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Words and Worlds

Abstract:

One of the paradoxes of any artistic process is the transformation of the intensities of thought and sensation into the empirical fixities of form. For novelists, the sentence, paragraph and chapter are the standard textual forms that represent the richness of character, setting and event, and the insights into human nature they embody. In this paper I draw on approaches from literature, painting and poststructuralist philosophy to investigate the process by which words become worlds

Keywords:

Novel – Narratology – Literary Composition

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Any act of writing involves the selection of a set of words from a potentially limitless number of combinations. The nature of what is to be written has an important effect on how this process of selection takes place, and each type of text has its own peculiarities. Few text types, however, pose as many challenges as the novel. In terms of content, here is a list of some of the things we expect to find in a novel: characters, stories, conflicts, moral dilemmas, settings, descriptions, psychological insights, consciousnesses, thoughts, feelings and sensations, societies, macro- and microcosms, and so on. Each of these terms is the tip of an iceberg, a heading below which swarms countless referents waiting to be rendered in language and served up to the reader. When faced with these infinitude – the endless proliferation of word and world – how does the novelist choose the right words? And how are these words given shape, pattern and form in order to become novels?

When faced with any seemingly impossible task, there is only ever one sensible line of action: to cut it up into achievable sub-tasks. There is a sense in which, at the most crudely empirical level, novel writing is a process of shape-giving, a moulding, cutting, and sectioning of a subjectively experienced world that, when ordered in accordance with certain textual structures, yields meaning and insight into the human condition. Writing a novel is the carving, moulding and shaping of words and worlds that constantly shift shape and form before our eyes, constantly thwarting our attempts to give them fixed meaning, and only sometimes obeying our will.

Sentences

Writers may choose words, but they write with sentences. If you write traditional sentences, you start with a capital letter, and you end with a full stop. Whenever I tap out that capital letter, it's like casting some part of myself into the air, and the very second I tap it out, I also have a forethought, a projection of the full stop that's to come, a simultaneous creation of the beginning and the end, the leap and the landing. Yet to think you start from a height and end up somewhere down below is to exclude a wide range of possibilities. Sometimes you might only hoist yourself a little off the ground and end up at a higher point; the leap is short, but it needs power. Sometimes you might end up at the same height from where you started. An infinite variety of combinations is possible, as infinite as your thoughts themselves.

The sentence. You start staring at your screen, but there's always a sense of blindness, a millisecond of pure psychic blankness; writing a sentence is always a leap over the *abyme*, it's always a throw of the dice. One of the main techniques of the painter Francis Bacon was the throwing of paint at the canvas (Sylvester 1987: 90-92). In characteristically paradoxical fashion, Bacon's flinging of paint was of the most considered nature. To associate his approach with the (apparent) *laissez-faire* of Pollock would be a mistake. Bacon flung paint at already pictorial images in order to introduce an extreme aleatoric moment into any given picture, pictures that were already a combination of chance and calculation. To create a sentence is fling paint, into the blankness of eyes wide open. Only you are not flinging a substance that reacts on the nervous system in an immediate sensuous way. You're flinging your thoughts into words, and the words at the page, and, to use a somewhat reductive semiotic model, the

words will in turn being decoded by another nervous system through the particular semiosis of the linguistic signifier. The melding of chance and the iron laws of the linguistic system has its own logic, its own strange mix.

When we use sentences, we often don't give much thought to their materiality, and trends in literary theory over the last 30 years or so, often arising from what could be considered an idealist philosophic tradition, haven't given us much chance to consider this aspect. We've come to think of them as chains of signs, abstractions that can represent, for the realists among us, things, and for certain hardcore poststructuralists, other signs. A painter, however, is always confronted with the materiality of the medium they use; they daub it, smear it, smell it, and it is always obvious to them that they are using one order of materiality to represent another (or not to represent at all, but to create an object in itself). There are of course vast differences between how sentences and paint marks signify, but what Bacon's flinging of paint celebrates is the corporeality of the signifying medium, and it is this corporeality, this physicality of sentences and texts, that I wish to explore in relation to the novel. In particular, I'd like to focus on how we as writers shape a novel, how we cut, slice, and size from the phenomenal world in order to create another world that our readers enter into, live in for a while, and later emerge from hopefully knowing a little more about human nature.

