

Dandelions and Objectivity: Degraded Language in Contemporary American Politics and Poetry

The fact that a yawning chasm divides America in ideology admits of no refutation. It is illustrated generally in the harlequin of state voting tendencies, but extends well beyond the partisan furor of national politics into social and cultural realms too. The rivalry began with real economic, social and moral disparities, but has been exacerbated by a ragbag of politicians, pundits, demagogues and quacks, and, worst of all, an apathetic public. The rhetoric spewed forth by both sides is vague, disingenuous, and destructive, and has an insidious effect on all other fields of inquiry, so that two as different as politics and poetry both reflect a need for more formal, objective discourse and less chicanery.

That is to say that the very language of the times has become vindictive by partisan interests, and disheveled by the public's general laziness. And it doesn't take a linguistic anthropologist to explain that when language becomes sloppy, so too does thought. The two are, in fact, inextricable. George Orwell, in "Politics and the English Language"ⁱ, attempts to describe the downward spiral of decadent language and thought:

A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening with the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.

The connection between thought and language is not an obscure one: indeed, we who speak a particular language also *think* in it. And Orwell insists that clear thought is a “necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.” Needless to say, Orwell, who in his novel *1984* wrote about a totalitarian government creating “doublespeak” to limit the potential of its citizens’ thought, is not the only writer of our time who saw the deterioration of English as a dangerous threat, with drastic implications for politics especially. Twelve years earlier, in 1934, the poet Ezra Pound, in *The ABC of Reading*ⁱⁱ, defended the “social function” of writers. While Pound’s fascist leanings are to this day well known and reprehensible (he published *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* just a year earlier), his linguistic capacity is unparalleled. He argued that, “if a nation’s literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays.” And continued,

Your legislator can’t legislate for the public good, your commander can’t command, your populace (if you be a democratic country) can’t instruct its ‘representatives’, save by language (32).

Efficiency, accuracy, and clarity are what define good writing, no matter what the age, according to Pound. But as early as 1916, a witty and crotchety Cambridge man of letters named Sir Arthur Quiller-Couchⁱⁱⁱ lectured on the growing timidity, lethargy, and overall debasement of the language, evinced by the popular style he referred to as “Jargon” writing. Though at one point he hilariously attacks the neologisms of science, such as “antibody,” which he calls “a barbarism, and a mongrel at that” (42), his criticism is nevertheless helpful when he attempts to whack the truly pernicious weeds, as they emerge from “Boards of Government, County Councils, Syndicates, Committees,

Commercial Firms” etc (103). Jargon is defined by a surfeit of meaningless or abstract nouns, ostentatious diction, hackneyed metaphor, gap-toothed logic, and the fear of having to actually say what one means.

Instead of sinking into the habit of Jargon, he exhorts us to employ concrete nouns and active verbs in order to give precise imagery to abstract concepts, quoting, for instance, Sancho Panza in Cervantes’ masterpiece, *Don Quixote*: “How excellent a thing is sleep, it wraps a man round like a cloak.” “A Jargoneer,” Quiller-Couch adds to Panza’s quote, “would have said that ‘among the beneficent qualities of sleep its capacity for withdrawing the human consciousness from the contemplation of immediate circumstances may perhaps be accounted not the least remarkable’” (109). In an effort to further inflect his point, he translates Hamlet’s famous soliloquy into Jargon:

To be, or the contrary? Whether the former or the latter be preferable would seem to admit of some difference of opinion; the answer in the present case being of an affirmative or of a negative character according as to whether one elects on the one hand to mentally suffer the disfavour of fortune, albeit in an extreme degree . . . (116)

This is parody, yes, but once identified, Jargon can be found clouding up the literature of newsstands, corporate memos, travel brochures, and even “literary” journals. Once again, the point is not simply that professors of English find modern discourse lacking in aesthetics, but rather that habitual indirectness influences politicians and public figures who, to be cautious and avoid criticism, attempt to circumlocute every point.

