Reading Style

A Life in Sentences

Jenny Davidson

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To snare a sensibility in words, especially one that is alive and powerful, one must be tentative and nimble. The form of jottings, rather than an essay (with its claim to a linear, consecutive argument), seemed more appropriate for getting down something of this particular fugitive sensibility.

—Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964)

The most direct probe of the intensity of our ludic readers' needs to escape from unpleasant consciousness is Question 3a in the Reading Habits Questionnaire (scored in chapter 5 as part of the Frustration Index); namely, how would one feel to discover, alone in a strange hotel, that one had nothing to read. This question elicited a range of replies from the 129 students readily scored in terms of their affective tone and intensity. These dimensions are even more clearly discerned in the response of the 28 ludic readers who replied to this question. In approximate sequence of intensity, with headings selected on intuitive grounds to describe the tone of the response, these 28 replies are set out below (if more than one reader made a given response the number who did so is indicated in parenthesis):

No emotion: nothing
Displeasure: restless (2), frustrated (5), annoyed, peeved, a bit hassled
Anger: bloody annoyed
Agitated: manic, bothered, a little upset, let down, disappointed, bad, bitterly disappointed, terrible
Anxiety: lost (2), quite lost, lost and miserable, really miserable, desolate!, awful/dispossessed, desperate

—Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure* (1988)

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1

The Glimmer Factor

Anthony Burgess's *99 Novels*

I've always been bothered by the notion that literature is worth reading chiefly for what it teaches us about life. Of course we learn things about life from literature: it's self-evident that a book may make its reader wiser or more philosophical in some measure consequent upon the nature of the book itself, the timing and circumstances of the reader's encounter with it and the reader's openness to transformation. But there is also something intolerably banal about the idea that the main reward of reading a novel by Leo Tolstoy or George Eliot should be my becoming a slightly better person. Partly I am troubled that the motive of pleasure recedes so far from view. This kind of emphasis on self-improvement also steals the limelight from a more stringently cognitive aspect of reading. Not the simple fact of transportation, of being lost in a book,

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but rather a form of intellectual play that seems to me ultimately as ethical as its lesson-driven counterpart: ethical in the sense of its developing one's capacities of comprehension to the fullest, taking the jumbled furniture of the human mind (the meager apparatus of Lear's "poor, bare, forked animal") and teaching it to make meaning out of words. To make the idea that literature tells us about life the primary reason for reading Laurence Sterne, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and their like degrades the very thing that draws me to literature in the first place: the glimmer of the sentences, not first and foremost the wisdom contained in them. By stripping literary language down to its constituent parts, I perversely gain a sense of transcendence, an emotional as well as intellectual liberation that comes by way of the most precise consideration of details of language.

All sentences are not created equal. Some are more interesting, more intricate, more attractive or repellent than others. This book originated in a series of lectures I gave at Columbia University in the fall of 2009. The course was called "On Style," and we read through what I think of as one of the central genealogies of the European realist novel (*Emma*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Golden Bowl* and the opening chunk of *In Search of Lost Time*) along with a more idiosyncratic set of sequels in style: shorter pieces by Georges Perec, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Wayne Koestenbaum, Luc Sante and Gary Lutz, and then W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, with Sebald representing the culmination of one line of thought as to what might be done in the novel by way of a Proustian first-person subjective narrating intelligence and Hollinghurst standing for the radical reimagining of a third-person mode of narration associated with Gustave Flaubert and Henry James. That sequence of readings remains the core of the book, though I have trimmed the discussions of Flaubert and Marcel Proust

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and permitted myself to roam more freely and waywardly between texts and topics than the license of a class syllabus necessarily permits. Most of all, I have allowed my extracurricular reading to inflect the book's observations about style and sensibility. I am in possession of a novel-reading habit that invites terms like *compulsion* or *addiction*, and that on the face of things has little to do with my working life as a professor of literature. (Being a fast and voracious reader is not a necessity for academic life, merely a valuable convenience.) Visiting our family in the United States the summer I turned five, my English grandmother was sufficiently worried about the extent and intensity of my reading that she wanted my mother to take me to the doctor, and my reading undoubtedly remains excessive, unbalanced.