Sentences are linear. You place one word after another, one sentence after another, and then you place the sentence under another sentence. You read across, then you read down. It's all tied to the swivel of the head, rooted in the body. No one likes to read a text in landscape; you're doing an endless panning shot that never seems to end. When reading a book, normally you read across for a while, then you lower your head, you scan and swivel and tilt up and down. The page is not just a window, it's also a territory delimited by the body, by the head and neck and shoulders and arms.

In that rectangle delimited by the body are the sentences, hoisted up, pinned down, snipped from the continuum of your thoughts. The sentences are lines stretched out between the capital letter and the full stop. Sometimes you string them taut as possible. This is what Joyce often does in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Between the capital and full stop there is usually as little punctuation as possible, an attempt at a perfect flowing linearity of the word. You follow the sentences as if they were lines etched into the page that your eyes run across like quicksilver, spidery copperplate, only a strangely modern, *sans serif* version you've never quite experienced before:

He drained his third cup of watery tea to the dregs and set to chewing the crusts of fried bread that were scattered near him, staring into the dark pool of the jar. The yellow dripping had been scooped out like a boghole and the pool under it brought back to his memory the dark turfcoloured water of the bath in Clongowes. The box of pawn ticks at his elbow had just been rifled he took up idly one after another in his greasy fingers the blue and white docketts, scrawled and sanded and creased and bearing the name of the pledger as Daly or McEvoy. (Joyce 1991: 17)

But Joyce not only strings them tight; he also creates all kinds of patterns, exploits all kinds of rhythms, all delimited by the capital and full stop. He doesn't use commas much. He doesn't want the pause created by the comma, he doesn't want his sentences to stumble, to pant. The misuse of the comma; for the Joyce of *The Portrait* it creates

the worst kind of panting sentence. He wants the sentences to be concrete entities and the images they create to be clusters of sensation, to bear the rhythms and speeds of sensation itself. Your nervous system goes for rides down these rivers of sentences, sometimes meandering, sometimes shooting rapids.

Later, in *Finnegan's Wake*, Joyce augments this linearity and develops, perhaps as fully as language will allow, the synchronic axis of the linguistic signifier, at least as manifest in words on the printed page. The clean lines of *Portrait* vanish, the smooth strips of carefully cut ribbons give way to knots and tangles, some elegant, some ragged. In *Finnegan's Wake* the reading of the words is often like experiencing complex chords, many notes pressed at once to create a distinct harmony, or disharmony:

In the name of Annah the Allmaziful, the Everlasting, the Bringer of Plurabilities, haloed be her eve, her singtime sung, her rill be run, unhemmed as it is uneven. (Joyce 1975: 104)

It's clear that the rhythm of the Lord's Prayer that lies beneath (is connected to) the apparent surface of the sentence. There is hardly a part of *Finnegan's Wake* that is not overcoded or undercoded with some sort of allusion in some sort of way, a rhizome that proliferates in (at least) two directions:¹ on the immediate level, it concerns a set of characters such as Anna Livia Plurabelle, her husband the innkeeper Finnegan, and their children Shem and Shaun. On another level, the one demonstrated by the undertow of the presence of the Lord's Prayer, it is underpinned by the deafening roar of the echoes of Western European culture.

In *Finnegan's Wake* Joyce is asking the reader to enter into a mode of reading that is simultaneously synchronic and diachronic. Now, there is always this aspect to any text, to any use of language. Words and their senses evolve over time, and as we learn more about them, we learn about their layers of meaning, and there is a sense in which they all co-exist. But it was perhaps Joyce who was the first to consciously exploit the synchronic dimension of sense, to elevate this feature of words to an aesthetic principle in the novel form, and to couple it with the diachronic. And that is why *Finnegan's Wake* is, in any practical sense, unreadable. The reader is constantly being asked to move forward, but also to drill down into history: it's like walking on quicksand. The body is not given its standard pleasure of swivelling, scanning, tilting. It staggers forward, trying to negotiate the diachronic and the synchronic simultaneously, a vertigo that has its own pleasures, its own decentred corporeality.