Of course, a number of contemporary writers have addressed the decline of language in America. John McWhorter recently wrote *Doing Our Own Thing: The*

Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like, Care^{iv}. Here McWhorter half-jokingly divides the history of public speaking in the U.S. into the “Gilded Age,” and the “Age of Aquarius,” and attempts to show how the “do your own thing” attitude of the revolutionary 1960’s, with all of its anti-establishment zeal for authentic (read: lackadaisical) speech, dramatically undermined the integrity of American public discourse. Now, he argues, even America’s most conservative politicians speak like, for instance, Jane Fonda in 1972 (54).

His examples are more poignant than those of Pound or Quiller-Couch, because he addresses current issues, such as the war in Iraq. For instance, in October of 2002, Senator Sam Brownback, representing Kansas in a speech to the U.S. Senate, said:

And if we don’t go at Iraq, that our effort in the war on terrorism dwindles down into an intelligence operation. We go at Iraq and it says to countries that support terrorists, there remain six in the world that are as our definition state sponsors of terrorists, you say to those countries: We are serious about terrorism, we’re serious about you not supporting terrorism on your own soil (45).

Needless to say, common speech rarely looks good in print, no matter how intelligent the speaker may be. But that is precisely why past generations *practiced* oratory! From the days of Aristotle’s Lyceum, the art of rhetoric has been an important study for anyone who would dare make public his or her opinions. It was once widely believed that politicians ought to be especially adept at clear expression, and yet, because of the squirrely attention span of America’s pay-per-view public today, informative discourse has given way to the profundities of the bumper sticker.

Remember that grammar is not the issue here (though you can imagine how my Microsoft Word grammar-checker eats up that Brownback quote). Nor is fustian diction. The public would not accept a politician who speaks too bookishly, and besides, bookishness is often convoluted, where brashness at least conveys a strong sense of approval or disapproval. Erudite speech befuddles while choppy speech bowdlerizes, and still neither offers the concision that voters ought to demand of representatives. Our politicians have happily appropriated the attitude of movie stars, while avoiding the “snobby” double-talk of book-toting professors. This is because contemporary political campaigns are enamored of an average Joe who may or may not exist. Political personalities are all about tossing a football, or hanging out by a rusty shed at the ranch.

Americans, if they care at all, may argue that the countercultural revolutionary movement of the ‘60’s replaced antiquated and histrionic modes of speech with the fresh vernacular of the people. This is true, but the trendy, rebellious rejection of formal (or “old-white-male-style”) speech and writing has, over the years, greatly counteracted the political aims of that same movement. Politicians now need not bother with details, when laying out a scheme to bomb another country for example, because they know that what the public really wants to hear is a sort of motivational gym-coach whistle of a speech, peppered with resounding archaisms from all over the cultural conscious. In a poignant passage, Orwell warns against this emotive technique:

When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases—*bestial atrocities, iron heel, bloodstained tyranny, free peoples of the world, stand shoulder to shoulder*—one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some

kind of dummy: a feeling which suddenly becomes stronger at moments when the light catches the speaker's spectacles and turns them into blank discs which seem to have no eyes behind them (166).

Though President George W. Bush more than gratifies our need for meaningless cant, the political left wing is not exempt from the charge of demagoguery and balderdash either. Here is Robert Brandon, of Duke University, explaining the utter lack of political diversity—that is, the lack of hardly any right wing employees—at the university:

If, as John Stuart Mill said, stupid people are generally conservative, then there are lots of conservatives we will never hire. Mill's analysis may go some way towards explaining the power of the Republican party in our society and the relative scarcity of Republicans in academia. Players in the NBA tend to be taller than average. There is a good reason for this. Members of academia tend to be a bit smarter than average. There is a good reason for this too^v.

One need not even disagree with Professor Brandon to see that his statement is pompous and trite. And illogical: the first sentence, a conditional statement, has a conclusion that is unrelated to its antecedent. The second statement makes Brandon's bitterness and resentment, two emotions that fatally undermine the writer's credibility, explicit. Such a sweeping condemnation of one's ideological opponents betokens not a more intellectual but rather a more jealous and reactionary stance (Kramer 3).

