

BASIC ENGLISH AND WORDSWORTH

(A Radio Talk)

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NATURALLY no one says that keeping within the Basic words all the time would be a good way of writing poetry. The use of Basic with poetry is, in a sense, for the education of the reader of poetry. But happily not all our education goes on at school, and some knowledge of the ideas of the Basic system, of the *sort* of way in which Basic gets a complex idea broken up into its parts, may be a help even to a good reader. It lets him get more grip on what he is reading. That at least is the belief which I am putting forward today, and if it seems to you very foolish and unprobable at first, it would be kind of you, in place of judging against this talk at the start, to keep in mind that the test is in the examples, which come later.

But first, why did I say that keeping within the Basic words would not make good poetry? Chiefly because the great trick of poetry, the reason, you might say, for writing in verse at all, is that it lets the writer get his thought crushed into a small space. Then it is like gunpowder, if the trick is done well; the thought comes bursting into the reader's mind. But this is not the only way of writing poetry, or if it is, then the trick may be done with very simple words. We will take an example of Wordsworth doing that. Probably Wordsworth would be pleased with this bit

of the argument. Because it was his chief opinion that poetry had better be made out of "the simple language of men," though he made good poetry out of hard words as well.

The sea was laughing at a distance, all
The solid mountains were as bright as clouds.

That is Wordsworth, and in Basic, and good poetry; we will come back to it later on. You might get the idea that the Basic words are dead and uninteresting, because they are so simple; that all the bright and living English words are outside the list. This is clearly not true in the two lines from Wordsworth; they may be simple, but there is nothing "dead" about them.

Or you might say that it is not possible to have poetry without verbs. That is, complex verbs, not like the Basic *put* and *take* and so on. Because full verbs give force, and color, and song, and the taste of the living minute, and all that sort of thing. Well, it is true that the thought is less crushed together in Basic, and being crushed together is a help for poetry, so no doubt it is true that poetry has a need for complex verbs. What is not true is that there is anything feeble or dead about *put* and *take*. Here is Swinburne writing about the place where dead men go to, and about Persephone, the great woman, or being, under whose authority they go. She is Death, and she is the daughter of the earth, because though the summer is fertile (and the earth is fertile) still the winter comes after it (and the winter is death). I will give the rough sense in Basic first.

She is waiting for everyone. She is waiting for every man from his birth on. She has let out of her memory the earth who was her mother, and the way of living when fruit and grain are coming to their growth. And the spring, and the seeds, and the birds who go away in winter, all take wing for her, and go one after another to this place where the sound of the songs that were made in summer becomes hollow, and the flowers are laughed at because they were beautiful.

She waits for each and other,
She waits for all men born,
Forgets the earth her mother,
The life of fruits and corn,
And spring and seeds and swallow
Take wing for her and follow,
Where summer song rings hollow
And flowers are *put to scorn*.

Now one thing is quite clear. It is no use your saying that *take wing for her* and *put to scorn*, in this verse, have only got the feeble little verbs *put* and *take*, so they are feeble. They are very strong, they come out of the lines like the right arm. In fact, they are kept back for the places where most force is needed. It is they who make the smash at the end. That does not say that the Basic verbs are the best ones for poetry *all the time*. But it is sometimes said that there is necessarily a dead feeling about the verbs in Basic, and it seems a good thing to give an answer.

Still, our use of Basic here is not for writing poetry, but for getting the effect of normal poetry clear. So let us take a look at the effect of putting the lines into Basic. There are two points of interest. *Life* seems quite clear at first—"the life of fruits and corn"—but putting this into Basic has a strange effect. The word is not in the Basic list, and you have to say to yourself, What life? What *sort* of life of a fruit is in question here? And then it becomes clear that Swinburne has in mind summer, as the time of growth of the fruit, and the feelings that we have in summer as the opposite to winter and death. In fact, without this connection the lines have no sense. The swallow is not going to its death when it goes south from England at the start of the winter. It only comes into the verse as one of the signs that winter is coming, and because winter is used in the verse as a sign of death. The swallow goes with desire and hope to a warmer country. But men in the end, so the later verses say, get a desire for death and go to it quickly, as the swallow goes south away from winter. Now this is a simple enough bit of poetry, as poetry

goes. But it is quite possible for a reader not to get all this system of comparisons that are working at the back of it. And then turning the poetry into Basic is a help, because it makes you put the right questions.

