

UgLY PrOSE

The virtues of very bad sentences.

 By M. Thomas Gammarino

As a younger writer, I spent lots of time trying to write elegant prose. I read and emulated the acrobatics of Nabokov, the romantic flights of Cheever and Woolf and Baldwin, the liposuction of Hemingway and Carver. But even as I steadily internalized the virtues of “good” writing – clarity, precision, variety, etc. – I was also discovering a batch of writers who wrote phenomenally *bad* prose. And here’s the thing: I loved it every bit as much.

To be sure, I’m not talking about prose that is *merely* bad, i.e. incompetent or unrefined; I’m talking about prose that has been masterfully crafted to defy all of those received virtues and wear its ugliness on its sleeve – prose that aims not to shimmer and flow so much as creak and stink and ooze.

We might say that good bad prose falls into two types: the “naturalized” and the “unnaturalized.”

By “naturalized,” I mean that there is some intramural narrative justification for the shoddiness. Here’s an example, from the beginning of George Saunders’ short story “Jon:”

Back in the time of which I am speaking, due to our Coördinators had mandated us, we had all seen that educational video of “It’s Yours to Do With What You Like!” in which teens like ourselves speak on the healthy benefits of getting off by oneself and doing what one feels like in terms of self-touching, which what we learned from that video was, there is nothing wrong with self-touching, because love is a mystery but the mechanics of love need not be, so go off alone, see what is up, with you and your relation to your own gonads, and the main thing is, just have fun, feeling no shame!

This run-on violates nearly all of the dictates of conventionally good prose. First we get the clunky and overwrought adverbial phrase, followed by a grammatically impoverished one (“due to” invites an object that never quite comes). Then we get “ourselves” and the gloriously inelegant “in terms of self-touching,” followed by the unearned “love is a mystery,” the jarring point-of-view shift to the second-person, the awkward de-contraction (“see what is up”), and the coup de grâce: a wholly unwarranted exclamation point. On its surface, there is a very definite my-kid-could-do-that quality to this opening paragraph, but of course kids can’t do that, not as craftily and multi-dimensionally as Saunders does. If you read the story, you’ll find that the narrator is a teenaged boy who has been raised in an advertising research facility as a programmed, narcotized product tester. The bad prose therefore enfold something of the dystopian setting and plot; it *makes sense* that Jon would speak like this. And, of course, it’s ironic: Saunders knows the writing is bad, and he knows that we know that he knows that, so he’s free to louse it up as expertly as he can.

To take an even more in-your-face example of naturalized bad prose, let’s look at Daniel Keyes’ classic *Flowers for Algernon*, which contains gems like this:

She said; You, got. to-mix?them!up: She showd? me” how, to mix! Them; up, and now! I can. mix (up all? kinds of punctuation – in, my. writing! There” are lots, of rules; to learn? But. Im get’ing them in my head:

One thing? I, like: about, Dear Miss Kinian: (that’s, the way? it goes; in a Business, letter (if I ever go into business?) is that, she: always; gives me’ a reason” when – I ask. She”s a gen’ius! I wish! I could be smart-like-her;

Punctuation, is? fun!

The effect is humorous, thank goodness, because otherwise the story is almost too painful to bear. If you’ve read the novel (or the novella it grew out of), you know what I mean. If you

haven’t, suffice it to say that at the outset of the story Charlie, our narrator, has an IQ of 68. It’s soon to elevate, however, and so too, in lockstep, is his prose.

In both of these examples, sentence-level concerns remain in some sense subordinate to story. We can’t help notice the language, and yet, per realism, we mostly see through it to the world it projects. Certain other writers – more self-consciously “avant-garde” ones, if you like – so delight in writing off-kilter prose that they raise it to the level of genuine aesthetic vision and depart from realism altogether. **Their unapologetically awkward sentences become vehicles for defamiliarizing, and thereby refreshing, our relationships to language, if not to the world itself.**

They “purify the words of the tribe,” to borrow Stéphane Mallarmé’s phrase.

