

## Editorial

EVERYONE IN ACADEMIA COMPLAINS about students' language disabilities, and the linguistically challenged generation is now old enough to make its mark on the media, from which I present two recent samples: "The reasons for why are very much circumspect at this particular point," opined a CBC Radio news reporter. Another said that the native people in Canada are suffering increased health problems because they're turning away from their traditional diet and "embracing french fries."

Median language skill is declining, but the good news is there's no drop-off at the top end, if submissions to our journal are any indication. I'd like to call your attention to the non-fiction section of this issue, where language-use would be less noticeable than in fiction or poetry. Here, it would seem, language should be a transparent window to the ideas, not an object of appreciation on its own. But this does not mean that linguistic style doesn't matter in essays, or that there's just one good non-fiction style. Our essays show a high level of linguistic skill, and a wide diversity of voice.

Our first essay is by Robert Tittler, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History at Concordia University. The style here is what one would expect—or, rather, hope for—from an academic essay: calm and lucid, mostly slightly formal and impersonal, with complex sentence structure and a large vocabulary. The second essay is also by an academic: Paul Viminitz teaches philosophy at the University of Lethbridge; but there's quite a different voice in this one. It's personal and informal, lively and playful. It reads more like a lecture than a printed essay; the author himself is a vivid presence here, forcefully haranguing you. (When I copy-edited this, I actually cooled it down a bit, by eliminating a large number of italicizations—emphases which I thought were entirely appropriate for a lecture, but just too much for written form.)

The stylistic differences between these two essays are not decorative accidents; they are connected to differences in the authors' aims. The historical essay reports, describes and explains; the philosophical essay argues. Where you have an argument, it's nice to have a response; and I'm happy that Kent A. Peacock, a colleague of Viminitz at Lethbridge, has contributed a few pages of rebuttal.

The next non-fiction item is not an academic essay at all: it's a travelogue, an account of the author's visit to what is surely one of the dark places of the earth. Lyn Fox's prose here is very informal and jokey—exaggerated, in-your-face, half pulp-fiction men's-magazine style, half send-up of that style, a highly entertaining take on a very exotic place. There are some deeper points here, but they're somewhat buried in the gonzo razzle-dazzle. (I should tell you that I enjoyed the fireworks so much that I requested he cut out some of the deeper points, and he agreed.)

The last is "William," by Bill Chernin. The author's great-grandfather's name is the title of this, and I asked him if this was fiction or non-fiction. He was unsure, and reports being advised by an English professor friend that it was "creative non-fiction." I'm wary of this categorization, which carries with it hints of the post-modern claim that all "truth" should be surrounded by scare-quotes. But we can usefully apply the category pre-post-modernly here. The core of what this piece says is true, Chernin tells me, though it is embellished and reconstructed around the edges. What's important here, however, is that its purposes and techniques are those of fiction. Its emphasis is individual, not universal, expressive and painterly, not reportorial. We don't really care how much of this is true, because, like all good fiction, it's true-to-life. I found it very moving.

Each of these is, I think, a very good read on its own; but put together, they demonstrate the extraordinary variety of voice that skilful non-fiction writers can assume. Hope you enjoy this variety, and these pieces individually, as much as I did.

R.M.M.