keywords is missing, his programmatic account of his enterprise, and his elevation of political keywords to primary status, is entirely apropos:

if words unify and mobilize, they have a still greater, hidden power as well. Words legitimate the outward frame of poli-

tics.... [O]f all the functions of political talk, the superimposition of some believable sense and endurable legitimacy on top of the chaotic motions of day-to-day power is the least dispensable. Let the citizens believe that the law is a thing of logic (rather than the whim of men called judges), that their government is a democracy (though only a fraction of the people rule), that human beings were born with rights (though it is plain that they are born to the powerlessness of infancy), and their words have consequences. Let such words shift, let a part of the citizenry suddenly read new meanings into the reigning political figures of speech, let the self-evident truth undergirding the structures of power be open to doubt and contest, and the event is momentous indeed. (5)

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