

SENTENCED

I turn sentences around. That's my life. I write a sentence and then I turn it around. Then I look at it and turn it around again.

Philip Roth

I was recently at a dinner party here in town where a writer acclaimed for the style of his thickly perfumed memoirs held forth to the guests, contending that Hemingway, Salinger, Orwell, Tolstoy, Beckett and Bolaño, among other authors, were no good. Those were his words. “*No good.*” Imagine my surprise when I discovered that this person *had not actually read* some of these writers’ major works. When I asked this aromatic author how he knew they were no good, he said, “I go to a bookstore. I pick up a book. I read the first sentence. If it’s good, I continue to the second sentence. If not, I put the book down. Bad writer.” I pictured him rapping George Orwell’s head with a rolled-up newspaper, shouting, “Bad writer! Bad writer!”

Shortly after that evening, I came upon a *New Yorker* review by the esteemed critic Dan Chiasson that began, “I have a candidate for the author of the most interesting contemporary English sentences, and he is not primarily a prose writer. Poets work primarily in lines, and often dream of writing perfect ones; that is why every poet is an innovator of sentences...”

Along came Francine Prose, who was asked in a *Times Book Review* interview, “Do you consider yourself a fiction or a nonfiction person,” to which she responded: “I consider myself a sentence person.”

Recently, I picked up James Salter’s *Light Years* and opened it to Richard Ford’s introduction, which begins, “It is an article of faith among readers of fiction that James Salter writes American sentences better than anybody writing today.” (Footnote: what is an “American

sentence,” exactly?) Later Ford says, “no one...forges great notice and verbal imagination as beautifully, lavishly, surprisingly, sometimes as heartlessly, but always excitingly into sentences.”

From Michelle de Kretser: “I repeat my mantra: literature lives in sentences.”

I hear a lot of this talk about sentences lately. The word “sentence” itself seems to spill from the mouths of writers as easily as “pitch perfect” or “whip smart” rises to the lips of cliché-plagued critics. The New York Times Sunday Magazine these days even has a feature called “New Sentences” that teases out the brilliance of...well...sentences.

The sentence seems a perfect unit for The Age Of A.D.D. And though I like a good sentence as much as the next guy, from all the chatter one might gather that a writer’s primary job is not to produce a work, it’s to extrude a sentence, and that the most important unit of literary production is no longer the story, the novel, the poem or the play.

What’s called “contemporary literary fiction” certainly is teeming with fine sentences. Smart sentences. “Poetic” sentences. Looping pynchonesque sentences with curlicuing dependent clauses. I applaud such sentences. I marvel at them and their authors. But is some point, some larger perspective being lost here? Are great poems made of gorgeous phrases, great films of terrific shots, great plays of snappy lines? George Meredith was a superb stylist and a rotten novelist. Thomas Hardy was a lox with sentences but his lumbering novels remain as great and compelling as ever. Eugene O’Neill’s dialogue is like a heap of unfinished lumber, yet his magnitude reminds us that drama is not language, it’s what’s *beneath* the language.

Flaubert may have started the process with his endless and frankly tiresome quest for *le mot juste*, a quest that was a lifelong gift to a master *procrastinateur* like Flaubert. Then of course there was Joyce, amassing fine sentences over years and years and in the process creating

Ulysses, one of the greatest and most unreadable of books. And please, spare me those people who say they laugh out loud reading *Ulysses*. They must find *Popular Mechanics* hilarious.

Mostly, I blame Nabokov for our state of affairs – a writer who composed his books sentence by sentence on index cards. Truth to tell, the books look – and read – like it. I frankly find all of his *oeuvre*, *Lolita* and particularly *Pale Fire* included, insufferable in its heartlessness and condescension, in its marzipan prose and grad school literary games. Somebody or other once said that Nabokov wrote great sentences and Dostoievsky great novels. I'd like to hand that person a prize for reminding the world that a sentence is to a great work as a plank is to the *Pequod*.

Eliot takes an angle on this matter in a letter to James Strachey:

“Whether one writes a piece of work well or not seems to me a matter of crystallization – the good sentence, the good word, is only the final stage in the process. One can groan enough over the choice of a word, but there is something much more important to groan over first. It seems to me just the same in poetry – the words come easily enough, in comparison to the core of it – the tone – and nobody can help one in the least with that.”

In a review of a book called *A Treasury of English Prose*, Virginia Woolf wrote:

And who are the people who keep [great prose] alive, extend its powers, and increase its triumphs? The novelists. Only we must not go to them for perfect passages, descriptions, perorations, reflections so highly wrought that they can stand alone without their context. We must go to them for chapters, not sentences....

Wyndham Lewis said, “Pure art is dilettante art.”

John Ruskin said: “The demand for perfection is always a sign of misunderstanding the ends of art.”

So, here's to the imperfect writers, to graceless Dreiser and clotted Iris Murdoch, to ponderous George Gissing and clumsy Patricia Highsmith, to the totally cardboard, utterly immortal Agatha Christie. To all the all-too-human non-geniuses we love and go back to, but not for their sentences.

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