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SAMUEL JOHNSON'S *DICTIONARY* AND THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WORLD OF WORDS

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CONTENTS

Giovanni Iamartino and Robert DeMaria, Jr. <i>Introduction</i>	5
Robert DeMaria, Jr. <i>North and South in Johnson's Dictionary</i>	11
Chris P. Pearce <i>Recovering the "Rigour of Interpretative Lexicography": Border Crossings in Johnson's Dictionary</i>	33
Marina Dossena <i>"The Cinic Scotomastic"? Johnson, His Commentators, Scots, French, and the Story of English</i>	51
Sandro Jung <i>Johnson's Dictionary and the Language of William Collins's Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegoric Subjects</i>	69
J.T. Scanlan <i>Johnson's Dictionary and Legal Dictionaries</i>	87
Silvia Pireddu <i>The "Landscape of the Body": The Language of Medicine in Johnson's Dictionary</i>	107
Mirella Billi <i>Johnson's Beauties. The Lexicon of the Aesthetics in the Dic- tionary</i>	131
Laura Pinnavaia <i>Idiomatic Expressions Regarding Food and Drink in Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language (1755 and 1773)</i> ..	151
David Vancil <i>Some Observations about the Samuel Johnson Miniature Dictionaries in the Cordell Collection</i>	167
Alessandra Vicentini <i>In Johnson's Footsteps: Baretti's English Gram- mar and the Spread of the English Language in Italy during the Eigh- teenth Century</i>	179

(continua nella pagina seguente →)



TILGHER-GENOVA

Giovanni Iamartino <i>English Flour and Italian Bran: Johnson's Dictionary and the Reformation of Italian Lexicography in the Early Nineteenth Century</i>	203
Silvia Cacchiani <i>Desperately, Utterly and Other Intensifiers. On Their Inclusion and Definition in Dr Johnson's Dictionary</i>	217
Silvia Masi <i>Lexicographic Material under Observation: From Johnson's Dictionary to a Model for a Cognition-based Dictionary of Lexical Patterns</i>	237
Contributors	259

(Instructions: p. 262)

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Giovanni Iamartino

English Flour and Italian Bran: Johnson's Dictionary and the Reformation of Italian Lexicography in the Early Nineteenth Century

1. *Introduction*

Every student of the history of the English language knows that all the various plans devised in early modern Britain to establish a national linguistic academy came to nothing,¹ and that the opposition to such an idea was most convincingly voiced by the man whose work came, in a way, to take the place of an academy – I mean, of course, Samuel Johnson and his *Dictionary of the English Language*.²

What is perhaps less known is the connection between Johnson's *Dictionary* and the Italian *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*; it was a two-way trade, although Johnson did most of the giving and his Italian counterparts did – or, at least, meant to do – most of the taking. Accordingly, after briefly summarizing Johnson's stance on the Cruscanti, it is the purpose of this paper to consider how his *Dictionary* was received and what use it was put to in Italy by both the Florentine academicians and their Italian opponents and critics.

¹ For a survey of the English situation in comparison with the continental one, see Grayson 1985 and Woodhouse 1985b; see also Del Lungo Camiciotti 1990: 29 ff.

² The quotations from Johnson's *Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language* and Preface to the *Dictionary* will be taken from Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005.

2. Johnson and the Vocabolario

Probably, Samuel Johnson had the opportunity to peruse the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* for the first time while working on the annotated catalogue of the great Harleian library in the 1740s: the *Vocabolario* provided a model for what would be Johnson's only true innovation in English monolingual lexicography, that is to say, the copious use of illustrative quotations from the best writers; and, in addition, the *Vocabolario*, together with the *Dictionnaire* of the French Academy, may have been a memento of what was still missing on the bookshelves of the English gentlemen and men of letters.

Despite the English aversion to the establishment of a linguistic academy, English literary society – Johnsonian scholarship tells us –

hoped Johnson would bring the nation level with its cultural rivals, particularly France. Johnson was sensitive to this expectation and he says explicitly in his Preface, “I have devoted this book, the labour of years, to the honour of my country, that we may no longer yield the palm of philology without a contest to the nations of the continent”. (DeMaria 1997: 86)

