

INTRODUCTION

Critical and intelligent reading of prose is an art and as such, it is acquired and perfected by training and practice. Being the most ubiquitous form of literature, especially as fiction, prose ought to have seriously engaged the minds of the critic and the teacher to produce detailed instructions and illuminating handbooks for the learning of that art, but it has been so utterly ignored by both that one can hardly find a guidebook which might somehow advise the reader in the development of those powers that help him gain a fuller and richer appreciation of prose. This indifference has in turn made our college students so deplorably insensitive to the techniques and subtleties of prose that, strangely enough, they often score higher in the more complex analysis of a poem than they do in a prose piece. All they think of in their study of prose is the problems of lexicon and semantics and what they hardly attempt is the application of technical knowledge for a

fairly advanced interpretation of prose.

The primary object of this book is to direct the attention of the student to the delicate details of expression by some eminent prose writers of England and America and in the meantime acquaint him with most of the prominent features of prose from the sixteenth century to the present time. This will naturally provide him with a number of criteria and touchstones which will enable him, by means of comparison and contrast, to make sound and intelligent judgment when he happens to come across the works of those prose writers who are not represented in this book. The selected extracts include examples of narrative, descriptive and expository prose taken from various literary forms such as the Essay, Criticism, Novel, Satire, and the Philosophical and Historical Discourse. The student is advised to read and re-read each separate excerpt closely and with great attention and then strive to

- a) understand the meaning and implication of the content,
- b) ascertain the sentiments of the author to his theme and
- c) evaluate the individual manner of the writer, that is, his style.

Since the exercises are so arranged that these objects be dealt with in the order given, care should be taken to tackle them in their designed sequence of groups A, B, C and D.

The exercises of group A are designed to enable the student to overcome the semantic problems of the passage and to direct him to a full understanding of the context. First the vocabulary is examined. When a writer's choice of words is being studied the questions that are of interest are: which vocabulary strata does he prefer? Does he use

everyday words or unusual and remote words? Does he appear to be fastidious about his choices, that is, are his words refined and Precious or Direct and blunt? Are they mostly Abstract or Concrete? And, above all, does he favor Latin words or Anglo-saxon words? Here the distinction is between Latin, Greek, French and Italian borrowings on the one hand and the earlier words from Old English, the Scandinavian and Germanic languages on the other. Although it is not always true that "Latin" words are long and uncommon and "Saxon" terms short and current, the Latin word is ordinarily long, refined, scientific, technical, literary or ecclesiastical whereas Saxon words are likely to be popular, everyday, short and often crude. However, the best guide, when the student is in doubt, would be a good etymological dictionary. While still examining a prose piece word by word, the student should be looking also for any notable abundance of sensory words, slang words, archaisms, epithets and adverbs.

The second section of group A explores the difficult phrases whose meanings are important to the argument of the whole passage and their understanding would be essential for the illumination of the author's theme. These phrases are highlighted because they contain ambiguities, euphemisms, syntactic problems or because they are just idiomatic. When explaining the meaning of such phrases, the student should take care to supply an equivalent which fits into the structure of the writer's argument.

Since it is also necessary that the student should understand the significance of the allusions in the passage, there follows usually an exercise of any reference that the

writer may have indirectly made to the Scriptures, mythology or the works of other writers, either classical or otherwise. Before going any further in the study of the passage, the student is expected to consult the appropriate reference work and supply brief explanatory notes for such allusions.

Sometimes an author uses words that are technical and are generally employed in science, philosophy, religion, music or in literature. These should by no means be overlooked as they provide an opportunity for the student to enlarge his vocabulary in the fields not specifically his own.

Having considered the meaning of the salient words and phrases, and the significance of the various allusions, the student is advised to read the extract once more and examine the type of sentence that the author favors most. Some writers prefer long and periodic sentences of which the meaning is not quite clear until the reader comes to the end of them. The following statement by James Boswell is a good example of a periodic sentence:

Had Dr. Johnson written his own life, in conformity with the opinion which he has given, that every man's life may be best written by himself; had he employed in the preservation of his own history, that clearness of narration and elegance of language in which he has embalmed so many eminent persons, the world would probably have had the most perfect example of biography that was ever exhibited.

From *The Life of Samuel Johnson*

Or this extreme one by Thomas De Quincey:

I do not often weep: for not only do my thoughts on subjects connected with the chief interests of man daily, nay hourly, descend a thousand fathoms "too deep for tears"; not only does the sternness of my habits of thought present an antagonism to the feelings which prompt tears—wanting of necessity to those who, being protected usually by their levity from any tendency to meditative sorrow, would by that same levity be made incapable of resisting it on any casual access of such feelings:— but also, I believe that all minds which have contemplated such objects as deeply as I have done, must, for their own protection from utter despondency, have early encouraged and cherished some tranquilizing belief as to the future balances and the hieroglyphic meanings of human sufferings.

From *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*

In Contrast to such writers, there are some who usually prefer to put their ideas in loose and short sentences. The following illustration is by William Makepeace Thackeray:

My lady had on her side three idols: first and foremost, Jove the supreme ruler, was her lord, Harry's patron, the Viscount of Castlewood. All wishes of his were laws with her. If he had a headache, she was ill. If he frowned, she trembled. If he joked, she smiled and was charmed. If he went

a-hunting, she was always at the window to see him ride away, her little son crowning on her arm, or on the watch till his return. She made dishes for his dinner: spiced his wine for him : made the toast for his tankard at breakfast: hushed the house when he slept in his chair, and watched for a look when he awoke. If my Lord was not a little proud of his beauty, my lady adored it.

