

## SPEAKING TO A WRITER

### AN INTERVIEW WITH RIDLEY BEETON



Ridley Beeton is currently Professor Extraordinarius at the University of South Africa, where he retired last year as Head of the Département of English, a position he held for many years. Professor Beeton has become known for his vital concern with language, literature, education and culture in this country. Testimony of this concern is multifold. Professor Beeton has been a council member of the Human Sciences Research Council since 1976, and was elected on three occasions as President of the English Academy of South Africa. He has earned wide respect as a poet, teacher, literary critic, essayist and lexicographer. Two anthologies

of his poetry were recently published: *The Landscape of Requirement* (1981) and *Tattoos* (1983). He is also an authority on South African literature: apart from numerous articles in this field, Professor Beeton is the author of two books on the life and works of Olive Schreiner; he is the editor of *A Pilot Bibliography of South African English Literature* (1976); and he is one of the compilers of the *Companion to South African English Literature*, which is soon to be published by Ad. Donker. Professor Beeton was a founding editor of this journal, *English Usage in Southern Africa*, together with Miss Helen Dorner of the Department of English at Unisa. The journal began as the ancillary of their research into South African English, a project

that culminated in the publication of their *Dictionary of English Usage in Southern Africa* (1975).

In the following interview with Keith Richmond, Professor Beeton reflects his enduring concern for language, literature and education in this country, and he shares his thoughts on the possible role of creative writing today. (He is currently running a workshop on creative writing, for the Institute of Continuing Education at Unisa.)

K.R. Professor, you have long been prominent in English education in South Africa. Ours is a country of great language diversity, and I wondered whether you consider this to be a problem in maintaining standards here.

R.B. I think there is a problem in maintaining certain standards of clarity and communication, but I also think English in different countries is a tremendous challenge. It is a challenge all over the world. As you know, according to Professor Higgins, in America they haven't used it for years. And yet they have, with great effect; and I think in this country, too, we have used English with great effect. We don't have to be ashamed of certain local descriptives. We are after all a different country from southern England, and we have to recognize that. But there are dangers when meaning becomes blurred, especially, I should think, at what one would call a reasonably civilized level.

K.R. Does this mean that one ought not to apply too dogmatically any abstract criteria in determining acceptability or admissibility?

R.B. I think this is so. I think one must not be too dogmatic, but I believe there is a point where one must take a decision about certain words and usages, and say whether they are acceptable or not. Clearly this is going to stir up controversy - this is the purpose. You know, when Helen Dorner and I issued the first numbers of *English Usage in Southern Africa*, and finally our *Dictionary of English Usage in Southern Africa*, people found some of the rulings very arbitrary indeed - and I must say that some of the rulings I still have grave doubts about and continually debate. But at least it is a debate about language and about the acceptability of language; and not only acceptability but also the enrichment of language. There is a line between what enriches and what impoverishes. I don't know where the line is, but it depends on vigilant people to try and draw it.

K.R. Given the various forms and subcultural manifestations of English, particularly in this country, the role of dictionaries is surely becoming more and more important. Having compiled a dictionary yourself, what is your comment on this? Do you see the dictionary as being a growing necessity today?

R.B. Oh yes. I think every child and every family should have a dictionary. I am not afraid of subcultures, incidentally - they will develop; that's an aspect of life. For example, some years ago I collected for *English Usage in Southern Africa* a list of 'schoolboyisms' - expressions used by schoolboys to impress their peers or to be at one with their peers. What I do feel is that all people - schoolboys or members of other subcultures - should be given the chance to outgrow the limitations of their restricted vocabulary; and the dictionary is a way. Dictionaries often differ, of course, but they are of help in matters of meaning, use and pronunciation.

K.R. It is also true, I think, that by giving definition to concepts, words grant ready access to them. In this light, a dictionary can expand one's capacity to see and understand.