To demonstrate further that the corruption of American language and thought pervades both the left, as well as the obviously linguistically impaired right, recall Hart

Seely's *Pieces of Intelligence: The Existentialist Poetry of Donald Rumsfeld^{vi}*, a book that transcribes a number of Rummy's most exhilarating verbal feats, presented with the textual spacing of William Carlos Williams' sparse poetry.

THE UNKNOWN

As we know,
There are known knowns.
There are things we know we know.
We also know
There are known unknowns.
That is to say
We know there are some things
We do not know.
But there are also unknown unknowns,
The ones we don't know
We don't know.

What originally struck me about this statement, after recovering my toppled chair and drying my eyes, was that to the best of my judgment, it is perfectly sensible. At various recitations of this brilliant piece, I have challenged particularly indignant jeerers to produce a logically equivalent paraphrase. As yet, no one has been able to deliver. Moreover, I suspect that if this quote were found in Lao Tze's *Tao Te Ching*, it would invariably meet the applause of many petit-leftish circles. But as it is more reminiscent of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, I don't expect that hypothesis to ever be proven. Finally,

whether Rumsfeld's quote seems clear or not, it surely cannot be more ridiculous than one of Al Sharpton's recent comments on the president:

Clearly, he lied. Now if he is an unconscious liar, and doesn't realize when he's lying, then we're really in trouble So I hope he knew he was lying, because if he didn't, and just went in some kind of crazy, psychological breakdown, then we are really in trouble . . . I'm a minister. Why do people lie? Because they're liars^{vii}.

Poetry too has suffered most from America's abandoning of the verbal arts, and often incites the flippancy with which citizens disregard high-wrought language. Because it was once preeminent reading in popularity amongst intellectuals and the greater public, right and left wing alike, it is illustrative of the vast difference between the "Gilded Age" and "Age of Aquarius" of American writing. A cursory discussion will show how the iconoclastic flouting of formality and convention has ultimately compromised freedom of artistic expression, while severely maiming and diminishing the body of loyal readership that poets once enjoyed.

Interestingly, it is the great experimenter and "Father of Modern English Poetry," Pound, with whom I shall begin, because his early theories of composition (circa 1907) explain the importance of direct speech—"straight talk, straight as the Greek!" he once exclaimed:

[Poetic] language must be a fine language, departing in no way from speech save by a heightened intensity (i.e. simplicity). There must be no book words . . . Objectivity, and again objectivity, and

expression . . . nothing that you couldn't, in some circumstance, in stress of some emotion, actually say^{viii}.

For Pound, this language would be realized best in *Cathay*, a work that includes his “translations” of Chinese poetry, and of the Anglo-Saxon poem “The Seafarer.” These poems are all lyrical, that is, personally emotional song, which would seem to contradict his reiterated demand for objectivity. Lyricism can be objective, however, if one makes the assumption that poetry is necessarily universal, as Aristotle said in his *Poetics*^{ix}. The notion of “universality” is often rightfully refuted in light of Deconstructionist thought and contemporary anthropological and linguistic discoveries. But McWhorter makes the exception that “there are no societies without a linguistic activity that falls under the rubric of poetry” (80). This does not in any way vindicate Pound’s “absolute rhythm,” or Aristotle’s ideas either, but it does suggest that an approximate, quasi-Platonic shadow of universality is not a misbegotten hope. And the presumption that a poet not only speaks for him or herself but also for the masses dates back to Homer, and up through Chaucer all the way to Whitman, only to be abruptly chastised today under the ferule of institutionalized pluralism. Cristina Nehring describes the current, subjective fad in an essay entitled “Our essays, Ourselves: In Defense of the Big Idea^x,”

To present an opinion is to risk being presumptuous, pompous, and, as Epstein calls Emerson, a ‘gasbag.’ It is to assume a knowledge of one’s neighbor one cannot or should not have. It is to sin against identity politics. It is to deny diversity. The more exclusive your attention to your own idiosyncratic tastes, the

unique particulars of your life . . . the more politically kosher and celebrated your essay.