The other point is maybe of more interest to writers in Basic than to poetry readers. *Scorn* is not in the list, and to give the sense of this verse in Basic you have to get round "put to scorn." But it is not possible to give the "sense" without giving the right suggestion, because the connections of thought, in this sort of poetry, are in the suggestions, and seem to be only feelings. It is no good saying that the flowers are made to seem feeble and unwise, though that is the simplest answer. Or even that they are laughed at cruelly, though that is much better, because it puts our attention onto Persephone, who is cruel. The idea, or so it seems to me, is that the flowers are laughed at *wrongly*. The more beautiful they were the more pain there would be in death. So the way Persephone is judging them is the opposite to the way they were judged in the summer, by living men and by the fertile earth. What is better up here on earth seems worse to her. So the best way to say "put to scorn," it seems to me, was to put "laughed at because they were beautiful." Well, this may be wrong, but you see the line of thought that is needed. When you make this attempt at turning the sense of a bit of poetry into Basic you will get a feeling that your answer is wrong, at some points. This feeling is a sort of pointer. It is only through our taste about the effects of language that we get our knowledge about its working. In looking for the reason why your first answer was wrong, you are sent on to the important questions about poetry. So this process makes the structure of the poetry much clearer.

Let us go back now to the lines by Wordsworth. They are about the morning when Wordsworth first was certain that he had to give himself to writing poetry. It is early in the morning, and Wordsworth is up on the top of a mountain. There is an

interesting point here, because Wordsworth made changes in the lines when he was older. So in our Basic account we have another thing to do. This is the first way of writing the lines.

magnificent
 The morning was, in memorable pomp,
 More glorious than I ever had beheld.
 The sea was laughing at a distance, all
 The solid mountains were as bright as clouds.

Now an attempt at the sense in Basic.

The morning seemed strong and beautiful. I had a respect for it, as if it was a King, a ruler, coming out before the eyes of his nation, and with a train of servants round him. It seemed that this would never go out of my memory. The morning was more brightly and clearly beautiful than I had ever seen it before. The sea was laughing at a distance; all the solid mountains were as bright as clouds.

Well, that took a great number of words. And one trouble is, in giving all those words for *pomp* we get a detailed picture, not a general idea. *Magnificent* and *glorious* seem all right; we are able to say why they are different; one is strong, the other bright. But there is another trouble here. We have made these three words seem much more different than they were in the poetry. In them all the morning (or the sun) is *making itself seem* great, like the ruler. When we see this we see why they are in that order. First the morning seems strong, maybe like a ruler who is doing great things (magnificent); then this gives the idea of the ruler coming out on view (pomp). But you are not to have any protest in your mind against rulers and the way they make themselves important. So the morning was truly bright in itself (glorious), and the sea was not self-important, it was laughing. There is a sort of pull here between two ideas, that of the authority of the good ruler and the natural good of being free. And the effect is that this beautiful morning is like a sign of some good secret at the back of all experience. As so frequently in Wordsworth, in fact, there is an idea of religion not clearly in view. It seems

to me that putting the lines into Basic makes this turn of thought much clearer, for the very reason that Basic is so short of words like *magnificent*. The effect is like taking the cover off a machine.

But the last two lines are not simple, though they are in Basic. You get a strange feeling that *solid* and *bright* are two opposites coming together.

The solid mountains were as bright as clouds.

The mountains are solid because they are heavy, hard, causes of danger; commonly they are dark; they have a cruel authority; they have a connection with the sad experience down here on earth. But now they have given up all that, and they are bright, like the clouds in the air. So all the parts of this morning view are working together; they are all a sign of the good secret, that is true about everything. And there is the same pull here as before between the ideas of authority and of being free.

But there is another point here. This surprising connection of ideas, *solid* and *bright*, was there waiting for us before, inside the complex words *magnificent*, *pomp*, and *glorious*. The ruler makes us see his force when he comes out on view; he is solid. But he is a good ruler, and will make us happy; or at any rate his purpose in coming out on view is to give us that feeling. One of the effects of his force, in fact, is that we are now looking at something beautiful, as he goes by in his ornaments, and he does that as a sign that he will make us happy. So he is bright. And all this group of ideas, which may seem very complex, is not one person's invention but the normal feeling in words like *pomp* and *magnificent*. But Wordsworth was taking this idea in the words more seriously. It was his serious belief that the beautiful view was a sign of some greater good thing. And the way he gives us that feeling is by taking the complex idea in *magnificent* to bits. That is why he is able to give us this shock with the simple Basic words *solid and bright*. Because it is not only the reader who has to be able to take an idea to bits. We see here

the writer having to do it as well. After starting with an old comparison, of the sun to a ruler, which would have no great effect, he gets a feeling, "Why is that interesting to me? What is this suggestion that it has, of some more important idea?" and so he takes it to bits. The surprise which is so important for poetry comes in his further thought about the comparison, and there he is using simpler ideas. So it is not quite by chance that the last two lines here are only using words that are in the Basic list.

