

Literature and Research Writing

by Neil Caudle, University Research Magazine Association

The poet A. R. Ammons told his students that we would never come into our own as writers until we could look our literary mommies and daddies in the eyes, stare them down, and see their faults. It's a necessary rebellion, Ammons said, because without it the authority by which we speak, by which we command a reader's attention, is not our authority but that of Sitwell or Tolstoy or Flaubert. Daddy, can I please wear your watch and run your saw and shoot your gun? Can I please have the keys to your prose?

We rebel, and then we reconcile. Then we take our mommies and daddies for all they've got. This is the natural order of things. My reconciliations are incomplete. I have not hurried home to embrace Mark Twain or Joseph Conrad. Screw 'em. But Faulkner, Count No-Count, bombastic, egomaniacal drunk—I like him very much, now that I no longer worship at his feet. There are many, many more.

Roger asked us to bring samples of our work, break them down, and say who is to blame for what. I'll read two very brief passages with different styles and different influences. First, the lead from a story called "The Breath of the Forest."

When Christopher Martens has climbed to the top of the tower, some 200 feet in the air, having hugged the rough X's of steelwork so tight that his arms are now bleeding and raw, he can rest long enough to gaze down on the deep, pillowed green of the forest. He can watch the macaws, bright as feathered candy, cruising the moist, rising air.

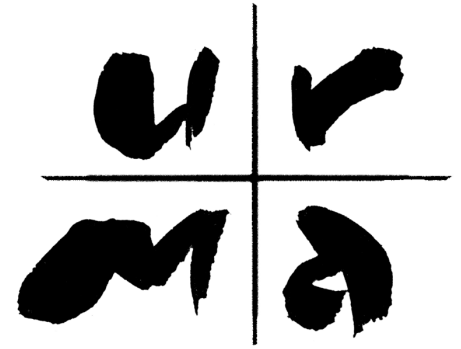
For a marine scientist who grew up with boats, whose preferred elevation is sea level or below, whose wife introduces him as the "mud man" because he spends so much time down and dirty in coastal sediments, this is an unthinkable height. What is he doing here, aloft in the wilds of Brazil, with only a smattering of Portuguese, with some gadgets wired inside of kitchenware like homemade bombs? He has come here to measure the breath of the forest.

You might feel the shadow of Faulkner hanging over the long sentences, or in the way the clauses are layered. But the truth is, this is pure Southern Baptist sermon rhetoric, courtesy of my grandfather, the preacher. Faulkner is responsible, though, for my preoccupation with the arrangement of people and objects in space. (I believe that he acquired this attribute from Thomas Hardy, but no matter.) Think of Caddy up the tree, showing us her muddy drawers; Cash outside his mother's window, building her coffin; or Jason, cornered in the kitchen with Quentin and Dilsey, as his long-suffering mother comes padding down the stairs. Arrangement signifies. It speaks.

But the authors I owe the most are those who thrived on the energy of contrast. Flaubert and Nabokov, especially. I have acquired that appetite, a craving for steelwork against the pillowed green, for the mud man aloft, for the bomblike gadgets wired inside of kitchenware. This is one of my primary motives, one of my sources of pleasure.

I live in the woods, but I am not a Nature writer, and I have never been entirely satisfied with anyone writing about Nature or people in Nature. I resisted Whitman by taking up with his latter-day disciple, A. R. Ammons, who updates the palette with science and all kinds of newfangled diction. And so, when I go to the woods, I don't pursue the pastoral. I don't dream away the clank and bang of modern life. I like to bring it with me.

I might, with a stretch, claim a literary pedigree for my obsession with the structure of sounds in text. Maybe you heard this in the sample I just read. I firmly believe that "deep," followed by a comma, are the necessary rhyming note and rest to tune the ear for "pillowed green," and that this structure, once established, should recur as its echo in "moist, rising air"), but the truth is that this obsession with the structure of sounds came from song writing, which I took up long before poems or prose, at eleven or twelve. Hank Wil-



liams and Roger Miller knew how to pattern lines of sound. So did the composers I found in my hymnal. Later, when I read Shakespeare, I saw the same techniques on a grander, finer scale, but the songs and the hymns came first.

Now, for the sake of contrast, listen to another brief passage, the lead from a story called "The Whole Elephant."

We'll try to do this without hype because Russ Taylor and Rich Superfine and Sean Washburn tell us that hype doesn't help. So we are not going to promise you a time when you will stroll around in an airborne cloud of teeny-tiny machines all invisibly whirring in tune with your needs. We are not going to promise you much of anything at all. Except a story.

So here goes.

From this point forward, please think small. Virus, molecule, atom. That small. Not so many years ago, life on that scale was fuzzy and remote, like faraway stars. A scientist could see these tiny things, dimly, but the rest of us took them on faith.

Not any more. Let's say you have a son or daughter at Orange High School in Hillsborough, North Carolina. Your teenager may have sat down at a computer there, fired up an Internet link to the physics and astronomy department in Chapel Hill, goosed a robotic arm into gear, and whacked, shoved, mashed or otherwise bullied a virus. Yes, a teenager can actually do this.

In college, as I was patiently slogging my way through the Russians, Grit Lit, and the turgid experiments of John Barth, William Gass, Malcolm Lowry, and Thomas Pynchon, I occasionally played hooky with a novelist who wrote for the impatient: James M. Cain (*The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Double Indemnity*, *The*

Butterfly).

Cain's stock in trade was irony, and when I choose to be ironic, as I did in this lead (implying a promise even as I claimed not to promise), I tend to think of Cain (or feel his patterns). So the tone owes a bit to Cain: abrupt and edgy, with some restless aggression. Cain used sentence fragments as though to drive his grammar teachers crazy. His thoughts arrived piecemeal, hooked up by implication. But you always got it. Always.

By the way, "invisibly whirring" isn't stolen (I don't think), but it is the kind of phrase A. R. Ammons might use. Cain? Probably not. So not only do I have to reconcile myself with all of my literary mothers and fathers, but sometimes I have to reconcile them, the Cains and the Faulkners and the Nabokovs, one to the other. And all the while I'm hearing Archie Ammons in my ear: Neil, learn their chops, but get your own game.