

Writers voice and style

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When writing prose, one expects either first or third person, but not both which O’Callaghan does in his goth novella, “ Nothing on Earth”. Lodge (p. 88, 1988) states that writing in the two tenses “ can disorientate the reader” and disrupt “ logical relationships between the concepts or entities or events.” Typically, the genre is flamboyant and disjointed, with grim content which is certainly true of O’Callaghan’s novella. The reader may feel disengaged by several nameless characters: the girl, a cleaner, an elderly priest (a pivotal character and narrator), and his brother.

While “ the novel may not be a dialogue with the author” (Fludernik, 2001), readers could find their “ quest for the origin of the text”, (Dawson, 2013) and “ interactional experience,” (ibid) puzzling. Although O’Callaghan’s voice “ remains invisible” (p. 45, Alvarez, 2005), the reader is invited to “ imagine hearing a voice on a page speak out to ... grab your attention,” (Utley, 2015) which the narrator’s voice achieves resolving any polemic of “ voice”.

“ Arousing and holding the [reader’s attention] is by being specific, definite and concrete” in plain language, style and linked voice, (Strunk, p. 22, 1926). O’Callaghan, however, entices readers, embroidering the book’s fabric with florid language: the girl’s “[English] “ freeze-dried... taken out of the vacuum packing” (p. 11), “ drifted through those rooms with invisibilities weightlessness” (p. 45) or “ slid into her sandals” (p. 69).

“ Voice” “ give[s] the impression of speaking naturally ... is persuasive, artificiality is the contrary; for our hearers are prejudiced”, Elbow (2007). An obvious “ naturalness” exists between Martina and her niece, the girl, as they chat in the garden (p. 60). Martina asks the girl what Mutti (as the girl

calls her mother, “Helen, not her real name (p. 21)), said “about her darling sister [Martina]” (p. 60). The girl replies “Martina loved being gawked at” (ibid); softer vowels and consonants accentuate the hard, guttural voiced plosive of /g/ and /k/ in “gawked” in this paragraph. Martina and the girl sunbathe as if it is “work” (p. 63). Using Martina’s phone, the girl sets a timer alert, records herself singing “Everybody turn,” and to end their sunbathing ritual sets the timer to play “Everybody turn! Everybody turn!” (p. 63).

Disappearance of the girl’s parents, Helen (p.), Paul (p. 109), and the girl herself (p. 142) and related police investigations. Paul rejects police suspicions that Helen went to London (p. 53). When Paul was made redundant, the girl was waiting outside in pyjamas (p. 81). He exclaims: “What the hell is going on?” The girl “felt safer outside,” ... “[Martine]’s not in her room”(ibid). Paul calls the property developer, Flood, asks for Marcus, their security guard (p. 84). Reluctantly Flood admits Marcus went to Reading weeks ago (p. 85). Ipso facto no site security and Martina had “doll[ed] herself up to visit an empty caravan” (ibid).

One of many far-fetched scenarios is the girl’s father, Paul’s, disappearance waiting for the girl’s freshly baked flapjacks which she had said would be “ready in ten minutes” (p. 108). The girl calls her father who doesn’t reply. She goes through the rooms but cannot find him. Then, “[t]he kitchen started bleating:”(p. 109) “Everybody turn, ... Everybody turn...,” (ibid). “Both the front and back door were locked from the inside.” The keys rattle in her father’s jacket pocket (ibid). It harkens back to sunbathing with Martina;

the girl recorded herself singing “ Everybody turn, ... Everybody turn. (p. 63), pose more unanswered questions: Where did Paul go? How had he left a house which was locked on the inside, with the keys in his jacket pocket in the house? Is the “ bleating” kitchen the mobile phone? Language describing the girl’s reactions convey a demented, panic-stricken flight. Phrases signalling her desperation include: “ sprinted without breathing or stopping” and “ she hammered” [on the door] (p. 11). A traumatised child, what drove her to “[try] very hard not to start crying” (p. 11) while explaining her desolation to the priest whose front door she had pounded. Attempts to answer such questions is an academic exercise in futility.

As the novella begins, so it ends. A pattern of people, services and things appear or disappear. The girl, on encountering the priest, says, “ one minute he [her Papa] is behind you. And next time he was gone.” (p. 11); the girl’s mother, “ Helen goes out and didn’t return”, (p. 51); cement mixer, breeze blocks, soil, wheels, doors, ... disappeared (p. 69); “[a]fter the water, the money ran out. ... line went dead” (p. 105); Paul shaking hands with the Poles at number 3” (p. 92); Martina’s unreported disappearance “ a month ago”, (p. 135), “ demons”, noises” and Poles in number three” which the Priest “ knew ... remained vacant” (p. 138). The novella concludes in the only way it can; the brother from the States “ stop[s] answering” the priest’s calls (p. 173).

