

THE
ART
OF
PROSE

Second Edition

Woodward

THE CRAFT OF PROSE

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For Bill and Larry

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PREFACE

TO THE SECOND EDITION

In preparing this second edition of *The Craft of Prose* I have been guided by the principles of the first edition, but I have also been conscious of the classroom experience of teachers who have used the book during the past four years. Although the changes are not sweeping, they are, I believe, significant. By omitting eight of the original selections and adding sixteen new ones for this edition, I have brought the number of selections to sixty-seven; all of the new selections are from the twentieth century. So that students and teachers may have a sampling of longer essays, I have added a new section of complete essays without teaching apparatus, and I have been less rigid than in the original edition in limiting the other selections to lengths that students normally write. Since the methods of descriptive writing are useful for the other forms of prose, I have placed the section on description first, followed by sections on exposition, argumentation, and narration.

In order to provide a firmer basis for close analysis and discussion of the selections, I have revised several of the introductory sections extensively and reworked many of the questions for study and discussion. Vocabulary words are now identified by paragraph to make their context more accessible.

It gives me pleasure to acknowledge my gratitude to my students on whom these materials have been tested, to my colleagues in the profession—friends and strangers alike—who have generously commented on the book, to Richard Kuhn and Dorothy Ohliger of Wadsworth Publishing Company, who are more than editors, and to my wife, Carol, who has been a constant source of encouragement.

R. H. W.

PREFACE

TO THE FIRST EDITION

In his *Autobiography* Benjamin Franklin recalls his use of certain *Spectator* papers to improve his style and fluency, his vocabulary, and his organization of ideas. Franklin's comments on how he learned to write appear as the first selection in this book—as an example of the process theme, but also as a statement of a principle on which this book is based: that a writer learns his craft at least partly through a careful analysis of what he reads. By noting the methods and devices of careful authors, he becomes conscious of the tools of prose and is able to make use of these tools in his own compositions.

With respect to organization and method, then, this book is a collection of models illustrating the four principal forms of prose: exposition, description, narration, and argumentation. All of the materials provided—the selections, the introductions to each section, the questions and suggestions for writing that follow each selection—are designed primarily to promote the student's understanding of various kinds of prose, the basic relationships and differences between them, and the methods by which a workmanlike piece of prose is constructed and developed.

Another fundamental feature of this volume concerns the length of the selections; though self-contained, they are generally only four hundred to a thousand words in length—about the same as the normal length of the student's own papers. No selection is so long that the student will find himself adrift in a sea of words. He will be able to see both shores at all times and therefore can concentrate on the methods of navigation. He will not experience the confusion that frequently comes from the sheer immensity of the broad water that surrounds him in the midst of a long essay.

The selections—for the most part drawn from the works of well-known English and American authors, from Francis Bacon and

Thomas Fuller to William Faulkner and Edmund Wilson—were chosen on the basis of several criteria: their literary value, their success in illustrating the methods of prose discussed in the introductions, their combined brevity and completeness, and their intrinsic interest.

Each selection is preceded by a brief commentary, which provides information that the student needs if he is to read the material intelligently: relevant information about the author and the context in which the selection originally appeared.* The questions that follow each selection call attention to organization, the techniques of prose composition, content, and other relevant matters such as style, tone, figurative language, and sentence structure. These questions may be used in various ways: as guides to the student when he reads the selection outside of class, as subjects for written assignments, as a basis for class discussion. They are not exhaustive, certainly. Each teacher will undoubtedly introduce additional questions that he considers important to the selection. The questions, then, are not designed to take the place of the instructor, but rather to provide him with an analytical apparatus that he may use and supplement as he sees fit.

In addition, almost every selection is followed by suggestions for writing: not lists of topics based on the content of the selections, but writing projects that involve the use of techniques illustrated by the preceding material. (Some of these projects, if assigned, will take the student into the library; for these assignments, the teacher will want to see that certain books are placed on reserve for the student's use.) There are more suggested assignments than any student could write, or any teacher read, in a full-year course; thus, for a single semester's work, both student and teacher can select from a wide variety of writing projects. Through experience I have found that it is best to assign and discuss several of the selections illustrating a single form of writing, and then to allow the student a reasonably wide choice among the writing assignments following those selections.

