Refiguring Prose Style

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A colleague once told me that she learned grammar in order to teach it. “I never knew the rules,” she said. Did she mean she learned them so well that she was able to forget them? Maybe. But if she was like me, she gained her facility with language through conversation and reading. She learned how to use language by using it, by reading and speaking and being spoken to, her vocabulary and diction increasingly more sophisticated as the language she encountered was added to her own repertoire. That’s how I learned to write, if it’s not the method I teach my students. An inattentive student before college, I had read over four hundred novels prior to graduating high school. Five large boxes still gather dust in my parents’ garage. Those boxes of books were my teachers.

In high school I read novels, pulp works, science fiction, and the like to the exclusion of everything else. I read through the night, until my room brightened with sunlight and I could hear my parents awaken downstairs. At that time, I would kill my lights and pretend to be asleep—night after night of this, getting what sleep I could during my classes, which was a surprising amount. I remember more than once being awoken by a classmate who was handing out tests to the desks in the rear of the classroom. I didn’t know we were having a test, and looking down at it, the material was totally unfamiliar to me. I had checked out of academics.

Earlier, in middle school, I recall getting grammar instruction through self-paced “modules.” Over the course of the year, you checked out these modules, read them and worked the exercises, and your grade was determined by how many of these you completed. There was a module on the semicolon, on conjunctions, on irregular verbs. It was mostly unsupervised activity, and cheating was rampant. Kids sold the answers to the exercises along with bubble gum (25 cents a piece) during recess and after school. But even cheating was not enough for me. By the end of seventh grade, I had failed to finish the minimum number of modules.
The only reason I remember this at all is because of the terrible time I had with the school and with my parents during the last month of that year. I can vaguely remember the covers of these things, in colored construction paper, each piece of punctuation given legs, arms, and a smiling face in hand-drawn illustrations, and nothing else, not a single thing they might have taught me.

The one class in which I did well was literature. I scored exceedingly well in reading comprehension on the California Achievement Tests, and so I knew what I was reading, and if I wasn’t reading the texts, if I wasn’t asleep, I understood the lectures enough to fake it on the tests. Like many con artists, I learned that a glib tongue and a glib pen could substitute for effort. My teacher Mrs. Harvey once wrote on the bottom of one of my typically short and pointed essays that I ought to give others classes in writing. It wasn’t the first time this “gift” of mine had been identified. Like most people, I was quick to claim it as an innate quality, as if all the reading I’d done might not have been the distinguishing variable between my peers and myself.

At the University of Texas, I read and reread my favorite authors. By then I’d upgraded to more “literary” works. And I made a name for myself as a writer, turning out editorials for the campus newspaper and taking a sequence of intensive expository writing courses. Flannery O’Connor said that she became a writer because she wrote well, and I was steered along in much the same way. Eventually, I entered a graduate creative writing program, where I began to take seriously the idea that my writing skills originated in the texts I read. I developed a systematic method of hastening the process.

I transcribed passages from authors who I believed could teach me something, and I improvised my own passages in the rhythms of those transcriptions. I did it until I could mimic the rhythms of their prose even in speech. I gave myself exercises, transcribing a page of Barry Hannah’s unique prose and seguing into a freewriting exercise in which I continued the passage with my own material, with his rhythms, diction, and vocabulary. Here is an exercise I did back then based on two passages taken from two different stories by Raymond Carver. The first two passages are his. The third is mine.

It seemed to me everything took a bad turn for my father after that. Just like Dummy, he wasn’t the same man anymore. That arm coming up and going back down in the water, it was like so long to good times and hello to bad.
Because it was nothing but that all the years after Dummy drowned himself in that dark water. (Carver 1988b, 159)

Later, after things had changed for us, and the kid had come along, all of that, Fran would look back on that evening at Bud’s place as the beginning of the change. But she’s wrong. The change came later—and when it came, it was like something that happened to other people, not something that could have happened to us. (264)

When everybody finished painting, they came over around the front of the house. They came over to where I was. At the curb was where I had situated myself, where I could get a good look. The house looked different. It wasn’t the place it was yesterday. It looked like someplace another family lived. From where I stood, the sun hit the windows and the windows blinked, as if to let me in on the joke. I’m still yours, it seemed to say. And I wanted to believe that. But it was hard somehow. That things could change really. One day looks nothing like the one before it and your thinking you’ll turn over a new leaf. I’ve left all that behind me. But it’s a trick. Because that day’s just like the one before it and the one before that, and all the others strung together so tightly it doesn’t matter that one may not look like another. What I’m saying is that it’s all closely related, whether you see it or not.