By any account, Donald Barthelme has to be reckoned one of the great prose stylists of the 20th century, the worthy heir to masters like Joyce and Beckett. If postmodernism can bear the irony of having a canon, Barthelme must be somewhere near dead center. Whatever postmodernism may mean – and the jury is forever out on that – we can at least agree that Barthelme was fundamentally a collage artist, finding in the “dreck” (his word) of midcentury American culture, readymades to be lifted and artfully juxtaposed. Sometimes Barthelme’s collages function at the level of content (e.g. “Porcupines at the University,” which combines, well, porcupines and the university), sometimes at the level of form, and very often both. In either case, where Saunders’ and Keyes’ bad prose comes from fouling up sentences, Barthelme’s comes mainly from screwing around in the spaces between them. The effect is one of free-floating irony. The targets of his pastiches and satires aren’t always identifiable in any one-to-one way, but it’s clear he’s not capitulating to dreck so much as using it against itself. In an interview with the *Paris Review*, Barthelme said this of his method:

I look for a particular kind of sentence, perhaps more often the awkward than the beautiful. A back-broke sentence is interesting. Any sentence that begins with the phrase, ‘It is not clear that...’ is clearly clumsy but preparing itself for greatness of a kind. A way of backing into a story – of getting past the reader’s hardwon armor.”



If you’re new to Barthelme, reading him may take a little practice, but once you’re attuned to the registers he works in, you’ll find his ungainly, albeit perfectly pitched, prose can sometimes break your heart.

Ben Marcus is one of several writers who have clearly inherited Barthelme’s mantle. His first book, the story collection *The Age of Wire and String*, is “a catalog of the life project” in which Marcus adopts the deadpan tone, Latinate specificity, and wooden syntax of the logician (incidentally, Marcus’ father was a career mathematician, and Ben himself studied philosophy at NYU) to inventory the mundane sociology of an alternate Ohio, where a “girl burned in water” is the “basic unit of religious currency,” and there is a “time-based sense” to the term “Walter.” English words are reconnotated or imbued with altogether new meanings until sooner or later the reader’s frames of reference give out. If you have a taste for surrealism, and language play, it’s fabulously interesting. Here, for example, is his definition of “Heaven:”

Area of final containment. It is modeled after the first house. It may be hooked and slid and shifted. The bottom may be sawed through. Members inside stare outward and sometimes reach.

Now if we try to read this in the realist mode – that is, if we let it project a world for us – we find it strangely incomplete. Heaven is modeled after the “first house,” but don’t expect Marcus to say anything more about that. Heaven may be “hooked and slid and shifted.” OK, but how? Hooked with what? Slid to where? What is the bottom made of that it can be sawed through? And most obviously, most *badly*, “reach” is a transitive verb. It is impossible to read that members “sometimes reach” and not ask what it is they reach. The effect is part disorientation, part schizoid euphoria.

Marcus also gets good use out of the generally ill-advised passive voice, especially when the active might have done just as well:

“The snoring person can be stuffed with cool air to slow the delivery of its language...” (From “Snoring, Accidental Speech.”)

“It is understood in terms of the phenomenon of combustion as seen in wood and brick...” (From “Views from the First House.”)

It is known that certain figures will chase circular objects when a song is played. (From “Hidden Ball Inside a Song.”)

And get past our armor he does. Barthelme is no aesthetic nihilist; like his modernist forebears, he still takes aim at the ineffable, but he gets there by the most sublunary paths. An example from his short story “Paraguay,” which is a kind of travelogue gone awry:

Anechoic chambers placed randomly about the city (on the model of telephone booths) are said to have actually saved lives. Wood is becoming rare. They are now paying for yellow pine what was formerly paid for rosewood. Relational methods govern the layout of cities. Curiously, in some of the most successful projects the design has been swung upon small collections of rare animals spaced (on the lost-horse principle) on a lack of grid. Carefully calculated mixes: mambas, the black wrasse, the giselle. Electrolytic jelly exhibiting a capture ratio far in excess of standard is used to fix the animals in place.