Although the volume can easily provide the necessary reading for a semester's course, teachers who emphasize ideas and content through the reading of full-length works will find the book suitable as a supplemental reader for occasional assignments involving closer analyses of specific writing problems than are available in more general anthologies.

* The titles for many of the selections have been provided by the editor.

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DESCRIPTION

The word *description* is from the Latin *describere*, meaning “to write about.” But “writing about” may also refer to exposition, or argumentation, or narration. As one of the four major types of discourse, description involves more than telling “about” a subject. The writer of description transfers his observations and sense impressions to the reader; he conveys mood, images, sensations—communicating experience rather than providing factual information or conducting an argument or telling a story.

Unlike exposition, argumentation, and narration, description is a supporting device, a tool of other forms of prose. In exposition, description is a means for making subjects vivid. For example, in the expository essay “Cutting In” Herman Melville describes the block and tackle as a “vast bunch of grapes” and likens the removal of the blubber of a whale to the peeling of an orange. Frequently the difference between exposition and description is slight, primarily a matter of emphasis. If the emphasis of the writer is upon explana-

tion, as in "Cutting In," he is writing exposition; if his emphasis is upon communicating impressions, as in Melville's portrayal of Captain Ahab, he is writing description. Similarly, as illustrated in Sinclair Lewis's description of "The House of Babbitt" and Budd Schulberg's description of "The Victor Milgrim Office," the careful selection of descriptive details may be employed effectively as a device of persuasion, a form of argumentation. Lewis and Schulberg, through their descriptions, indirectly ask the reader to accept and share their implicit criticism of the characters they are describing. In narration, either fiction or nonfiction, description is employed to create mood and atmosphere, to make settings—landscapes, houses, rooms, furnishings—seem real, to make characters come alive. Most of the selections in the present section are taken from works that are mainly narrative; and many of the selections in the section on "Narration" (particularly Langston Hughes's "Salvation," William Allen White's "A Child Went Forth," Henry David Thoreau's "My House by Walden Pond," James Anthony Froude's "Mary Stuart on the Scaffold," and John Steinbeck's "The Turtle") contain descriptive passages that supplement and enhance and give added meaning to the narrative account.

Every description emphasizes one of two principal approaches to its subject. It is either **realistic** or **impressionistic**. That is, every description either portrays a subject as objectively or scientifically as possible, in the manner of the camera, or subjectively, in the manner of the artist. The camera captures details; the artist is free to interpret the details as he sees them. Yet no description can maintain one approach to the absolute exclusion of the other. A camera must, of course, be focused on the subject; and the very act of choosing the angle, of utilizing light and shadow, involves selection or interpretation. Frank Norris, in his realistic description of Polk Street, piles detail upon detail to suggest the color and the almost ceaseless activity of the street. Even so, he has had to exclude from his description details that would have conveyed a different picture of the street. Similarly, no matter how impressionistic a writer wishes to be, he still must work within the confines of the material he has selected. Melville, in his description of Captain Ahab, emphasizes two principal details: Ahab's ivory leg and his livid scar; therefore, Melville must use these details to create an impression of Ahab's tragic dignity.

Effective description, whether primarily realistic or impressionistic,

depends in large measure upon the **use of details**. Details provide the authenticity necessary to make descriptions convincing; and details provide the most effective means of conveying a writer's attitude toward his subject. Writers known for the excellence of their description, therefore, have been keenly aware of the importance of *careful selection of details*—sights, sounds, odors, actions. Sinclair Lewis, for instance, uses numerous details in his writings; but he selects only those that most clearly convey his attitude toward his subject. In his novel *Main Street*, as he describes Carol Kennicott on her first walk through Gopher Prairie, he introduces the reader to the objects and sights that spell despair to Carol—the untidy, dirty, tawdry aspects of a small town's business section: the fly-specked store windows, the faded paper lining the shelves of the stores, the odor of onions and lard in the lunchroom. Recognizing the effectiveness of such details in creating a specific impression and an authentic description, Lewis maintained a large notebook in which he carefully recorded his observations so that he would have them available when he needed them.