Though she is speaking of essays rather than poetry, Montaigne and Emerson rather than Chaucer and Whitman, her criticism is apt. Introspection has become literal: today's poets walk around with their eyeballs turned inward, only occasionally bumping into other people, who are inevitably poets just like themselves. *The New Orleans Review*^{xi} provides a fit sample of the esoteric, toenail-contemplating poetry of our time. This stanza is from Andrew Miller's poem, "Her Queen of Brussels":

In spring her palms grew rough
Like the pages of the diary she let me read.
Still with those hands we danced . . .

The problem here is not so much the total lack of interest readers might feel in the enigmatic conversations of beatnik lovers, but rather the disgust they must feel upon realizing that the poem is merely a peek into the narrator's diary, as he peeks into his girlfriend's, whose writing undoubtedly reveals a peek into some other poor poetaster's diary, and so on to infinity. The reader finds him or herself not in a House of Mirrors, but a House of Diaries, where one is tortured not with the reflections of one's own vanity, which would at least be educational, but with the petty vanities of someone else. Subjectivity here is simply overbearing.

What is more, these meek verses spring up like dandelions (albeit bitter ones that resent their irreparable alienation from the rest of the yard). Their agoraphobia pervades the more renowned literary journals as well. So much has the preference for informality and personality and the fear of absolutist authoritarianism gripped our writers, that Robert

Creeley says in his introduction to *The Best American Poetry: 2002*^{xii}, which he edited: “I thought that these poems now to follow were the best among a great many that might well follow them and also be the best, and that they in turn might well find others, so that they also might follow, and be the best, too—for each time, each place, and each person.” While this is heartwarming condolence for those who didn’t make the cut, still it evinces a mindset that is at best indecisive. I believe that the quivering little dandelion poems of our time will eventually explode into cottony balls and lose themselves in the wind. Perhaps then we will look back and see that the poets who had the gusto to speak not only for themselves, but for all humans, and not only for their own time, but for ages, will be remembered as the ones who crystallized a moment in the tumultuous, early years of America in the 21st century.

After all, it is our lot to live at a time when information flows from a Big Rock Candy Mountain; when the number of educated publishers, editors, writers, and readers is unparalleled; when commentators and editorialists can opine in the pages of innumerable specialty magazines and periodicals, or seek a strand of the worldwide web to post their treatises; and when the dawning century promises to be every bit as awesome and horrifying and inspiring as the last. To allow commodity, faction, shortsightedness or authority to prevent us from clearly and accurately speaking our minds to one another would be to resign our voice to the mouthpieces of the powers that be. And to allow the muddled logic and empty rants of jargoners and demagogues to influence and pervert our speech is a failure that cannot be blamed on totalitarian government or political correctness, but rather on our own apathetic indulgence. What we need is honesty,

frankness, and the courage to say what we really think. But it is formality, not idiosyncrasy that will insure our thoughts are understood.

ⁱ Orwell, George. *A Collection of Essays*. Harcourt Inc., 1981.

ⁱⁱ Pound, Ezra. *The ABC of Reading*. New Directions, 1952.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quiller-Couch, Sir Arthur. *The Art of Writing*. Capricorn Books, 1961.

^{iv} McWhorter, John. *Doing Our Own Thing: The Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like, Care*. Gotham Books, 2003.

^v *The New Criterion*. March 2004 issue, page 3.

^{vi} Seely, Hart, Ed. *Pieces of Intelligence: The Existentialist Poetry of Donald Rumsfeld*. The Free Press, 2003.

^{vii} *The Economist*. Feb. 21-27, 2004, page 29.

^{viii} www.duke.edu/~tkp1/poetrydefs.htm

^{ix} Aristotle. *Poetics*. Dover Thrift, 1997. Page 17.

^x *Harper's Magazine*. May 2003, page 80.

^{xi} *The New Orleans Review*. Number 2, 2002.

^{xii} Creely, Robert and Lehman, David, Eds. *The Best American Poetry*. Scribner Poetry, 2002. Intro. xxii.

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