

SOME PROSE ABOUT PROSE ABOUT PROSE

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Introduction

The dialogic view of discourse seems only natural. Viewing a combination of voices as answering one another, we proceed from the assumption that verbs such as “to talk” have as their object a listener(s) who then respond(s). Hence, we perceive at least two entities in discourse. Our perception of differences in diction, tone, style and, in sum, authorship distinguish separate components of discourse: articulations. We find such an approach valuable because it allows us to establish pieces and then fit them together. (A jigsaw puzzle of a Kandinsky painting should seem easier to do than writing an essay about it). Or, let’s just say the question/answer or thesis/antithesis (bipartite) structure appeals because it begins with a statement which creates a “need” for information or reaction (that is a kind of direct development); and then, with the next statement, fills that need. Narrative sells itself in a similar way, by having the question “and then what happened?” propelling each new development.

So, our first impulse is to see things as fitting together in a discourse rather than existing together as a unified but complex set of statements. “I cannot imagine composition existing in a series of blocks”. A “block”, here, would be the question/thesis or answer/antithesis. The synthesis (or moral), if there is one, becomes a third block. These blocks are clearly defined statements (they may, of course, consist of more than one sentence) upon which and under which other statements are placed. A complete composition is not such brick laying, but rather a mass of content related by how everything snowballs into meaning.

There are times when a handful of texts (procured separately, each with its own title and author) seem to relate to one another. Similarities between statements can easily be discounted as having been written under different historical circumstances *or* be viewed as a case of the chronologically later statement being a comment on the earlier one. But why bother? I’m trying to arrive at “wisdom” by a simpler model: related propositions combine to form facets (other propositions) out of their relationships. That is, it seems to me, that these facets have, as their shared edges, the original related propositions; not then a series of blocks, but an irregular crystal. The working of such a model is one of the things which make literature interesting. It is what a Henry James’ sentence does as a whole (how all the words combine) that makes it interesting. Diagramming it would show it also works as

a “series of blocks” but such schematizing is of limited use. I hope that below, “Form” of thought becomes “no more than an extension of content”. Or, as James put it: “The form, it seems to me, is appreciated after the fact”. The texts are:

1. Fielding, Henry. *Joseph Andrews* (pub. 1742).
2. James, Henry. *The Art of Fiction* (1884).
3. Stevenson, Robert Louis. *A Humble Remonstrance* (1884).
4. Stein, Gertrude. *Narration* (1934).
5. Creeley, Robert. *Notes for a New Prose* (1951).

Chronologically, a lexicon seems to refine (at a bumpy, but somewhat accelerating rate): eg. Fielding- “Authoring”; James- “fiction”; Stevenson- “fictitious narrative in *prose*” (italics, RLS); Stein- “narration”, “composition”, “prose”; Creeley- “prose”.

ONE

“Words” “for the sake of what content possible, might shape them into sense”. Content does not just shape form, but informs the words themselves, gives them their particularness. Rhythm operates on the level of the denotative meaning of the words in a work. What a word means and how it fits into a sentence in prose partially dictate inflection and pronunciation. Stein most jarringly showed how the literal meaning of a word and its place in the sentence is what separates it from nonsense. A momentum establishes itself within a sentence: “Picking her way with Maggie through the local puddles, diving with her into smelly cottages and supporting her, at smellier shops, in firmness over the weight of joints and the taste of cheese, it was still her secret that was universally interwoven”.

The connotative meanings, the context, the place of a word within a structure of other surrounding words makes them musical & integrates them. The feel or meaning of the phrase depends on this integration: “I was a result, from town to town, I thought I’d used the generation of hearing come close from the same thing, from the ample other worlds, I begin to experience three or four a year to what I could do to, from then on one was supposed to get wet, a substitute for getting attracted takes the same day presence of reason to control.” (Peter Seaton)

“We do not as yet get the basic fact, that reality is just that which is believed, just as long as it is, believed.” “The ordering of *conjecture* will remain as “real” as the ordering of fact, given the right hand.” There is an ordering involved. “Conjecture” versus “fact” isn’t really the point. “Given the right hand” gets closer but still misses. Composition &/or combination documents the imposition of order on words. Words *are* facts; their combination is always “real” conjecture. Composition insists that the ordering of words relates to the order of phrases, sentences, paragraphs, chapters or whatever units are recognized (by the typography) as above words. Any writing is such a series of combinations. In prose, these serve to push the work forward &, as story is dropped or distorted, becomes the main impulse to go from one phrase to the next. While there are idiosyncrasies of

structure from one text to the next, the forward motion & the recalling of words and sentences to each other create any prose work's unity.

