

Athenaeum Society
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- It was a dark and stormy night...

To stand tall, to humbly crawl; to laugh, to cry; to puke bitterly, to suck on come what may — here follows my turbulent infancy.

Mr. President, Mr. Secretary and esteemed gentlemen of the Athenaeum Society.

The year is 1873. A man lies dying in semi-obscurity. Never mind that he was once one of the most well-read authors in Victorian England second only to Charles Dickens in popularity. Never mind that he was the confidant and best friend of Dickens - that one of Dicken's children was named for him, that he was the child's godfather, and that it was *he* who convinced Dickens to change the ending of *Great Expectations*, arranging for its hero, Pip, to get married and live happily-ever-after because the reading public wanted a "happy ending." Never mind that the great man had coined such well known phrases as "the pen is mightier than the sword," "the great unwashed," and "the almighty dollar. Never mind that he sat in Parliament for nine years and published dozens of novels in a variety of genres, including historical fiction, mystery, romance, the occult, and science fiction and that one of his novels, *Rienzi*, was made into an opera by Richard Wagner. Never mind that his book, *Ernest Maltravers*, was the first complete novel from the west to be translated into Japanese in 1878. Never mind that his most popular book has made the transition to the silver screen - not once, but three times - one of them starring strong man Steve Reeves - and each movie version judged to be better than the book itself.

Despite these many accomplishments, this man's memory is consigned, much like his beloved pet pig "Pickwick," to the slaughterhouse of oblivion, his accomplishments stuffed into the sausage casings of mediocrity, and his novels rendered into the lard of indistinguishment.

His books lie like unwanted pig-snouts on the butcher shop floor of literary acumen, and he is not heard of again for about 100 years, except for occasional readings of his most famous novel, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, which will be assigned to unlucky students by sadistic, spinster English teachers with narrow eyes, shrunken chests, and a red pen stained with the blood of those foolish enough to choose *Batman meets Mr. Clean* for their semester book report.

But then an extraordinary thing happened. He is discovered by a cartoon dog sitting on top of a doghouse pounding on a typewriter.

This Athenaeum paper is, of course, referring to the brilliant poet, play-write, novelist, politician, and statesman, Sir Edward George Earle Lytton Bulwer-Lytton.

"It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents—except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness."

This is the opening sentence of the novel *Paul Clifford*, written in 1830, the same year that, in America, Edwin Beard Budding was granted a patent for the invention of the lawnmower. Coincidence? I think not.

The novel recounts the adventures of one "Paul Clifford," a character leading a double life both as a criminal and a gentleman of leisure. It is a bodice-ripping, thrill-ride with highwaymen,

murder, intrigue, what passed for sex in Victorian England, beautiful damsels and a whole lot of words. It was very popular in its day. You might be asking yourself at this point — Is the rest of the novel as bad as the opening sentence? Or, if you have the attention span of the gentlemen here at the head table, your question might be, "Okay, I don't understand what Schweizer's on about, but I've got a urology appointment with Ken Dougherty on Monday. Can it be as bad as they say?" The answer to both questions is "Yes." Later in the novel, a fellow lighting his pipe is described as "applying the Promethium spark to his tube." You might hear the same phrase used by Dr. Dougherty's nurse, and if you do — run, do not walk — to the nearest exit.

But let us return to this opening sentence — "It was a dark and stormy night, etc...." Is it really *that* bad?

Let us imagine for a few moments that the master himself has returned. Taking into account that literary tastes have changed and that Papa Hemingway's version of Bulwer-Lytton's opening salvo might have read

A storm came and sometimes in the wind there was noise on the rooftops, and you could see that the street lamps were having a bad time...

Taking this into account — would our author, prowling around a Books-A-Million, find better opening prose? Bulwer looks in amazement as he trods through the Romance aisles — the book's bright relief covers with their depictions of splendidly torsoed heros coupling with heroines whose bosoms are overflowing into the cookbook section. He scans the extravagant blurbs. Nothing there to make Victorian tastes seem lurid, although in his day, all the pictures were on the inside. He feels a little naughty though, because all the heaving bosoms put him in mind of Vesuvius. Moving out of *Romance* and over to the best sellers, he picks up *Love and Dreams* by Patricia Hagen. He reads the opening sentence.

