

on the narrator's behalf, is an attractive challenge, and the compensations are several. For example, three of the triplets in the genetic code (UAA, UAG, UGA) are labeled "nonsense" or "stop," according to which version of the table you use. One can exploit those three in various ways, of course, and my narrator does, performing all through another compensation—as a specimen of someone doing this particular harebrained-sounding thing. The sense of using a universal given, in a not altogether spurious way, intensifies and disciplines the writing experience as well as, I trust, the reading one. A reader on the right wavelength may feel enlivened, enlarged, through experiencing such systemic devices in the narrative. I would hope he/she might respond as D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson does in his book *On Growth and Form* when, in a footnote to the chapter on "The Forms of Cells," he juxtaposes the catenary curves to be found in a vertical section of a topsoil belled out by wind with those to be found in Dürer's drawings of the wrinkles under an old man's eyes.

[1976]

## In Defense of Purple Prose

WORD IS ITS USES, as William H. Gass shows in his rollicking conspectus, *On Being Blue*, although he might have ogled purple as well. Purple does seep into his blue-book, however, here tinting some "spent body like a bruise," there leaving a "lavender thumb"-print of "broken veins." In fact, as well as being a book of blue's uses—in talk, literature, and the dictionary—*On Being Blue* is a prime, up-to-date example of purple prose, not so much a patch as it is a pyramid, a pandemonium, a seething nuclear pile of words. Infatuated with blue, its optical resonance and its metaphorical range, Gass picks up samples from far and near, revelling in the word's every appearance, teasing and inciting and delving until the little tome glides off on its own like emancipated lava, announcing I Am Words, I Am Language, I Am Style. The book is elaborate without being ornate, ambulatory without ever being pedestrian, and, for those whose tastes run to purple, a definitive joy. It reminds us that the almost lost art of phrase-making attracts the scorn of only those who have never made up a stylish phrase in their lives, as if style, somehow, had become taboo, a menace to people, gods, and cars.

Of course, purple is not only uses of the word. It is the world written *up*, intensified and made pleurably palpable, not only to suggest the impetuous abundance of Creation, but also to add to it by showing—showing off—the expansive power of the mind itself, its unique knack for making itself at home among trees, dawns, viruses, and then turning them into something else: a word, a daub, a sonata.

The impulse here is to make everything larger than life, almost to over-respond, maybe because, habituated to life "written down," in both senses, we become inured and have to be woken up with something almost intolerably vivid. When the deep purple blooms, you are looking at a dimension, not a posy.

Consider Paul Cézanne's famous doubt, eloquently pondered in an essay by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Was what Cézanne saw, and painted, in his head or "out there"? Or was it, as an attuned spectator may well ask, in the paint itself, in the fine-ground lumps of geology he painted with? Plump for all three, in a mood of feckless empathy. You can see what nagged at him, as I think it must have nagged at such masters of purple as Browne, Macaulay, Joyce, Faulkner, Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens, Dahlberg and Nabokov. Is it something lacking in you that makes you want, in your visionary versions of the world, to load every rift with ore? The phrase is Keats's. Notice how he emphasizes the contributive, creative end of things, implying that the ore in the ordinary isn't enough. He wants ore-dinary. Maybe it's not a lack, though, but a lack's complementary opposite: that powerful early-warning-system of the sensibility we call imagination, the system that Coleridge called "esemplastic" because it fuses the many into one. Maybe some creative heads, in order to see the world at all, and to find it worth representing, need to begin by putting it in gaudy colors. More sternly, in a mood of utmost reverence, they recognize that what you bring to the act of perception is often just as important as what you perceive. "We receive," wrote the same Coleridge, "but what we give." He understood these things, maybe a bit too well for his productivity as a poet. I think the Romantic poets as a whole understood that the mind and the world interact, a fact which it has taken twentieth-century physics to remind us of. The gist of the whole thing is that a mind fully deployed, and here mind includes imagination, will find the merest thing an inexhaustible object of wonderment, itself included (in a fit of modesty, of course). A carrot. A wart biopsied. The way in which, in a recent Italian movie, *The Night of the Shooting Stars*, an old man caught in the rain shoves his head and shoulders into the crowd already occupying what space there is beneath a tarpaulin covering the back of a pick-up truck. They are holding the tarp over them with their hands. As he butts forward, his shirt rides up from his pants and an elliptical slice of his back gets wet. The camera does not linger on him, but my

mind's eye did, making me wonder about our passion to keep our heads dry. Can it be because the brain is more like a chemical soup than it is like an abacus or a computer? Do we dread dilution?