Although rivalry with France, rather than Italy, was acutely felt in eighteenth-century England, Johnson's few references and allusions to the Italian Accademia are worth reviewing. No direct mention of the Cruscanti's work is made in Johnson's *Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*: in the final paragraph only, the author refers to his proposed undertaking as “a contest with united academies [i.e., the French and Italian ones] and long successions of learned compilers” (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 58). Eight years later, the Italian Academy is referred to three times in the dictionary Preface: firstly, while commenting on his presentation of technical words and on the difficulty to find them in literary works, Johnson writes that “To furnish the academicians *della Crusca* with words of this kind, a series of comedies called *la Fiera*, or *the Fair*, was professedly written by *Buonaroti*” (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 103), i.e., Michelangelo Buonarroti il Giovane; secondly, after reluctantly recognizing the impossibility to fix the language, and after reminding his readers

that the French and Italian academies had been instituted “with this hope”, Johnson goes on to say that “no *Italian* will maintain, that the diction of any modern writer is not perceptibly different from that of *Boccace, Machiavel, or Caro*” (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 105); and lastly, in his final paragraph he dismisses future criticism of his work by saying that his *Dictionary* had not been compiled “under the shelter of academick bowers” – a shelter, anyway, that is no security against mistakes since “the aggregated knowledge, and co-operating diligence of the *Italian* academicians, did not secure them from the censure of *Beni*” (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 112).³

If one reads these references and those to the Académie Française scattered in the *Plan* and Preface in the light of the eighteenth-century controversies over the establishment of an English academy, one cannot help noticing two conflicting attitudes: on the one hand, the attempts on the part of academies to correct, improve and ascertain their own national tongues are seen as useless, if not misleading; on the other hand,

Johnson invited comparison between his own *Dictionary* and the work of the continental academies. [...] Brief references to the academies in the *Plan* and Preface suggest a desire that his work and theirs be seen as equivalent. Johnson’s most explicit statement, however, is found in the preface to the octavo abridged edition, published in 1756: “I lately published a dictionary, like those compiled by the academies of Italy and France, for the use of such as aspire to exactness of criticism or elegance of style.” When his *Dictionary* was ceremoniously presented to the French and Italian academies, and they reciprocated with gifts of their own dictionaries to Johnson, the identification of his achievement with that of the academies was completed. (Reddick 1990: 15-16)⁴

³ Johnson must have gathered these pieces of information on the Cruscant’s aims, methods and shortcomings from his Italian friend and admirer Giuseppe Baretti, who, “while he had eulogised the original aims and achievements of the *Accademia*, had evidently warned Johnson against the pedantry of subsequent editions (warnings discernible in Baretti’s own criticism of the *Crusca* on the pages of his journal, *La frusta letteraria*)” (Woodhouse 1985a: 5). See also Woodhouse 1985b: 179 and DeMaria, this volume.

⁴ The identification is also made explicit by James Boswell when he writes in the

3. *The Accademia della Crusca and Johnson's Dictionary*

When turning to Italy in order to see if and how Johnson's masterpiece was able to exert some kind of influence on the evolution of Italian lexicographic tradition, it must first be said that references to Samuel Johnson in the Academy's archival sources were uncovered by the Crusca Secretary Severina Parodi in the course of her investigations while writing the official history of the Academy (Parodi 1983). Two years later, J.R. Woodhouse (1985a) published a short article on these references, basically consisting of two documents: the Academy Diary entry which recorded Johnson's gift of a presentation copy of his *Dictionary* to the Accademia della Crusca, and a draft of their thank-you letter to Johnson.

The latter document, penned by the then Vice-Secretary to the Accademia, Rosso Antonio Martini, is worth quoting (in Woodhouse's translation) when Martini writes that

Already habituated by long experience to consider, as the principal object of its occupation, the study of the Tuscan Language through the repeated editions of its *Vocabolario*, the Academy had to accept with necessarily great pleasure a work which conformed so well with the same, a work which has been brought to perfection with such diligence and labour by a learned and illustrious man of letters. Further, in observing the two prefatory tractates on the Origin and the Grammar of English idiom, the Academy has felt a strong impulse to bring to fulfilment, following such a noble model, the work of the *Tuscan Etymologist* and of the *Dictionary of the Arts/Crafts*, already for so long the subject of its meditation.⁵

Life of Johnson: "The *Dictionary*, with a *Grammar and History of the English Language*, being now at length published, in two volumes folio, the world contemplated with wonder so stupendous a work atchieved by one man, while other countries had thought such undertakings fit only for whole academies" (Boswell [1791] 1980: 209). Boswell's *Life* also records the well-known anecdote about the large disproportion between the abilities of Frenchmen and Englishmen, and Garrick's complimentary epigram *On Johnson's Dictionary* (Boswell [1791] 1980: 134-135, 214-215). For a few comments on these texts, see DeMaria and Kolb (1998: 22-24, 38-38), and also the passage where they write that "On the titlepage of the *Dictionary*, Johnson is Samuel Johnson, A.M. and, in a sense, he acknowledged that writing that book made him a member of the academy, *malgre lui*" (DeMaria and Kolb 1998: 41).

