

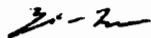
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Dear Colleague:

Jacques Barzun has something interesting to say about prose, which I will pass on to you. "How to define the quality of prose? It is motion allied to transparency. Prose is at its best when it does not call attention to itself." He then adds a historical note that will make poets angry and defensive. "Writing prose is a much more difficult craft than writing poetry. One proof of that truth is that all peoples have produced poetry--and this at the very beginning of their literature--but not all have developed a tolerable prose. There is none in English and French until the early seventeenth century. Up to that time, sentences meander at great length by the addition of clauses in no special order. The result is talk, not prose" (The American Scholar, Spring 1987).

Well, I think I now know why prose is so unpopular. It is unnatural--the specialized artifact of a particular period in history. Poetry, by contrast, is natural. Children, for instance, often use striking metaphors: what they say can be highly poetic. Talk is natural but, contrary to commonsense, it is more a mixture of so-and-so poetry and errant nonsense than good prose. It is a jungle, and it has to be drastically pruned before it can become a garden. But here we seem to run into a paradox. Good prose, as Barzun says, is transparent. It directs attention to reality rather than to itself. But good prose is also high artifice. As a sophisticated human product it demands its own place under the sun. Far from being transparent to reality it casts a shadow over it. So what are we to do if we want to get at the truth of things? Just rap or talk? That was the solution of the sixties. Even now some professors prefer to rap or just talk rather than take time to produce a crystalline lecture. They are, however, mistaken if they think that lots of talk back and forth get the class closer to truth. Talk is primarily a social device: lots of it, back and forth, cement society even if what is said is mostly trivia and nonsense. So a professor who conducts his class as rapping sessions is likely to garner a highly desirable social reward--namely, high evaluation from students.

Best wishes,



P.S. I hope I don't have to tell you that I am just talking. I don't pretend to be writing prose.