Or take a horse moving about all night in its stall. Would it be worthless to write a whole novel about it? You never know. What you'd bring to the feat is what matters, and it might not be an advantage to know much about horses. All you need is a mind.

Or take the bald, blank end of a stem from which a hibiscus bloom has dropped, and you can feel the rough ends of the dried-up tiny tubes that fed it: micro-straws bound together by nature's clamp, like fascii, along which streamed the fuel of display. That's how a purple paragraph itself might start to bloom. The urge is more than the yen to make a well-upholstered paragraph that connoisseurs will clip and paste into albums of such things. It's a homage to nature and to what human ingenuity can do with nature's givens.

Certain producers of plain prose, however, have conned the reading public into believing that only in prose plain, humdrum, or flat, can you articulate the mind of inarticulate ordinary Joe. Even to begin to do that, you need to be more articulate than Joe, or you might as well tape-record him and leave it at that. This essentially minimalist vogue depends on the premise that only an almost invisible style can be sincere, honest, moving, sensitive, and so forth, whereas prose that draws attention to itself by being revved up, ample, intense, incandescent or flamboyant, turns its back on something almost holy, and that is the human bond with ordinariness. I doubt if much unmitigated ordinariness can exist. As Harold Nicolson once observed, only one man in a thousand is boring, and he's interesting because he's a man in a thousand. Surely the passion for the plain, the homespun, the banal, is itself a form of betrayal, a refusal to look honestly at a complex universe, a get-poor-quick attitude that wraps up everything in simplistic formulas never to be inspected for veracity or point. Got up as a cry from the heart, it's really an excuse for dull and mindless writing, larded over with the speciously democratic myth that says this is how most folks are. Well, most folks are lazy, especially when confronted with a book, and some writers are lazy too, writing in the same anonymous style as everyone else. How many prose writers can you identify from their style? Not many have that singular emanation from the temperament or those combinations of words all of them

characteristic for a certain gait, a certain tone, a certain idiosyncratic consecutiveness of thought and image. Stone the crows by all means, but let the birds of paradise get on with the business of being gorgeous. Even Hemingway, who has much to do with this vogue for the flat, breaks his own habit in certain rapturous, long sentences in which he seems to recognize that, although being alive is just one damn thing after another, there is no ultimate sum, no total; you just go on adding as long as you live, which is perhaps why a medieval monk, illuminating one capital letter for months, say, was living as full a life as Brother Busymitts, who rushes through a dozen in an hour.

It is not an either/or thing anyway. Human beings need pageantry every bit as much as they need austerity. The apocryphal tale of Samuel Beckett's living in a totally bare room because he felt that furniture insulted the purity of space has its counterpart in certain over-furnished salons in Balzac. We are the richer for the tale and those salons. We hear it all the time for minimal prose, though, the complimentary epithets for which never vary: taut, clean, crisp, tight, terse, lean, as if all we ever wanted were the skeletal. Is it because humans dread obesity, or fullness, or the relentless tug of gravity, that the righteous cult of the vacant has done so well? It takes a certain amount of sass to speak up for prose that's rich, succulent, and full of novelty. Disgust, allied with some anti-pleasure principle, rules the roost and fixes taste. Out of these narrow and uninspected notions, the self-righteous have wrung moralistic criteria for esthetic deeds, which is understandable in a basically puritan country that is profoundly corrupt but hates to admit it. Purple is immoral, undemocratic, and insincere; at best artsy, at worst the exterminating angel of depravity. The truth would seem to be that, so long as originality and lexical precision prevail, the sentient writer has a right to immerse himself or herself in phenomena and come up with as personal a version as can be. A writer who can't do purple is missing a trick. A writer who does purple all the time ought to have more tricks. A writer who is afraid of mind, which English-speaking writers tend to be, unlike their European counterparts, is a lion afraid of meat.

After all, it is the mind that stages such apparently incongruous and impossible things as making a stone talk, speaking up for posthumous narrators and dead characters, and, as in Gabriel García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, tuning in to the collective

imagination of a country's people as they begin to confect the myth of its dead dictator. The reader listens in to an unwieldy, ramshackle process that nevertheless is going to get where it is going. The people want an image: potent, nasty, and attractively damnable, and they are willing to lie, to fudge, to get it. It was the mind, surely, that led me to invent my story, "Those Pearls, His Eyes,"<sup>1</sup> in which a Rare Books Librarian finds himself afflicted with the grievous gift of seeing, not through a glass darkly, but as if through a scanning electron microscope: "The staples he tried to fit into his stapler were a vermilion ribcage. Outsqueezed toothpaste was a violet quicksand above which he floated weightlessly. Being nylon, his pajamas revealed themselves as an endlessly interlocking grid of repeated capital omegas." Indeed, there may be hope that, in purple, scientific writing (i.e. writing informed by science) may come into its own as a special genre of art as remote from science fiction, and its dipstick prose, as satellites are from bacon rinds. You solve mind's impasse with mind's instrument, not with your foot. One is always a godfather, never a god, although creative people through the ages have wanted it otherwise.