In interviews, O’Callaghan says life is uncertain and inconclusive and “ everything we know about the book [its oddities and anomalies] are in the book. We can only know what is in the book. If it is not in the book we cannot

know it” (ibid), a truism of fiction, but quintessential to O’Callaghan’s novella.

Polley: The Walled Garden and An Age (777)

By contrast to O’Callaghan’s novella, Polley’s poetry collection, “ Jackself” in the third person broaches emotionally or politically sensitive issues delving into language, style and “ voice”. The poems for this essay are The Walled Garden (p. 27) and An Age (p. 32). Although Polley wants readers to take his poetry at face value, the meaning can be obscure. In the former, Polley seemingly assumes the reader knows the “ Wall Brown butterfly” is a climate change victim (Barkham, The Guardian, 24th December 2014). The only similarities in these two poems are simple language, sophisticated imagery and concepts.

The Whispering Garden’s gentler less abrupt rhythm, rythmically slower cadence and pace are evident in its opening line:

“ listen to those hollyhocks

those lupins”?

Phonetically, the vowels are voiced sounds and the consonants are voiceless, for example /h/, /t/, /p/, and /s/, or voiced sonorants such as /l/, /p/. Save for /ck/ in “ hocks”, the sonorants (sonorous consonants) /l/ or /p/, and vowels use breath, to create a soft, silent sound, not hard consonantal end of the scale with strong, guttural sounds. The onomatopoeic “ those” bolsters the visual imagery of bees buzzing in and around lupins and hollyhock.

Wren’s opening statement “listen” to those hollyhocks those lupins”? How can one “listen” to them? What is one listening to?

“ Wren says I’ve watched the bees

Stealing in and out with their furry microphones”

Envisage, hollyhocks (silent, hissing, long /s/) and lupins (buzzing long /z/), alive with bees buzzing, darting, busily collecting pollen with “ their furry microphones” (buzzing long /z/), metaphorically inferring bees’ buzzing wings and thoraces when pollinating. It helps to know the botanical, natural history references and ecological implications to appreciate this poem’s depth. Wren, tells Jackself of the reprimand for interfering with the bees’ boxes:

“ I’ve put my ear to the box

where they take the noise

only to be warned ...

all the time”

Unexpectedly, Wren breaks off and exclaims excitedly:

“ look!”

he says scrambling to his feet

in the crook

of Jackself's elbow

a Wall Brown butterfly”

Why Wren's excitement? It is only a butterfly, after all.

An Age (p. 32), when read aloud, has a rhythmic drum beat, redolent of defining its metre and groove, combining gutturals, voiced and voiceless sounds with back or front consonants and vowels. Rhythm is “ only one of [Polley's] poetic devices” (p. 90, Lodge). In the following stanza, the repetitions create rhythm and structural meaning:

“... he stands for an age

not for a dark age.

not for an ice age or an iron age,”

Canny use of such techniques, strategically used punctuation, and command of non-punctuation reinforces Polley's message: clear, deep and explicit agonising in the last stanza. Polley's choices add firmness to language and meaning. Spacing elegantly emphasises language and accentuates monosyllabic words in the last stanza's opening lines:

“ he stands for an age”

Then take the line:

“ not for an ice age or an iron age”.

“ Or” forces space for a cunningly imposed pause for breath – a natural substitution for a comma. Moreover, opening the poem with the simile of Jackself, “ staying in today, like a tool in a toolbox,” hints at the poem’s dour, doomful humour in its repetition of “ age”:

“ not for a dark age.

not for an ice age or an iron age,”

Preceded by the metonymy, “ he stands for an age”, one adduces “ he” represents an era of people sympathetic to bees enjoying their habitat in a pesticide-free ecosystem:

“ but for a

pollen age, when bees

browsed the workshops

of wildflowers for powder”

Ineffably, the passage looks to the future, hoping mankind reverses environmental harm. Ultimately, the reader must form their own conclusions about the poem’s meaning. The emotionally charged closing stanza objects to the bees’ plight evinced by Jackself, who “ stands for an age”. It concludes poignantly, if with gently barbed allusions, to the bees’s former glory of their “ pollen age” when they “ browsed the workshops of wildflowers for powder”. The nuances of “ he stands for an age” is ambiguous; is Jackself standing for an interminably long time, or an era worried by the environmental impact on

bees? Its adept artfulness and harmonious arrangement of fitting multifaceted concepts and parts in playful, literary style.

My writing (952)

Contentious as it is to analyse the metaphor “voice”, blogger and writer, Pawlik-Kienlen (2009) cautions: “your “voice” can’t be learned. It has to be freed”; Goldberg (p. 23, 1986, 2005), advises to “open and trust in our own voice and process. Ultimately, if the process is good, the end will be good.” Like Polley, writing is my vehicle for self-expression, focusing on relationships, environment, engineering, construction, and transport.