"The first peach and melon fingers of dawn began to slowly creep above the shadowy domes, spires and crosses that made up the skyline of St. Petersburg, Russia, to stealthily push aside the clawing vestiges of night, parting the skies for a new day...in that late summer of 1893."

WHAT?

Gadzooks! To "slowly creep" and to "stealthily push aside"? Has the language so degenerated here in the Colonies that they freely split infinitives? It seems as if they boldly do.

The rest seems Lyttonian enough. "Peach and melon fingers of dawn": more specific than "the fruity fingers of dawn" certainly. Bulwer doesn't know if he could have passed on the alliteration, though. Dawn with fingers of fruit: best not to think about that one too long.

What about "stealthily creep"? How else would something creep? Loudly? Perhaps. And these fruity fingers are pushing aside "the clawing vestiges of night." Vestiges? From the latin word for "footprint"? Fingers pushing away clawing footprints? She must mean the night has feet with big claws. Then along comes dawn with its sweet-smelling fruity fingers and pushes aside these smelly, clawed feet — or at least paws over their tracks.

Then there are the "domes, spires and crosses that made up the skyline of St. Petersburg, Russia." Of course. The trick is to use still more words. After all, a novel has to have 70,000 or so. No sense in stopping after "the domes, spires and crosses of St. Petersburg." St. Petersburg, Florida is also known for its domes, spires and crosses. And then "in that late summer of 1893." It reads like an afterthought, but this is the last chance to throw it in. It was

nice though to be reminded that dawn parts the sky for a new day. We might forget when dawns comes.

His self esteem still secure, Bulwer confidently picks up another book, Janet Dailey's *Heiress: Sunlight pierced the thick canopy formed by the branching limbs of the oak trees and dappled the century-old marble monument that laid claim to this section of the Houston cemetery as the Lawson family plot.*

Bulwer is relieved. He has found another word-waster, another heir - or heiress - to his tradition. We have the "thick canopy formed by the branching limbs." No use in saying "the thick canopy of branching limbs," dropping the "formed by." But branching limbs? Isn't *branching* what limbs do? And they are the "branching limbs of oak trees." Would her readers have felt cheated if she had said that "sunlight pierced the canopy of oaks"? That brings the word count from fourteen to six. Less than half. Nah. You can't write like that and churn out one 500-page novel after another.

Bulwer is on a roll. Ignoring the rest of Janet Dailey's run-on sentence, he snatches up Gail Godwin's *A Southern Family*:

Going to see Claire's family on the isolated hilltop where Ralph Quick had built his domestic fortress was an ordeal for Julia.

Bulwer can sympathize with the ordeal, now having to deal with one of his own - that is, wading through a seventeen-word subject phrase before a verb finally surfaces. And what a verb to wait for: *was*. Not exactly kinetic, much less melodramatic. A lot of opening sentences, in Bulwer's day, like to build to some sort of conclusion - a highlight, if you will. At least we get a character in this one - Julia - even if she does sound a trifle petulant. Having to go and see the relatives in their isolated hilltop fortress is bad enough without being asked to hold up the ends of anti-climactic sentences.

Now, lest you think that I actually know what a "subject phrase" is, rest assured that, like all of you, I have no idea. But I know people, and these are people who take this stuff seriously. *VERY* seriously. These are people who would *kill* you if you subjugated a verb clause, whatever that means.

"So," I asked my Grammar-Nazi friend, "how can we get some interest and climax into that opener and allow a lady of quality her rightful due? There must be a way." She rolls her eyes. "How about "It was always an ordeal for Julia to visit Claire's family on the isolated hilltop where Ralph Quick had built his fortress." This structure begins with positing the ordeal - what ordeal? - For Julia to visit. Question raised. Question answered. Furthermore the sentence ends with the imposing image of the fortress." Nicely done.

Sentence structure is *always* important in these matters. In fact, sentence structure can be crucial and can, in fact, change the meaning dramatically. For example:

The boss had to fire somebody, and he narrowed it down to one of two people, Debra or Jack. It was an impossible decision because they were both good workers. Rather than flip a coin, he decided he would fire the first one who used the water cooler the next morning. Debra came in the next morning with a horrible hangover after partying all night. She went to the cooler to take an aspirin.

The boss approached her and said, "Debra, I've never done this before but I have to lay you or Jack off."