R.B. It should never be seen as restrictive; a good dictionary certainly is expansive. It must both open doors and present challenges. You know, most writers fear that they will not get the idea they have in their heads into writing. I believe that in searching for words you are in fact accreting new meanings which you may not have defined in your head but which you will possibly be able to explore on paper. That's why I think dictionaries of synonyms are so good. The thesaurus arrangement, too, is tremendously helpful.

Having made a dictionary, I am aware only too well of its faults, and my own dream is that one day it will be revised. After its publication, especially at the beginning, we got several responses - many of them angry about things that the editors had regarded as acceptable colloquially, and which I believe we were wrong about at the time. For example, although we fought against a word like 'kaffir' because it hurt people, we fought at least colloquially for the word 'coolie'. At the time I gave a statement to the press, saying that if I ever revised the dictionary I would revise that finding, because I saw just how much hurt was caused by 'coolie' being looked on as acceptable colloquially, even when people used it without the intention of being hurtful. But having explored it, its fullest meaning came out. I

don't for a moment compare myself with Samuel Johnson, but I am sure Dr Johnson, when he did his dictionary, opened up a wide terrain for people to explore themselves - to explore their concepts and to explore words which had the power either of giving new life or of confining or insulting people.

K.R. The *Dictionary of English Usage in Southern Africa* began in 1970 as the *Index of English Usage in Southern Africa*. Could you tell me something briefly about the origins of this project and the reasons for it?

R.B. What I can tell you is that Helen Dorner and I did not sit down in cold blood and think we were going to make a dictionary. What happened, as would happen in any department of English, was that we received numerous enquiries about English usage, and we seemed to spend a lot of time trying to find the answers, giving them to enquirers, and then losing the result. So we decided to start this card index, and we found that it was growing. It was really meant originally to be mainly about undesirable phrasing, usages, certain examples of what we then regarded as 'barbarisms'. But we found that there were more and more vocabulary items coming into it, and we decided then to go ahead and - still calling it an index - include this growing percentage of vocabulary items. We began the index on nothing at all except the conviction that something should be done rather than be talked about any further. It was never our intention then to pronounce on vocabulary items, but since we had called it a prescriptive (as opposed to descriptive) index we decided to include these and decide which words and expressions we considered to be enriching to the language. We realized that we were playing the Fowler or the Partridge role and not the big dictionary-making role. (We didn't have the resources, nor did we *want* to play the latter role.) We knew that 'prescriptive' would lead to a great deal of unpopularity, especially in a mixed society such as ours. People found their favourite word condemned and another one approved for a reason which didn't seem to them particularly clear, but we felt that once we had embarked on this we had to keep to it. At the same time we realized - because of the large number of vocabulary items we included - that we couldn't be quite a Fowler or a Partridge and adopt that individual tone that they have, which is delightful, often helpful and often challenging. But we hoped that our findings would challenge, and not only challenge indignation but challenge people to further exploration. If that's been done I feel that at least part of my role there has been completed.

As you know, after the Dictionary was published, and *English Usage in Southern Africa* began to appear as a conventional journal, it concentrated more and more on subjects such as regional English, or English in certain professions. I think this has made the journal the interesting and living thing it is.

K.R. I suppose it is one of the conditions of maintaining vitality in the English language that it should be able to accommodate expressions from languages with which it comes into contact - expressions which enrich it, as you say.

R.B. Concerning vocabulary in particular, I don't think English in this country could get along without its numerous borrowings from its Afrikaans neighbour and from African languages. You only have to look at the *Oxford English Dictionary* to find that one of your first words is 'Aardvark'. That's English, and it came via South African English. I think 'Aasvoël' may be another. I know if you start on the Afrikaans 'earth' words you might find quite a few in English dictionaries now. There are these words that are going to become universal English because they say something singular and specific, and are colourful in their context. At the same time, we should not speak a mish-mash of several languages which is only partly intelligible as English. In America, you know, there is this great debate about Black English now. I think the problem about Black English is not that it lacks colour but that it lacks certain intelligibilities to other people, and in my opinion does the cause of the Black people no good. However, this is usually at a colloquial level. So my advice to English speakers in this country is: keep your English universal, but keep it fresh. It is almost conflict, in a way: try to keep yourself pure, but keep yourself colourful. But this is the challenge, and it's a challenge to English wherever it finds itself - even in English, from region to region, and especially in matters of pronunciation.