My guide, in terms of the selection of texts, has been personal taste, not representative coverage of the full range of possibilities for literary language in English. One reader of an earlier draft of this book commented on its having been fairly standard, in the middle of the twentieth century, to tell a story about the great tradition of fictional prose style that began with Austen or Flaubert, proceeded through James and Proust to high modernism (James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Woolf) and thence to Samuel Beckett or the French new novel (Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute et al.). To some extent I take that story for granted, but it's not a story I see the need to retell. Indeed, I am not really interested in making an argument about style, what it is and its genealogies in the Anglo-American novel. The rationale for the inclusion of each passage I write about is often just that it speaks to me strongly—that it has a high glimmer factor—or that it lets me single out some aspect of style on which I wish to comment. If there is an argument here, it operates in the fashion of a field notebook, by way of selection and description, as an entomologist or ornithologist might not merely transmit something

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of a way of looking, sharpening the tools of perception, but perhaps also begin to elicit a deeper comprehension of how to know which objects most reward such scrutiny.

Francis Spufford called his memoir of childhood reading *The Child That Books Built*, and like Spufford, I feel that I have been largely shaped by the books I have read. I was a "word child," as one of Iris Murdoch's novels has it: novels were a means of escape, of transport from the quotidian (childhood is full of long boring stretches!), first into worlds like Narnia or Laura Ingalls Wilder's prairie but later into spaces less physically rendered and more purely conjured as constructions of language and intellect, T. S. Eliot's Waste Land, say, or Fyodor Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor's cell. As a precocious reader in late childhood and adolescence, one is forced to find intellectual guides in odd places: Robert Graves was an important one, leading me by way of *I, Claudius* to *The White Goddess* and from there to Sir James George Fraser's *The Golden Bough*, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* and Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*; the detective novels of Dorothy L. Sayers and Nicholas Blake sent me to Jacobean revenge tragedies and the pastiche work of Thomas Lovell Beddoes and A. E. Housman, and Ezra Pound's anthologies and works of criticism (especially *Confucius to Cummings* and *The ABCs of Reading*) opened up a route to Chapman's Homer and Hardy's lyrics. I cannot reread John Fowles in adulthood without my enjoyment of the novels being overshadowed by a sense of the unpleasant personality revealed by the posthumous publication of his journals, but *The Magus* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* opened up worlds for me then. Perhaps my most indispensable guide was Anthony Burgess: the verbal playfulness of his Enderby novels in the first instance, but also the sub-Joycean byplay of his Shakespeare novel *Nothing Like the Sun* (in which Burgess voluntarily restricted his vocabulary to words Shakespeare could feasibly

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have known, allowing only a single exception, *spurgeoning*, a verb he coined to honor the critic Caroline Spurgeon), the intense linguistic inventiveness of *A Clockwork Orange*, the sparky polemical engagements of books like *The Wanting Seed* and *The End of the World News*.

And then I obtained a copy of Burgess's little guide *99 Novels: The Best in English Since 1939*, and I was transfixed. It is a peculiar and cranky book, one that prompts the suspicion of its having been slapped together in considerable haste (in an interview, Burgess once claimed it had been written in two weeks). Novels are presented in chronological order, two or three for each year, perhaps contributing to some of the peculiarities of the selection (things like the omission of *A House for Mr. Biswas* or the inclusion of Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*, which is pretty certainly *not* one of the best novels written in English since 1939). This slender volume, though, led me to *Pale Fire* and *Giles Goat-Boy* and *The Alexandria Quartet* and *At Swim-Two-Birds*, to Alasdair Gray's peculiar and brilliant *Lanark* (aside from its other distinctions, one of the great literary representations of skin disease) and V. S. Naipaul's dreadfully bleak *A Bend in the River.* One of the most significant reading experiences I had as a consequence of *99 Novels* was *Gravity's Rainbow*, which I am not sure I would have persisted with otherwise at age fifteen, but which Burgess's praise persuaded me to make my way through with the help of a dictionary. One of the most striking features of Thomas Pynchon's style in this book is the crashing together of a number of different specialized vocabularies, a unique mélange that can be effectively evoked by synecdoche (*smegma*, *Ouspenskian*, *Poisson distribution*); it transformed my sense of what could be done in language.