⁵ This is Woodhouse's (1985a: 4) translation. The original Italian text, quoted by

Two ideas need stressing: firstly, in Martini's opinion, Johnson's *Dictionary* conformed to the model laid down by the *Vocabolario*, thus implicitly affirming the Italian work's primacy and value; and secondly, the English dictionary or, better, its paratextual matters can become a suitable model for the Cruscant's new projects.

As a matter of fact, after the fourth 1729-1738 edition of the *Vocabolario*, and especially from the 1740s onwards, some attempts at supplementing the strictly literary set-up of the *Vocabolario* had been made;⁶ unfortunately, however, nothing came of these projects, which – it should be noted – might have represented a true renewal of the Academy's lexicographical tradition, as they were meant to make up for the two most relevant defects of the *Vocabolario*, that is to say, the absence of etymological information in the entries and the exclusion of technical terminology in the wordlist.

In 1755, therefore, the Academy's Vice-Secretary was probably aware that the failure to carry out these projects meant that the Accademia della Crusca was by now excluded from what had been happening in European lexicography – i.e., the methodological renewal that had as its outstanding results, apart from Johnson's *Dictionary*, Ephraim Chamber's *Cyclopaedia* (1728) and the French *Encyclopédie* (1751-1780). That is why Professor Woodhouse's view can be shared when he writes that Martini stressed Johnson's adherence to the model of the Italian *Vocabolario* as an attempt to reassert its usefulness and quality at a time when the Cruscant's authority was being questioned and the Academy itself risked dissolution for its unprofitability.⁷

Parodi (1983: 110-111), runs as follows: "Avvezza già di lunga mano a riguardare come oggetto principale delle sue occupazioni lo studio della Lingua Toscana, per mezzo delle replicate impressioni del suo Vocabolario, ha dovuto necessariamente ricevere con gran piacere un'Opera così conforme al medesimo e con sì gran diligenza e fatica condotta alla perfezione da un dotto e illustre letterato. Anzi, nell'osservare i due premiali Trattati dell'Origine e della Grammatica dell'Idioma Inglese, ha sentito accrescersi un forte impulso di ridurre quando che sia a compimento, sopra un sì nobile modello, l'Opere dell'Etimologico toscano e del Vocabolario delle arti, già da gran tempo da lei meditate".

⁶ See Parodi 1983: 106-108 and Sessa 1991.

⁷ Woodhouse 1985a: 4. The author also comments on a letter by Martini to Giovanni Bottari – again discovered by Severina Parodi (1983: 118) – where Martini repeats that Johnson's work was "in buona parte formata sopra 'l gusto del nostro *Vocabo-*

And dissolved it was in 1783 by order of the Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo of Tuscany. When the Crusca was reconstituted in 1811 by Napoleon I, then King of Italy, a revision of the *Vocabolario* was declared to be its top priority. A committee of six was appointed; they divided into two subcommittees: the first one was to deal with the corrections and additions to the latest edition of the *Vocabolario*; the second one, more theoretically minded, was to draft a new list of the authors and works to be excerpted and, above all, to collect those relevant texts that might be helpful to excogitate a new methodology and to provide an updated lexicographical framework for the new edition.

The latter subcommittee, then, decided that the following documents would be worth studying: (a) the preface written by Giovanni Bottari for the latest published edition of the 1730s; (b) the manuscript plans for a new edition of the *Vocabolario* penned by Rosso Antonio Martini in 1747, and by Ildefonso Fridiani in 1784; (c) the Italian translation of the prologue to the Castillian dictionary published in 1770; and (d) the Italian translation of the Preface to Johnson's *Dictionary* (Johnson 1813).

These two translations had been made by the committee member Giovanni Lessi, and he and his colleagues were

convinced that, for the compilation of the new Dictionary, it might be expedient to know which method was adopted in their similar respective works by the Royal Academy of Madrid and by the distinguished lexicographer Samuel Johnson.⁸

To these versions, published in 1813, the subcommittee added the Italian translation of Jonathan Swift's *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* two years later (Swift 1815).