One of the first things I learned was that prose styles invite particular stories. In the passages above, the language lends itself to the expression of how our lives can be irrevocably changed in ways we only partly understand or can articulate. The prose of these passages is perfect for such a revelation, the short sentence that leaps into and is redefined by the sentence that follows. It simulates a mind at work, dramatizing more than describing.

Doing these exercises, I learned that I couldn’t write a Raymond Carveresque story in T. Coraghessan Boyle’s vivid, hyperactive prose. I couldn’t write a story of a young man’s first romantic disappointment in the cynical prose of Flannery O’Connor. Of course, a writer must borrow and alter and merge styles to write the story she wants to write.

I’ve written stories in the prose rhythms of some of my most admired authors, and I’ve published a few of them. Like me, writers as disparate as Joan Didion, Hunter S. Thompson, Malcolm X, Somerset Maugham, Winston Churchill, and Benjamin Franklin have all credited their development as writers to the practice of imitation. Much recent scholarship
has deciphered how the most “original” art is the product of earlier art, and the idea of an “original voice” has been reconstructed. It exists not in the mythic, whole-cloth manner we once supposed but as a unique blend of influences. The practice of imitation can take this process, raise it to the surface, and accelerate it.

Of course, as Paul Butler has noted in his essay advocating imitation and writing immersion, composition scholars who privilege an expressionist pedagogy, one that has as its goal the finding and expression of “voice,” have been suspicious of imitation (2001, 108). They may even blame poor student writing on imitation. They note the not uncommon incidents when a student attempts to “put on” a language over which he or she has no control. Essays written in this way are often mockeries of formal, academic prose, clumsily patched together, riddled with grammatical errors. Like every teacher of writing, I’m familiar with these phenomena. Here’s a sample from an essay I recently received:

 Were the women of minority left in the gutter of society? Well the answer to that is yes this advancement that has happen was equal to all women of all ethical races and class. These women were all treated as one because they were well educated to be a candidate for a position, the more independent, and their responsibility was at a minimum.

You can see the student grasping at a level of discourse he doesn’t understand. Ethical races and classes? What position? Their responsibility was at a minimum? David Bartholomae described a similar essay as “more a matter if imitation or parody than a matter of invention and discovery” (1986, 11). He says such writing seems to “come through the writer, and not from the writer” (8). But the question really is not whether the writing comes “through” the writer. Of course it does. The important question is: from where is it coming?

And it is true that some students are greatly helped by the simple advice: speak as yourself, without overreaching, in your best language. Usually such students have a foundation of Standard American English, broadly defined. Their writing breaks down when they try to sound like masters of academic discourse, but clears up when they relax and tune in to the language of MTV news jockey Tabitha Soren, or any other member of that student’s speech community, including not only individuals to whom the students speak, but those individuals the students value and listen to regularly.

There are other students that have it harder, however. Their speech community doesn’t include anyone who could write “correctly,” and even
if they were to find their voice, they could not use it to write a passing essay. And I have students like this, who write naturally, in their recognizable speech rhythms, and when I read their essays, I can hear them speak. Once, while part of a committee of college writing teachers who were grading student essays, a colleague said of such a student: “This writer has a voice. And that’s his problem.” I knew immediately what he meant, because as well as those students who try to “put on” language, students I find relatively easy to coach and whose writing reliably improves, I have such students whose “voice” is their problem, at least in the classroom.

Such students aren’t less intelligent. In his essay “Tense Present,” David Foster Wallace contrasts the bully who flunks English but rules the playground with the “brain” who gets good marks but whose so-proper speech earns him beatings outside the classroom door; both have failed in exactly the same way. They have failed to master the language of more than one context, in this case, the dialect of the playground as well as that of the classroom (2001, 52). Students who are strangers to the language of the classroom are often my most insightful; they are usually my most worldly. They have mastered the language of the street corner or the language of the vocations open to someone who begins to work at age fourteen. Sometimes these students are truly ESL students, but more often they are students who have only one dialect at their command and thus their problems in the classroom only resemble those of ESL students. It is a difference of degree and not of kind. I have speakers and writers of Black English, with its more sophisticated use of aspect, verb use that indicates the duration, completion, or repetition of action. For example, “he be swimming” means not that “he is swimming,” but that he has been swimming for a while, not just now, and not just once (Kurland 2000). I have speakers and writers of creolized dialects such as that used by some second-generation Vietnamese immigrants. Other students are harder to pin down. I teach in New Orleans, a place of extraordinary linguistic diversity that is protected by centuries-old divisions of race, class, occupation, and sometimes even neighborhood. It’s a polyglot city. The differences between the English they speak and Standard American English are as difficult to address as the differences between Spanish and English, and when they are addressed, they should probably be addressed the same way.