I was lucky to be a student at an excellent independent school in Philadelphia—Germantown Friends School—that was also attached to a library that transcended the limitations

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of the ordinary school library, the Friends Free Library of Germantown. I worked there during summers in high school, and its small but excellent adult fiction collection, tucked away on an upstairs balcony, served almost as my private preserve during those years; the children's room at the Friends Free saw much heavier use, while adult readers of popular fiction would have sought out the much larger, more up-to-date and reader-friendly collection a few blocks away at the large public library branch on Chelten Avenue. The Friends Free held many of the books Burgess recommended—it was that sort of collection, high-middlebrow with not much to recommend itself to a reader less bent on self-education and mind expansion than my teenage self. That was where I found *Gravity's Rainbow* and the novels of Muriel Spark, Joyce Carol Oates and Doris Lessing, indeed of Burgess himself. I have a vivid memory of sitting at age thirteen in my polyester kilt and polo shirt on the bleachers at a Friday afternoon lacrosse game, immersed in Burgess's *Earthly Powers* ("It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the archbishop had come to see me") and very much hoping that the coach wouldn't puncture my readerly bubble by subbing me in. I was a terrible lacrosse player, but I liked the arcane names for the defensive positions I usually played, point and cover point; it speaks to the extent of my literary preoccupations that I often accidentally misremembered the second as "counter point," as in the Aldous Huxley title *Point Counter Point* (Huxley, according to Burgess's somewhat unbalanced account, having written three of the best ninety-nine novels published in English since 1939).

In the meantime I was also reading and rereading Austen, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, *The Hobbit* and the Lord of the Rings trilogy, Josephine Tey, Alice Walker, Diana Wynne Jones, the stories of Arthur Conan Doyle and Robert Louis Stevenson: really, whatever came to hand. I experienced

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a shock of recognition when I came across a passage, quoted in Stephen Burt's biography of Randall Jarrell, in which Jarrell describes his own childhood: "A shrew or a humming-bird eats half its weight in twenty-four hours; when I was a boy I read half my weight in a week. I went to school, played, did the things the grown-ups made me do; but no matter how little time I had left, there were never books enough to fill it—I lived on the ragged edge of having nothing to read."[1] I read greedily, omnivorously and much too quickly for my own comfort: *The Tin Drum* and *Terra Nostra* were usefully copious fodder, and so were Anne McCaffrey's Pern novels and the complete works of Piers Anthony, Michael Crichton, Anne Rice, Robert Ludlum and a host of others.

Going to university and gaining firsthand access to one of the world's great research libraries would open up new dimensions of reading to me. I had hungered illicitly as a high school student for Barthes and Jacques Derrida, whose names were mentioned in the Sunday supplements but whose writings I would not have known how to get hold of. I remember with a tinge of remorse (it was certainly neither the first nor the last time I spent the night at a friend's house lost in a book) plucking *S/Z* from a shelf in my friend S.'s bedroom the summer after our high school graduation; her stepmother, to whom the book belonged, had done graduate work in literature, and Barthes's approach to literary analysis held for me the force of revelation. Now I immersed myself in the writings not just of Barthes and Derrida but of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Gérard Genette, Victor Shklovskii and many others. A few years later, in graduate school, I would become a serious reader of John Locke and David Hume and Adam Smith and Edmund Burke and William Hazlitt. I have always had a particular soft spot for the novelist-essayists, writers like George Orwell and Rebecca West and James Baldwin whose genius resides more in the texture of thought in the prose than in

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one particular individual novel, but I would also increasingly encounter works of scholarship that possessed the near-magical force and clarity of my favorite novels: Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*, Thomas Nagel's *Mortal Questions*, John Passmore's *The Perfectibility of Man*. Novels no longer had to serve as my proxy for the whole world of ideas.

