

# In Defense of Poetry

A colleague of mine—expressing what I suspect is a view held by more than a few persons in higher education—recently told me that what today’s students need is “practical English” language skills that are “functional” as opposed to “poetic.” I’m not quite sure what my friend meant by *practical and functional* (who, after all, would defend impractical and useless English?). But I think he defined “practical” English as having little to do with aesthetic matters like meter and metaphor and everything to do with social utility. The folks who hold this pragmatic view value language study only as a tool to some other economic, religious, or political end. Poetic and literary studies make neither bricks nor bread, they reason, so let the lilies of poetry grow where they may. The *practical* English department must till the rocky soil of grammar and usage, training its students to create more utilitarian literary forms such as the office memorandum, the morning devotional, and the ceremonious speech.

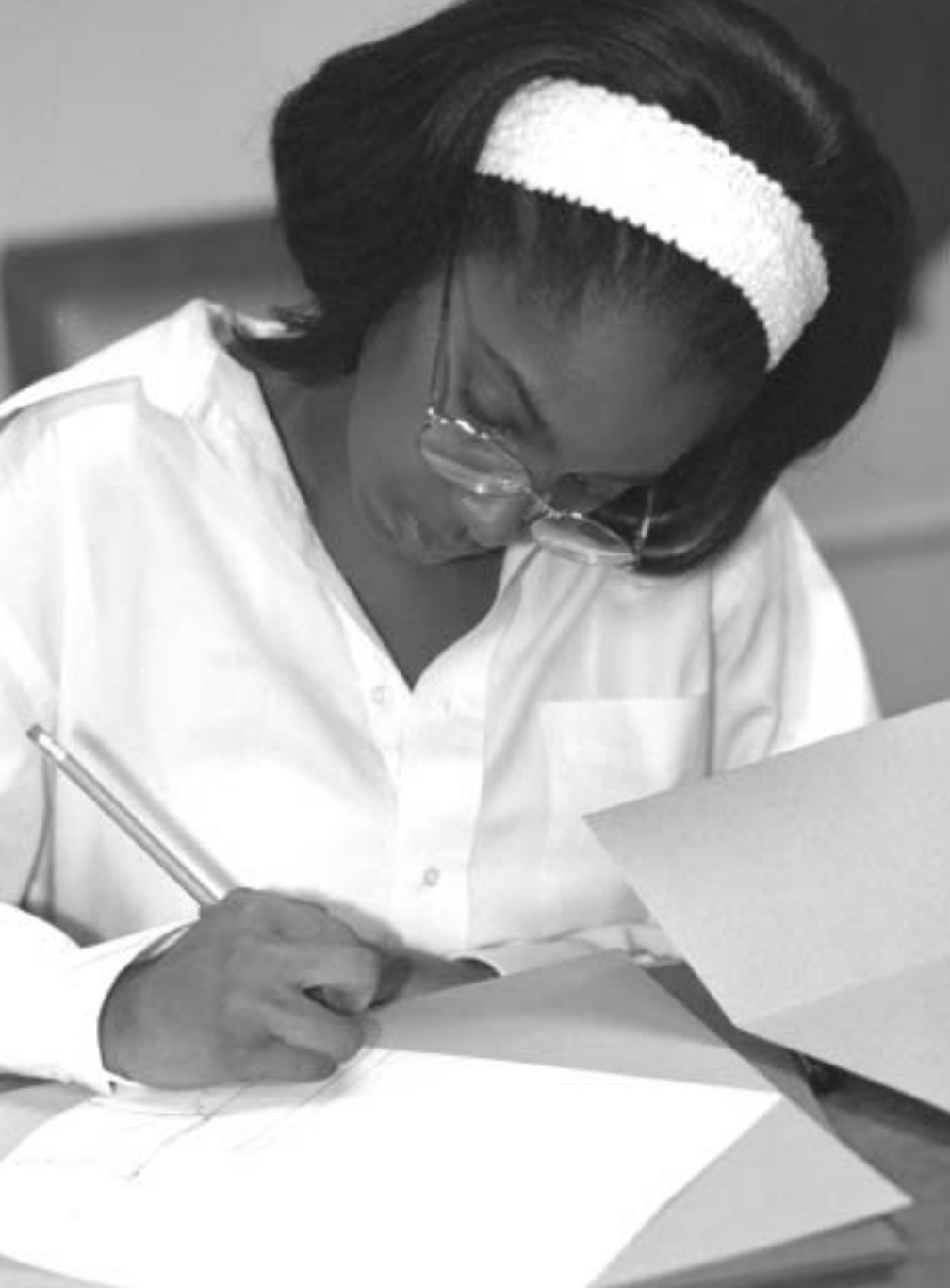
Now, I have nothing against memorandums, devotionals, or speeches—not in principle, at any rate. And surely, grammar and usage must be taught and taught well. But I do think that creating a dichotomy between the practical and the poetic is both false and dangerous.