The superficial similarities between the English dialects and the English demanded by the classroom lures us into half measures. When my students’ prose shows systemic grammar errors (not grammar slips), I point them out, offer rules, demand they track and correct their errors
in proofreading journals, but those errors still beleaguer their writing at the end of the semester. Understandably, the students become frustrated with proofreading in order to correct language use that isn’t incorrect, but rather only being employed in a context where it isn’t appropriate. They too are confused by the superficial similarities between their English and my English. They are being told their use of language is wrong when they know the truth: it is not wrong. It is not only appropriate, but necessary in other contexts, at home, at certain jobs, among their friends, and so on. Instead of trying to correct a dialect that needs no correction, they should be learning an entirely new dialect, that employed by the classroom. Intuitively, they know this, and in trying to “put on” a new dialect, they create the feared “imitations.” The problem is not that they are trying to imitate, but that they have no sources to imitate, and the rhetoric of an “individual voice” discourages them from finding and studying such sources. A student won’t become truly fluent in Standard American English until she has moved to where the language is lived, the prose of proficient writers.

The truth is that students who fall into imitations that read as parodies of academic discourse are working largely from models that are unknown—and, I’d argue, nonexistent. In front of a room of English faculty, I heard a job applicant, when asked about the readings she assigned her writing classes, respond that she didn’t assign readings, that her students already had enough texts. I watched heads swivel, eyebrows lift, a gasp was almost audible. If it were the movies, a newsman would have dashed for a payphone. I ask my students sometimes how many of them have read a single book, really, cover to cover, and I respect their candor when in a class of twenty-five freshmen, I see four or five raised hands. The truth is, many of my students could hardly be said to imitate anything. They have no models. What they produce could more accurately be labeled simulations, in the way Baudrillard defined that term: copies without originals. The problem isn’t that they are trying to sound like someone else, but that through a lack of resources, their efforts meet with failure. They are trying to invent or discover within themselves an appropriate language to address the assignment, but no matter how long they look or how deeply they go, they cannot find that language inside them.

How to help such a student? Self-expression, an authentic voice, fails to meet the class’s goal. Constructing the student as one with a transcendent, monolithic self leaves the teacher with no effective pedagogy. It becomes readily clear that the student must express something other than
the self, and we can help that student by following a theoretical model that dismisses the old idea of the self. Instead of characterizing a failing text as coming “through” a writer, and not “from” him, we must acknowledge that our best writing does, in fact, move through us.

In “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes says, “[T]ext is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture” (1988, 170). An act of writing is a dance of sources, or appropriated language and concepts, expressing themselves in their combinations and conflicts. And the reader, as Barthes says, “ought at least to know that the inner thing he thinks to translate is itself only a ready-formed dictionary” (170). Thus conceived, the author has multiple selves. He is a unique confluence of other voices, none his own. “It is the language which speaks, not the author” (168). The writer does not invent; he can, as Barthes states, “only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original” (170). Foucault also asserted what he called the “plurality of self” that an author contains, or which contains him or her (1988, 205). When one refers to an author, one “does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since [writing] can give rise simultaneously to several selves” (205). As a result, Foucault says, “writing has freed itself from the dimension of expression” (197).

How freeing this line of thought can be! When one’s writing fails its subject and purpose, it is not a failure of the writer or of a process that looks no further than the writer, that holds the writer morally accountable for its sentences as well as its ideas. The student will not be constructed with an Emersonian model, a god in ruins, one whose potential she betrays with each failed piece of writing. A failure in writing is a failure in appropriation. Barthes states that “language knows a subject, not a person” (1988, 169). Students are often unacquainted with the language that knows the subject upon which they must write. They must absorb that language before they can write on that subject. Let’s understand what we mean by appropriation, since, as writing teachers, we are wary of a pedagogy that might seem to celebrate plagiarism. By appropriation, I am not talking about the short-term borrowing of ideas but the intuitive use of the language that addresses a subject. The goal of a student writer is the absorption or channeling of language that transforms the self and thus the writer from who he might be in the workplace, who he might be on Friday nights, to who he must be in the classroom, one who navigates the language of the academy because he has become a locus for its expression.