The immersive reading of my childhood was a great gift, that ability to transport myself by losing myself in a book; so was the wide and deep exploratory reading of adolescence, with Burgess and others as my guide, and then the more intellectually focused reading I began to do at age seventeen or eighteen. But all along, from earliest childhood, I was practicing and honing a set of reading skills that would become not just a valuable professional or personal asset, a mode at once of consolation and of academic self-advancement, but actually my chief way of being in the world. This reading, it would not be hyperbolic to say, is what makes life itself worthwhile: there are other things I like to do also (running, swimming, yoga, eating cake), but I think I would die if I didn't have reading to protect me from the buzz of unwanted thoughts, the tedium of everyday existence, the stresses and strains of human interaction, etc. etc. This mode of reading has something in common, as I have already suggested, with the natural historian's way of looking closely and lovingly at things, of describing in order to understand, an orientation I associate especially with writers like Oliver Sacks or the British paleontologist Richard Fortey. It involves the application of a critical intelligence, more neutrally observing than judging or summing up and yet very ready to make selections and discriminations when they are called for. This kind of reading has been as much a compulsion for me as the more purely escapist forms of novel-reading to which I remain in thrall. Looking very closely at the style and techniques of certain

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literary works, books that will repay near-infinite amounts of reading and rereading, seems to me at once perversely unworldly and profoundly practical, at one and the same time supremely playful and deadly in earnest. It is what I spend a great deal of my time doing in the classroom: it may be valuable to arrive at broad thematic generalizations about a work or an author, but it strikes me as rash to try to answer the big questions about what something means if you can't yet parse the meanings of the words in one dense enigmatic sentence.

Reading Style is not my own *99 Novels*. It has less to say about which books must be read than about how to read. That said, the book does offer a sort of anthology of prose styles, the primary logic for inclusion being strong personal preference rather than representative selection. In that sense, it's not a genealogy or taxonomy so much as it is a sampler of sentences I have loved. (Beckett is a notable omission, perhaps because I love his plays much more passionately than his prose fiction; play texts are outside the scope of this book, although I have long had a yen to write a little book on the history from earliest times to the present day of the stage direction, which seems to me to bear an interesting relationship to the forms of notation novelists would come to develop for representing human movement in third-person narration.)

The unit of taste in this case is the sentence, sometimes the paragraph, its structure and sensibility, its fugitive feel on the tongue. I strongly experience the allure of a certain type of box of chocolates not so much because of the chocolates themselves as because of the exquisite nature of the choice offered in map or legend. In my mother's family, that paper guide was known as a "suggester": a chart of sorts representing each chocolate's exterior and signaling (graphically, verbally) the delights contained therein. If I were choosing a box of Jacques Torres chocolates for someone else, I would pick the dark-chocolate selection because

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of its clear gastronomical superiority, but if I were buying it just for myself, a decadent and unlikely prospect, I would choose milk chocolate; dark chocolate may be aesthetically preferable to milk, but I like it much less than its sweeter, less pungent counterpart. My taste in prose differs from my taste in chocolate, but it similarly lacks a sense of proportion ("Truth is disputable, taste is not"). I love anchovies, I hate dill, but it would be absurd to construe my preferences as objective verdicts on the respective merits of those two foodstuffs. When I loathe a book, though, my passionate contempt is colored partly by my conviction that it's morally as well as aesthetically pernicious. I feel furious or even outraged by, say, the sentimentality of Markus Zusak's young-adult Holocaust novel *The Book Thief* or the cultish paranoia of Mark Danielewski's intricately self-protective *House of Leaves*; this is one of the ways in which morality enters into even the most stringently formalist ways of reading, and I will return later to the complex antagonisms and interdependencies that unite reading for the sentence and reading for the heart.

