

Rowan Williams the Theobabbler

In the introduction to his magisterial anthology, the late John Gross declined to offer a definition of good prose. His taste was as catholic as his knowledge was deep and wide, but it was also sure. Gross included examples of the flowery and the spare, the tragic and the comic, the poetical and the matter-of-fact in his book, but every extract was good of its type. On the matter of good prose, Gross was truly ecumenical.

If Gross, who probably knew more English prose than any man who ever lived, could not define the quality that made prose good, it is unlikely that anyone else ever will be able to do so: certainly not Dr Rowan Williams, late Archbishop of Canterbury. It is odd that *The Guardian* should have published an essay by him, titled *A Summons to Writers*, on this very subject, for Dr Williams is a writer who generally avoids cliché only by resort to vagueness or obscurity. Alas, he has never taken to heart (or head) the distinction made by his predecessor in the Church, Bishop Butler, between perplexity and confusion of thought, the former inhering in the subject, the latter being in the mind of him who would express himself. Of course, this does not mean that Dr Williams' prose is altogether valueless: a bad example is, in a sense, a good example, for it teaches us what to avoid.

Here is a fairly typical example of Dr Williams' reflections taken from one of his articles:

The advance of legislation around the protection of ethnic

minorities,

not only from very specific kinds of practical discrimination but also

from demeaning public speech, reflects such a reactive move: "civic

discourse and practice," the developing moral and imaginative

awareness of a society, lead us to recognize that certain ways of

speaking and behaving habitually restrict the possibilities of certain

groups, implicitly as well as explicitly.

'The advance of legislation around...': as Polonius would have said, that's an ill phrase, a vile phrase: precisely the 'bureaucratic double-speak and ambiguous cliché' that Dr Williams laments as being dominant in our time.

In his essay in *The Guardian*, he writes:

Merton, with another theological twist that Orwell would probably

not have much appreciated, also implies that if our fundamental

human problem is "Prometheanism", wanting to steal divinity from

God rather than labouring at being human, then good

writing, with

its inbuilt ironies and its awareness of its own conditions, is one of

the things that stop us imagining we are more than human.

And Dr Williams adds complacently, 'Perhaps that's as good a definition of good writing as we're going to find.'

We? As Sam Goldwyn said, include me out.