If some of the logical connective tissue seems to be missing between sentences, rest assured, it is. The story, by this point, has become mostly a litany of official-sounding non-sequiturs and inscrutabilities, a “slumgullion” (again, Barthelme’s word) of cultural and linguistic detritus. And yet, as Barthelme said in another interview:

Mixing bits of this and that from various areas of life to make something that did not exist before is an oddly hopeful endeavor. The sentence “Electrolytic jelly exhibiting a capture ratio far in excess of standard is used to fix animals in place” made me very happy – perhaps in excess of its merit. But there is in the world such a thing as electrolytic jelly; the “capture ratio” comes from the jargon of sound technology; and the animals themselves are a salad of the real and the invented. The flat, almost “dead” tone paradoxically makes possible an almost-lyricism.

It’s hard to imagine that Williams formed the idea for this sentence and then retrofitted language to it. No, a sentence like this can only grow out of its own sonic, semi-signifying enzymes. In his essay “The Sentence Is A Lonely Place,” Lutz talks about his own composing process:

And as the words reconstitute themselves and metamorphose, your sentence may begin to make a series of departures from what you may have intended to express; the language may start taking on, as they say, a life of its own, a life that contests or trumps the life you had sponsored to live on the page. But it was you who incited these words to shimmer and mutate and reconfigure even further – and what they now are saying may well be much more acute and more crucial than what you had thought you wanted to say.

I am reminded here of a story I have heard about Einstein. While at work on his theory of general relativity, he produced an equation that announced to him, unambiguously, that our universe is expanding. At the time, everyone, including Einstein himself, believed in a static-state universe, so he ignored his result and finessed the numbers until they produced the kind of universe he’d wanted at the outset. He later came to think of this as the “biggest blunder” of his life.

Truth, the lesson seems to be, is sometimes a function of careful listening, and of getting out of our own way. I am not prepared to defend any grand metaphysical claims here, but it seems to me that a radical innovator like Lutz is a sort of mystic, crafting sentences that transcend, even unite, “good” and “bad.” Be warned, though, as Hemingway wrote in *Death in the Afternoon*, “Mysticism implies a mystery and there are many mysteries; but incompetence is not one of them.”

So first you need to learn to write well. Then you can write as badly as you want. ■

Not only does the passive voice contribute to the quasi-authoritative tone Marcus is so fond of, but it also confers on the work a disembodied, almost haunted, feeling: Where are the doers of all these verbs?

Another inheritor of the Barthelmeian tradition – though Gertrude Stein and the language poets are back there too – is Gary Lutz, who has got to be writing some of the worst prose around. To be sure, Lutz is a virtuoso. He knows English grammar well enough to have written a couple of books on the subject, and his command equips him with an unparalleled ability to contort language in the most surprising and clever ways. He relishes rhetorical devices like syllepsis and catechrisis (if you don’t know what those are, allow me to recommend Mark Forsyth’s excellent *The Elements of Eloquence*). And yet, as the language piles up in his stories, characters and narratives do begin to emerge. Like Marcus, Lutz is a language surrealist, with his characters and situations growing out of linguistic caprice, worlds from words (it’s no coincidence that both of these writers were ushered into print by legendary editor Gordon Lish). Here’s an excerpt from Lutz’ short story “Devotions,” from his aptly titled collection *Stories in the Worst Way*:

From time to time I show up in myself just long enough for people to know they are not in the room alone. Usually, these are people who expect something from me – a near future, a not-too-distant future. What I tell them is limited to the people I have already had myself married against. Everything I say is to the best of my knowledge and next to nothing. It comes nowhere close.

If we strain a little, we can make out the ghostly outline of a narrative here, but it’s clear that language is the animating force of the story. This is not the sort of fiction you can get lost in; rather, it is the sort that, if you let it, can fizz and pop and create exhilarating new pathways in your brain.

And lest it seem from my examples so far that only men are writing good bad prose, here’s a dizzying sentence from Diane Williams, another writer in Lish’s stable:

“I do not want to leave behind anything during the accumulation that I will have to grasp at one glance because it is not a piece of crap.” (From “The Time of Harmony, Or Crudite.”)

