

Great Speeches & and the Art of Poetry. The difference?

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To begin with my father!

My father Norm is 91, still independent and not a screw loose. He still quotes Shakespeare, mainly Othello about his good name:

*Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed.*

and from MacBeth:

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more.
'Tis is a tale told by an idiot,
full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

But also *Clancy of the Overflow*, *An Arab's farewell to his steed*, and *The Last of his Tribe*.

Coming from the son of a Gas Works crane driver who left the English potteries for a better life, that's something. Coming from a man who went to school with no shoes, that's really something.

He passed an exam that got him into the selective high school, Fort Street Boys High in Sydney. But his father made him take an apprenticeship at 15 as a Fitter and Turner. He studied years at night school, became an engineer and spent 40 years in this leisure time in the Lion's Club developing and building aged care and a nursing home when there were none.

Ask him what this poetry means to him, and why he remembers them and he says because 'they are pertinent'; they are 'true'. Their value is in how they make him *feel*.

And I think they appeal to him because they speak of the value of honour, acknowledgment of other's needs, of the great and small people, of life's quick breath. Because they have a nobility about them.

So does he remember speeches? Churchill of course. He lived through it. He was building the planes. They were at the door of death.

He can quote all those famous lines, but they're not the first thing on his lips. Poetry is. Shakespeare is.

In Political speeches, the moment is everything. Churchill at risk of being colonised by the Nazis.; John Kennedy and Reagan both at the Berlin wall speaking of FREEDOM. Obama there again, attempting to convince a world that religious differences forestall that freedom.

A good speech includes as Dennis says, a whole variety of rhetorical techniques, some of them such as repetition and alliteration, similar to some used in poetry.

But the INTENT is different. The intent is to persuade to belief or action. To in fact, manipulate. And they are really remembered for a catchline from often very long speeches, that inspire people into doing something or believing enough to vote for the speaker.

The techniques of a good speech owe more to rhetoric than to poetry. Speeches are generated as Dennis points out with the first rule: 'know your audience'.

The second is 'know your speaker', get inside his mind so that the speech seems authentic. You need a person with credibility to deliver it too.

And delivery is everything. It needs to be good, practised, *seem* natural and authentic.

In 1996 I was Professor and Foundation Head of the School of Social Inquiry at Deakin University. A feminist academic activist in the battle against reproductive and genetic engineering for 16 years, I had travelled internationally regularly; been called by national, state and international governments to be part of public decision-making.

I had addressed a meeting of the House of Lords and MPs at the Houses of Parliament in London on the Enoch Powel Embryo Experimentation Bill. I had advised many state and national governments in Australia and overseas. I had been on all the Australian Television & radio current affairs programmes.

Speeches, speeches, everywhere.

They went well. Somehow intuitively I knew the importance of many of the points Dennis makes in his book.

Maybe all those years that Dad made me do debating in front the lounge room mirror helped. Or maybe an education not unlike the education in Shakespeare's time as Dennis points out, for an 'educated man'.

I studied Latin, ancient history, history, grammar and literature, French and of course maths and science. But those background subjects gave me an understanding of power and how it works; of the history I came from; of a language and how to construct it logically and clearly; and reasoning and debating skills. It also included all of Shakespeare's plays – and the bible.

Osmosis?

I love ancient history and can still remember the impact of the Ephebic Oath required from young Athenian men when they attained status as citizens at 18 and served in the military school for 2 years, which concluded with

'... we will strive unceasingly to quicken the public sense of civic duty. Thus, in all these ways, we will transmit this city, not only not less, but far greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.'

How like Kennedy's 'Ask not what your country can do for you ... ask what you can do for your country' (*which he drafted and Ted Sorenson assisted with*)

After breast cancer & burnout, I returned to poetry.