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2

Lord Leighton, Liberace and the Advantages of Bad Writing

Helen DeWitt, Harry Stephen Keeler, Lionel Shriver, George Eliot

These pages treat the inner workings of sentences and paragraphs as they function in novels. To read for the sentence risks becoming trivial or pedantic: what about character, plot, imagery, the host of other pleasures prose fiction lavishes upon its readers? But the shape of any given sentence—its arc, to use the visual metaphor; its cadence, to rank ear before eye—produces part of its meaning, sometimes the most important part. The aspects of meaning contributed by word choice, by diction, by syntax are sometimes neglected by people who write about novels, and this book is designed partly to redress that balance, offering a modest manifesto in aid of reading for the sentence. Sentences can be verbal artifacts of untold complexity, and I am especially interested in ones that are hidden, like Edgar Allan Poe's purloined letter, in plain view:

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in novels, which tend to be thought of as being made up of larger units (scenes, chapters, episodes) rather than as the accumulation of a number of sentences large enough that one would not want to have to count them by hand.

The term *style* derives from the Latin *stilus*, a pointed instrument for writing. *Style* conjures up the little black dress, a world of haute couture and Audrey Hepburn, but it also invokes William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White's *Elements of Style* and the grammatical prescriptions of the style sheet; though grammar may seem less glamorous than fashion, *glamour* is etymologically speaking a corruption of *grammar*, by way of a set of related terms (*gramarye*, *grimoire*) that refer to a body of occult knowledge. The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that *style* may refer to the manner in which something is written, including a writer's characteristic mode of expression, but a pattern of tension soon emerges from its series of definitions. Is style merely something superficial, referring to features "which belong to form and expression rather than to the substance of the thought or the matter expressed"? Or do we instead adopt the wisdom embodied in the old adage "The style is the man," which implies that every aspect of character is written into each sentence a person writes?

My own suspicions gibe better with the second notion. Style is not extraneous, style is everything; one need not be a pure Wildean aesthete to adhere to such a view. To some extent I believe this is true for all writing, not just for literary writing, and I would use the word *temperament* to sum up the complex set of intellectual, emotional, political and cultural traits that make up a given person's identity as it is expressed in words. Temperament can be discerned with extraordinary clarity and economy in certain sentences or paragraphs ("The theatre is a better school of moral sentiments than churches"), and a reader's selection of which bits of a writer's work to foreground itself serves as one way of presenting an argument

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about that writer's deep nature. It has always seemed to me (but then I have the soul of a copy editor) that the sentence is the key to the heart: that sentences embody ethos in a way that renders deeply ingrained habits of thought visible to the naked eye. As a corollary, a particular passage's fissures and self-contradictions, its peculiar force or suppleness or stringency, may become the most interesting and revealing object of literary scrutiny, with style both subjecting itself to and facilitating acts of judgment. This way of reading may equally provide traction on the prose of writers such as Thomas Hobbes and Edward Gibbon and Ralph Waldo Emerson, but my self-imposed mandate here involves a more specific question about writing: what can be learned by attending closely to the sentences of some of the great imaginative fictions of the last couple hundred years?

This is a formalist project in the sense that I will focus very persistently on linguistic details, but I've already started to make the case for the ethical freight of formalism and its reading practices. There seems to me little point in considering style apart from morality, and Helen DeWitt's novel *The Last Samurai* offers an exceptionally clear and appealing version of the argument that style may itself serve as a kind of morality. The novel's two narrators are Sibylla Newman and her son Ludo, a child of prodigious intelligence and learning who is desperately eager for Sibylla to reveal the identity of his father, a well-known writer who impregnated Sibylla during a one-night stand that came about chiefly as a consequence of her being too polite to tell him what she really thought of his prose style. The pseudonym Sibylla gives to the writer in question is Liberace:

> Liberace the musician had a terrible facility and a terrible sincerity; what he played he played with feeling, whether it was Roll Out the Barrel or I'll Be Seeing You, and in sad pieces a tear would well up over the

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> mascara and drop to the silver diamanté of a velvet coat while the rings on his hands flashed up and down the keyboard, and in a thousand mirrors he would see the tear, the mascara, the rings, he would see himself seeing the mascara, the rings, the tear. All this could be found too in Liberace (the writer): the slick, buttery arpeggios, the self-regarding virtuosity as the clever ring-laden hands sparkled over the keys, the professional sincerity which found expressiveness for the cynical & the sentimental, for the pornographic, even for alienation & affectlessness.[1]

