

Ornate — Or Not.

A fellow writer said to me, “You write the way you talk.”

Now, I’m not sure he meant this as a compliment. And really, he’s incorrect: I swear a lot more when I talk.

But yes, I often try to sound conversational in my writing. On the other hand, I sometimes write poetry, and that’s certainly ‘formal.’

Although there are no hard lines, I mentally divide writing into two styles, which I’ll call, ‘direct,’ and ‘ornate.’

In direct writing, the content of the piece is everything. Story, memoir, cake recipe, essay. It’s ‘what’ you say that’s important.

In ornate writing the words and constructs are important. Poetry is the best example, but stories, memoirs and their like can also contain ornate writing.

These are the extremes, and neither of them is intrinsically ‘better’ than the other. In fact, most writing is a mixture of the two styles. Each has its place.

For example: When asked by a bereaved family to write a eulogy for someone, you won’t make many points by writing:

“We buried Dan; we had to, Man.”

But it is direct.

On the other hand, if Ikea instructions read:

“Slowly insert the smooth hard dowel (‘A’) into the deep welcoming orifice (‘B’) and twist to seat firmly...” it would probably break up your bookcase assembly party, and prompt your four-year-old to ask, “What s a ‘oral face’?”

In times past, most writing was fairly ornate. This is probably because literacy was an uncommon and hard-won achievement. The ‘elites’ who had attained it celebrated their accomplishment and delighted each other with their abilities. Even today, what was ‘ordinary prose’ in the nineteenth century seems ‘flowery’ and ‘formal’ to us. Often, we enjoy it. It has a genuine beauty. But that beauty is often one of form, as opposed to content. (There are letters from the Civil War whose contents deal with carnage and tragedy. Their content is dismal, and stripped of their ‘form,’ they are unappealing. However, wrapped in it, they are works of art.)

In our time and culture, literacy has become a birthright, the province of all people. Amazingly,

as you read this, the written word has come to rival — and perhaps even surpass — the spoken word as our primary medium of communication.

There is a tremendous ‘inversion’ happening. The preferred medium for ‘archiving’ speech used to be the written word. Now, because of ubiquitous recording equipment, it is the spoken word. (Who of us has ever read Kennedy’s ‘Ich bin ein Berliner’ speech?)

On the other hand, the current medium for just ‘talking’ to others is becoming ‘texting’ in all its forms: email, tweets, blogs...

A consequence of all this is that writing has become far more ‘direct.’ For better or for worse, ‘ornate’ writing singles itself out. It often appears ‘wordy,’ or ‘pretentious.’ It calls attention to the ‘act of writing’ (craft), rather than the ‘purpose for writing’ (content).

This is fine, if it is what you intend. Most often, it’s not.

I have my own theory: Ours is a rabidly narcissistic society. Ornate writing shines a spotlight on the writer and his abilities rather than the (neutral) content. It is probably not your intent to provoke an ego contest with your reader.

Please understand, I am not referring here to effective prose imagery which insinuates itself seamlessly into a narrative. I am speaking of writing in which the form becomes the *raison*.

There are many who mourn the current disfavor of ‘ornate’ writing. (And although I am reluctant to say it, ornate writing is exploring new ground in the realm of hip-hop and ‘rap.’) I myself love reading poetry and ‘classics,’ and I rail against the current tyranny of Free Verse.

But still, most of what I write (and will write here) would be characterized as direct.

So why am I discussing this in a column about ‘Right Brain Writing’?

Well, we’ve already said that ornate writing calls attention to the words, and the structure of what you write. If you recall, these are very much left-brain issues. As a writer who is targeting the right brain, you don’t want the flow interrupted. You don’t want your reader to take time out to think, “Oh that was clever,” or “What a beautiful way to put that!” You want to maintain that steady stream of communication between you and the reader’s ear.

Certainly there may be times when you do want to appeal to the reader’s left brain. At those times, you use a different set of tools: structure, vocabulary, logic. Exploring those tools will also be part of our agenda.

You are the writer. It’s up to you to decide how you want to communicate with your reader. We will simply examine and clarify your choices.—m—