Although one cannot help praising the concerted effort of these

lario", i.e., "formed in large measure according to the taste of our own *Vocabolario*" (Woodhouse 1985a: 5).

⁸ This is the present writer's translation from the Academy Diary, quoted from Parodi 1983: 131. The Italian original text runs as follows: "persuasi che per la compilazione del nuovo Vocabolario possa giovare di conoscere il metodo tenuto nel consimil rispettivo lavoro dalla R. Accademia di Madrid, e dall'egregio Lessicografo Samuel Johnson." See also Parodi 1983: 130 ff.

Cruscantini to improve the methodology behind their *Vocabolario*, it soon became clear that the updating of the dictionary would be no easy task; as a matter of fact, the first instalment of the new, 5th edition was published only fifty years later, in 1863. Many historical and cultural facts will go a long way to explain this considerable delay; however, if the above list of documents is considered again, one can easily understand why the Cruscantini's well-meaning work reached a complete deadlock.

In the first place, the association of the old Italian preface and plans with some foreign, more theoretically up-to-date documents, may be seen as an awkward attempt to embrace the new without really losing hold of the past, something like – to use the poet's words – mixing memory and desire. In the second place, although it was undoubtedly a good idea to translate the prefaces to the Spanish and English dictionaries, it could be argued that the translation of Swift's *Proposal* is a sure sign that the Cruscantini did not really know what they were aiming for: Swift's reasoning may have been music to their ears, but one can wonder whether they realized that Swift's advocacy of an academy and his ideas on language usage did not tune in with Johnson's opinions, at least those opinions expressed in the Preface to the *Dictionary*. One can even suspect that they translated Swift's *Proposal* because of a misunderstanding: the Cruscantini must have learnt about Swift's treatise from Johnson's Preface, where he says that

Swift, in his petty treatise on the *English* language, allows that new words must sometimes be introduced, but proposed that none should be suffered to become obsolete (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 107)

and then the lexicographer goes on to criticize this statement;⁹ but in the Italian translation – generally speaking, a correct one – the first part of this sentence is rendered as “Swift nel suo bel Trattato sulla Lingua inglese...” (Johnson 1813: 39): the word “petty” must have been read and translated as if it were “pretty”, and Swift's *Pro-*

⁹ In their note to this passage, Kolb and DeMaria quote an excerpt from Johnson's “Life of Swift” where Swift's *Proposal* is described as “written without much knowledge of the general nature of language, and without any accurate enquiry into the history of other tongues” (Kolb and DeMaria (eds) 2005: 107n).

posal, briefly dismissed as unimportant by Johnson, became worth translating for the Academy's purposes.

One cannot help concluding that, if the 5th (so far, the last) edition of the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* owes something to Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, this was not the result of the Cruscanti's absorption with it, but it is rather a consequence of the fact that the Englishman's dictionary was used – this time, really used – by the Italian, early nineteenth-century anti-Crusca movement to expose the shortcomings of the *Vocabolario* and to undermine its century-old authority. The analysis of such criticism will make up the last part of the present paper.

4. *The Anti-Crusca Movement and Johnson's Dictionary*

Soon after the Accademia della Crusca was established in 1583, a dispute was stirred up – both inside and outside the Academy – about the kind of language and texts to base the *Vocabolario* on: some favoured the faithful imitation of the classic Florentine dialect as it had been used to perfection in the writings of the so-called “Three Crowns” – Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio; others pushed for a larger linguistic and literary *koiné*, a Tuscan one, or even non-Tuscan.

The dispute degenerated into heated polemics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when it became clear that the Academy's task of sieving out the language to separate the bran (in Italian, *crusca*) from the flour meant – or, at least, was perceived by the Italian literary elite to mean – both a dogmatic, blind acceptance of old writers as such, without questioning their value, and a narrow-minded refusal to take more recent and non-Florentine writers into consideration. As a consequence, while the Cruscanti vainly attempted to break the deadlock referred to above, the neo-classic and romantic literary parties joined forces, under the leadership of the classicist poet Vincenzo Monti (1754-1828), to level criticism at the academicians and their *Vocabolario*.

Monti, the second best neo-classic Italian poet after Ugo Foscolo,

was at the height of his fame after the publication of his excellent translation of the *Iliad* (2 vols, 1810-1811). His classical education had been tinged with some tenets of the Enlightenment: the superiority of reason as a guide to all knowledge and human concern, an abiding faith in progress, and the anti-obscurantist and anti-authoritarian stance. These ideas – together with his desire to mediate between classical tradition and contemporary culture, and to contribute towards the new national language – developed Monti's critical attitude towards the *Crusca*, though he had recently been appointed a non-resident member of the Academy.