By Ronald Osborn

## All Language Is Poetic

It is false because all language is, broadly defined, poetic. When we study language, we discover that it is endlessly analogical, allusive, and even pictorial. Poetry—that is, metaphor—cannot be avoided, even when suppressed. Indeed, in making his case for “practical English,” my very practical colleague disparaged poetry on the grounds that it is too “flowery.” (Behold, the hearty weed!) The real gulf is therefore not between the “poetic” and the “practical,” but between good poetry and bad poetry, between metaphors that illuminate and enliven and those that obscure, stupefy, and control.

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And herein lies the danger: Those who value language only as a means to what they call “practical” ends—whether economic, religious, or political—may in fact harbor only contempt for language itself. And, I believe, contempt for language invariably leads to contempt for humanity.

### I

In the realm of business and economics, the temptation to obscurity seems particularly grave. Bureaucratic institutions fixated on the “bottom line” exude verbal and written language that is bloated with redundant phrases, sterile metaphors, and stupefying jargon.<sup>1</sup> Consider the following paragraph, selected almost at random, from a folder of documents on my desk:

“The budgeting exercise requires the analysis of variables affecting each department of the organization. This analysis transforms into information that is to be used in

preparation of the financial budget. Two-way communication of information is advocated here in preparation for budgets. This means that information is communicated both ways between top management and those involved in the primary activities of the college.”

The writer means (I think) that faculty members need to ask for permission before they spend money. One cannot be certain, though; for this kind of language is not really intended to communicate. It is meant, consciously or not, to inflate the status of some office by spewing out directives that make it sound authoritative and in control. The utility of the words lies precisely in their ability to suffocate meaning.

Other vacuous constructions from the same folder include the following: Instead of job skills, students of today will be taught “knowledge-based competencies.” In the process, they will not mature; but rather “develop socio-emotional maturity.” And if this sounds like an infectious disease, rest assured: Adventist schools no longer simply have rules that promote health—they “empower students to take responsibility for their own well-being through a health-promoting lifestyle.” Health-promoting? Never mind that the phrase is as verbally clotted as a chain-smoker’s lungs. The real message beneath all this

linguistic clutter, by its very obscurity, is clear enough: Here is an institution that is big and important and complicated in ways you shouldn’t ask or think about: Just trust us.

The classic illustration of how the mandarins of “practicality” reduce meaning to murk and fuzz comes from George Orwell’s essay, “Politics and the English Language.”<sup>2</sup> Orwell quotes a well-known piece of poetry from Ecclesiastes and then translates it into modern English. The Authorized Version reads:

“I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.”

Now, here is Orwell’s rendition of the same passage in contemporary bureaucratic prose:

“Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena

compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.”

Notice what has been lost in the transformation. Gone are the precise and vivid images from actual human experience. Gone, too, are the strong one-syllable words. In their place is an unwholesome syrup of slick sounds, a pretentious and euphonious chirping that substitutes for real thought or feeling. Managers are consumed by the fear that simple language is the mark of a simple person. But the simplicity of the biblical poem is the result of hard thinking and a high regard for truth. It is the “practical” and “objective” style, by contrast, that has all the marks of a vain and muddled mind.