"He liked I expect the idea of effortless excellence, & being unable to combine the two had settled for the one he could be sure of," Sibylla concludes, aphoristically (Oscar Wilde is one of the talismans with which she wards off an existential despair). At Liberace's flat, she is horrified to note the presence of "a brand new book by Lord Leighton":

> By Lord Leighton, of course, I don't mean the Hellenising late-Victorian painter of A Syracusan Bride Leading Wild Beasts in Procession and Greek Girls Playing at Ball, but the painterly American writer who is the spiritual heir of that artist. Lord Leighton (the painter) specialised in scenes of antiquity in which marvellous perplexities of drapery roamed the canvas, tarrying only in their travels to protect the modesty of a recruit from the Tyrone Power school of acting. His fault was not a lack of skill: it is the faultlessness of his skill which makes the paintings embarrassing to watch, so bare do they strip the mind of their creator. Only the pen of Lord Leighton the writer could do justice to the brush of Lord Leighton the painter, for just so did Lord Leighton (the writer) bring the most agitated emotions

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> to an airless to a hushed to an unhurried while each word took on because there was all the time in the world for each word to take on the bloom which only a great Master can give to a word using his time to allow all unseemly energy to become aware of its nakedness and snatch gratefully at the fig leaf provided until all passion in the airlessness in the hush in the absence of hurry sank decently down in the slow death of motion to perpetual stasis: a character could not look, or step, or speak, without a gorgeous train of sentences swathing his poor stupid thoughts and unfolding in beautiful languor on the still and breathless air. (70–71)

Sibylla's war on cliché and bad writing is the crusade of a person who believes that human ethical life depends on the clear and effective practice of rational thought, including clarity of language (it is related to the argument Orwell made in "Politics and the English Language," but with a less political and more aesthetic and intellectual slant). Those gorgeous trains of sentences aren't just in bad taste, they're an offense against humanity, and style here is seen to be the repository of character, something we have an obligation to judge: to judge, and to cry out against when we find it wanting.

This version of the argument about style rests, really, on sensibility, a word I like because of the way it opens up more to ethos than style does while retaining the sense of what's at stake being a matter more of texture or tact or feel than first and foremost of ideas or arguments. The novelist Lydia Millet has made what seems to me a related argument, only this is the "hard" version, which goes further in terms of mandating an ethics of fictional subject matter as well as style. Millet took issue, in a piece published in the *Globe and Mail* in 2006, not so much with Alice Munro's canonization as "the Grande Dame of Canadian realism" as with the consequences

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of that canonization (in the *New Yorker*, Jonathan Franzen had recently called her "the best living writer in North America").[2] Her objection rested on the extent to which Munro's prose, so skillful and precise, makes "insistent choice of the purely personal, the proximate world of the self and its near relations," with the individual and his or her relationships with friends and family at the heart of this world's "cosmology" and even Munro's depiction of the land she knows so well serving as "a setting primarily for a specific subset of us, for the foibles and discoveries and preoccupations of the social self." The shortcoming of "the broader, dominant literary culture of realistic and personal fictions," Millet goes on to say, in which Munro leads and others follow, is that almost everything else "drops away entirely in favour of a massive foreground of people with problems":

> These problems are rarely starvation or war; they tend to be adultery or career disappointment, say, which leaves us with a literary culture whose preoccupation is not meaning or beauty, not right or wrong, not our philosophies or propensity for atrocities or corrupt churches and governments, but rather our sex lives, our social mistakes, our neighbourhood failures and sibling rivalries. Enlightenment humanism finds a kind of perfect expression here: If our deliberations about our personal lives, consisting of a near-infinite scrutiny of the tiny passages through which we move in relation to friends and lovers, constitutes the best calling of art, must such self-scrutiny not also be our own highest calling and rightful task?