Dennis writes advice to the would-be speechwriter:

‘As a speech writer one of the first lessons is that being a speechwriter is not like being a part-time poet. It involves hard work, not just sudden inspiration’. (p 234)

But poetry **IS** hard work. Its creation involves stages:

It involves a lifetime of observation as well as: listening, and reflecting on our observations as we go; followed by recording; followed by the moment of creating the poem – that ‘self-gone’ silence, that muse connection, that meditation, indeed that prayer-like moment; that giving over in faith to the core of poetic being. It requires what Virginia Woolf called ‘receptive waiting’.

Then the editing, endless editing (REALLY HARD WORK!)

Finally, a poem – as close into the original observation, experience, moment, narrative, image, as we can take the reader. The true poem has you ENTER the experience, not see it only as described.

And the intent is not to persuade, or manipulate, but to give, to stir.

It is to generate solace and consolation; it is survival; it is a way to write history and politics; a way to give something back; a way to impact on the heart. As I’ve written before:

‘Coming out of the ordinary or the mystical, it calls us to ourselves; drawing into view the inner working relationships between the conscious and the unconscious; the passionate intensity of the feeling life as well as the corrugated pathways of thought.

Poetry can inform, renew, move, uncover understanding, create change’.

Poetry comes out of feeling, from the heart’s truth. Audre Lourde wrote ‘.... the poet - whispers in our dreams: *I feel therefore I am, therefore I can be free.*’ (p.139)

In poetry, language is not for persuasion but it is a form and a place.

The poet’s land, stories, place, spirit are inside language. And the language of poetry, is the purest form because it speaks from the place where we all began: it comes from silence, out of the silence; then out of the sounds of the womb, then out of the first touch, then out of feeling. And it returns to silence.

It comes out of the body. Emily Dickinson wrote: ‘If I read a book and it makes my whole body so that no fire can ever warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken of, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know. Is there any other way.’

And who is the audience? Who is listening in poetry?

I am. In poetry, I finally really hear myself. And there is the other, the one person to whom I am speaking, who cares; and who miraculously turns out to be many more than one.

Will the poem /speech continue to have an impact?

Obama's appeal as a candidate was inseparable from his gift as a talker. His speechwriter, or "mind reader" (as Obama calls him) was Jon Favreau, aged 28.

And yet, I asked a 23 year old politically active son of a friend to talk about speeches his generation remember. They only recall, he says, those speeches they learned about in history ... like Whitlam in 1975!!!

The political moment is different now he said. What counts as value is different. Now forms of power are not focused so much in the one politician but in more amorphous form like Murdoch's network of communications control. There is no real centre or obvious ideology to support or attack.

I think that famous speeches are now from the *long-ago*. Now my sons' generation get their news from the internet. They take no time to listen to longish speeches.

Notably, the President of the United States had to reschedule his State of the Union Address because it was clashing with the premiere of the final series of 'Lost' on television.

The values in past great speeches seem old fashioned to many young people even as they still move my own generation. Honesty, loyalty, duty, honour, a sense of nobility, an ideal of service. Service clubs are demographically challenged. Social life and organization is different now.

Evenings are spent attached to machines of one kind or another, not talking and reading and playing cards. We are no longer glued to the radio for The Famous Speech or the Queens' Message. We are individualized. We got what we fought for. We broke the chains of conformity. It's just, what did we replace them with?

Politicians enjoy little respect these days in general. Much like poets. Once in Irish history, the poet stood at the right hand of the King, and their future rose or fell on the words of the bard.

The poetry politics uses now is, after all, merely the trappings of metaphor and feeling. Depth in poetry comes only from a desire not to manipulate, but to connect with authenticity.

Poetry is difficult to write; difficult to get right; difficult to live inside. It is feared, it is misunderstood, it is neglected. It is a language in fear for its life, threatened by the colonising forces of commerce, by pranksters creating language codes so difficult they are indecipherable, by the sheer indifference of readers looking for fast-food language: words without darkness, without challenge and passion and hope.

And yet we still write poetry. Why? Because we know that life and depth and meaning emerge from that shape, and moving between the border of the conscious and unconscious, take us home every time to what Emily Dickinson called 'soul country'.