

The Struggle for the Soul of the Sentence

by Sven Birkerts

Ours is the great era of infotainment, of the much lamented migration away from serious reading. The communications revolution—everything from e-mail to the ubiquitous cell phone—has spawned what seems to many an impoverished, phrase-based paradigm. The sound byte, the instant message—with every year, increments of meaning and expression seem to shrink. One might naturally expect American fiction of the last quarter-century to reflect that contraction, and gifted young writers, the products of an accelerated culture of distraction, to map in their prose the rhythms and diction patterns of our times.

Instead, almost to a writer, a new generation of novelists and short-story writers are forging styles of notable complexity and of cultural, if not always psychological, nuance. Life as presented in fiction has never seemed more ramified, more mined with implication, more multiplex in possibility. This shocking reverse of expectation marks a major shift in the how and what of literary fiction in America. A pitched battle between ways of seeing and representing the world—what might be called a struggle over the soul of the sentence—has been fought for at least a half-century now, and skirmishes during the past two decades have brought a victory for complexity that few would have predicted.

To give this battle a crude first formulation, we are witnessing the later stages of a long warfare between what I think of as ascetic realism—a belief in the artistic and ethical primacy of the understated treatment of the here and now—and something we might call, for want of an official term, “maximalism,” a tendency toward expansive, centrifugal narrative that aspires to embrace the complexity of contemporary life. If we go back a quarter-century, to the mid-1970s, we can see the polarity alive and well, represented, on the one hand, by Raymond Carver’s influential short-story collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) and, on the other, by Thomas Pynchon’s limit-busting novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973).

In these works, the conflict between worldviews is revealed at the level of the sentence. The aesthetics of a Carver and a Pynchon could not be more different. Carver’s writing registers, by way of a harshly pruned-back affect, the injurious impact of the world on the susceptible psyche. Pynchon’s prose opens itself to the overwhelmingness of life, registering detail, exploring myriad connections (often in a playful manner), and communicating a



Capturing a “minimalist” moment: Edward Hopper’s Summer Evening (1947).

sense of open-endedness that is always outrunning the perceptions of the moment.

At the subsentence—thematic—level, what we confront is the gulf between two visions of Americanness, one older and one of more recent vintage. The perspective with the longer lineage assumes a link between willed simplicity and virtue, and harks back to a mythos of rural and small-town beginnings that has been at the core of our popular culture from the start. The newer vision would mark the epochal changes brought on by the acceleration, interconnectedness, and radically expanded sense of context that are the products of late modernity. What Philip Rahv once described as the core split in our literature between “redskins” and “palefaces”—primitives and aesthetes, if you will—can now be seen as the split between the conserving and the liberating impulses. There are those who have a hard time facing the fact that our world has been refigured in the last decades by globalism and electronic communications, among other things, and those who are scrambling to make sense of the new situation.

For a long time I shared what I think of as the great populist prejudice. I had imbibed it in my schooling and in all the reading I’d done growing up in the 1950s and ’60s, in what might fairly be called the Age of Hemingway in American fiction. Our American genius, I was far from alone in believing, was at root an unpretentious directness, a humble, plain-spoken, verb-and-noun relation to the primary conditions of life and the largely stoical codes that honor them. I mean, among other things, the “manly” restraint of excessive feeling, and a rejection of pretense and, with it, intellectual complexity. This credo had its iconic father and manner: Within the

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plank-and-nail sentences of Ernest Hemingway, the ethos had its most representative life. “The door of Henry’s lunch-room opened and two men came in”: A standard of purity and realism was embodied in such prose.

This equating of the demotic with the essential American virtues did not originate with Hemingway, but it found its great midcentury expression in his work and his public presence. (Something of the same hierarchy could be said to have prevailed in poetry, with Robert Frost taking the Hemingway position, and possibly in the essay as well, where the chair belonged to E. B. White.) The plainspoken tradition had its mainly male line of succession. The spirit and the prose were passed along through writers such as Robert Stone, Andre Dubus, Richard Ford, and a number of others. But Raymond Carver was Hemingway’s primary heir.