But when Wordsworth was older it seemed to him that there was not enough weight in these lines for such an important poet as the older Wordsworth. And he made changes, that take it much further away from Basic. One good judge has said that he made it much better, and maybe you will say the same. These are the new lines:

magnificent
 The morning rose, in memorable pomp,
 Glorious as e'er I had beheld — in front
 The sea lay laughing at a distance; near,
 The solid mountains shone, bright as the clouds.

The chief changes are in the morning *rose* for the morning *was*; the sea *lay* laughing for the sea *was* laughing; the mountains *shone* for the mountains *were*, and the new words in *front* and *rear*. Now certainly this seems tighter verse. There are more facts in it. One writer says that this makes it clearer. For example, it is now clear that the sea was in the middle of the view, in front, and that the mountains were nearer to Wordsworth than the sea was. But here it is time to make a protest against something I was saying before. I said that it was important for poetry to get ideas crushed together. But *what* ideas? Why, after all, is it important for us to get the right picture here? Maybe some readers of the old lines had got the right feeling, though they took the sea to be nearer than the mountains. But now Wordsworth says to them "You are making a foolish error. In *fact*,

at the time when I had this important feeling, the sea was *not* nearer than the mountains." That is, in the new lines Wordsworth is painting a picture. This is as good a morning as even he, William Wordsworth, has ever seen, and he is giving a clear account of it. You see how cold this makes him; he is an expert on views of mountains. But in the old lines it was his *feelings* about the sea and the mountains and the morning that were important, and the forces working in his heart. And that is what is interesting in the lines, if anything is interesting. The idea that pushing in more facts *about the view* makes the lines more interesting is simply an error.

The other changes are all changes in verbs; he takes out the simple Basic ones and puts in complex verbs. Then it will be better because more ideas will have been pushed in — that is his feeling. The morning *rose*, he says, came up, as if the sun sometimes went down in the morning. This detail seems very little indeed. But it makes clear that the time was very early in the morning, and maybe this touch has an effect. What *came up* was the sun, and the change puts your attention onto the sun. Possibly it was only the sun, not the morning in general, who was a ruler and *magnificent*. At any rate the sea *lay* laughing; it was flat on its back. It had no authority against the sun; it was in a feeble position. Taken by itself, the change to *lay* might be a beautiful one, but it has a connection with the others. And then the mountains *shone*; they gave out light. So it is clear that they gave back light from the first rays of the sun, which was then first coming up in the morning. They were not bright in themselves. They were only giving back light from the sun. So the old shock of surprise in *solid* and *bright* has quite gone. There is no secret about the morning. It was the *sun* that was making things bright. This is quite clear now that Wordsworth has given us all the details.

In fact there are only two important persons now, the sun and Wordsworth. Every one of the changes has been working

in this direction. Wordsworth is important because the reader has to get clear the details of what Wordsworth saw. And the sun is important because it is the *cause* as it is from the point of view of science, of all the details in the picture. But the old effect was a pull between two feelings, between saying that authority is good and saying it is good to be free and open to experience. The weight now has all come down on the side of authority. When Wordsworth was young and in trouble he came back to the mountains and took them as teachers. The poor mountains are nobody now, but it is pleasing to see a smile from a mountain when Wordsworth or the sun goes past. A good mountain, at such a time, will take its hat off. It is a strange and sad thing, but it probably seemed to Wordsworth, when he made these changes, that he was only giving the lines a bit of polish. What he was doing was more like turning the guns round from firing at the Germans and pointing them against the French.

Well, you may say that this account is all false, and that the later lines are better. That may be so, but it seems to me clear that the ideas we are using are the right ones. If you gave a full answer to this account, you would have to make use of the same ideas. Because the nerve of the poetry is in this complex group of ideas which are inside words like *magnificent* and *pomp*, ideas which we take in reading simply as feelings. We do not commonly get the ideas opened up, and see the reasons for the feelings. So all this argument about the effect of the lines has come straight out of our attempt at putting the sense into Basic. Without that start we would probably not see what was important, in the structure of the thought.