The problem of **point of view**, which will be discussed more fully with reference to the process theme, is also extremely important in description. The writer must enable the reader to see the subject from a particular location. Shifts in point of view blur the picture just as the movement of the camera blurs a photograph. If a street is being described from a specific window, the description should contain nothing that cannot be seen from that window. If a person is being described in a darkened room, any attention to the bright color of his clothes would be jarring. If an individual is being described as he is seated, any reference to his manner of walking should be withheld until he is moving about.

When considering his subject, the writer must also decide what **effect** he wishes to create. Lewis, in "The House of Babbitt," conveys a sense of dissatisfaction with the Babbitts; Poe, in "The House of Usher," a sense of foreboding and gloom; Mark Twain, in "Steamboat Town," a sense of excitement sandwiched between long periods of ennui. All details should support the desired effect; any details that do not do so must be excluded. The writer's attitude toward his material and his readers—that is, the **tone** he strives to create—contributes greatly to his success in achieving the desired effect. In the passages referred to, Lewis is basically ironic, Poe is somber, and Twain is nostalgic.

The use of **figurative language** is a common device of description, though it must be employed carefully. Its purpose is to appeal to the imagination of the reader by creating images that are fresh, vivid, and precise. Those figures of speech that come too quickly to mind are likely to be trite and hackneyed. Unless the figures are fresh, they will not be striking and will be passed over by the reader. The three most common figures of speech are the simile, the metaphor, and personification. All are devices to suggest comparison, to create mood, and to make the unfamiliar clear by describing it in terms of the familiar.

The **simile** employs such words as *like* or *as* and makes a direct comparison. In the definition of literature by Barnet, Berman, and Burto appears a quotation from Robert Burns:

O, my luve's like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June.

As the authors point out, the comparison associates with the woman the qualities possessed by the rose—freshness, vitality, beauty of form, fragrance, and texture. Through time and frequent use, however, the comparison has lost its effectiveness, except in the original poem. Such similes as the following, though descriptive, have become trite and should be avoided: *black as pitch*, *bright as a penny*, *brown as a berry*, *flat as a pancake*, *hard as a rock*, *high as the sky*, *sharp as a tack*, *skinny as a rail*, *sweet as sugar*, *tough as nails*. On the other hand, fresh similes—if appropriate—create memorable impressions. Stephen Crane, describing the movement of a small boat in a turbulent sea, writes: “The craft pranced and reared and plunged like an animal. As each wave came, and she rose for it, she seemed like a horse making at a fence outrageously high.” W. Somerset Maugham describes his lady missionary as having a long face, “like a sheep’s,” and of speaking in a manner that “fell on the ear with a hard monotony, irritating to the nerves like the pitiless clamour of the pneumatic drill.” Maugham’s brief portrait of Mrs. Davidson is compactly unattractive largely because of the appropriate and vivid figurative language that he employs in her description.

The **metaphor** accomplishes the same end as the simile but does so indirectly, without the use of a preposition or a conjunction. One object is said to *be* another: “Professor Jones is an old bear”; “The room is an absolute pigpen”; “The company was deluged with orders.” These metaphors carry to Professor Jones the traditional

grouchingness of the bear, to the room the litter and sloppiness of a pigpen, and to the business concern the overwhelming quantity of orders that can be likened to a flood. In the selections that follow are numerous examples of metaphors—some fresh and exciting, some timeworn but still effective. Frank Norris, for instance, compares school children with bees when he says that they “swarmed the sidewalks.” Harold Frederic suggests the wrinkled quality of dried fruit when he speaks of one of his characters as having a “juiceless countenance.” When Ernie Pyle describes a first sergeant as the “backbone” of the army and states that Sergeant Levesque was “a natural-born center of any stage,” he is employing anatomical and theatrical imagery to create effective description.