I was caught up short when I first read this precisely because of how vividly and clearly it seemed to articulate something that has been on my mind as long as I have been reading short stories. The literary short story, in North America, suffers

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especially pervasively from the sort of self-absorption (to use the term literally rather than pejoratively, describing simply an involvement with individual self) that Millet discerns and deplores. I have always liked Muriel Spark especially because of how she bucks the trend of novelists being interested primarily in individuals in couples, traditional families, parents and children. Spark's novels tend to be set in schools and boardinghouses and convents—in short, in places where the fundamental unit is not the couple or the nuclear or extended family but rather the small- to medium-sized group: Spark is the great novelist of small groups! In contrast, the tradition of John Updike and John Cheever and Alice Munro seems to me excessively centered on an aspect of life that would seem to be woefully narrow, at least in the greater context of political struggle and institutional service and global migration and passionate religious belief or intellectual commitment, to name just a few of the things that make lives interesting.

This is a digression, but it happened that in the same month that Millet weighed in on the problem of tiny passages, Joan Acocella published an encomium in the *New Yorker* on Alice McDermott's latest novel. I must confess that I have never read a word of McDermott's fiction beyond the bits Acocella quoted in this piece, but those passages, eminently skillful and quoted lovingly by Acocella, aroused my deepest suspicion and dislike.[3] Here the protagonist is coming out of lunchtime Mass in New York just after World War II:

> Leaving the church, she felt the wind rise, felt the pinprick of pebble and grit against her stockings and her cheeks. . . . And all before her, the lunch-hour crowd bent under the April sun and into the bitter April wind, jackets flapping and eyes squinting, or else skirts pressed to the backs of legs and jacket hems pressed to bottoms. And trailing them, outrunning them, skittering along the

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> gutter and the sidewalk and the low gray steps of the church, banging into ankles and knees and one another, scraps of paper, newspapers, candy wrappers, what else?—office memos? shopping lists? The paper detritus that she had somewhere read, or had heard it said, trails armies, or was it (she had seen a photograph) the scraps of letters and wrappers and snapshots that blow across battlefields after all but the dead had fled?[4]

I'm not crazy about the rather grandiose rhetorical gesture in the last part of the passage, but that's neither here nor there. What struck me was that this is a kind of language I strongly associate with the literary short story (though obviously novels are written in this mode as well, and this is a novel rather than a story); the problem I have with it—the thing that makes it leave me cold—is that it is so much concerned with sensation at the expense of thought or even emotion. I'm not enthusiastic about that aspect of Woolf's writing either—it seems to me that the challenge the modernists imposed on themselves, of radically extending what sentences could do vis-à-vis the physiological moment-to-moment intensity of lived experience, was not in the end a really fruitful one. I find myself not very interested even in my *own* sensations, and not at all interested in sensations and physical observations supposedly filtered through the consciousness of this character of McDermott's. I would rather know what the character *thinks*, thinks about something interesting or funny or important or irrelevant. The abstract quality of this perceptiveness about scraps of paper and skirts pressed to the backs of legs (the word "skittering" strikes me in this context as excessively and self-consciously literary) isn't *sensible*; it's not funny, either, and I expect it's really the sensation-freighted-with-significance thing that alienates me rather than the focus on sensation in itself. This is always the problem I have reading Alice Munro

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or William Trevor. Both are wonderfully good writers, and if I am going to read that kind of thing, I would take Munro or Trevor over almost anyone else I can think of, and yet I find myself as a reader having really no *need* for that kind of thing.