What can be done by way of being a demiurge is to fashion a material world out of the one already on hand, not allusively but close-up, so much so that the things the words denote seem right on top of the words, on top of the reader too. The ideal is to create a verbal world that has as much presence, as much apparent physical bulk, as the world around it. So you get it both ways: the words evoke the world that isn't made of words, and they as far as possible enact it too. The prose, especially when it's purple, seems almost to be made of the same material as what it's about.

This is an illusion, to be sure, but art *is* illusion, and what's needed is an art that temporarily blots out the real. In theory, a reader should not be able, at least while in the reading trance, to tell art from its matrix. So, reading Thomas Mann's description in *Confessions of Felix Krull Confidence Man* of a delicatessen window should, for a while, be nearly the same as staring into a comparable deli window in Manhattan. It's when the words blot out the real, and displace it, that prose comes into its own, conjuring, fooling, aping, yet never quite

<sup>1</sup>New Directions International Anthology: 44.

achieving the impression that, in dealing with an elephant, it is actually working in elephant hide. There lingers always, just out of view, on the conjectural fringe of vision, the fact that what's going on is verbal. It will not turn to the sun, like a plant, or wither without actually falling off its stem, or spawn tapeworms in its interior. It will not oxidize except through the material body of its vehicle: ink and paper. Yet it has mass, texture, and shape. It calls into play all the senses and it can interact at the speed of ionization with the reader's mind.

What an extraordinary thing: our minds loll in two states, ably transposing words into things, things into words, and also words-almost-things back into plain and simple words, and things-almost-words back into plain and simple things. As if there were any words or things as plain and simple as that. What goes on in this hybrid mental shuttling to and fro is something passive but active, a compromise in affairs of scale, dimensionality, and abstraction. The phrase "Teddy-bear" is smaller than the toy animal, which in turn is smaller (usually) than the big bear from the wilds; is almost entirely flat (a printed phrase stands up a little from the surface it is printed on); and lacks physical attributes conspicuous in any bear. The words represent, but they also re-present, and when the wordsmith turns to purple various things happen. The presence of the supervising wordsmith becomes more blatant, but the things being presented in words have a more unruly presence. They bristle, they buzz, they come out at you. It is predictable, I suppose, that writers pushing toward extremes will reveal themselves more at the same time as they re-energize what might otherwise have remained a sedate still-life.

Purple isn't quite *onomatopoeia*, whose modern meaning is different from what it meant in Greek. Now it means making a word sound like its referent (*hiss, crack, cuckoo*), but it used to mean *word-coining*, which is wider. Purple, I suggest, when it isn't just showing off, is phrase-coining; an attempt to build longish units of language that more or less replicate sizeable chunks of Being in much the same way as the hiss-crack-cuckoo words mimic a sound. There is language that plunges in, not too proud to steal a noise from Mother Nature, and there is language that prides itself on the distance it keeps itself at. Then there is purple which, from quite a distance away, plunges back into phenomena all over again, only to emerge with a bigger verbal ostentation. It is rather moving, this shift from parroting to abstraction,

and then back from abstraction into what might be called symphonic hyperbole. It is almost like revisiting our ancestors, whose imaginations and throats our words evince. After all, words began as acts of abstract approximation, a simultaneous closeness and removedness that nabbed the essence of a thing in a shout, a grunt, a hiss, but partly in order to refer to it in general. Take the word muscle, for instance, which comes from some Roman's impression that, when a muscle flexes, a small mouse—a *musculus*—seems to be running underneath the skin. We have all but lost that mouse, and I am not saying that purple will retrieve it; it might, it might not, depending on how much etymology the purplist has. But purple will perhaps restore the shielded, abstracted modern reader to that more atavistic state of mind in which the observer can imagine a subcutaneous mouse. It is not a matter of coming up with new words, but, fiercer, of coming up with new and more imposing combinations of words, and of re-addressing the metaphorical state of mind to the old goings-on. It is certainly a long way from the clinical, almost philatelic dotting on particulars we find in the French New Novel, but is quite near to the habits of Latin American magical realism, which is both a literary and a sociological thing. What might seem a literary flight of fancy exists already in parts of Brazil, where freshwater dolphins appear on birth certificates as the fathers of certain children. Purple relishes that sort of thing, zeroing in on it or concocting it as part of the thing it loves to make: a paste as thick as life itself; a stream of phenomena delighted in for their own sake. And it is not a matter of inventing something out of nothing, for that cannot be done; everything is derivative, so there is no getting away from what might be thought the bases of life, of art. The far-fetched always takes you home again, never mind how forced its colors, how strained its combinations, how almost unthinkable its novelties. The color we have never seen, the smell we have never smelled, the mind we have never known, can only be made from the colors, the smells, the minds, we already know. You can go very far away, but the umbilical never snaps, and home base can always reel you in. Purple, however, makes the most of the ride.