Paragraphs

A paragraph is a kind of cutting, but this cutting is less an incision than a sizing, a sectioning, a shaping of unit of meaning larger than the sentence. Here we see an aspect of cutting that is always present, certainly at the level of the sentence as well: cutting to give shape and form. This is a kind of Apollonian moment, to use the term in the Nietzschean sense of form-giving (Nietzsche 1967: 33-38). This is a cutting not so much to remove something that is wrong, the excision of something poisoning the system as a whole, but a modification of elements to achieve proportions whereby the parts will create a whole, a moment of gestalt.

As a literary work progresses in its construction, the manipulation of sense is difficult because there are different densities of sense at the level of the sentence, paragraph, chapter and work as a whole. Each level needs its own kind of gestalt, the moment where the parts become more than the whole. And each of these gestalts are embedded in another gestalt, that of paragraph, chapter, part, work as whole. The type of meaning each unit expresses differs greatly from one work to the next, and it would be impossible to come to any master code for all text types. However, at a kind of basic cognitive level, in terms of the apprehension of shapes and patterns, the paragraph needs to be constructed as a semantic unit that requires a single overarching sense of a degree of generality that can harness the sentences and make them work together.² If the sentence is a street, the paragraph is a small neighbourhood.

Paragraphs usually have very general, nearly banal, overarching topics. They're often mini-essays when in the telling mode, and in the showing mode they usually form one concrete part of a scene. Here are some examples, more or less taken from random from a wide selection of novels:

Proust: *Combray*, p.163. A description of a pond, with some reflections on nature.

Isherwood: *Goodbye to Berlin*, p.202. Chris meets Natalia and gives his impression of her.

Musil: *The Man Without Qualities*, p.298. Ulrich ponders Diotima's beauty.

Duras: *The Lover*, p.7. The narrator considers her ravaged face (via the comment of a stranger).

McGahan: *The White Earth*, p.73. John attempts to get work on rural properties.

Each of these paragraphs has a different narrative function, depending on, among other factors, where it is placed in the novel. Duras' ravaged face constitutes the opening short paragraph of *The Lover*:

One day, I was already old, in the entrance of a public place a man came up to me. He introduced himself and said, 'I've known you for years. Everyone says you were beautiful when you were young, but I want to tell you I think you're more beautiful now than then. Rather than your face as a young woman, I prefer your face as it is now. Ravaged.' (Duras 1985: 3)

A novel's first paragraph can have a variety of functions, but they are by definition introductory, an entry point into a temporal field that may or not be linear in design. Duras' first paragraph establishes a story, but also launches a series of images that are central to the protagonist's corporeality. The ageing woman's ravaged face soon becomes the adolescent female body, and, later, as the story progresses, this body is progressively eroticised with a dress, a hat, some, lipstick. When the face is isolated pictorially from the rest of the body, it is called a portrait, and this portrait of Duras', the briefest sketch imaginable, is a palimpsest, the youthful face emergent from the aging face, the aging face rupturing not only from the stresses of life, but from the lingering youthful vitality that is still manifest within it. Thus the drama of Duras' first paragraph goes beyond the theatrics of the *nouveau roman*'s clipped rhythms; it is embedded in a contrapuntal series of beginnings and ends, a semantic unit that maintains its own coherence, but is seamlessly interwoven into the text as a whole.

Chapters

How we shape our chapters is not usually determined by language factors. It is more determined by what Seymour Chatman calls, in *Story and Discourse*, ‘existents’ (1986: 113): characters, places, events. I would argue that there is one determining existent that determines the chapter, and that is the ‘event’, or more specifically, a sequence of events that can cover hours, days, weeks, months or years. As we all know, good dramatic stories are not simply attempts at transcripts (whatever that would look like) of real life; they are very much constructed entities. The selection, formulation, and ordering of events is a complex process, one that is governed by, among other things, genre and stylisation. This process of formulating events we could call carving. Now carving has at least two aspects. You can carve a piece of wood to make a likeness of something: maybe a toy horse. Or you carve up something pre-existent: a country, or a horse. In the first instance, you have a substance from which you can make a likeness because it has a certain innate blankness or malleability, in this case a piece of wood. In the second, you are cutting to pieces something that already has an identity, with the intent of making smaller, discrete pieces that you order to your own liking. Constructing events can have these two aspects: the first when you are generating the material from the set of signifiers and their recombinations that as yet have no unified meaning, the second in the sense that you are taking your experience of the world and selecting pieces, carving up the totality that has confronted you, that you have been immersed in, into a unified meaning.