What am I proposing as a model instead, or rather what sort of fiction attracts me as strongly as this repels me, in the cool core sense of pushing me away? I would offer two different answers, the first slightly perverse and the second more in earnest. My perverse counterexample to the McDermott-Munro-Trevor school of fiction-writing, a writer as profoundly antithetical to that mode as anything one can imagine, is the cult favorite Harry Stephen Keeler. Keeler has some passionate detractors. Crime fiction publisher and provocateur Otto Penzler, writing for the *New York Sun*, called Keeler "the worst writer in the world": "Keeler is to good literature as rectal cancer is to good health. He makes the J. D. Robb novels seem as if they were written by Shakespeare. Given the choice of reading three Keeler novels back to back or being imprisoned in an Iranian jail, you'd need to think about it."[5] Penzler's hyperbole is counterbalanced by the equally hyperbolic advocacy of a coterie of prominent Keelerites. Paul Collins edited *The Riddle of the Traveling Skull* (1934) for a McSweeney's reissue in 2005, and the novelist and critic Ed Park is another influential supporter (his younger son is named Keeler!). While I would not call myself a full-blown Keelerite, I am undoubtedly taken with Keeler's prose style. Certain novels are famous for having invented their own idioms: *1984*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Chandler both developed highly recognizable idioms, and so did Dickens; it would be a mistake to think of this as a twentieth-century phenomenon, as on some level any really good novel does this, so that it is only the case that some examples are more exaggerated or obviously remarkable than others.

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Keeler's idiom is so strange as almost to amount to a new dialect of English. *The Riddle of the Traveling Skull* is dense with vivid but peculiar colloquialisms ("two shakes of a lamblet's tail," "24-carat thoroughbred"), and Keeler makes very odd use of the dash to signal thinking. Here are a few sentences that give the feel of his prose:

> Canada is as much of a refuge for you as—as a Wisconsin lumber camp is for a lost virgin.
>
> My forehead was so corrugated, as I could sense by feeling alone, that an Eskimo's fur coat, sprinkled with nothing but Lux, could have been washed on it.
>
> Either as a detective I was a good sofa-pillow crocheter, or else I was playing in the identical luck of the piccolo player when the eccentric millionaire filled up the instruments of each member of the German band with $5 gold pieces.
>
> I held up that costermonger dummy significantly.[6]

It would not be a good thing if everybody wrote like Keeler. But his use of simile and comparison is strikingly imaginative, almost grotesquely so. His inset references are strange for reasons at once verbal and substantive, conspiring to elicit an unusually strongly cognitive readerly response. The stuttered "as" in that first sentence makes a comparison that complicates rather than clarifying, as similes are generally supposed to do; the "corrugated" forehead of the second example literalizes the conventional synecdoche in which a furrowed brow is supposed to represent thinking, grounding the image by way of a bizarre far-flung allusion to the now-outdated technology of the washboard. The third example does something similar to the first, insofar as what are grammatically represented

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as alternatives actually offer the same thing twice rather than proposing two possibilities differing in their fundamentals; the image of the German band, the piccolo and so forth has something of the same particularizing strangeness as the Lux-sprinkled fur coat of the preceding example. Of the final example, I will only say that I am very certain this particular sequence of seven words has never appeared in any other literary work: the noun *costermonger dummy* shares that strangeness so characteristically at once verbal and physical, with the odd placement of the adverb at the end of the sentence compounding the effect. This is style for its own sake, a demented high-energy arabesque not really directed toward anything other than the performance of a sensibility. Many readers will prefer McDermott to Keeler. But what this style has going for it that McDermott's sort of prose doesn't is a sheer verbal inventiveness and originality that delights me far more than the tastefully modulated sentences of a Munro or a Trevor.

My second example lacks the lightness of touch, the wayward strangeness of the Keeler passages. It is drawn from Lionel Shriver's novel *The Post-Birthday World*, which takes a set of characters and recounts two divergent stories for them, fates and futures that split off depending on a choice made by the protagonist, Irina, on her birthday. I have already suggested, by way of those quotations from *The Last Samurai*, that it is worth asking what it means to talk about style as something moralized. Beyond the linguistic or strictly literary aspects of a novel's style, is it just a fallacy to think that styles encapsulate moral orientations toward characters, or is it fair to think of diction itself as intrinsically wrapped up with acts of moral judgment? The reason *The Post-Birthday World* so clearly illuminates this question arises from Shriver's decision to tell two stories that run on parallel tracks. Consider these two passages, the first from the post-birthday world in which Irina has kissed another man (her live-in boyfriend,

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