If one looks at writing in this way, one understands why it proves so difficult to help a student through grammar instruction. Beyond the
fundamental universals, people acquire language through appropriation, not the memorization and practice of grammar rules. Grammar, the linguist Julia S. Falk writes, “describes the knowledge that speakers have about their language, but it does not describe the ways in which people actually produce sentences or determine the meaning of the sentences they encounter” (1973, 195). In other words, she says, “it is not an imitative model of the faculty itself.” We must give students an imitative model.

Looking at the process of how language is acquired can help. The linguists Elizabeth Stine and John Bohannon state that language acquisition “is clearly some form of observational learning, broadly construed” (1983, 590). Although innate faculties set the stage for language acquisition, Skinner’s assertion that “echoic behavior [imitation] is useful in the process of language acquisition because it allows the ‘short-circuiting of the process of progressive approximations” remains valid (Stine and Bohannon 1983, 591). Whitehurst and Vasta also argue for the necessity of imitation, and describe the acquisition of syntax with “the comprehension-imitation-production hypothesis” (Stine and Bohannon 1983 591). Basically, it asserts that first one understands an utterance, then one may faithfully and appropriately imitate that utterance; finally one is able to use that language, lexicon, and syntax spontaneously. Research has shown that grammatical forms appear in imitated speech prior to their appearance in spontaneous speech.

To use imitation effectively in the classroom, one must employ all its forms: (1) topographical, which is an exact point-to-point copy of the modeled text; (2) partial, in which the copy is partially improvised, or rearranged; and (3) selective, in which the imitation is controlled by the grammatical structure. The selective imitation has the same grammatical structure, but may describe completely new events or objects. Students should be given an appropriate model and assigned transcriptions and improvisations off that model, first as a class, then individually.

That was exactly what I was doing when I created for myself those exercises in graduate school. I took exemplary passages from admired authors and transcribed them, word by word, either on the page or the computer screen. Often, I built grammar trees over the sentences that broke down the ways the various elements interacted with one another. (Winston Churchill attributed the success of his writing to the practice of diagramming sentences when he was younger.) I asked myself, were the sentences cumulative or periodic? How did the parallelism work? Then
I would edit their prose, turning their sentences around, turning them back. I combined sentences and separated them. Lastly, I wrote my own passages in the rhythms of their prose. I might start literally substituting my own words into their sentence structures, and as I grew more confident, changing those structures a bit while remaining faithful to that particular author’s “voice.”

Remember the student who asserted that women were “left in the gutter of society?” In the same essay, he wrote: “With women being focus on their career and out of the kitchen send messages to their mate, which is, help out or I am gone.” He was one of my seemingly hopeless cases. In order to pass out of Freshman Composition, he had to pass the university’s exit examination, an in-class essay of at least four hundred words that would be graded blindly by other members of the English faculty. He’d either gotten discouraged and dropped out of previous courses, or seen them through only to fail the final essay. My class made his fourth attempt, and he was a senior and hoping to graduate. I felt as desperate as he did. In my office one afternoon, I asked if he’d be willing to try something different. He was vaguely familiar with the parts of speech; he didn’t know how to break down sentences, and it seemed a little late to learn. We had only a couple of months until the end of the semester. So he agreed to some transcription exercises, outside the classroom, to be brought in to me only as a guarantee it would be done. I began with Hemingway, not as an ethical model but because of the simplicity of his style and because he had been used as a model for so many other successful writers. The first passage he transcribed was the first paragraph of The Sun Also Rises. The first paragraph reads like this:

Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Do not think that I am very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn. He cared nothing for boxing, in fact he disliked it, but he learned it painfully and thoroughly to counteract the feeling of inferiority and shyness he had felt on being treated as a Jew at Princeton. There was a certain inner comfort in knowing he could knock down anybody who was snooty to him, although, being very shy and a thoroughly nice boy, he never fought except in the gym. He was Spider Kelly’s star pupil. Spider Kelly taught all his young gentlemen to box like featherweights, no matter whether they weighed one hundred and five or two hundred and five pounds. But it seemed to fit Cohn. He was really very fast. He was so good that Spider promptly overmatched him and got his nose permanently flattened. This increased Cohn’s distaste for boxing, but it gave him a certain satisfaction of some strange sort, and it certainly
improved his nose. In his last year at Princeton he read too much and took to wearing spectacles. I never met any one of his class who remembered him. They did not even remember that he was middleweight boxing champion. (1926, 3–4)

My student wrote his own passage modeled on his transcription.