## ***Creating a dichotomy between the practical and the poetic is both false and dangerous.***

### II

Orwell’s illustration points to a fact that should give Christian advocates of “practical English” further pause: Much of the Bible—the prophets, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, the Song of Songs—is poetry. By all indications, Jesus was steeped in these books, expressing Himself time and again through allusions to the Psalms in particular. Yet few of us study the Bible as literature as well as theology. I was taught from an early age, for example, that when Jesus said, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” He was fulfilling a prophecy contained in Psalm 22. In other words, Psalm 22 is not a poem but a crystal ball. But while the Psalms may contain prophetic hints of the Crucifixion, Jesus surely wasn’t bound in some fatalistic sense to *quote* from them in His moment of desolation. As far as I can tell, Jesus said what He did because Psalm 22 was a poem He knew and loved for its insights into human suffering. It was this poem that best gave voice to His anguish.

### **Formulaic Mantras and Fossilized Rituals**

Biblical poetry does help protect the church from the totally debased speech of the marketplace. But even the best language can be drained of meaning through the wrong kinds of usage. Lightening flashes of spiritual insight are turned into formulaic mantras to calm the nerves. Hard-won truths are ground into a fine and palatable powder by sheer force of repetition. The bread of life is fossilized into the stone of ritual. The pulpit may thus serve not to free minds but to reinforce a stultifying conformity.

The problem isn’t necessarily the words used in religious settings. But when the same words are trotted out repeatedly in a careless or doctrinaire fashion, they grow slack and stale. Next, they go rotten. Stephen Carter calls such clichés



of religion “God-talk”: seemingly pious language that through mendacious or repetitious usage trivializes faith, the very thing it claims to serve.<sup>3</sup>

Spiritual atrophy therefore has to do not only with stone hearts—with insensitivity to social injustice; but also with tin ears—insensitivity to balance and beauty. Hence, my friend and mentor Ottilie Stafford wrote in 1978 in response to a utilitarian push in Adventist education, that English teachers “who feel comfortable teaching grammar, but do not like poetry, ought not to be in Christian classrooms, for they will limit the ability of their students to experience and to express the feelings and thoughts that are at the center of the Christian experience.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Restoring the Meaning**

Could it be the old and true words some of us prefer will only be restored by being used *less* often and with greater care? It’s useful to remember that the ancient Hebrews would not even *say* the name of the Almighty. We might also recall Jeremiah’s withering blast at those pious souls whose mode of worship consisted of repeating ad nauseam, “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. . .” (7:4). For truth be told, much of religious language, Adventist language included, recalls not the rich and varied metaphors of Scripture but the trials of Soviet dissident poet Joseph Brodsky, who was tortured by the secret

police by being forced to say his own name over and over again: "Joseph Brodsky, Joseph Brodsky, Joseph Brodsky. . . ."

### III

This brings us to the third pillar of this Tower of Babel that I have been attempting to describe. The language of marketing and management is little more than smoke and mirrors, and the language of religion is often pressed into the service of mortal designs. But the language of modern politics is "practical" language par excellence. Here at last is speech that *really gets things done*.

The way political language gets things done is by bewildering ordinary citizens with pernicious cant and double-talk that masks massive waste and brutality. A billion-dollar missile crashes and we are told, as William Zinsser points out, that it "impacted prematurely with the ground."<sup>5</sup> Vast sums are spent on bombs and tanks the public does not want, while the military reports that the money was spent

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on "counterforce deterrence."

Meanwhile, as America's ongoing war in Iraq amply illustrates, armies no longer maim and kill. It's much more palatable to hear that they "engage" and "neutralize" with "assertive disarmament," "surgical strikes," and "area denial ordinances" (i.e., cluster bombs). Because nearly all acts of violence are now defined as "defensive" (don't expect to see a Department of *Offense*), innocent people killed by "friendly fire" or "incontinent ordinance delivery" are not victims of aggression; they are "collateral damage," just as anti-people bombs are described as "antipersonnel devices."

Every war in history, from the standpoint of the aggressor, has been fought for defensive reasons. Adolph Hitler

"pre-emptively" bombed Czechoslovakia in "defense" of hypothetical dangers and German "national interest."

We can find many similar examples of governments using language largely as a mask. When the United States dropped poisonous herbicides and incendiary bombs on Cambodia,



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Laos, and South Vietnam, it claimed to be “defending” the South against “internal aggression” from the North.

