

Beautiful Writing

by
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The prosodic goal of the writer (in my estimation of serious fiction) is to present beautiful writing. The definition of ‘beautiful writing’ is somewhat ethereal, in that it cannot be fully represented in words. Beautiful writing is a cumulative effect—of elegant sentence structure, of eloquent metaphors, of poetic turn-of-phrase, and of overall representation. The prose must seem as if hewn from crystal—the entire form must reverberate when attacked by reading, and the language must be energized by multidimensional phrasing. The sentences themselves must be crisp and clean, as if made of a perfect titanium skeleton crowned by a flawless jeweled carapace. Each sentence must be an organic part of the whole composition, like a brilliant bird in a cloud of migrating birds.

The whole of the work must be as solid as an ancient pyramid, and must have an overall form that is linear and smooth. No single aspect of the work must weaken the whole; it is the consistent strength of the prose that creates an object of words.

Beautiful writing begins at the beginning—with accurate sentence structure. I am assuming that the writer wishing to write beautifully not only possesses a basic understanding of grammar and punctuation, but also a solid understanding of the mechanics of forming coherent sentences. The basis of beautiful writing is clarity—and clarity in writing is achieved through precision. It doesn’t matter how the writer wants to phrase a sentence—it only matters that the sentence precisely describes what the writer means to say. That is why some of the most basic stories are well received—not for the genius of their subject matter, but for the clarity with which it is presented.

Many writers confuse abundance for complexity, and so compose convoluted and overburdened sentences in the mistaken impression that doing so will create a collage of affective sensory data. But complexity can be created without abundance; in fact, it should be created without abundance. For instance, if I wish to write a passage about a character contemplating suicide (and with apologies to Shakespeare’s Hamlet) then I want to infuse as much emotional turmoil into his thought process in order to illustrate the potential tragedy of the act:

“Nathan held the knife above his wrist. He’d read long ago in a novel that the proper way for someone to cut his or her wrist was to draw

the blade down the length of the forearm. He wondered vaguely if he could sustain the will to endure that much pain before adequately completing the task. Through the walls of the hotel room he could hear the unintelligible voices of other people, but they were like the voices of ghosts. If they were actually ghosts, then his voice might join them soon. He stared at the reflection of the lamplight on the knife's blade and began to cry. In an isolated part of his thoughts he felt that it was senseless to release that much sorrow when his psychological release was so close at hand. But then he thought that it might very well be a part of the process of leaving his sorrow behind, and he laid the knife aside long enough to explore that celebration in the convulsions of his body."

A cardinal rule for assessing the clarity of a written passage is to count the number of modifiers against the number of nouns, verbs and prepositions. This may sound ridiculously fundamental, but it remains the best means to monitor the strength of your prose. Our emotional reaction to fictional situations does not depend upon the writer's attempts to describe the emotional state of the story's characters—our emotional reaction takes place in our own minds as we assess the fictional circumstances themselves. I cannot emphasize this enough. For instance, I could have written:

"Nathan shakily held the knife above his wrist. He'd read long ago in a lurid novel that the proper way for someone to fatally slash his or her wrist was to draw the blade down the arm. He wondered vaguely if he could sustain the will to endure that much horrible pain before adequately completing the terrible task. Through the cheap walls of the inexpensive hotel room he could hear the unintelligible voices of the other people, but they were like the whispering, lilting voices of ghosts. If they were actually horrid ghosts, then his voice might phantasmagorically join them soon. He stared at the foreboding reflection of lamplight on the knife's blade and began to cry pitifully. In an isolated part of his tormented thoughts he felt that it was laughingly senseless to release so much inborn sorrow when his prayed-for psychological release was so close at hand. But then he thought that it might very well be part of the process of leaving his untenable sorrow behind, and he tremblingly laid the knife aside long enough to explore that celebration in the uncontrollable convulsions of his sobbing body."

The first selection is 173 words long. The second version is 190 words long. Those 17 extra words are the difference in the clarity of the passage.

What the reader sees is the emotional consequence of the entire scene; what the writer sees (in the second example) is the emotional consequence of *each* sentence in the passage. This is the greatest mistake that writers make at the basic level of composition. A passage's focus is obscured by a larding on of modifiers (shakily, fatally, horrible, terrible, inexpensive, horrid, phantasmagorically, foreboding, prayed-for, tremblingly, and etc.) Whether they are adjectives or adverbs, they are poison to the whole composition when they are inartistically applied. It is not that modifiers in and of themselves make for bad writing—but they must be included appropriately for the effect of the *entire passage or work* to benefit from them *properly*. Keep in mind that each modifier creates an

emotional aura for the word it modifies. And with each modifier used the writer accumulates a confusing emotional soup that renders the whole of the passage or scene comically apportioned. I'll repeat—the emotional response in a given work is *cumulative*. The emotional or psychological effect of the passage must be singularly precise in order to create that effect in the reader.

Beautiful writing is also accomplished through the manner in which a writer says a thing within a passage or work. Masterful phrasing is always celebrated; and masterful phrasing is what we most celebrate in the works of William Shakespeare. The poetic aspects of his work translate also into the best works of fiction. Melville's *Moby Dick* is replete with beautiful passages. A writer may phrase an expression uniquely, or ornately, or cleverly, or eloquently, depending on the material and the body of the work. An example of unique phrasing from our initial passage:

"He wondered vaguely if he could sustain the will to endure that much pain before adequately completely the task."

