

## ENDPAPERS

## Letter From The Boardroom

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The idea that poetry might have relevance to business is not a new one. As early as 1992, Dana Gioia in *Can Poetry Matter?* pointed out how many poets have had business careers, and what kind of play-off there might be. Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot were but two of the list he mentioned, and Gioia himself has had a successful business career culminating in the influential role of chair of America’s NEA.

When I go to see him in Washington in 2005 he is courteous and encouraging. So you’re writing a book on poetry and business? he says. That’s great news. He tells me how, when he was Marketing Director of General Foods, he turned round Jello from a \$7m loss to a climbing \$20m profit venture. He credits this success to his ability to think creatively. It was no coincidence that during the development of his strategy for rescuing Jello, his evenings were devoted to poetry.

When the Strategy Institute of The Boston Consulting Group approached me to write a book on poetry and business, it soon became clear that a large part of the challenge would be to find a common ground on which to reach the business executive. My research for the book was of necessity eclectic. In philosophy, cognitive science, linguistics, literature, and business studies lay much of interest. In the many poems I discovered and re-discovered was a richness of relevance that had to be sifted. A book such as this could not be written without tough experience in the pragmatic world of business interchange. I flew to Prague. I flew to San Francisco, New York, Boston. I talked to and argued with converts and sceptics. I flew to Kuwait City, to Tokyo. I ran workshops and gave presentations. Gradually the central thesis of the book – that reading and engaging with poetry demands ways of thinking that are not generally privileged in the business community – sharpened and took shape.

What I found underlined in the various kinds of interchange was summarized by a young participant at a workshop in Tokyo. “I am looking for a new way to discuss things,” he said. “When I step into the office in the morning I have to leave a whole lot of myself behind. They demand a lot of you. A certain kind of focus. I want to know where this different poetry focus could fit in.”

The essence of business rhetoric is to simplify, to ‘cut to the chase’, to minimize ambiguity and neutralize paradox. The tendency is to rely on the tried-and-tested, and to focus attention on the rational, deductive mode. The skills prized in business practice are, in this respect, the opposite of the skills that need to be brought to poetry interpretation. A poem doesn’t argue, hurry from *a* to *b*, assert the validity of a position, or deal in binary opposition. What a poem does do is to work dynamically, show ‘meaning’ as multivalent, hold oppositions in delicate balance, and reach beyond logic. As Roman Jakobson so famously put it, poetry is “organized violence committed on ordinary speech”.

So how might getting to grips with this “organized violence” benefit the business leader?

“In the current business environment there are no easy answers or simple solutions”, wrote Hans-Paul Buerkner, CEO of The Boston Consulting Group, in December 2007. “It’s the rare problem that has only one dimension anymore; most have many dimensions with difficult tradeoffs and unclear second- and third-order implications. Instead of trying to ignore this complexity companies must confront it – indeed, embrace it – and leaders need to learn to cope with it.”

The qualities of a poem require of its reader (and I speak here of a reader who is seeking to get to the heart of a poem through all the necessary fascinating and devious means), an acute apprehension of nuance in language, a strong logical capability, an ear for music, and a keen alertness to 'weak signals'. There can be no cut-to-the-chase, no paraphrase, no impatience with ambiguity and paradox. A storm of devices operating on different levels assails the reader. Image, symbol, rhyme, rhythm, syntactical gymnastics, tonal and metaphorical counter-tow – these are but a taste of the delights and challenges in store.

The very nature of the poem delays the pinning down which, under ordinary (non-poetry) circumstances, might be achieved quite swiftly. A poem causes its readers to consult things not susceptible to rational deduction. It encourages them to access what lies outside logic and words, in the realm of response by feeling. To get to grips with what the poem is doing, they have to be able to move readily between logic and non-logic, abandoning neither, utilizing both. This ability is the essence of "poetic competence".

The value of this capability to the business practitioner is manifold. It can sharpen the perceptual muscles needed to see patterns and opportunities emerging across a dynamic landscape, and thus help leaders develop more subtle and innovative and comprehensive strategies. It can attune the executive's ear to the finer nuances of communication. It can encourage the relishing of ambiguity and the embracing of paradox, enabling an 'either-and' rather than an 'either-or' approach to complex objectives. A corporate culture amenable to creativity and innovation may be fostered by habituation to poetry's requirement for the exploration of complex linkages.

There are advantages on a group as well as an individual level. Business practitioners working together on getting to grips with a poem find that a neutral ground of infinite richness and complexity is opened up for them, and one where the habitual workplace barriers may be broken down. Values, ethics, principles and beliefs can be revealed indirectly and in a non-risk environment. Cross-cultural understanding can be enhanced, issues of corporate social responsibility addressed, and the nuances of differently-focused value-systems recognized and acted upon freshly.

Poetry as a fruitful partner in executive development has been welcomed (in marketing-speak) by the 'early-adopters'. How far, in these testing times, its relevance to the bottom line will gain general credence has yet to be established.

In Washington back in 2005 it's hot and steamy and the fan on Dana Gioia's office ceiling goes round and round, casting a moving shadow on the book-lined walls, the quiet amplitude of the chairs and tables.

"You know what?" he says. "I kept it secret for a long time, my writing poetry. And then a piece came out in the *New Yorker*, I'd won a prize for a poem, and the news got round. My boss, who was CEO then of General Foods called me into his office. He was one of the old style of CEOs, a real tough-guy. I went into this office and he was smoking a cheroot like always. He kept me standing for a minute then signalled me to sit down.

"What's this I hear?" he said, 'What's this I've been hearing? I read about it, Dana. Tell me. Is it true? Is it true you're a poet?'

"I'm afraid it is, Sir," I said.

I tell you, he gave me that look he was famous for, and spat the cheroot out there on the ashtray and said, 'Shit!'"

Clare Morgan is Director of Oxford University's MSt in Creative Writing. *What Poetry Brings to Business* was published by University of Michigan Press in 2010. Her new novel, *A Book for All and None*, is forthcoming (Weidenfeld & Nicolson) in June.