K.R. Given the diversity of language groups in this country, all of whom speak English and add to its colour, we experience in a microcosmic way the influences that change English across the globe. It is becoming more and more an international language - and to that extent, perhaps, is influencing other languages itself, not just being influenced.

R.B. Yes. You know, we always expect this to be a one-way process, but English no doubt does have this impact in South Africa and all over the world. The fact is that most

people want to speak English now. For one reason or another it has indeed become the universal language, the means of international communication. People often think it is because its grammar may be easier, but the real state of English is that in fact its grammar is very poor. It is a language which has lost inflection, it is a language that has accumulated a number of illogical prepositions, but it is a language people feel they can have access to without being completely correct all the time. They can make their meaning clear. I have participated in several language courses in America - they were concerned with writing, actually - and the emphasis in teaching children how to write was simply on trying to get the meaning across. Grammatical mistakes could be corrected later, such as mistakes in concord, or even spelling mistakes.

English is a language of accretion. It is also a great thief, of course; but I think it's a noble thief. It takes what it can to enrich its users. The danger is in taking something as an easy route to what is regarded as 'communication'.

- K.R. Do you think that the emphasis today on communication of factual information is impoverishing, particularly in the context of education? You referred just now to teaching children to write. I imagine that the educative process is best fostered by regarding language as an expressive medium - something creative and individual.
- R.B. Oh yes. (Incidentally, I use the term 'expressive English' in a rather different sense. I do not use 'expressive' to mean the expression of emotion or thoughts of a subjective nature, but expressive in the sense of 'expository English'). I see English as something to be used not only all over South Africa and all over the world, but across all disciplines. But the scientific disciplines tend to pick up jargon (jargon is not necessarily bad but often these words obscure and are a short cut), and you will find that most scientific institutions have editors to help them write English of wider currency. My own approach has always been very clear: the simpler, the better; and I don't know that science has any need in most of its work to use a highly esoteric language. English must be used everywhere, and I don't think science has claims to a specific and different sort of English.
- K.R. Granted the capacity of language to open new vistas of meaning, and having been a teacher yourself for so many years in this country, at Unisa, do you have any observations on the role of a university department of English,

specifically in a country such as ours that spans both first and third world conditions? Can such a department meet the needs of both contexts?

R.B. Ideally, a standard implies a good standard, and a degree standard in English in South Africa should be the best degree in English that could be produced anywhere in the world. This ideal should remain; I can't see that it can go in any way. I would like to think that the course in English that we offer here at Unisa is equal or almost equal to any course offered anywhere else in English in the world. Although we are teaching a course specifically in English literature, I always insist that we are teaching language too, because it is through the testing and subtle use of the English language. So we are teaching English literature *and* language. One cannot deny that certain students come up to our university who are not equipped to meet the required standards, who either fail year after year, or who scrape through on a very unsatisfactory pass result. Since thinking about it more and more, my emphasis has tended to move away from literature as such for students, to the benefits of writing skills for students, and to giving them practice in writing. We have instituted certain - the word is unpopular but it must be used - 'remedial' elements in our Practical English courses at Unisa, to try and help these people. I don't think by any means this is the complete answer. Grammar undoubtedly has its place, but I tend to feel that grammar as such is not the opening to writing as such. I should like to see the emphasis moving across more and more to writing, and what makes writing effective. We spoke just now about writing on a host of subjects.. What I am now trying to explore are simple ways of getting people to talk about writing as such, as a process, and what we can do to write more effectively. Other university courses could also be made more practical by pointing out the benefits of writing proficiency and clarity. It doesn't have to be someone's opinion about a work like *Hamlet*, specifically; it can be someone's opinion about any subject - the state of computerization, shall we say.

