ANALYSIS

Postmodern Prose Style

The Shipping News (1993)

Annie Proulx

(1935-)

"Proulx mixes sentences with partial sentences, fragments, groups without a subject, or lacking a verb; so that word groups come at us like darts or missiles, sudden blows. While she rarely avoids comment, the comments are seemingly tangential, elliptical, and yet incisive…. Proulx mirrors one prevailing sense of the Nineties, at a time when normalcy was balanced by portents of disorder…."

Frederick R. Karl
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"Are critics avoiding the subject of prose, the better to praise novels which they know are badly written?… Proulx's wordplay virtually never lets up; it us hard to find three consecutive sentences in which she isn't trying to startle or impress the reader. Often more than one metaphor is devoted to the same image: 'Furious dabs of tulips stuttering in gardens'; 'An apron of sound lapped out of each dive'; 'The children rushed at Quoyle gripped him as a falling man clutches the window ledge, as a stream of electric particles arcs a gap and completes a circuit'; 'The ice mass leaned as though to admire its reflection in the waves, leaned until the southern tower was at the angle of a pencil in a writing hand, the northern tower reared over it like a lover.'

On the second page of *The Shipping News* Proulx introduces the central character as a man with a body like a loaf of bread, a head like a melon, facial features like fingertips, eyes the color of plastic and a chin like a shelf. The reader is left trying to care about a walking Arcimboldi painting. This isn't all bad, of course; the bit about the ice mass admiring its reflection would be effective if it weren't ruined by the laborious similes that follow. And every so often Proulx lets a really good image stand alone: 'The dining room, crowded with men, was lit by red bulbs that gave them a look of being roasted alive in their chairs.' Such hits are so rare, however, that after a while the reader stops trying to think about what the metaphors mean. Perhaps this is the very effect Proulx is aiming for; she seems to want to keep us on the surface of the text at all times, lest we forget her quirky presence for even a line or two.

But how to keep the focus on style even during the nuts-and-bolts work of exposition? How to get to the next metaphor-laden passage as fast as possible without resorting to straightforwardness, that dreaded idiom of the genre hack? Proulx's solution is an obtrusively ugly--and therefore 'literary'--telegraphese:

'Made a show of taking Quoyle back as a special favor. Temporary….Fired, car wash attendant, rehired. Fired, cabdriver, rehired'; 'Sliced purple tomato. Changed the talk to descriptions of places he had been, Strabane, South Amboy, Clark Fork. In Clark Fork he had played pool with a man with a deviated septum. Wearing kangaroo gloves.' By now the reader will have noticed that while this is wearying writing it is far from complex, especially not when compared to the Mandarin syntax of the past….

Proulx has plenty of long sentences, but they are usually little more than lists: 'Partridge, black, small, a restless traveler across the slope of life, an all-night talker; Mercalia, second wife of Partridge and the color of a brown feather on dark water, a hot intelligence; Quoyle large, white, stumbling along, going nowhere.' *Black*, *small*, *large* and *white* are perfunctory, inexpressive adjectives. For all its faux precision that feather simile is ultimately meaningless; there are too many different shades of brown to evoke whatever color Proulx had in mind (even with 'dark water' under it). A more conventional prose style--'Partridge was a small, black man who talked all night,' for example--would show up the poverty of observation at once, but by running a dozen dull attributes together Proulx can ensure that each is seen only in the context of a flashy whole. This technique, which calls to mind a bad photographer hurrying through a slide-show, is the key to most of her supposedly lyrical effects.

In this scene a woman has just had her arms sliced off by a piece of sheet metal: 'She stood there, amazed, rooted, seeing the grain of the wood of the barn clapboards, paint jawed away by sleet and driven sand, the unconcerned swallows darting and reappearing with insects clasped in their beaks looking like mustaches, the wind-ripped sky, the blank windows of the house, the old glass casting blue swirled reflections at her, the fountains of blood leaping from her stumped arms, even, in the first moment, hearing the wet thuds of her forearms against the barn and the bright sound of the metal striking.' (*Accordion Crimes*) The last thing Proulx wants is for you to start wondering whether someone with blood spurting from severed arms is going to stand 'rooted' long enough to see more than one bird disappear, catch an insect, and reappear, or whether the whole scene is not in bad taste of the juvenile variety. Instead you are meant to run your eyes down the page and succumb, under the sheer accumulation of words, to a spurious impression of what *The New York Times'* Walter Kendrick calls 'brilliant prose' (and in reference to this very excerpt, besides).

