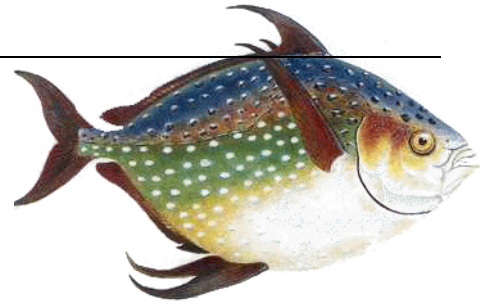


The Poison Fish

from *Telling Writing* by Ken Macrorie



One day a college student stopped a professor in the hall and said, “I have this terrible instructor who says I can’t write. Therefore, I shouldn’t teach English. He really grinds me. In another class I’ve been reading James Joyce, so I wrote this little comment on the instructor in Joyce’s style. Do you think I should submit it to *The Review*?”

The professor looked at the lines she had written about her instructor:

... the stridents in his glass lisdike him immersely. Day each that we tumble into the glass he sez to mee, “Eets too badly that you someday fright preach Engfish.”

and he knew the girl had found a name for the phony, pretentious language of the schools—English.

Most English teachers have been trained to correct students’ writing, not to read it; so they put down those bloody correction marks in the margins. When the students see them, they think they mean the teacher doesn’t care what students write, only how they punctuate and spell. So they give him English. He calls the assignments by their traditional names—themes. The students know theme writers seldom put down anything that counts for them. No one outside school ever writes anything called themes. Apparently they are teacher’s exercises, not really a kind of communication. On the first assignment in a college class a student begins his theme like this:

I went downtown today for the first time. When I got there I was completely astonished by the hustle and the bustle that was going on. My first impression of the downtown area was quite impressive.

Beautiful English. The writer said not simply that he was astonished, but complete astonished, as if the word astonished had no force of its own. The student reported (pretended would be a truer word) to have observed hustle and bustle, and then explained in true English that the hustle and bustle was going on. He managed to work in the academic word area, and finished by saying the impression was impressive.

*But wise men pierce this rotten diction
and fasten words again to
visible things.*

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

The teacher does not want English, but gets it. Discouraged, he often tries a different tack. Asks the boys to write about sports, maybe. Then they will drop English because they care about what they are saying. One boy starts his theme like this:

The co-captains of the respective teams are going out to the middle of the field for the toss of the coin.

English again. Only two teams play in a football game and there could be no reason in that sentence for using the word respective. But it was the sort of word the boy thought English teachers wanted.

With all that fish smell permeating the room, the teacher feels queasy. He tried other ways of getting rid of English. He asks the students to keep a personal journal. Maybe if they talk about themselves they will find their natural voices. The next day one of the girls turns in a journal containing this entry:

It is hard to realize just how much you miss someone until you are away from this person. It seems that the time you are away from this person is wasted. You seem to wait and wait till you can see this person again. Then when the time comes, it passes far too quickly.

Another kind of English—not fancy, academic language, but simply everyday words that say nothing because they keep all the girl’s experience private. Anyone else reading that entry would forget it instantly because neither the writer nor the person written about come alive. A year later the sentence would mean almost nothing even to the writer.

A teacher becomes fed up with writing like that. He doesn’t see that most of the signals in the school are telling students to write English. Even the textbook begins with an English sentence, and surely it should be a model of writing for students. Its first sentence is:

If you are a student who desires assistance in order to write effectively and fluently, then this textbook is written for you.

Pure English undefiled, a tongue never spoken outside the walls. No student would stop another on campus and say, “I desire assistance locating Sangren Hall,” or “Will you show me the most effective way to the bus stop?” Naturally the student thinks the textbook is a model of the language the teacher wants, so she give that language to him.

Students thoroughly trained in English are hard put to find their natural voices in the classroom. They have left them out in the hall. Much earlier in life, though, they occasionally have written sharply and truly, as this third-grader did:

I can play huhwayun music on my gettar. It is like when grandma took a sick spell. Now she was shut up tight as a jar with a lid on. She gave a scream. When she gave that scream it was high. But it got lower and lower. Huhwayun music sounds something like that when she was getting lower.

From that passage a reader learns what “huhwayun” music sounds like.

Man’s maturity: to have regained the seriousness that he had as a child at play.

– FREDERICK NIETZSCHE

The difference between the college student’s writing and the third-grade child’s is simple: one is dead, the other alive. In the child’s comments the words speak to each other—high speaks to lower. And the ideas and things speak to each other—the Hawaiian guitar is like grandmother, and when she was sick it was like a jar with a lid on. The whole passage speaks to the reader. It is not pretentious. It is not phony. It is not private. In the English paragraphs of the student themes the words almost never speak to each other, and when they do, they say only “Blah.”

College students were once third-graders and occasionally wrote like that. Where did they lose that skill? Why?

They spent too many hours in school mastering English and reading cues from teacher and textbook that suggested it is the official language of the school. In it the student cannot express truths that count for him. He learns a language that prevents him from working toward truths, and then he tell lies.

In this empty circle teacher and student wander around boring each other. But there is a way out.