K.R. Looking ahead - do you have any particular projects that you would care to discuss now?

R.B. Well, it is my hope that the *Dictionary* will go on, with other people and fresher people, who will do different and possibly better things, and improve on that beginning. As for my own work now, having thought about it for several years and having received the efforts of a great many

people - their efforts at writing, both creative and expressive (or if you don't like the word 'expressive' we could use 'communicative') - I want to help these people more if I can, and my great aim is to launch writing classes. At the moment I've got my lines rather crossed, because I want to encourage simply basic good writing, and then I'd like to work with prospective creative writers, such as poets. I'm not sure that I won't be able to deal with both: why not ask a person who is inarticulate in prose to try and write his thoughts in poetry? The results could be quite interesting. But you can see the way the lines are crossing, and I am now trying to get them uncrossed. I have been trying to write a working paper for a long time about writing at the creative and the expressive levels; but the emphasis is always on *writing*. I don't want to produce a genius, nor do I think I can, nor do I expect students to produce masterpieces. They need not even be students. They could just be people who come for occasional courses, who can talk about their writing, and learn from an exchange. I have always found this to be quite amicable. They are so encouraged that they go on, they want to write more and more. I recall a case during the Bay Area Writing Project at Berkeley, in California, of a Black teacher of English who felt she would never be able to write down any of her ideas. But she was encouraged by an inspired group of teachers, and the next week she read her piece in class. I thought it was very good. I told her so, and she said, 'There are so many things I want to write about now.' She had grown as a person. Being a teacher at a primary school, she will surely give something of that experience to her pupils. So, yes - to get back to your question - I do want to work on writing projects. Knowing what it is to feel inarticulate myself, I want to help other people become more expressive.

K.R. You are well qualified to speak on creative writing, having had two volumes of your own poetry published. What is your opinion of the potential for good poetry in this country, given our comments already on the cross-pollination amongst the languages here? Does this not offer a semantic richness that poets could well exploit?

R.B. I think everyone wants to write poetry. I have files and files of letters from people asking me to read their efforts. This is why I want to put the emphasis on writing; and because I am slightly more experienced in the field of poetry I want to start here. I think one can get poetry from many quarters. Poetry has the capacity for accepting the unusual. We spoke about the corruption of language - well, poetry, it seems to me, can accept terms which might



confound the purist and yet will enrich the language because of their context. Here there is a tremendous possibility of cross-pollination, as long as one does not find oneself in an exclusive linguistic or creative clique. There is a danger that only one group of poets - 'protest' poets, for example - will be thought to write the only 'real' poetry, and that the 'suburban' poets (as they were once called) have nothing to say. I think these 'groups', if such they really are, have a lot to say to each other, and I think this is where we have to work. Further, if we are going to accept certain new words and expressions into the language it will probably be through poetry. I mean, if you look at Shakespeare - there are certain terms that were not in the vocabulary then, but he brought them into the language either by borrowing or by inventing them. And how much richer the language for that work! Some poetry is absolutely unintelligible, but often it does make certain colloquial and regional and even subcultural words clearer, enabling them to be used with greater force in future.

K.R. Professor, I know that your first poetry workshop recently got under way. Could you share some of your impressions of how the course will develop, and how it is being conducted?

R.B. Well, the procedure essentially is that I don't give any sort of formal tuition in poetry or language - for example, in metrics, or in rhyming, or in grammar, or in spelling (although I recommend a good dictionary). The first set of poems submitted by the participants I vetted myself; but after that they are free to come and hand out their own poems that they want to discuss (which I won't have seen) and will discuss them unseen in the workshop. Later on they will be presenting their own writing without any critical eye going over it initially. They will be presenting either the poems they like very much, to see if they find an appeal, or the poetry that they have had problems about to see what the workshop participants have to say about the work in question.