These slide-shows take place on almost every other page, but in the interests of fairness let's look at another one singled out for praise by both *The New York Times* (in this case Richard Eder) and *Time*. This is from 'The Mud Below,' a short story in *Close Range*: 'Pake knew a hundred dirt road short cuts, steering them through scabland and slope country, in and out of the tiger shits, over the tawny plain still grooved with pilgrim wagon ruts, into early darkness and the first storm laying down black ice, hard orange dawn, the world smoking, snaking dust devils on bare dirt, heat boiling out of the sun until the paint on the truck hood curled, ragged webs of dry rain that never hit the ground, through small-town traffic and stock on the road, band of horses in the morning fog, two redheaded cowboys moving a house that filled the roadway and Pake busting around and into the ditch to get past, leaving junkyards and Mexican cafes behind, turning into midnight motel entrances with RING OFFICE BELL signs or steering onto the black prairie for a stunned hour of sleep.'

There are good bits in there, to be sure, like the 'webs of dry rain that never hit the ground,' but not enough to make up for the incongruity of style. This is a long, mid-summer truck trip across the plains, a trip which the characters themselves apparently find dull and uneventful, and it receives the same breathless treatment as the twenty seconds of spurting blood in *Accordion Crimes*. Why? Because Proulx is too egocentric to put herself in her characters' shoes, even if she does sprinkle her text with enough regional slang, foreign words and other frippery to make *The New York Times* think that she 'grapples herself to her people.' 'Tiger shits,' for example, sounds like something a Pake might say, and it has the added advantage of being incomprehensible. The rest of that description has Yankee Tourist written all over it, and I don't mean just those 'pilgrim wagon ruts.' No one native to the region would think of house-movers as cowboys, nor would the occupants of that truck care about the hair color of two men passed at high speed in a ditch. So why should we care either?

There's plenty of irrelevant detail in Dickens too, and in Sterne and Gogol too, but at least it is imaginative and interesting. Not like this: '[Chris] wore a pair of dark glasses and began to run with a

bunch of *cholos*, especially with a rough called '*Venas*,' a black mole on his left nostril, someone who poured money into his white Buick with the crushed velvet upholstery, whose father, Paco Robelo, the whole Robelo family, were rumored to be connected with *narcotraficantes*. In a year or two Christ had his own car, a secondhand Chevrolet repainted silver, with painted flames….' As usual, the Proulxian lens is given a light dusting of authentic-looking vocabulary--in this case, Spanish words drawn unthinkingly from the dictionary ('*Narcotraficantes'* sounds as incongruous in this context as the word 'drug-traffickers' would sound in a trailer park.) We hear no more of Venas until several years and pages later, when an offhand sentence informs us that he was found clubbed to death. We're evidently not meant to wonder who did it or why, or how the death affects Christ. So why did we need to know the exact location of Venas' mole? His father's first name? If the lapping aprons are fake Dylan Thomas, an effort to mystify readers into thinking they are reading poetry, then this is fake Dos Passos, cheap detail flung in for the illusion of panoramic sweep.

It's a shame really, because by chattering on about everything from the pattern on a Band-Aid to the smell of 'Sierra Free dish detergent scented with calendula and horsemint,' Proulx drowns out occasional details that are well-observed, such as the information which is somehow both funny and sad at the same time that a man's cheap wet socks have dyed his toenails blue. Someone needs to tell her that half of good writing is knowing what to leave out.

But such an acclaimed writer can hardly be blamed for thinking, 'If it ain't broke, why fix it?' Her novel *Postcards* (1992) received the PEN/Faulkner Book Award (1993) and the Pulitzer Prize (1994). At least some of this success seems to derive from the appeal of her regional settings and characters. Carolyn See compares the Wyoming of *Close Range* to a 'gorgeous, abusive spouse. You don't ever want to leave him unless you have to, but'--post-feminist chuckle--'you just might have to.' Plenty of urban intellectuals, it seems, would rather smile on an affectionately stylized cowboy underclass than admit that rednecks are the same dreary bullies west of the Mississippi as east of it. Even the hokiest aphorisms are held up for admiration: 'Well,' says an acquaintance [in *Close Range*], 'you rodeo, you're a rooster on Tuesday, a feather-duster on Wednesday.' On that line Proulx gains the crossroads of great writing, the intersection of the specific and the universal, of the fate offered by her upland Wyoming and by the human condition at large.' (Richard Eder, *The New York Times*) I know what you're thinking. I thought so too for a second. Believe me, the man is serious.

