

DICTION IN POETRY

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MODERN ENGLISH IS AN IMPURE and undisciplined literary language. It is style-less, a writer must make his own style in it. An important element of a style is its vocabulary. This matters in every kind of writing, but especially in poetry. Words carry their full weight in a poem and will embarrass it if they are out of place or under strain. Therefore it behoves a poet writing in English to know his words well.

In structure and grammatical vocabulary English is a West Germanic language; its closest relations are Flemish, Dutch, Frisian, Platt-Deutsch and, at a slight remove, German. The first Germanic settlers of England, in the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries A.D., spoke pure dialects of West Germanic, which had a few borrowed Latin words. Then Danes and Norwegians began settling the country too, and the West Germanic dialects began borrowing their closely-related words. Somehow the language of the Celts had almost no effect on that of their conquerors, and the Romans left nothing in the language of the country they had occupied except a few place names. After the Norman Conquest, in the eleventh century, French words came into the vocabularies of these dialects in great numbers, and for nearly two centuries French was the language of Court and Church and of much literature, but not of the common people. By the fourteenth century West Germanic had re-established itself as the language of government and literature, as well as of the people. After the Reformation it was the language of the Church as well. The predominant dialect was that of London, which was mostly Anglian, and the language was known as English.

It was by now already an impure language, full of borrowed words, from French, Scandinavian, Latin direct and Latin through French. It was ready to welcome more. Important English scholars of the Renaissance made a point of writing in English instead of Latin, but they brought Latin and Greek words into it to give it substance, as they thought, and dignity. Shakespeare made fun of these hard words but he too made considerable and effective use of Latin words, and Milton used Latin words and constructions extensively. Our common speech and our literary language are both full of borrowings that Shakespeare and Milton brought into English.

Borrowing from Latin and Greek and, once again, from French went on in the eighteenth century, and meanwhile words had been coming in from Flemish and Dutch, from the New World, from Africa and the Middle East and, later, from India. With the advancement of the natural sciences and technologies in the nineteenth century, hundreds of new words were coined from Latin and Greek, and this process carried over into politics and the social sciences. English is now full of newcomers, words from these specialized vocabularies that have acquired popular currency. And there are modern regional dialects, claiming literary autonomy: there is American English, which has sub-dialects, and there are Australian and Canadian Englishes and West Indian English, and others. Besides these there are many slang vocabularies that arise from underworlds, from wars, from the media, from sports and other sources, which flourish briefly and are gone, leaving maybe a word or two more or less permanently in the language. Bureaucracy has contributed many words and turns of speech.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century some writers became dissatisfied with the impurity of English. Best known among these was William Morris. He made serious efforts to clear his vocabulary of borrowings, and went so far as to reintroduce English words that had become obsolete, and he invented modern forms for English words that had not survived the Middle Ages. Paradoxically one gets an impression of outlandishness from this purified English vocabulary at a first reading, but it grows on one, it has strength and grace, its moods seem true. It is not hard to feel a longing for such a language; Ernest Hemingway felt it. An awareness of the English in a literary vocabulary is most helpful in understanding its over-all make-up and quality. The great virtue of the study of Old English is the insight it gives into the heart and bone structure of our language.

The origin and family connections of a word may be learned from its etymological note in a good dictionary, or better, from an etymological dictionary. A poet also wants to know a word's history, what its meanings have been and how they have changed over the centuries. Many words have changed meaning somewhat in crossing an ocean. The stages and wanderings of a word's life, the ways it has been used, are all helpful things for a writer to know. Dictionaries are different from one another in the kind of information they provide; the most comprehensive and generous is the great *Oxford English Dictionary*, with its modern supplements.

To illustrate these preliminary remarks on the subject of diction I shall quote four Canadian poems. The first is "A Shadow," by Raymond Souster:

A shadow should be
a comfort, a companion
especially on cold winter nights.