I am suggesting that purple prose, ornate and elaborate as it sometimes is, reminds us of things we do ill to forget: the arbitrary, derivative, and fictional nature of language; its unreliable relationship with phenomena; its kinship with paint and voodoo and gesture and

wordless song; its sheer mystery; its enormous distance from mathematics, photography, and the mouths of its pioneers; its affinities with pleasure and luxury, its capacity for hitting the mind's eye—the mind's ear, the mind's very membranes—with what isn't there, with what is impossible and (until the very moment of its investiture in words) unthinkable. Purple, after phrases coined by Horace and Macaulay, it may always have to be called, but I would call it the style of extreme awareness.

I have heard it said that writing which ponders things in detail, takes its time, and habitually masticates things until a wonder leaps forth, is "Victorian," no doubt because the word evokes portly self-satisfaction or finicky dawdling. It makes more sense, though, to think of purple in both its deep and its shallow incarnations as Elizabethan or Jacobean: fine language, all the way from articulate frenzy to garish excess. Purple, it seems to me, is when the microcosm fights back against the always victorious and uncaring macrocosm, whose relative immortality we cannot forgive.

A wide net will bring in such treasures as the Gass book I began with, and the same author's *Omensetter's Luck*; Faulkner's purple masterpiece of spectacular and speculative dithyramb, *Absalom, Absalom!*; Lawrence Durrell's witty, crafted velvet; the poignant narcissisms of Juan Goytisolo, whose prose has a cutting edge whereas his fellow Spaniard, Juan Benet, sometimes turns a sentence into a closet oratorio, as in his novel, *A Meditation*. There is Dylan Thomas's prose, both letters and broadcasts and stories; the erotic skywriting of Guy Davenport; the quiet verbal accumulations of Walter Abish, intent upon quelling histrionics with an avalanche of ironic snowflakes; the rapturous, almost mystical fiction of the Brazilian Osman Lins, whose exquisite formal, visionary novel, *Avalovara*, deserves a wider audience; and, among autobiographies, Michel Leiris's honorable abjectness in *Manhood* and the rapt, exalted tenderness amid terror in Diane Ackerman's *On Extended Wings*, in which a metaphysical poet learns how to fly a plane. Cortázar, Tournier, Purdy, Richard Howard, Evan S. Connell, Jean Genet, Arno Schmidt, William Gaddis, the Hawkes of *The Passion Artist*, the Gombrowicz of *Ferdydurke*, the Thomas Bernhard of *Correction*, the Maurice Blanchot of *Thomas the Obscure*: they all partake of this favor, this pageantry of the mind, this candid *flambée*.

They tell us, these authors, that it is headily terrifying to be alive, that nonetheless living consists not of refusals, eschewals, or denials; no, we are besieged itinerants who do not belong to ourselves. We are more like Lucky in *Waiting For Godot*, when that bewitching mish-mash of data and names, echoes and useful things to remember, pours from him like expedited ectoplasm. We write in appalled fascination, wondering what chemical underwriters prompt the spasm into style. In order to be reverential of life, we do not have to work overtime to pin down the world-outlook of the nasturtium, but we may try to; nor do we have to linger too long on the curious aroma of mulled disappointment that hovers in the hallways of university literature departments, although we may. We simply have to heed the presence of all our words and the chance, during life, of combining them deliberately in unprecedented and luminous ways. Prose is malleable, not ordained. Phrase-making is often a humble, almost involuntary virtuosity. And purple, whatever it may seem to cat-calling wallflowers as it flaunts by with eloquence raised to its highest power, is bound, because of what it does so well, to cause exhilaration. It is also bound, however, because of what it cannot ever do, to deepen the sense of metaphysical fear. And what it cannot ever do is start from scratch.

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