But existents aren’t the only element important to organising chapters, even if they may be a determining one. There are also the more abstract modalities; the carving up of consciousness, and the carving up of time. The carving up of consciousness is what is known as point of view. The novelist wants to write about a number of people who have close emotional ties, how they live, love, how they give each other joy and how they make each other suffer. The novelist embarks on writing the book making sure each individual character has their own separate consciousness, each has their own way of looking at the world. As they build their characters, the writer is mindful that their skill will be gauged by how convincing (real) they manage to make each member of the cast. This, however, is a very atomised way of thinking about point of view, a Cartesian grid where every consciousness is shut up into its own little box. There is another way we can look at point of view. We can also see it as a kind of collective entity, with each character’s point of view linked to another point of view, the moment of contact of consciousnesses as important as the moment of discreteness.

This is, in a sense, what Milan Kundera tries to do in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. In the Flaubertian tradition, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* has an ensemble cast distributed in a schema that Genette (1980: 189) would call variable focalisation: we go from character to character, privy not only to their actions, but also to their thoughts, in a circuit that builds up layers of action that implicate each character so closely it doesn’t take long for the collective of lovers, husbands and other family members to become as important as individual protagonists. Flaubert’s greatest novel, *Madame Bovary*, may bear the name of its protagonist in affirmation of bourgeois

individualism, but Emma's transgressions only have force and weight to the degree they participate in the moral universe of others.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* Kundera builds on these kinds of techniques. The overall design of the novel is simple. There are seven 'parts' each part is divided into either a short scene, a short essay-like section, or a combination of both, with these units functioning as chapters. Each of the novel's parts is governed by keywords (Part One: Lightness and Weight, Part Two: Soul and Body, and so on). The novel's point of view schema is divided between the two protagonists, Tomas and Teresa, with each part dominated by one or the other; the points of view of the secondary players is represented in the body of these. In the spirit of postmodernism, Kundera adds a metafictional dimension; from time to time the narrator of the novel does not hesitate to step out from his extradiegetic position and comment upon his creations.

Such a sectioning of consciousness is standard enough, with the metafictional aspect adding a flourish. But where the novel transcends a traditional point of view schema is in the way Kundera narrates the same incident from the differing perspective of his characters. The 'existent' (the event that Tomas and Teresa have participated in) is often the same, but the interpretation is different. In accordance with the conventions of a love story, certain types of events are carved from the lives of Teresa and Tomas: first sexual encounter, defining childhood moment, etc. And in accordance with a point of view technique that permits the narration of the same event by differing protagonists, consciousness has been sectioned and recombined to create narrative effects of substantial depth and breadth, showing us how the same event can mean different things to different people according to their world view, or 'existential code', as Kundera (1988: 29) calls it.

The organisational unit within which these effects are generated is that of the chapter, a textual unit that mediates between the specificity of the sentence and the gestalt of the novel a whole.

The Work and the World

To make a book like a novel is to create a unified meaning of a particular type. It's a unity that is at the very threshold of unity. The best novels are dynamic, unstable systems that barely hold together, but somehow do. They're made up of diverse matters that don't belong together, but somehow do. The present situations and themes that are defined yet unresolved. They make the familiar unfamiliar, and vice versa.

Yet, in the practical sense, they are static entities: words on a page, one word following the next. In formal terms, they are like maps. One way of making a map is to draw a representation of the world on a sphere, then make cuts into the sphere, vertically, like an orange, so it can be flattened onto a two-dimensional surface. At the macro level, that's what a novel, or any larger text that aspires to an overall coherency, is like.