“Is that – Your Car?” (Appendix 2), ponders the harm of Rolls Royce’s “gas-guzzling lubricated pollutants ... facilitating with alacrity, Planet Earth’s early demise ...” Where did I find that powerful line? Leonard Cohen, () said, as do I:

“I don’t know, and if I did, I’d go there more often,”

Passing a squashed car dump inspired me to assign newly unearthed, graphically rich language to my observation. Was it influenced by childhood memories of gleeful laughter driving past abandoned, “rusted, decomposed,” cars? If so, why wait years to express itself? It could be “yes”, “no” or “maybe”. But that is to tease and play with my audience. Frankly, I have no idea.

“Life Beyond The Wall”, (Appendix 3), flash fiction, potentially goth, the narrator a man with little sight, “attempt[s] to see whatever there was to

see as far as the eye, that is [his] eye, could see.” He scarcely sees the wall. Is it near or far – who knows? – is akin to his perception of time “ long blur, linked by ... a hybrid of blurs” seasonal “ ground scrunched under foot” making way for “ the sweet aroma of wild roses.” Snippets of world class songs a “[l]ong time ago” distract from present and future non-events, hint at time’s hidden ghosts. Assiduously, the narrator’s references to “ the wall” symbolises deep dark enigmata of history and sinister overtones indicated “ newly found freedom”, “ sordid, seamy stories of – death and life.” Solidified defeatism is apparent in “ twisting and warping the truth deviously and dishonestly distorting it beyond recognition,” and repetitions of “ no comment”. Doom and gloom buried in the closing paragraphs “ ulterior motives ... disdainfully dismiss[ed]”, and wall’s “ holes ... aren’t pretty patterns”.

In the genre of memoire, starts with strong guttural phonemes of /k/, /g/, /d/, and /t/, commands attention – “ It was bitter. A thick blanket of crisp, clean, white snow covered the hard icy ground. We stood there. Shivering. Freezing.” Visual language says everything and nothing, draws the reader in gradually revealing the funeral of a revered matriarch. The narrator, a second generation immigrant, shares trumped up political charges of the 19th Century, Cable Street Riots, Spanish Civil War, barbaric brutality of World War II and racism’s impact on everyday work and family life.

My stories rarely draw on experience. Gareth’s Last Stand, (2009, Appendix 5) is an exception. Its title and compelling opening sentence: “ I feel honoured and privileged to have played a part in Gareth’s last stand.” My

fear of writing a deeply personal narrative resolved by merging with another, took a leap of faith and “ trust in the process [of the workshop]” ... essential for group work” (Stern, 2009) “ to depict it in detail,” Goldberg (p. xv, 2006).

My innate ability to create a sense of openness belies my requirement for privacy. Other people, their needs and intrusions alienate me. In blogging on Katie Ford’s poem *Fire* (2014), Hazelwood & Sipple (2015) discuss readers’ infringements into writer privacy which I experienced for an autobiographical piece (Appendix 3). It is hard to dismiss those crossing the line, wanting “ the fine details of [my] life”. My breakthrough came in a seminar when I realised “ the only details I owe anyone ... I leave on the page. ... to write without fear. And leave it all on the page. (ibid).

Vices that inhabit me and inhibit my “ voice”, are “ the same old tired tricks” of language (Alvarez, p. 27, 2005): poor paragraphing, long, convoluted sentences, multiple clauses, surfeit of commas, tautologies. duplicated words and phrases. Thus the reader’s challenge is structural sense-making to reach the rhyme and elicit my meaning. “ Burning through first thoughts, to the place where energy is ... writing what your mind actually sees and feels, not what it thinks” (Goldberg, p. 16, 1986, 2005), is not to persuade myself that my writing conveys deep and meaningful perceptions. Nor is it to say that “ first ideas” precludes refining and re-writing content. The only resolution to these writing crises is to execute Goldberg’s metaphor, “ Samurai”, (pp. 262-3, 1986, 2005) or go on “ a word diet” ... minus long rambling sentences using the passive voice and obscure words” (Young, citing Flesch, p. 13, 2002). This, and powerful synonym databases, extricate

me from the quagmire of the “ language rut’s” restricted vocabulary that limits my writing’s potency.

A highly practiced, silent observer of my environment forms the raw material of my writing. Distilling the logic of my choice of one word for another is a “ necessary evil”. To find that place with answers to such vexed questions entails digging into the depths of my soul - a journey that tightens my grip on something at which I excel, self-analysis. The more I do it the better I am at finding ways to know myself - an important resource successful writers require. For, as King (2006) writes, why spend time on inconsequential when there is only one life so what you spend your time on had better be important (p.).