Mine's neither,
 being more of a *nuisance*,

either playing at stepping on my heels,
 or making like *terror*, *fond* of showing
 blackness so *close* behind
 darker than anything I've seen
 even deepest in myself.¹

Souster writes as down-to-earth and consistent an English as one is likely to find in any writer. The words I have italicized are borrowings, mostly from French but they have been in English use for so long that they hardly colour the plain Englishness of the poem. Their meanings have changed little, though the early meaning of “comfort” is “a strengthening” and of “companion” is “sharer of bread,” helpful things to know. The poem’s English words have had their current sense for over a thousand years, as far back as can be known. The phrase “making like terror” sounds very modern, but there are early intransitive uses of “make.” “Fond” is a borrowing, but from another Germanic language, Swedish or Icelandic. Its meaning has changed, though its earliest sense, “foolish,” is still in it, and gives it its flavour. “Nuisance” was a stronger word to begin with, and meant something harmful. It was derived from a verb, and still feels like one. The English words have acquired shades of meaning and dropped them again on the way through the centuries; some fill many columns in the Oxford Dictionary; the verb “play” fills ten and the verb “step” seven.

Souster might scorn the bringing to bear of this kind of learning on his poem. I would not suggest that he had composed in a learned way. But I do know that he is a careful and well-informed poet, and it is clear that he knows his vocabulary. Few poets are as consistent; every word he writes has the ring of the same voice, and the same passion and conviction of truth.

Here is a sonnet, now, from Robert Finch’s recent collection, *Has and Is*. It shows an almost opposite kind of skill and awareness of diction, so that whereas Raymond Souster’s art is to conceal art, Robert Finch’s is to rejoice in it.

This *rose* you give me cannot ever *fade*
 Until I *fade* with it and it with me,
 And should you give me others they would be
 Not a *succession* but an *accolade*.

The first *rose* is the last and all between,
 Its *fragrance* too is theirs, its *imbrications*
 In them *repeat* unending *celebrations*
 Of what is seen and what will yet be seen,
Incessantly discernible as *roses*,
 Though clothed in *costumes infinitely varied*,
 The good *intent* that *launches* them is *carried*
 By the most *tenuous vehicle* it chooses,
 Even the *semblance* of a *voice* one knows
 Can make the *silence* blossom like a rose.²

It is not hard to see the difference in vocabulary between this poem and Raymond Souster's. It has twenty-one different borrowed words, five of which are Latin, and of the French borrowings many are late. Of the English words, a high proportion are merely grammatical: demonstratives, prepositions, conjunctions and auxiliary verbs. Much of the meaning is carried by the borrowings. This ratio of borrowed to English words is now more normal, for conversation as well as writing, than Souster's, though Souster's vocabulary draws less attention to itself. Finch's Latin words give an impression of wit and pleasure, one can share the poem's relish in the exotic sounds of "imbrications," and their rhythms and rhymes are sprightly. At the same time they convey a sentiment, gracefully, that we respond to.

MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S POEM, "Henri Rousseau and Friends" is as form-conscious as Robert Finch's, but its rhythms and its irregular verse pattern are very different. It shows the same candid delight in Latin, however, and a brightness of style in using it, along with a counterpoise of ferocity and gentleness of sentiment that is characteristic of Ondaatje's writing. Here is the third stanza, which speaks of the creatures in the douanier Rousseau's painting:

They are the *ideals of dreams*.
 Among the *exactness*,
 the *symmetrical petals*,
 the *efficiently flying angels*,
 there is *complete liberation*.
 The *parrot is interchangeable*;
 tomorrow in its *place*
 a *waltzing man* and a *tiger*,
 brash *legs* of a bird.³

Again, the borrowed words are italicized. "Dreams" and "legs" are from Old Norse and "waltzing" is from modern German, so they are borrowed from within the Germanic family. There was an English word "dream," but it meant "joy" and was displaced by that French word. "Brash," in this sense, seems to have been a sixteenth-century coinage; here it must mean "brittle" and in this context it is an unusual and effective word.

Ondaatje's stanza is quite as Latinate as Finch's sonnet, but its tone is different; the Latin words are used familiarly, they are not flourished. "Brash," whose origins are probably English, is the most attention-getting word in the stanza.

The second section of Margaret Atwood's poem "He Reappears" exemplifies another sort of diction altogether, cunningly employed, as one would expect.