Stylistically, he was a direct descendant, with his pared-down, understated prose idiom. Carver’s thematic interests, though, took more of a turn toward implied interiority. Where Hemingway was preoccupied with war and its lacerating effects on the manly self-conception, never mind the soul, Carver took on the loss and failure faced by individuals left behind by the general rush into modernity. His was the blue-collar lament, the cry of the new superfluous man. The downbeat poignancy of this passage from “They’re Not Your Husband” is vintage Carver:

Early Ober was between jobs as a salesman. But Doreen, his wife, had gone to work nights as a waitress at a twenty-four-hour coffee shop at the edge of town. One night, when he was drinking, Early decided to stop by the coffee shop and have something to eat. He wanted to see where Doreen worked, and he wanted to see if he could order something on the house.

We find a similar naturalistic bluntness in such writers as Stone, Dubus, Ford, Russell Banks, Tobias Wolff, and Geoffrey Wolff, to name a few. Yet all of them work more with an eye toward narrative development, and cannot be said to be Carver protégés in any sense. Carver’s influence is far more apparent in the work of the so-called minimalists, a group of mainly young writers, many of whom were published in the 1970s and ’80s by an influential editor at Alfred A. Knopf, Gordon Lish (who, as an editor at *Esquire*, had been instrumental in getting Carver’s early work published).

Minimalism took to more stylized extremes the idea of the understated utterance, though with more ironic inflection, and the belief that suggestion and implication were built through careful strategies of withholding. Minimalists likewise eschewed big themes, preferring to create uneasy portraits of American middle-class domesticity. But here we bump up against one aspect of the paradox that is at the root of this seeming face-off between approaches. For if the subject matter was, in this most reduced sense, realistic, the impetus of the

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mode was aesthetic: The prose of minimalist exemplars such as Amy Hempel, Mary Robison, Janet Kauffman, and others unmistakably reflects a highly craft-conscious sensibility. Every feature in this close-cropped scene from one of Hempel's stories is bathed in hyperawareness: "Ten candles in a fish stick tell you it's Gully's birthday. The birthday girl is the center of attention; she squints into the popping flash cubes. The black cat seems to know every smooth pose there is."

Hempel's carefully posed affect is fairly representative. If the popular equation of minimalism with an antiornamental—therefore democrat-ic/populist—approach ever really held up, it does so no longer. Indeed, if we look past the reflexive association of Hemingway's clipped sentences with the plainspoken truth of things, we find a high degree of aestheticism there as well. Hemingway is as mannered, in his way, as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf are in theirs, as studied as Cézanne (whom he studied).

So it was hardly a surprise when gadfly essayist and novelist Tom Wolfe saw no realism to commend in minimalism in his hyperbolic blast "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel," published in *Harper's* in 1989. Pistols popping in all directions, Wolfe declared the landscape of American fiction blighted and plumped hard for the kind of reheated Balzacianism that his two best-selling novels, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990) and *A Man in Full* (1998), could be said to represent. As Wolfe wrote in a much-quoted passage:

At this weak, pale, tabescent moment in the history of American literature, we need a battalion, a brigade, of Zolas to head out into this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, hog-stomping Baroque country of ours and reclaim it as literary property. Philip Roth was absolutely right. The imagination of the novelist is powerless before what he knows he's going to read in tomorrow morning's newspaper. But a generation of American writers has drawn precisely the wrong conclusion from that perfectly valid observation. The answer is not to leave the rude beast, the material, also known as the life around us, to the journalists but to do what journalists do, or are supposed to do, which is to wrestle the beast and bring it to terms.

Wolfe, though he growled and gnashed in his distinctively big-bad style, was hardly alone in his impatience with the evasions of minimalism and with the more self-consciously formalized metafictional experiments of writers such as Robert Coover, John Hawkes, and John Barth, in which the artifice of fiction becomes in some sense the subject. His essay helped to expose the limitations of American piety about the truth-telling power of plainspoken prose—and to reveal that the polarity between the ascetic realists and the mandarin maximalists was not what it seemed at all. For, in his high dudgeon, Wolfe also swept aside as hopeless aesthetes the "palefaces," whose elaborate sentences may, in fact, have been lassoing the "rude wild beast" in new and inventive ways that he failed to appreciate, wedded as he was to a 19th-century prose of enumerative specificity

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and linearity. He did not seem to see that the deeper nature of selfhood and social reality was itself changing, transforming our fundamental notions of connectedness, of subject and object, of consciousness, in a world less temporally and spatially fixed than ever before.