For just this reason, the poetic line and stanza are unimportant in prose. Husserl writes: "That the expired part of the melody is objective to me is due —one is inclined to say— to memory, and it is due to expectation, which looks ahead that, on encountering the tone actually sounding, I do not assume that that is all." "Prose is the *projection* of ideas, in time". Breaking, enjambment is just not the issue in prose; continuous motion (however much modulated) in both directions is. Line breaks can't matter in prose. Pauses will occur as a part of the text's place in the language (punctuation which is always a sign of more than just a pause— i. e. the qualitative difference between a period and a comma). And there are the pauses which emphasize the structure: "As to those vacant pages which are placed between our books, they are to be regarded as those stages where, in long journeys, the traveler stays some time to repose himself, and consider of what he hath seen in the parts he hath already passed through" "What are the contents prefixed to every chapter, but so many inscriptions over the gates of inns (to continue the same metaphor) informing the reader what entertainment he is to expect". And so "it becomes an author generally to divide a book, as it does a butcher to joint his meat, for such assistance is of great help to both the reader and the carver."

The continuous motion recognized, the author sometimes breaks it up for the reader's sake, but the text would not demand it (cf. Gertrude Stein's *How to Write*).

"sentences and paragraphs need not necessarily go on existing" "sentences which within themselves carry no emotion because a thing balanced within itself does not give out nor have within any emotion but sentences existing within themselves by the balance that holds them when they are in succession one after the other and makes a paragraph have the emotion that any succession can give to anything."

TWO

Prose, since it relies on successive word order, makes story almost irresistibly attractive. Seems like a lot's been written and said about the seductive quality of narrative, its ability to manipulate the passive reader. Of equal import: narrative can seduce and manipulate the writer of prose. This is not necessarily good or bad, one gives oneself up to a structure or an impulse in writing. The novelist "will find besides that he, who is free —who has the right to invent or steal a missing incident, who has the right, more precious still, of wholesale omission— is frequently defeated, and, with all his advantages, leaves a less strong impression of reality and passion [than a historian]."

Story is, in prose, at one level just a structure. Any structure on prose will succeed or fail as it accomplishes its primary purpose: allowing the successive ordering of words to create motion. To use an image more overtly metaphorical: structure at this level, the level of story or composition, is like a track upon which at least one team of words runs a relay race. James on Turgeniff: "The first form

in which a tale appeared to him was as the figure of an individual or a combination of individuals, whom he wished to see in action, being sure that such people must do something very special and interesting. They stood before him definite, vivid, and he wished to know, and show, as much as possible of their nature. The first thing was to make clear to himself what he did know, to begin with..."

Form comes out of content, but structure comes out of knowledge. Not like knowing what you're talking about, but grasping, perceiving, the connection between the mind's statements and language. Prose is written out of that connection. I'm saying more here than just "writing is verbalizing what is imagined". I'm dealing with structure. Structure in prose is knowing. And "knowledge then is what you know at the time at anytime that you really know anything. And in knowing anything you know it as you know it, you know it at the time that you are knowing it and in that way the way that you are knowing it knowing has not succession there may be continuous states of knowing anything but at no time of knowing is there anything but knowing that thing the thing you know, know carefully what you do know and of course anybody can know that this is so". So knowledge, an unsuccessful momentary phenomenon of thought and/or perception, leads to the successive ordering of words, of language.

The mind may know something in words, but these words, like prose, reflect the structure of the language, which by its largeness cannot immediately become the structure of prose. "One writes the novel, one paints the picture, of one's language and of one's time, and calling it modern English will not, alas! make the difficult task any easier" and, at the risk of quoting a somewhat over-quoted passage: "The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything."

Or

'In the midst of these transactions, the embassy returned, which had been sent, in pious times, to Mecca.'

Vathek, William Beckford.

"William had pointed me up the brook, but I chose to go down, which was only fair because it was his day, though one likes as well to follow and see where a brook goes as to find one's way to the places it comes from, and its tiny springs and headwaters, and in this case trout were not to be considered."

A Dunnet Shepherdess, Sarah Orne Jewett.

"The wind had risen with the moon and it was occasionally sweeping over the plain in a manner that made it not difficult for the sentinel to imagine strange and unearthly sounds were mingling in the blasts."

The Prairie, James Fenimore Cooper.