Butit is undeniably the sheer bizarreness of Proulx's writing that wins her the most points, thereby confirming Evelyn Waugh's assertion that 'professional reviewers read so many bad books in the course of duty that they get an unhealthy craving for arresting phrases.' No one really care what the words mean; 'apron of sound' is startling, therefore it is good--or rather, 'evocative' and 'compelling,' conveniently vague attributes that have become *the* literary catchwords of our time. Nor does anyone mind the lack of polish. *Time*'s John Skow wrote the following in approval of *Close Range*: 'Annie Proulx twirls words like a black-hat badman twirling Colts, fires them off for the sheer hell of it, blam, blam, no though of missing, empty beer cans jump in the dust, misses one, laughs, reloads, blams some more. Something like that.'

Proulx also benefits from the current practice of viewing a novelist's writing less in terms of prose than in terms of individual sentences. Critics go through a novel half-consciously adding up the 'good' ones, by which they mean the showy kind that can stand alone in the excerpt box, and if these attain a certain critical mass--the more famous the writer, the slighter the mass--the book is praised. (The ratio of good sentences to bad is not taken into account, which explains why some novelists are more than happy to discuss their work in terms of sentences instead of prose.) Far from complaining about the incompatibility of form and content, Proulx's reviewers praise her sentences for having lives of their own. They 'dance and coil, slither and pounce' (K. Francis Tanabe, *The Washington Post*), 'every single sentence surprises and delights and just bowls you over,' (Carolyn See, *The Washington Post*), a Proulx sentence 'whistles and snaps' (Dan Cryer, *Newsday*). In 1999 K. Francis Tanabe kicked off *The Washington Post*'s online discussion of Proulx's work by asking participants to join him in 'choosing your favorite sentence(s) from any of the stories in *Close Range*.'

Now, what reviewer in the old days would have expected people to have a favorite sentence from a work of prose fiction? A favorite passage, sure, a favorite line of dialogue, maybe, but a favorite *sentence*?

You have to read a great novel more than once to realize how consistently good the prose is, because the first time around, and often even the second, you're too involved in the story to notice. John Skow raves of Proulx's language that 'when it works, which is most of the time, it sweeps aside all ideas, her own and the reader's, and allows no response except banging the hands together.' Can such language really be said to be working?

Reviewers today often lapse into the style of the writer they are praising, so when reading about Proulx's work be prepared for a lot of bad taste, indifferent grammar and contrivedly 'literary' expression: 'Birds, building materials and human body parts are equal grist to Ms. Proulx's language mill, which grinds brilliant prose out of them all.' (Walter Kendrick, *The New York Times*) '[Proulx] grapples herself to her people with such authentic language that when poetry turns up, the grapple holds and they unforcedly elevate.' (Richard Eder, *The New York Times*) Note how Eder scorns *ascend* for the transitive *elevate*; you can just imagine Proulx nodding in approval, and Skow banging his hands together.

And no discussion of Proulx is complete without the mention of poetry. Carolyn See, for example, tries to explain why the author of *Close Range* is 'the best prose stylist working in English now, bar none,' by positing a resemblance between the rhythm of her sentences and the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. It is relevant to quote [Cyril] Connolly… 'There is no reason why prose should not be poetical provided that the poetry in it is assimilated to the medium and that its rhythms follow the structure of prose and not of verse--it is the undisciplined, undigested, unassimilated poetry written often in unconscious blank verse and bearing no relation to the construction, if any, of the book, which has discredited 'fine writing'…. 'Poetry has gone through a bad patch and severe discipline has been necessary to write it; consequently others who start out with only facility, sensibility and a lyrical outlook, rather than undergo the hardships of training, have allowed their poetical feeling to relax in prose'."

B. R. Myers
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