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Sheldon Cooper, the comically literal-minded character in the TV series *The Big Bang Theory*, would probably respond to the show’s witty theme song by pointing out some inaccuracies in the lyrics. For example, the song refers to the beginning of life on Earth as the time when “the autotrophs began to drool”. This suggests that an autotroph is a primitive animal when, in fact, plants are the main autotrophs.

*Autotroph* is derived from the Greek *auto* (self) and *trophe* (nutrition). Plants nurture themselves in the sense that they use the energy of the sun to convert carbon dioxide and water into the organic carbon compounds needed for growth and activity. By contrast, *heterotrophs* (animals and fungi) simply consume these pre-produced materials.

Biologists refer to *trophic levels* to analyse ecological systems and how energy flows through their food chains. For the purposes of the theme song of *The Big Bang Theory*, however, the main advantage of the term *autotroph* is that it *sounds* scientific!
Nantucket! Take out your map and look at it. See what a real corner of the world it occupies; how it stands there, away off shore, more lonely than the Eddystone lighthouse. Look at it—a mere hillock, and elbow of sand; all beach, without a background. There is more sand there than you would use in twenty years as a substitute for blotting paper. Some gamesome wights will tell you that they have to plant weeds there, they don’t grow naturally; that they import Canada thistles; that they have to send beyond seas for a spile to stop a leak in an oil cask; that pieces of wood in Nantucket are carried about like bits of the true cross in Rome; that people there plant toadstools near their houses, to get under the shade in summer time; that one blade of grass makes an oasis, three blades in a day’s walk a prairie; that they wear quicksand shoes, something like Laplander snowshoes; that they are so shut up, belted about, every way inclosed, surrounded, and made an utter island of by the ocean, that to their very chairs and tables small clams will sometimes be found adhering, as to the backs of sea turtles. But these extravaganzas only show that Nantucket is no Illinois.

What wonder, then, that these Nantucketers, born on a beach, should take to the sea for a livelihood! They first caught crabs and quahogs in the sand; grown bolder, they waded out with nets for mackerel; more experienced, they pushed off in boats and captured cod; and at last, launching a navy of great ships on the sea, explored this watery world; put an incessant belt of circumnavigations round it; peeped in at Behring’s Straits; and in all seasons and all oceans declared everlasting war with the mightiest animated mass that has survived the flood; most monstrous and most mountainous! That Himmalehan, salt-sea Mastodon, clothed with such portentousness of unconscious power, that his very panics are more to be dreaded than his most fearless and malicious assaults!

1. gamesome wights: humorous people
2. spile: wooden plug
3. quahogs: edible North American shellfish
4. Behring’s Straits: between Alaska and Russia; nearly impossible to sail to
5. the flood: a reference to the Bible story of Noah’s Ark
6. Himmalehan: Himalayan; i.e. like the mountains
7. Mastodon: woolly mammoth; i.e. an example of a large animal
ANTONY’S EULOGY

In this scene from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, a group of knife-wielding senators have assassinated Caesar. Their leader, Brutus, takes the body to the market place and tells the crowd that “ambitious” Caesar had to die before he re-imposed monarchy on democratic Rome. The plotters then allow Caesar’s famous ally, Mark Antony, to give a funeral speech over the corpse, but Antony has to promise not to criticise the plotters.

Come I to speak in Caesar’s funeral. 
He was my friend, faithful and just to me: 
But Brutus says he was ambitious;1
And Brutus is an honourable man.

He2 hath brought many captives home to Rome
Whose ransoms did the general coffers3 fill:
Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?
When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept:
Ambition should be made of sterner stuff:

Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honourable man. ...

I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke,
But here I am to speak what I do know.
You all did love him once, not without cause:
What cause withholds you then, to mourn for him? ...
O masters, if I were disposed4 to stir
Your hearts and minds to mutiny and rage,
I should do Brutus wrong, and Cassius wrong,
Who, you all know, are honourable men: ...

What private griefs they have, alas, I know not,5
That made them do it: they are wise and honourable,
And will, no doubt, with reasons answer you. ...

I am no orator, as Brutus is;
But, as you know me all, a plain blunt man,
That love6 my friend; and that they know7 full well
That8 gave me public leave to speak of him: ...
For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth,
Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech,
To stir men’s blood: I only speak right on9;
For I tell you that which you yourselves do know;
Show you sweet Caesar’s wounds, poor poor dumb mouths,
And bid them speak for me: but were I Brutus,
And Brutus Antony, there were an Antony
Would ruffle up your spirits and put a tongue
In every wound of Caesar that should move
The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny.

1. *ambitious*: i.e. he wanted to become a dictator 
2. *He*: i.e. Caesar 
3. *general coffers*: public treasury 
4. *disposed*: inclined, of a mind 
5. *griefs*: complaints, grievances 
6. *That love*: who loves 
7. *that they know*: that is, “the plotters know I am no orator” 
8. *That*: who 
9. *right on*: directly, plainly