Joshua Anderson was once a rally car champion of the U.S. Do not think I was impressed with his ability to win races, but his ability to race the races. He cared nothing for being a top racer. In fact, he hated it, but rather be on the track then running circles on victory lane. There was a certain inner comfort in knowing he could race anybody at any given moment and not worry about the end results. He was Mike Miller star pupil. Mike Miller taught all his apprentice to race for the race, no matter what size engine that one may have. But it seemed to fit Anderson. He was really very fast. He was so good that Miller promptly overmatched him and got his car totaled. This increased Anderson’s distance from racing, but it gave him a certain satisfaction for some strange reason, and it certainly improved his attitude. In his last year in the circuit, he races so much that the bottom of his foot was shaped like a pedal. I don’t think anyone on the circuit now remembered him. They don’t even remember that he was the best rally car champion of his time.

Although his imitation seems parodic, it’s mostly correct, concrete and understandable—a tremendous improvement from the often incoherent prose he previously produced. But who gets the credit for the improvement? Although transcription is a shortcut for the process of language acquisition through reading, it’s no immediate fix. After several such exercises, I moved him on to other sources. Part of my idea was that language dictates content, and Hemingway’s prose was mostly the prose of a fiction writer. George Orwell is more of an essayist, and we focused next on his article “A Hanging.” It opens with this paragraph:

It was in Burma, a sodden morning of the rains. A sickly light, like yellow tin-foil, was slanting over the high walls into the jail yard. We were waiting outside the condemned cells, a row of sheds fronted with double bars, like small animal cages. Each cell measured about ten feet by ten and was quite bare within except for a plank bed and a pot of drinking water. In some of them brown silent men were squatting at the inner bars, with their blankets draped round them. These were the condemned men, due to be hanged within the next week or two. (1950, 142)

And here is my student’s exercise:
It was in New Orleans, a humid afternoon of sunshine. A bright light, like leaves was touching the buildings, hiding the evil in the shadows. We were waiting outside the Superdome, a row of people flooded the streets, like Times Square in New York. Each float was dressed with glitter, beads, and excited costume wearing riders. Some consisted of face painted children, who were dressed in super hero costumes, with their capes draped over them. These were Mardi Gras participants, due to have the time of their life in New Orleans.

When the time came for the exit examination, my student felt confident. I had been giving him positive, though qualified, feedback on his work. And he passed the examination, writing an essay that was flawed but demonstrated tremendous improvement. Here is a passage from his exit examination. The prompt asked whether the news media should show its audience graphic images from our latest war in Iraq.

If the media started showing it’s viewers pictures of dead soldiers from the aftermath of a battle, then people would see the truth about what goes on during war. The media is not supposed to be sympathetic towards its viewers, and debate if the viewers can handle seeing dead bodies on their TV sets. The media’s job is to report the news on what happens in the world, good or bad. They should not twist the facts to the public in fear the country’s morale may go down or speak against their nation.

There is a striking parallelism error in that last sentence, but if you compare it to the paragraph I excerpted earlier in this essay, you will see that he is expressing his ideas much more coherently. This is anecdotal evidence, I admit, but combined with my own experiences and the testimony of professional writers, it certainly encourages more experimentation. If my students could write as well as Orwell, even if they wrote slavishly in the manner of Orwell, they would make an A in my class. And then they would study someone else, and someone else, until these integrated sources had been absorbed and had changed them, making them like no one else, and the prose that came through them, channeled through a complex web of appropriated voices, those anterior sources, would be their own. Having mastered so many dialects, they could play the language in any idiom, improvising as they did so.

I’ve often wished I could tell certain students, go home, take a year, consume ten to fifteen books, reading pages out loud, then come back to class. I believe their writing ability would vastly improve. Such an action, though, either isn’t practical or within the authority of most composition instructors. Imitation, therefore, may provide an abbreviated way of
immersing those students in an effective classroom dialect, to make that language part of them, or maybe more accurately, make them part of that language, and thus improve their writing.