There are many ways to write the story of the gradual triumph of the maximalist approach. But a catalytic moment surely was the publication in 1973 of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, the novel that ambitiously combined antic black comedy, a compellingly paranoid historical vision, and a sensibility saturated in the ethos of the then-counterculture. To be sure, that big book's arrival was preceded by the publication in 1953 of Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* and in 1955 of William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*. And in their very different ways, more elaborate stylists such as John Updike and John Cheever, along with Roth and Bellow, were also staking an ambitious claim to charting our turbulent social and spiritual landscape. Still, Pynchon's novel remains, more than any other work, the ur-text for more contemporary makers of fiction; the book exerts its influence even on those who have never read it.

Pynchon's opening sentence is, it's true, arrestingly declarative: "A screaming comes across the sky." But before long, we are in the spawn bogs of the real, the essential, Pynchon sentences:

On a wooden pub sign daringly taken, one daylight raid, by a drunken Barley Gobbitch, across which still survives in intaglio the legend SNIPE AND SHAFT, Teddy Bloat is mincing bananas with a great isoceles knife, from beneath whose nervous blade Pirate with one hand shovels the blond mash into waffle batter resilient with fresh hens' eggs, for which Osbie Feel has exchanged an equal number of golf balls, these being even rarer this winter than real eggs, other hand blending the fruit in, not overvigorously, with a wire whisk, whilst surly Osbie himself, sucking frequently at the half-pint milkbottle filled with VAT 69 and water, tends to the bananas in the skillet and broiler.

Gloriously elliptical, digressive, allowing his clauses to loosen and drift before drawing tight around noun and verb, Pynchon is, by design or not, making a revolutionary turn against the Hemingway mode. Keep in mind, too, that Pynchon was writing before the advent of our polymorphous electronic culture. His contribution — one of many — was to patent a style, an approach that could later be adapted to rendering the strange interdependencies of a world liberated from its provincial boundedness. He modeled a swoop of mind, a way of combining precision with puckishness, a kind of rolling agglomeration that would prove formative for the generation now coming into its own.

What is happening can be seen as a kind of gradual ice-heave action against the seemingly dominant presence of the plainspoken and simplified. Slowly they advance, the proponents of the richer and headier view, each one different in form and



Sally Said (1994), by Jane Calvin

particular expression, sharing only the impulse to break the confining box, the austere stoicist ethos, and to get hold of—annex—the sense of a burgeoning world. In the footsteps of writers such as Updike, Roth, and Bellow, with their complex intelligences, we now remark the ascendancy of William Gass, Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Cynthia Ozick, Harold Brodkey, Annie Proulx, Toni Morrison, Paul West, and Maureen Howard, as well as short-story acrobats Barry Hannah, Denis Johnson, and Thom Jones. There is obviously a world of difference between the verbally impacted sentences of a Gass and the almost mythical involutions of Morrison, but at root one senses a common expansive will: to embrace, to mime, to unfold in the cadence of a sentence the complexities of life as lived. Far from a betrayal of the real, the elaboration of stylistic surface is often a more faithful transcription than the willfully reduced expression.

From David Foster Wallace (*Infinite Jest*) to Richard Powers (*Galatea 2.2*, *Plowing the Dark*) to Donald Antrim (*The Verificationist*) to Helen DeWitt (*The Last Samurai*) to Rick Moody (*Purple America*) to Colson Whitehead (*John Henry Days*) to Jonathan Franzen (*The Corrections*), and on and on, the drive is not just to structural layering and counterpoint, but to the building of sentences that articulate, at every point, implicit-

ly, the fact that life and the consciousness that greets it are deeply involved and involving.

Consider the tour de force convolutions of Wallace:

The student engineer, a pre-doctoral transuranial metallurgist working off massive G.S.L. debt, locks the levels and fills out the left side of his time sheet and ascends with his book back through a treillage of inter-neural stairways with semitic ideograms and developer smell and past snack bar and billiard hall and modem-banks and extensive student counseling offices around the rostral lamina, all the little-used many-staired neuroform way up to the artery-red fire door of the Union's rooftop, leaving Madam Psychosis, as is S.O.P., alone with her show and screen in the shadowless chill.