We started off by looking at a number of modern poets; the emphasis being on published modern poetry because I want to keep to writing that is essentially of this century. After reading and discussing several of the poems we went through the manuscript versions of 'Anthem for a Doomed Youth' by Wilfred Owen, which was very interesting. Then I read one of my poems which had been published, and another which I submitted under a pseudonym and had been rejected. I read the editorial opinion and asked for the participants' own opinions and criticisms of the poems. This, too, was

interesting: although I had asked for criticism, the participants confirmed my own impression of what I'd tried to do in the poems. Then we dealt with their own work, which elicited quite a lot of discussion.

I say to quieter participants who offer comment afterwards that they must at some stage learn to offer their observations in the workshop itself. It helps writers to respond. The pattern is that I read the poem, and perhaps will open the discussion. The members of the group then exchange views, and the poet responds to their observations.

K.R. It is essentially collaborative ...

R.B. It must be. If it is to be me alone, it is bound to fail. In the end, the first session lasted over three hours, but the ideal, with a break, is two and a quarter hours. The discussion is beginning; it's coming slowly, but it is there all right, and its quantity, quality and tempo will, I am sure, increase. One of the difficulties is that there are a lot of quiet people in the class who have something really valuable to say, and my job will be to try and draw them out and get them to work at making comment on their poetry and on other people's as well.

K.R. So there's no need for anyone to feel intimidated by rigid formal requirements?

R.B. I hope there's no intimidation at all. In fact, I said, 'Just say something, even if it sounds stupid to begin with.' What I want to get across to them specifically is that there must be a diversity in approach. Some people have said one should only write simple poems, straightforward poems. Well, this is too rigid. Poems are never really straightforward in the final analysis.

K.R. I believe in the future there is going to be a workshop on prose writing as well.

R.B. Yes - I feel that we must prepare this rather more carefully, because of the diversity in prose forms and subjects. We hope to get off the ground soon. One of the results of these developments is that I've been asked to talk about our workshop experience at a writing camp for high school pupils, organized by the South African Council for English Education (SACEE). It will be encouraging if these writing camps were to continue and to flourish.

- K.R. Do you see, or would you like to see, this kind of creative writing course being offered as part of the curriculum in more formal educational contexts?
- R.B. I think so. And I think it can be done either by live class or by correspondence, in terms of my experience. I'd really like to see it in faculties of education and departments of languages. One can allow not only for the practical constituent (which I think is very important, in discussing people's own work) but also for a study of the work and manuscripts of established writers as well.
- K.R. Is this something that has caught on in other countries?
- R.B. Certainly in America. You'll find that your writing workshop is operative in the usual university curriculum as part of your credits in English, for example; and it is offered at external divisions as well for other students, which may or may not be accredited. I would like to see it offered as an alternative to one of our optional courses. For example, if students don't want to study Victorian poetry, why not do a course in the writing of poetry? As I said before, I'm now preparing a document about my experiences with writing workshops and with aspiring writers over the years - I also want to incorporate my present workshop experience, which is at this stage tentative - and then present it to the university and to the heads of the departments I think might be interested.
- K.R. It seems to me that your commitment to and concern for education, language and literature has come to a resolution in this current concern of yours with the educative and liberating effect of creative writing. It seems fitting that this commitment and concern should be extending itself constructively into the future.
- R.B. I agree with what you have said, and it's a very generous summary of where I find myself now (somewhat confusedly). Creative writing itself must not be regarded as a precious exercise for the few who write poetry or short stories. All writing is creative, and it is principally in that sense that I am interested in creative writing.

## THE POTTER

He peers about the monstrous oven  
Feeding burning branches into cunning  
Mouths. He has sealed off the treasures  
Of his skill and vision, giving them

To the power of the flame. Then,  
After days of fury, he unbricks  
The silent structure and sees  
The product of his moving wheel

That fire has frozen. And then  
Come patterns, told in water,  
Made in stone: birds and flowers  
Beasts and reptiles, held in bondage

In the fortress of his art. They stand  
On shining tables and stone-shod floors  
And tell of fire and peace,  
Hands and eyes, minds and hearts.

RIDLEY BEETON