Two facts moved Monti to put his criticism into practice:¹⁰ firstly, between 1806 and 1811, a new edition of the *Vocabolario* was published in Verona under the editorship of Father Antonio Cesari, an uncompromising defender of linguistic purism; and secondly, in 1816 the *Crusca* declined – or, perhaps, spurned – the invitation to co-operate with the Milanese Istituto Italiano di Scienze, Lettere e Arti in order to compile a totally new dictionary. As Father Cesari's additions to the *Vocabolario* were seriously meant to reintroduce risible fourteenth-century archaisms and Florentine dialect words, and as the Accademia in Florence was not achieving much, Monti put his pen to paper and started writing and publishing – between 1818 and 1824 – the volumes of his *Proposta di alcune correzioni ed aggiunte al Vocabolario della Crusca* (Proposal of some emendations and additions to the *Vocabolario della Crusca*).¹¹

In this series of volumes, Monti published not only his own emendations and additions to the *Vocabolario*, but also many essays he had been eliciting from various scholars in order to fight against the Della Cruscan tradition and the backwardness of the Florentine cultural elite. Monti, more philologically- than theoretically-minded, was wise enough to concentrate on the revision of many a dictionary entry, while the more far-reaching implications of the criticism levelled at the Florentine Academy were developed by some contributors to the *Proposta*.

¹⁰ See Dardi 1990: 18-19, 213-214.

¹¹ See Dardi 1990: passim, especially 28 ff., and Marazzini 1989: 188 ff.

Among them, the Piedmontese Giuseppe Grassi (1779-1831) was no mean figure:¹² after making himself known as a man of letters, and getting in touch with the intelligentsia of his times (among them, Ludovico di Breme, Ugo Foscolo, Vincenzo Monti, Melchiorre Cesarotti, Giovanni Battista Niccolini and Giampietro Vieusseux), he compiled the first Italian military dictionary ever published in Italy (Grassi 1817), an undertaking tinged with political and socio-linguistic implications since French had until recently been the professional language of the Italian military. Grassi's expertise as a successful lexicographer and his adherence to the neo-classical school made him a prime candidate to help Monti in his *Proposta* against the Crusca and purism: this time, then, the Preface to Johnson's *Dictionary* was brandished as a weapon by the opponents of the Crusca in this latter-day Italian battle of the books.

Strictly speaking, Johnson's *Dictionary* had already been used to criticize the Crusca and its *Vocabolario*: in fact, in both his English and Italian works, most notably the *Frusta Letteraria* (1763-1765), Giuseppe Baretti – the Italian self-exile and only foreign member of Johnson's circle – had set up against the *Vocabolario della Crusca* the language reforms of the Académie Française and Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*.¹³ Vincenzo Monti, anyway, did not need to go back to Baretti's *Frusta Letteraria* of the 1760s, because in his capacity as a non-resident member of the Academy he had been sent, only a few years before, a copy of those texts, including the translation of Johnson's Preface, that the Cruscanti had been considering in order to reform their *Vocabolario*.

It so happened that the second volume of Monti's *Proposta*, published in 1819, had as its first contribution the *Parallelo del Vocabolario della Crusca con quello della Lingua Inglese compilato da Samuele Johnson e quello dell'Accademia Spagnola ne' loro principj costitutivi*

¹² Marazzini 2002 is a brief survey of Grassi's life and works. See also Soletti n.d. [1987].

¹³ See Woodhouse 1985b: 179. It is a remarkable fact that Giuseppe Grassi, who had the opportunity to voice his admiration for Johnson and his objections to the Cruscans some fifty years after Baretti, edited in 1797 a short-lived periodical that he called *Frusta letteraria*, in imitation of Baretti's journal (see Marazzini 2002: 649).

(Comparison between the *Vocabolario della Crusca* and the dictionaries of the English language, compiled by Samuel Johnson, and of the Spanish Academy in their guiding principles), by Giuseppe Grassi (although the title-page had only the initials G.G. on it).