From *Henry Esmond*

Although it is true that the subject-matter usually determines the type of sentence used in a prose piece, some authors have a natural tendency to one of these two types, but more often than not they individualize their prose either by the use of balanced, subordinate or antithetical clauses, or the insertion of such devices as "apostrophes" and "parentheses". Calculated misspellings, deliberate grammatical lapses, intentional vulgarisms and a disguised pedantic refinement are also some of the techniques that writers employ for their comic and satiric effects and make them distinct from others. A writer's sentence structure is always an important aspect of his prose and no thorough discussion of his style would be possible without first making a detailed and sensible study of his sentences.

The exercises of group B deal with the student's comprehension of the passage. Here he is asked to examine the extract again; this time for its import and implication. In the first section, the statements and phrases which contain a complex idea or an idiomatic

expression, or somehow obscure the meaning of the extract are to be explained. Then the student is to answer a number of questions which ensure his full understanding of the passage. When the whole passage is thus illuminated, he will be in a position to cope with the more difficult exercises of group C.

The exercises of this group treat of the manner in which the passage is written. They are designed to direct the student to an appreciation of the writer's style. Matters of technique that are considered, though in a varied order, are as follows:

a) Figures of speech, rhetorical figures and literary devices, though not precisely similar in meaning, are, for convenience, used interchangeably throughout and are examined to explore the emotive content of the extract. The questions which often arise here are: to what extent does the author use figurative language? Does he use literary figures to reinforce his theme, or does he use them for mere decorations? Do his devices intensify the emotive value of his statements, or are they forced, flat and irrelevant? What rhetorical figures of speech or of meaning does the author favor most? Do they shed any light on his interests and sentiments? The object of the questions in this section are to alert the student to the fact that in most prose pieces there is a number of half-concealed devices such as metaphor, simile, metonymy, irony, paradox, oxymoron and a host of others which, as a significant part of his interpretation, he should detect and explain.

b) In the exercises of group C. the student is often asked to discuss the rhythm of the writer's prose. It may

perhaps be astonishing for a student to hear that rhythm is an essential feature of prose just as it is of poetry. But, whereas, rhythm of poetry has a regular and easily perceptible pattern, the rhythm of prose is irregular and not readily appreciable. One of the differences between good prose and fair prose lies in their rhythms and cadences. Illustrations would perhaps be in order here. The following is an extract from the Book of Job—*The Old Testament*:

"There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil.

"And there was born unto him seven sons and three daughters.

"His substance also was seven thousand sheep, and three thousand camels, and five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she-asses, and a very great household; so that this man was the greatest of all the men of the east."

The cadences in this excerpt are so delicate and polished that it truly deserves the name of poetry. Even regardless of that beautiful alliteration of "z" sound in the first sentence which so remarkably enhances the poetic character of it, there is a perceptible sequence of iambs, trochees, anapests, dactyls, etc. which, incidentally, is not any more irregular than some modern poetry:

Thěre wás / ă mán / in̄ thē lánd / ǒf Úz / whōse
námē / wás Jób / ańd thát / mán wás / pér fěct / ańd

úp riġht / ańd ońe / thăt féared Gód / ańd ěs
chėwed / é vřil.

The following extract by Robert Louis Stevenson is so rhythmic that can easily be scanned and divided into a variety of definable feet by simply marking the stressed syllables¹:

The chānges / wróught / by déath / are in
themsélves / so shārp / and fińal / and so térrible /
and mélancholy / in their cónsequences / that the
thińg / stands alóne / in mán's / expérience, / and
has nó / párallel / upón eārth. / It outdóes / all
othér / áccidents / becaúse / it is the lást / of thém. /
Sómetimes / it leáps / súddenly / upón its / víctims /
like a Thúg; / sómetimes / it láys / a régular seige /
and creéps / upón / their cíttadel / dúring / a scóre /
of yeárs. /

From "*Æs Triplex*"

The student is therefore advised to cultivate in himself an awareness of the rhythmical qualities of prose by reading it aloud and trying to accentuate properly the cadent features of it.

c) It is only after a close examination of all the matters suggested above that the student should try, with

1. For a detailed discussion of prose rhythm, see Marjorie Boulton, *The Anatomy of Prose*, London: Routledge and Kegan, 1978, pp. 49-69.

great care, to characterize the style of the writer and to reach a decision as to whether it is plain or ornate and turgid; lucid or obscure; concise or diffuse, prolix, verbose or long-winded; meagre or copious; dull or vivid; rapid and racy or leisurely; austere or florid; insipid or vigorous; placid or energetic; dignified or pompous; elegant or clumsy; detached or eloquent and rhetorical; blunt or circumlocutive. These are some of the technical terms that are often used to describe a writer's style. The student is expected to look them up in a good dictionary and try to gain mastery of their proper usage. However, if he is asked to give his opinion of a writer's manner he needn't insist on their use if he has his own equivalents.

And lastly in the exercises of group D, the student is asked to do a piece of research work on the related topics given in the exercise and then to write a brief composition. The exercises of this group are intended to enable the student to acquaint himself with the life and works of the writer and to afford him likewise opportunities of constructive writing.

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