

On Finding Ideas

Will Harris

The American modernist poet Wallace Stevens thought that poetry should have nothing to do with the intellect but be 'a revelation in words by means of the words.' That's something like what prose means to me: the use of words – rather than the mind of the author or anything else – as the portal to revelation.

Or, put another way, 'greatness' doesn't adhere to writers but to *writing*. And yet that feels insufficient. I want to use the word *style*, embarrassing though that word is, because style suggests that quality which almost floats free of writing, capable of being isolated and talked about but impossible to pin down or imitate. Like in this passage from Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974):

'I have stared at that one spot on the creek bottom for so long, focusing past the rush of water, that when I stand, the opposite bank seems to stretch before my eyes and flow grassily upstream. When the bank settles down I

cross the sycamore log and enter again the big plowed field next to the steers' pasture.'

In the creek-like babble of Dillard's words there's a clear patterning of sibilants ('stared... stand... seems... settles... steers'), set against short vowel sounds ('spot... bottom... long... log'). This sketches out the contours of the syntax's ebbs and flows, one clause folding into another as the speaker's vantage shifts.

When she looks up from the creek, having stared at it for a long time, the opposite bank seems to swim, the grass having taken on the glassy sheen of water just as the static prose itself appears to flow. The technical name for this phenomenon – when an image, no longer there, remains imprinted on your vision – is *illusory palinopsia*. We look up from the page and find the world itself rearranged, or in the process of being rearranged, flowing.

In the second shorter, punctuation-less sentence, Dillard switches back to the present tense and we re-enter the world of brute action, of balancing on slippery logs, fording streams. But the crossing has already been enacted on the level of the movement of the prose.

For the sixteenth-century French essayist Michel de Montaigne, good prose is easily defined: bad writers *don't* think about what they write, ok writers think *as* they write, and great writers think *before* they write. But Dillard rips up this definition. Of course, she must have thought before she started writing – maybe a lot – but to place all the emphasis on the prior act of thinking misses the point. The writing is the thought, however many hours of observation, note-taking and research might have come before. The thing that needs to be said emerges in the act of saying it. A revelation in words by means of words.

Surrounded by stereotypes and slogans – dead language which promises clarity, a quick route to sense and an even speedier return to the business of ourselves – thinking or looking too hard at something can be disorienting: the world swims, and a sense of illusory palinopsia sets in. But this also, more than comfort or pleasure, is what 'style' in prose can induce: a moment of confusion, a mental re-adjustment, when for a split-second the distinction between the page and the world is transparent, one flowing into and altering the other. Prose is what's printed on the page; style is the imprint it leaves on the world.

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A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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