Descriptions of inanimate objects or animals may be enhanced by the use of human comparisons, a figure of speech called **personification**. Stephen Crane, in the passage quoted above, personifies his boat by referring to it as “she.” In his vivid and humorous descriptions of animals in the familiar “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” Mark Twain makes effective use of this device by giving the animals almost human personalities. The frog, Dan’l Webster, is “modest and straightfor’ard” despite his unusual gifts; and when, with his stomach full of quail-shot, he tries to jump, he heaves and strains, elevating his shoulders “like a Frenchman.” So vivid is the image that it is hard not to think of Dan’l as wearing a beret. But personification, when used to endow natural objects with human characteristics and emotions, frequently seems strained and unbelievable. Poe’s reference to the “vacant eye-like windows” of the House of Usher merely suggests a human characteristic; if he had gone further and referred to the windows as “those eyes that stared blankly and vacantly, never blinking, never closing, expressing no warmth or passion or desire,” the reader would probably be distracted by the image. Similarly, when Norris, in the selection on “Ploughing,” describes the earth as “thrilling with passion, vibrating with desire, offering itself to the caress of the plough, insistent, eager, imperious,” he is probably carrying personification to an unbelievable and distracting extreme.

Like figurative language, four rhetorical devices that concern the sounds of words can be used to enhance the effectiveness of description, as well as other forms of prose, but should be employed cautiously. **Alliteration**, the repetition of sounds at the beginnings of words or of stressed syllables, calls attention to the words and, in

addition to pleasing the ear, makes the words more emphatic and consequently more memorable. Mark Twain, for instance, writes of "the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi." Here, as in most instances of alliteration, the repetition of the initial sound helps to create tone and a balanced effect in the phrase. Similar to alliteration in purpose and effect are **assonance** (the repetition of similar vowel sounds) and **consonance** (the repetition of identical consonant sounds). When Twain describes a glimpse of the river as "a sort of sea, and withal a very still and brilliant and lovely one," he is making use of all three devices: alliteration in "a sort of sea"; assonance in "withal . . . still . . . brilliant"; and consonance in "withal . . . still . . . brilliant . . . lovely." The smoothness and mellifluous quality of Twain's prose is in part a result of his careful attention to the sound of words. **Onomatopoeia** is the formation of a word that imitates the sound associated with the action the word denotes. Frank Norris, in "Polk Street," writes of the *whirring* sound of the glass windows as the cable car passes; the word suggests the sound that the jostled windows make. Thus, through the use of a single adjective, Norris economically states that the windows make a sound and describes the sound they make. But all of these devices, decorative, pleasing, and effective when used moderately, are irritating when overused.

In the selection "Colorful, Colored, and Colorless Words," Paul Roberts discusses "colorful" words, those "calculated to produce a picture or induce an emotion"; "colored" words, "loaded with associations, good or bad"; and "colorless" words, "no longer capable of adding much to description." Students may find it useful to read the Roberts selection before moving forward to the discussions that follow.

The foregoing general discussion of the methods of description has application to all of the examples of descriptive writing in this book. Since different objects of description present different problems, however, some of the most common objects (descriptions of places; of people; and of sights, sounds, and sensations) are discussed separately.

DESCRIPTIONS OF PLACES

Descriptions of places involve four principal problems. Before he begins writing, the writer must consider his point of view, the dominant mood, the selection of details, and the order of the presentation of the details. He must ask himself, "Where am I standing as I view this scene? What mood do I wish to suggest?" Drawing upon memory or imagination or, best of all, actual observation, the writer should make a list of significant details about his subject—details that relate to as many of the senses as possible. He then must ask himself, "Which details should I emphasize? In what order can I best present these details?"

The writers whose descriptions of places appear in this book have answered these questions in various ways. In order to suggest the diversity of activity on San Francisco's Polk Street, Frank Norris places his main character in a window above the street and describes the activity below him in terms both of distance and time of day, using the street's most significant detail, the cable car, to give unity to the observations. Mark Twain, nostalgically describing his boyhood home town, makes effective use of contrast: he describes the scene both before and after its most dramatic moment—the arrival of the steamboat; he emphasizes the contrast by concentrating upon the same details viewed at different times. Edgar Allan Poe accentuates "the vacant eye-like windows" of the house of Roderick Usher, since they best express the ominous quality of the house and contribute to the mood of foreboding that he wishes to create. The order in which he presents details is the order of **climax**, from the least dramatic detail to the most dramatic. Both Budd Schulberg and Sinclair Lewis use the details of the furnishings of the office and home of their characters to comment unfavorably upon the occupants. In contrast to Poe, Schulberg works from the largest impression to the smallest, from the size of the office of the moving-picture magnate to the corners of his desk top. The bedroom of the Babbitts is used to typify