Here the expression is brief and subtle: 'sustain the will'.

I did not write 'find the will' or even 'find the willpower', because 'sustain the will' not only gets the meaning across but also colors it with a unique combination of terms. This unique way of saying 'find the willpower' adds the power of the verb 'sustain' to the implication of 'maintain', implying that the protagonist is uncertain of the process.

And an example of clever phrasing:

"He stared at the reflection of the lamplight on the knife's blade and began to cry."

Here the emphasis is on the combination of lamplight and reflection; I could have written, 'the reflections on the knife's blade', but the former version offers much more to the reader than the reflection. Here we, as readers, are made to see the reflection of the lamp in the knife. And without stating so overtly the phrasing creates a greater impression of the hotel room even while accomplishing its primary job.

And, finally, as an example of eloquence:

"But then he thought that it might very well be a part of the process of leaving his sorrow behind, and he laid the knife aside long enough to explore that celebration in the convulsions of his body."

The implication is that the character set the knife aside long enough to indulge an overwhelming crying jag. Now, the way that I phrased that information was done a little more eloquently. 'The process of leaving his sorrow behind' describes in formal terms the intensely emotional consequence of killing himself—but it is this formality that allows us to understand the greater implications of his actions. And, to close the passage with a poetic flourish, the character's crying jag is described as the character's intention to 'explore that celebration in the

convulsions of his body.” Again, the subtlety of phrasing adds a greater dimension to the overt actions occurring without adding a single modifier. This is the elusive quality known as ‘turn of phrase’. Again, it is what most people love about the writing of Shakespeare: ‘what a piece of work is man’, ‘there is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood’, ‘he was a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy’, ‘the quality of mercy is not ‘strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain’, and so much more that it becomes absurd that one writer could possibly possess that much artistry in his work.

The supposition drawn from Shakespeare is that that level of eloquence is the product of genius. Be that as it may, the competent writer can refine his or her own ear for such phrasing if he or she is careful not to confuse an infusion of unnecessary modifiers into the structure of descriptive sentences.

Beautiful writing also finds its strength in appropriate metaphors, similes and comparisons. An emphasis on the poetry of language can add another dimension to writing, and can intensify the meaning, or imply multiple meanings within the same expression. See my essay *Poetic Realism* for further elucidation on using poetry in the composition of fiction.

The first priority of writing is *clarity*. The second priority is *artistry*. And by artistry I mean the exotic effects of language that may be used to better illustrate what a writer means to say. These are the techniques discussed in most basic college English courses, and, regrettably, usually the first things forgotten by the writer (or labeled as academic baggage) when the course is completed. But these techniques are not baggage; they are the indispensable tools of the conscientious writer and must be embraced as such. The writer, like any artist, is only limited by the boundaries of his or her understanding of craft. Every compositional tool must be inventoried and kept ready for use. A writer should never be limited in expression because of laziness or the self-defensive dismissal of ‘archaic’ devices. A greater understanding of the use of language can only enhance a writer’s work.

For our purposes here I will illustrate the use of comparison and metaphor in creating a multidimensional layer of meaning. Let us assume that our protagonist has failed in his attempt to commit suicide in his hotel room. Now he stands by the open window of his room contemplating the night and the city, and the rush of traffic far below him.

“Nathan touched the cool metal surface of the window’s edge as his eyes focused on the parade of headlights moving in precise lines through the streets below. He felt removed from the city, he felt lifted above the sounds and the lights as if his mind were weightless and unattached, and an aspect of the air itself. In the imprecision of his thoughts he knew that he was still contained in the prison of his body, chained to the same history and followed by his own condemnation of the value of his life. But in that moment he released his spirit onto the world, onto the city and the night where it could feel as if it were an energetic part of a living, vibrant universe.”

The simile ‘as if his mind were weightless and unattached, and an aspect of the air itself’, does more than just illustrate that the character

is feeling detached from his circumstances; it provides us with the sensation itself, a freedom from the confinement of circumstances. The implication of freedom is immediately counterbalanced by metaphors of captivity: 'he was still contained in the prison of his body, chained to the same history and followed by his own condemnation of the value of his life'. The metaphors are all balanced, implying captivity in one way or another. But after the balancing of sensations the character's mind is once again freed from its circumstance—'But in that moment he released his spirit onto the world, onto the city and the night where it could feel as if it were an energetic part of a living, vibrant universe'. The word 'released' implies at least a temporary paroling of his spirit from the turmoil that it has been enduring, and the possibility of recognizing another state besides the miserable one in which he has been imprisoned, if only temporarily.

Please keep in mind that the only modifier in the passage that contains some implication of emotional state is the word 'vibrant'. And because it stands alone it provides a more intense emotional impact.

I have gone on at length here to illustrate how the composition of the prose itself should be the primary focus of the writer attempting to write good fiction; and if his or her study, technique and execution warrant, it is the first step in the production of beautiful writing. These are not writer's tricks; these are the basic and fundamental rules of magnificent writing. No writer ever produced great writing without adhering to these enduring principles.