The managing of information by the U.S. Government included assertions that the Vietnam “police action” was being won because American forces were daily “producing” favorable “kill ratios.” In a perfect reversal of meaning, destruction became “production.” As one U.S. major told reporters after the shelling of the civilian population of Ben Tre, “It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it.”<sup>6</sup>

The difference between good and bad language, these cynical euphemisms show, is not merely a matter of personal taste or style, but literally of life and death. Once again, I am indebted to Orwell, who wrote in 1946, “In our time, political speech and writings are largely the defense of the indefensible. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. Such phrase-

ology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Poetry as Defense**

Against language such as this, honest words may offer a feeble defense. But if there is any hope of resistance, it is, I think, the hope that comes from poetry.

This is not to say that being cultured and knowledgeable about literature and art will make one a humane or ethical person; there were men operating the death camps in Germany who could recite Goethe and Schiller by heart. But if one cannot discriminate between good and bad metaphors, between the pathos of tragedy and the tragedy of bathos, between honest sentiment and crude sentimentality in language, one is likely to be swindled out of purse, home, and life. There may be no greater protection against the propagandists and political manipulators of our age than verses like these from W. H. Auden’s “The Shield of Achilles”:

“Out of the air a voice without a face  
Proved by statistics that some cause was just  
In tones as dry and level as the place:  
No one was cheered and nothing was discussed;  
Column by column in a cloud of dust  
They marched away enduring a belief  
Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.”<sup>8</sup>



#### IV

We need a vision of learning that is out of fashion these days. Education by poetry can occur only at schools committed to teaching the liberal arts and the humanities *as part of the work of humanizing their students*. But the idea that knowledge should be pursued in a spirit of free inquiry and concern for truth does not set well with the technocratic, utilitarian spirit of our age. Parents, students, and even teachers are increasingly skeptical of anything that does not promise an immediate return on one's investment.

Administrators, too, are anxious about making learning "marketable," which is to say, market-based and market-driven. So emphasis on quantity quickly overrides emphasis on quality, attention to image replaces attention to reality, and the pursuit of diplomas crushes the pursuit of wisdom.

In this technocratic milieu—with its relentless demand for "quantifiable results," "efficiency," "responsiveness to market-based trends in higher education," "factor analysis for quality assurance," and so forth—English departments might try, as some urge, to prove their "relevance" by deemphasizing literature and composition and offering in their place trendy vocational courses of one sort or another. Why teach poetry, after all, when one can offer "practical" and (it is hoped) profitable courses in "business English," "English for industry," "legal English," or "English of mass communication"?

But when language studies are not merely related to but are in fact *subordinated* to the values and demands of the political economy, much of the reason for studying language as an academic discipline is lost. Further, in the end, the utilitarian conquest of language harms not only the English language, but also those who speak it.

#### A Betrayal of the Humanities

The attempt to make English departments more "practical" by bringing them into conformity with the values of the marketplace, social sciences, or other disciplines is a betrayal both of the humanities and of human beings. For the teaching of poetry is not incidental to the "serious" task of preparing students for the "real" world. It is the critical lens that allows students to see the real world as it *really* is, in both its beauty and its barbarism. It is also the mental training by which Christians can learn to resist the tyrannous and idolatrous claims that Lord Caesar and Lord Mammon routinely make on their lives.

#### Factories or Greenhouses?

I am not in fact such a purist as to think that getting a job after college is a trivial matter. But there are two ways to prepare students for careers. Mission College President Siriporn Tantipoonwinai frames the question in terms of two contrasting metaphors. "Will school be a factory where people are produced like bolts?" she asks. "Or will it be a greenhouse where knowledge is allowed to freely grow and flourish?"

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The greenhouse model suggests that the role of educators is to help students become, in the words of Ellen White, "thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other people's thought"<sup>10</sup>—a fine and poetic turn of phrase. The factory model, by contrast, says that education's goal is to produce well-trained, well-heeled functionaries—persons suited to the execution of tasks but not the challenge of thought. The former goal is the business of poetry. A slavish devotion to practical English will surely produce the most impractical and deadly creatures of all. ☞



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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Here and throughout, I am indebted to William Zinsser, *On Writing Well* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), pp. 7-18.
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8. W. H. Auden, "The Shield of Achilles" at Web site: <http://www.poets.org>.
9. Welcome address by President Siriporn Tantipoonwinai to students at Mission College, Thailand, August 19, 2003, translated by Wayne Hamra.
10. Ellen G. White, *True Education* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 2000), p. 18.