You take my hand and
 I'm suddenly in a bad movie,
 it goes on and on and
 why am I fascinated

We waltz in slow motion
 through an air stale with aphorisms
 we meet behind endless potted palms
 you climb through the wrong windows

Other people are leaving
 but I always stay till the end
 I paid my money, I
 want to see what happens.

In chance bathtubs I have to
 peel you off me
 in the form of smoke and melted
 celluloid

Have to face it I'm
 finally an addict,
 the smell of popcorn and worn plush
 lingers for weeks.⁴

This poem is as English in its vocabulary as Souster's; its setting might also be his though he would not be likely to use it in so sustained and interlocked a way, almost as an allegory, nor in so sharp a voice. The key words, "bad movie," stand out, as they should. They are a pairing of English — *bad* — and a modern coinage from an old Anglo-French word — *movie* — and their combined sense is so narrowly modern as to be already slightly archaic. Many of the poem's words draw their meanings from a common but period-limited activity, that of watching a moving picture in a post-war cinema (as it is now more frequently called). The particular sense of "bad movie" may have been current in the 1930's but hardly before, and the single word "movie" already feels dated. The words "slow motion," "popcorn," and "plush" belong to the movie language; so does the third stanza, though its words, taken separately, have no special connotations. "Air stale with aphorisms," "potted palms," the adjective "worn" in "worn plush," and the image of climbing through wrong windows belong to the allegory but not to the special language, they are the poet's own words.

The poem's diction, as I have said, is mainly English, and the borrowings are old and well-established; only "fascinated," "aphorisms," "celluloid," and "addict" seem at all exotic, and "fascinated" and "addict" are often found in slangy company. Virtually every word in the poem, however, must be understood in something like a cult sense. The poet is aware of all this, and works with dazzling skill.

It is a very modern poem. One day, however, in the not too distant future, it will provide delightful drudgery for a student of Canadian Literature, footnoting the overtones of "bad movie."

All four poems have been consistent in vocabulary. Their words keep to the mood of the poem they are in and do not vary from its voice. Margaret Atwood's poem makes use of a specialized vocabulary, and does so with a sure touch; no word takes us out of the bad movie, though "aphorisms" was a risk. Consistency is not easy; Modern English is full of distracting sub-languages: those of the sciences, pseudo-sciences and technologies, of bureaucracy, of sports, of dialects, of jazz, business and so on. And especially since the eighteenth century, with the growth of huge cities, writers have been tempted by the seductive ephemera of slang. Few of the scientific, technical or bureaucratic vocabularies have depth, and a poet who knows the sound of his or her voice is unlikely to use them. Their meanings tend to be expressed in phrases rather than words. But the slang vocabularies, though their elements too tend to be phrases rather than words, have atmosphere, mood and often feeling. They are ephemera, however, as I have said, and may date the poem they are in, or cause it to be forgotten.

A poem's vocabulary need not sound natural. "Naturalness," using the word in a current, imprecise but intelligible sense, is one of poetry's less valuable attributes. A poem should read out confidently, however, without confusion, and in a consistently recognizable voice. It is proper to think of the voice as the poem's rather than as the poet's. Some poets do have a vocabulary of their own, but it is a limitation, even in a strong poet; it limits the kind of things that can be said. Limitation, however, is preferable to inconsistency. Inconsistency intrudes a false note. A poem should be true in its stuff, in the way that anything well made is.

Poetry is as various as life, and its conventions will be tested and altered constantly. But it must always work with words. They are wilful and treacherous, they will say what they are going to say regardless of the poet's intentions. The poet can simply know everything knowable about them and remember that they are living creatures. It is in their wilfulness that the poem will live or die.

NOTES

¹ Raymond Souster, "A Shadow," *Collected Poems*, Vol. III (Ottawa: Oberon, 1982), p. 198; rpt. by permission of Oberon Press.

² Robert Finch, "This Rose You Gave Me," *Has and Is* (Erin: Porcupine's Quill, 1981), p. 75; rpt. by permission of the author.

³ Michael Ondaatje, "Henri Rousseau and Friends," *There's a Trick With a Knife I'm Learning To Do* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979), p. 10; rpt. by permission of the author.

⁴ Margaret Atwood, "He Reappears," *Power Politics* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 3; rpt. by permission of House of Anansi Press.