"Could you jack off?" she says. "I feel like crap."

But back to our hero -

Bulwer seizes *The Sins of the Flesh* by Fern Michaels:

The night was womblike with a dense, cloudy sky hanging overhead as if suspended.

Womblike — he doesn't even want to think about that. In his day only expectant mothers, midwives and physicians talked about wombs. What is womblike? Dark, certainly. He imagines it's soggy in there, cramped, not much room for ballroom dancing, and it certainly doesn't smell like lilacs. And then the cloudy sky is "hanging as if suspended". This one stops him for a moment, but he decides to consult a dictionary - just two rows over. He looks up the definition of "hang": *to suspend*. Ah, the clouds were suspended overhead as if *suspended*. Now *that* is emphasis. And he doesn't miss that the clouds are, in fact, overhead, right where you would find them in his day. That is one thing that hasn't changed.

Bulwer likes this game. He is still a match for any of these upstarts. He decides to try just one more, *The Servants of Twilight*, by Dean Koontz.

It began in sunshine, not on a dark and stormy night.

At last, someone in this century who knows how to begin a novel! Bulwer is vindicated and disappears in a puff of smoke.

Now, lest you gentlemen think that this paper is an English lesson, or worse yet, a grammar lesson, you may relax. Nor is it a paper on Sir Edward George Earle Lytton Bulwer-Lytton's literary accomplishments. Well, not directly.

Forgotten for over a hundred years, the rakish, good-looking Paul Clifford and his creator, Sir Bulwer, lie in obscurity, a pimple on the backside of world literature, but on July 12, 1965, Charles Schultz and Snoopy drag them back from the brink of oblivion. On that fateful morning, Snoopy is seen, on top of his doghouse, clattering away at the the typewriter.

*It was a dark and stormy night. Suddenly, a shot rang out!
A door slammed. The maid screamed.
Suddenly, a pirate ship appeared on the horizon!
While millions of people were starving, the king lived in luxury.
Meanwhile, on a small farm in Kansas, a boy was growing up.*

Snoopy continues to use the now-famous line with great effect over the coming years, beginning countless unpublished novels of dubious distinction. The line is picked up by detective novelists, TV shows and children's authors. Yet far chunkier literary cow-pies are about to be flung at Bulwer's reputation. In 1983, a contest springs forth like a determined Popeye to the libidinous bed of Olive Oil. I'm speaking now, of course, of the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Competition, the annual international contest that challenges entrants to compose the worst opening sentence to the worst of all possible novels. Attracting up to 10,000 entries every year, the competition spawns an embarrassment of dire fiction that is both horrifying and hilarious.

Watching Felicia walk into the bar was like watching two fat Rottweilers in yellow spandex and spike heels that had treed a scrawny bleach blond cat at the top of a skinny flagpole that for some reason had decided to sprout casaba melons.

From January to April, 1983, the English Department at San Jose State University sponsored the first competition. Now, twenty-five years later, the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest draws entries from all over the United States and nearly fifty foreign countries. The contest was

created by Dr. Scott Rice, to fill a pressing need. Most literary contests are inherently unfair, favoring as they do talent, sensibility, and intelligence. They are snooty affairs that only encourage the tyranny of the talented, rewarding a few by perpetuating a "talent" chauvinism. They are callously neglectful of the mediocre masses – those who *might* be authors if they had any craft, vision, or message.

"What about encouraging authors to write *good* books?" you might ask. I would answer, that's all very well and good, but what about those of us who would rather write bad books than read good ones? And besides, there are already more good books than a normal person can expect to read in a lifetime. Whenever someone writes another good book, it just creates a lot of anxiety for those who are afraid they will never find time to read it.

The Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest solves this problem and the rules are simple: Each entry must consist of a single sentence but you may submit as many entries as you wish. (One fellow once submitted over 3,000 entries. He didn't win.)

Sentences may be of any length, but it is strongly suggested that entrants go over 60 words at their own peril. Entries must be "original" (as it were) and previously unpublished. The deadline is April 15th of each year, although it has been discovered that Dr. Rice will take entries well into the summer. The winner is usually announced in July or August and winning will get you \$250, which you can then spend on a creative writing class at your local community college. I suggest poetry. It doesn't have to make sense, it doesn't have to rhyme, and if you can read it with a straight face while wearing a beret, you go to the head of the class.