The opening paragraphs of Grassi's 52-page-long essay (Grassi 1819) make three points clear: firstly, whereas the founding fathers of the Accademia della Crusca and the compilers of the first edition of the *Vocabolario* still deserve to be admired, the academicians of the following generations are to be blamed because they neither corrected their predecessors' mistakes nor increased and enriched the wordlist by adding to the *Vocabolario* the new scientific and philosophical terminology; secondly, the compilers of the very recent 1806 Verona issue of the *Vocabolario* acted even worse, as they – instead of furnishing it with the lexis of the natural sciences, mathematics, military art, commerce, political economy and statistics – had gone five centuries back to unearth bones and ashes, that's to say fourteenth-century archaisms; and thirdly, if education and research are more advanced in other nations than in Italy, this greatly depends on the philosophical – i.e., scientific – foundations of their dictionaries and on the speakers' and writers' unrestrained power and faculty to use existing words and to form new ones.

After these introductory remarks, pages 4 to 25 of Grassi's *Parallelo* deal with Johnson's *Dictionary*:¹⁴ the contents of the Preface are first reviewed (Grassi 1819: 4-22), then the principles that guided the compilation of “the most philosophic dictionary of all living languages” (“il dizionario più filosofico di tutte le lingue vive”, Grassi 1819: 22) are said to be based on reason, general grammar, the particular character of the English language, and its common usage; finally, Johnson's practical decisions about the wordlist, the etymologies, the illustrative quotations, and the definitions are summarized and favourably compared to the academicians' hesitating and unclear method (Grassi 1819: 22-25).

After a few pages devoted to a brief survey of the Spanish dic-

¹⁴ Grassi consulted the 1810 London edition of Johnson's *Dictionary* (see Grassi 1819: 4n).

tionary (Grassi 1819: 25-31), the author goes back to Johnson's work, selects the entries *ENTHUSIASM*, *TO THINK*, *SENSE*, *SOUL*, *IDEA*, *LIBERTY*, *LOVE*, and *EQUATION*, translates them into Italian, and juxtaposes them with the corresponding entries of the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*. Each pair of entries is commented to stress Johnson's merits: his ability to discriminate the different senses of polysemous words and order them in a rational sequence, his choice of the best examples from the best writers, his inclusion of the technical meanings of such a word as *equation*, etc., of course, Johnson's merits can but highlight the shortcomings of the Italian dictionary (Grassi 1819: 31-42) so that, as the critic writes when comparing the entries *SOUL* and *ANIMA*, the English and Italian entries are as different from each other as a schoolmaster's works differ from his pupil's (Grassi 1819: 37)

The same kind of criticism is levelled against the Italian *Vocabolario* when more entries are compared with those in the Spanish dictionary (Grassi 1819: 42-50). Grassi concludes his essay by reaffirming the necessity to reform the Italian dictionary along the lines of what Vincenzo Monti and Count Perticari had been suggesting in the *Proposta di alcune correzioni ed aggiunte al Vocabolario della Crusca* and by following the example of the English and Spanish dictionaries, particularly Johnson's, as he was rightly called "the interpreter of philosophy" ("l'interprete della filosofia", Grassi 1819: 51)¹⁵

5. *An Inconclusive Conclusion?*

By way of conclusion, one is tempted to quote the poet's words again, and ask "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" Although Johnson was dragged into the Italian cultural and lexicographical arena as the champion of modern dictionary-making, nothing came

¹⁵ A couple of years after his *Parallelo*, Grassi published a successful essay on synonyms in the Italian language (Grassi 1821), which was reprinted more than once: particularly important is the 1827 Milanese edition where this essay is preceded by a slightly revised text of the *Parallelo* (Grassi 1827).

out of it and no new edition of the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* was ever completed.¹⁶

It can safely be said, however, that both the Cruscanti and their opponents were right to try and make the English lexicographer serve their own purpose. What both parties probably did not realize was that the cultural and linguistic differences between early modern England and Italy could go a long way to explain why Johnson was able to achieve what the Crusca did not do. Neither did they know that Johnson himself had not satisfied his own expectations and, although he could favourably compare his own dictionary with those of other individuals and the Academies, he was aware – as he wrote in a letter of October 20, 1784 – that any dictionary has its limitations when put to the test of speculative perfection:

Had not the Crusca faults? Did not the academicians of France commit many faults? It is enough that a dictionary is better than others of the same kind. A perfect performance of any kind is not to be expected, and certainly not a perfect dictionary. (Redford (ed.) 1992-1994: IV.426)¹⁷

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¹⁶ As a matter of fact, the fifth edition of the *Vocabolario* started coming out in 1863 but it was discontinued after the eleventh volume was published (the last entry being *OZONO*) in 1923.

¹⁷ An earlier version of this paper was read at the first International Conference on Historical Lexicography and Lexicology, held in Leicester in July 2002.

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