We might marvel at, and also feel ourselves numbed by, the detailed density, the terminological fetishism, the “neuroform” intricacy of consciousness in descriptive motion. We might also look at this tweezer-extracted bit from Powers’s densely woven novel *Galatea 2.2*:

The web was a neighborhood more efficiently lonely than the one it replaced. Its solitude was bigger and faster. When relentless intelligence finally completed its program, when the terminal drop box brought the last barefoot, abused child on line and everyone could at last say anything instantly to everyone else in existence, it seemed to me that we’d still have nothing to say to each other and many more ways not to say it.

Not only is the prose elegant and clear, but it captures in its cadences, in its deferral of predicate, something of the phenomenon it reflects upon. There is here a palpable sense of language venturing a stretch, challenging our idea of sufficiency, opening itself to take in more reality.

Granted, these brief samples are from two of our more cerebral and experimental young writers, but I could very likely make my point by looking

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at the prose of better-known, or less overtly heady, writers—DeLillo, Proulx, Ozick, Howard, Michael Chabon, Michael Cunningham, Brad Leithauser, Steven Millhauser, Alice Munro, and Michael Ondaatje. All could be said to share a belief in linguistic potency, in language’s achieving its highest and most essential aims through enfold-

ing, not through suggesting by omission.

Maybe this prospering of the maximal does not represent a paradox, or contradiction, after all. To look at our new culture solely in terms of the forms

of electronic communications—the byte-speak mode—is to ignore the impact of the system itself. The net effect (pun intended) of that system is to make the world hugely more complex, and, perhaps less obviously, to force us to retool our reflexes, thereby allowing us to tolerate, possibly even requiring us to seek out, ever greater levels of sensory input. We do not live as our parents did. We do not live even as *we* lived 10 years ago. We might have to accept that we are changing, evolving new capacities that permit us to discern patterns and harmonies—rather than mere noise—in the much-expanded orchestration of reality.

This literary transformation has been working itself out from two directions. On the one side, contemporary writing, in prose style and subject matter, reflects the excitements and anxieties of the arrival of cyber-culture in all its permutations. At the same time—on the other side—we are witnessing the displacement of older themes and approaches. One generation of novelists after another cannot keep finding inspiration in, say, the confusions wrought by the sexual revolution (Updike, Mailer, Oates, Roth), or in the tensions and ambitions bound up in Jewish assimilation (Bellow, Roth, Malamud)—though younger writers, such as Chang-rae Lee in *A Gesture Life* or Jhumpa Lahiri in *The Interpreter of Maladies*, have found new twists and turns to chart in the assimilation struggles of other cultures. The simple fact is that changing realities do solicit the artist; they declare new needs and imperatives.

And that is the difference, the larger shift I'm talking about. The expansive thrust is not in itself a new thing. The quest to capture complexity and nuance has been part of writerly—indeed, artistic—sensibility since the time of Herodotus. Even in America, where an anti-intellectual suspicion of overly intricate subtlety took root early on (one byproduct, perhaps, of our frontier origins), many of the literary titans of the last century were expansive to the highest degree. What is new is a sense, not of arrival exactly, but of breaking through—in prose styles that signal an ascension to a new plane of vantage. These writers are pushing toward a vision based on the idea of radical social and psychological shifts in our ways of living and interacting. I see this as evidence of movement—I would even use that freighted word *progress*. It belies the tired postmodernist assumption that everything has been done and that there is no place left to go.

The diverse works of the young maximalists can be seen as the first reflection of this larger transformation in consciousness. They help mark our steady movement into global awareness, into the recognition that we are now and henceforth living in a world connected by a grid of lightning impulses. This world will never get simpler. Perceptions, communications, social relations, the meaning of time and distance, the very materiality of things—nothing is as it was. More than ever before, our living needs to be mirrored and interpreted, vigorously and discerningly. The struggle for the soul of the sentence is, at the same time, a struggle for the mastery of subject matter, which is nothing less than a world that threatens at every moment to outstrip us. □