Leopold looked up at the arrow piercing the skin of the dirigible with a sort of wondrous dismay -- the wheezy shriek was just the sort of sound he always imagined a baby moose being beaten with a pair of accordions might make.

Writing this badly is not as easy as one might think. Yes, a sentence can be bad, but in order to win, or even to make honorable mention, it has to *know* it's bad. And, as in so many other genres, most winners tend to follow a formula. The current model for the BLFC entries is as follows:

Long sentences; tightly constructed; mainly consisting of an elaborately over-inflated metaphor or simile that, in the end, is punctured by a ludicrously mundane or trivial final clause. For example - here's one of last year's winners:

The tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife, not even a sharp knife, but a dull one from that set of cheap knives you received as a wedding gift in a faux wooden block; the one you told yourself you'd replace, but in the end, forgot about because your husband ran off with another man, that kind of knife.

Or this one -

John lay in the morning dew next to his sleeping love as the pink hues of the sun rose over the rolling hills, illuminating a tender scene where for the first time satisfaction had come for a happy couple, who had fought all manner of obstacles to come to this one glorious moment, defiant in the face of Montana's repressive bestiality laws.

I, myself, not wishing to toot my own horn, but what the heck, have scored several times in the Bulwer-Lytton competition. The first was a few years ago, when I managed an honorable mention:

Although Brandi had been named Valedictorian and the outfit for her speech carefully chosen to prove that beauty and brains could indeed mix, she suddenly regretted her choice of attire, her rain-soaked t-shirt now valiantly engaging in the titanic struggle between the tensile strength of cotton and Newton's first law of motion.

And again last year in the Detective category:

She'd been strangled with a rosary: not a run-of-the-mill rosary like you might get at a Catholic bookstore where Hail Marys are two for a quarter and indulgences are included on the back flap of the May issue of "Nuns and Roses" magazine, but a fancy heirloom rosary with pearls, rubies, and a solid gold cross; a rosary with attitude; the kind of rosary that said "Get your Jehovah's Witness butt off my front porch.

Still the question remains "Why have a contest that actually encourages bad writing? Isn't there enough putrid prose in the world?"

According to Professor Rice, the contest doesn't actually encourage *bad* bad writing, but *good* bad writing - writing so deliberately rotten that it both entertains and instructs. Bad is only bad when it thinks it's good, or worse, doesn't care. Actually the contest is like other literary competitions in one respect: it rewards writers who achieve their desired effect. In this case, the effects were intentionally bad, but they required control over their materials. You might compare the "good" entrants to someone impersonating a drunk on ice skates. You might compare the "bad" entrants to drunks on typewriters.

My heart jumped into my mouth like a frog into a pond full of fly soup as I looked up at a dish that was flaunting the kind of body that made married men wish they were single, single men wish they were better looking, and every Chicago Cubs fan wish the starting lineup swung their bats the same way she swung her hips as she crossed the threshold of both the doorway and bad taste.

Most contestants fall into two classes; good writers pretending to be bad writers, and bad writers pretending to be good writers pretending to be bad writers. The contest is judged by a panel of undistinguished malcontents - the willing and the unqualified - unpublished authors, self-appointed arbiters and envious back-biters. This is obvious to me, because I haven't yet won the major prize. Even with such gems as this - my latest entry:

"Enid? Enid Pendulous?" Bernard called out into the waiting room, not for the first time regretting his accidental occupation as a "boudoir" photographer in the small town of Upchuck, Georgia; and as he held the door open for his next appointment and watched, horrified, as his old Sunday School teacher walked in, dropped her robe, tousled her hair and settled, naked, onto the heart-shaped bed, he didn't wonder very long about what genetic make-up in Miss Pendulous' ancestry had been the origin of her strangely erotic surname.

And so, in conclusion, and having heard a great many papers by Athenaeum members in the past 15 years, I suggest that, like myself, many of you have the lack of talent and vision, combined with a determination toward bad writing in general that would make for a fine Bulwer-Lytton competitor. I suggest you get to work. And with that admonition, I leave you with this...

There are certain people in the world who emanate an aura of well being -- they radiate sunshine, light up a room, bring out the best in others, and fill your half empty glass to overflowing - yes it was these very people thought Karl, as he sharpened his mirror-finished guthook knife, who were top of his list.