

## I. Wy du I Rite So Funnee?

This question has been asked of me consistently, since I began altering standard spelling and grammar back in the mid 1970's. It has been asked politely and it has been asked with expletives undeleted. Readers and editors have been offended and confused by it, as well as delighted by it. A friendly but critical colleague from the Pittsburgh Poetry Exchange dubbed it "steevspell" many years ago, and that has become my preferred name for it.

Here's the metaphor that I keep coming back to: most people think of words as if they were bricks. They think of words as hard, clearly shaped, baked clay units. They're made in some factory somewhere – doesn't matter where or with what clay – to be used to build permanent things. I think of words as soft clay, easily shaped and re-shaped, mostly used to build impermanent things in impermanent and poorly designed ways. It is the rare structure, indeed, that survives these harsh conditions that we build in.

I realize that to many readers, my language appears idiosyncratic, obscure, and nearly impenetrable. Yet, when I am writing, I feel like I am speaking in an "English" that underlays the infinite variations and personal morphologies that are illusorily lumped together into a single language. People question steevspell, as if "English" were a pre-existing, complete, and unalterable phenomenon in nature, and I am breaking the rules. I am not breaking the rules; I am discovering them; I am extending them.

My earliest intention was two-fold. First, I wanted to normalize English spelling to spoken English. This seemed easy to accomplish, in my naivete. I soon discovered that I wasn't the first to try such a project. For example, the Chicago Tribune attempted to partially normalize English, only to be booted into submission. On top of that, normalization presented all kinds of new problems. Conjugational and etymological continuities often had to be stretched or abandoned. And what was I to do with regional and national accents? If a written-spoken normalization had been my only motive, I too would have quit the project. But that is not the case. By the way, if you study the evolution of my spellings you will see that I have progressively moved towards a normalization that reflects my accent.

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My second intention with steevspell was more ambitious and radical. I wanted to develop a grammar in which subject and predicate, object and action were merged. I had heard that this was possible in Sanskrit, and it seemed intuitively right to me. Surely, the actor and the action are not two separate things, but aspects of one thing. Later, when I began to learn Hebrew, I saw how root words and the absence of written vowels were used to create dynamic, interweaving structures of sound, meaning, and perspective. But English, and most European languages, don't have (or don't focus on) these kinds of conceptual tools. Perhaps our language was creating unnatural distinctions between actor and action, or between past, present, and future. So I began to work the clay, and I found that the possibility of merging noun and verb in English was waiting patiently just below the surface. Actually we are doing it all the time! Colloquial usage commonly slurs the "ing" verb form into "in," as in "I'm goin' to the store." Superimpose this on the form that converts a verb into a noun using "-ence" (as in "transcend" to "transcendence"), and, presto, yu ar the transenden ov normel Eenglish!

Critics pointed out to me two other inter-related and important effects of steevspell. First, it forced them to read more slowly. This really annoys a lot of people. We have so much to do, and so much to read, we don't have time to crawl along, actually paying attention to individual words. But just a second. That's precisely what poetry is about! It's about paying attention to each word; hearing them, considering them, going back and reading phrases again and maybe even again, slowly proceeding, and ohmigosh, actually enjoying the sensuality of language. I hope you speed demons don't have sex the way you read, trying to get done as quickly as possible. I much prefer to read slowly, sensuously, seductively engaged with each word.

The other complaint I got, a complaint by another poet, mind you, was that my poetry forced him to read my work aloud if he wanted to understand it. Darn, that annoyed him. Say what?? That too is exactly what poetry is about: hearing the words, speaking the words, creating not a fleeting shadow of a thought as you rush on through a zillion words a minute, but resonating the words through the very bones of your body, from the chest outward.

So, you're not breaking my heart if you have to read slowly, and if you even have to read my poetry

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aloud to get it. That's what you're supposed to do with poetry.

There is at least one more effect intended by steevspell. Poetic language has ebbed and flowed for thousands of years between the use of heightened, formal language, and the use of colloquial, simplified language. Often, when language is used to convey a sense of the sacred, it tends towards the formal, and this may easily become awkward or stilted. Nonetheless, I want to separate my poetry from mundane and secular literature. Whether or not I succeed and achieve a sense of the sacred in my poetry is for you to decide, but that, too, is part of my intention.