More accurately, when you write a novel, you're creating a totality. You're taking something three-dimensional, four-dimensional, something dynamic, something made up of an endless mass of diverse matters, and trying to somehow pour it into the grooves, the runnels, of sentences. It seems an impossible task. You might as well be

trying to make a snapshot of the global weather at any given point in time. How do you capture something so vast with any accuracy? How do capture it at all? By the time you've described one aspect of the weather, the rest of the system has changed. The novel, then, can be seen as a series of snapshots of a small area of an experienced reality put into either causal or analogic relations as sentences, paragraphs and chapters. It's a crude patchwork quilt, the novel, square after square stitched together to form a whole with some kind of unifying design.

What is it that the writer is trying to flatten out? To render as the word? Different novelists have different worlds. Jane Austen's world is a world of women, manners, marriage and society. Don DeLillo's worlds are those of urban postmodernity.

Deleuze and Guattari have a concept that is of some use in trying to understand what the novelist is trying to lay out flat: the *socius*. Now, 'socius' is not a term that lends itself to easy analysis or neat definition, because it is a term that wants to embody all of human experience, all at once. And that's why it's so compelling for novelists who are interested in totalities.

Deleuze and Guattari characterise the *socius* as follows. (The first quote is from *Anti-Oedipus*, the second from *A Thousand Plateaus*):

[S]ociety is not first of all a milieu for exchange where the essential would be to circulate or to cause to circulate, but rather a *socius* of inscription where the essential thing is to mark or to be marked. There is circulation only if inscription requires or permits it. (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 142)

The prime function incumbent upon the *socius* has always been to codify the flows of desire, to inscribe them, to record them, to see to it that no flow exists that is not properly dammed up, channelled, regulated. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 33)

To mark and be marked, to codify, to channel and regulate, but above all to inscribe: these descriptions – I hesitate to use the term 'definitions', and perhaps 'fugal variations' might even be a better term – are surprisingly consistent, considering the breadth of the work and the span of time (more than a decade) that separates them. We cannot underestimate the importance of this process of inscription, this most writerly of terms that foregrounds the physicality of the act, the impact of chisel on stone, of engraving tool on precious metal, of glacier on river bed. Deleuze and Guattari seem less interested in writing as the transcendental concept made concrete as signifier (yet still ultimately disembodied from it), than wanting us to experience it as something utterly corporeal, the processes of the material world conceived of as a kind of writing in itself.

Template and Intensities

Writing is a regulation of intensities. And for me, if writing is about anything, it's about the intensities of human subjective experience, and finding ways of not necessarily representing them, but embodying them in a textual artefact. Call this representation, sure, but the creation of an artwork is still always about adding to the world as well as representing it.

The nature of these intensities is manifold, and the aesthetic forms they can take vary widely. For literature, one attempt to sum them up is in the Aristotelian poetics with its triune construction: the incitement in the reader of pity, fear and laughter. The forms the ancient Greeks used are tragedy, comedy and verse. The templates we use today, the templates into which we pour these intensities, are the novel, the poem, the play, the screenplay. Templates are precut forms we use to limit the infinite possibilities of form. They form a common structure of expression of intensities.

A template, however, suggests a rigidity of form, a uniformity, and that is certainly one way a novel can be. Yet such rigidity can be undercut by the tension between templates and intensities; the novel is a riverbed shaped by intensities, and that changes in order to contain them. On a writer-by-writer basis, we quickly see that the templates differ greatly; it is very much an individual form, one that might decide to use certain conventions, but reject others. When Hemingway decided to use only third-person objective in certain works, he put a constraint on himself that generated certain effects, namely, the ascendancy of showing over telling. When Nabokov decided that the prose sentence could use the full range of devices open to poetry, and use them often and abundantly, he generated a language that could still serve story and plot, but that also took English prose to a new level of lyricism.

Also, writers have different sensibilities that determine the forms of their novels. There are writers with a tendency to infinite compression – Borges, Beckett and Carver, for example – whose constraint was to show maximum content in minimum words. There are writers of isomorphism – broadly speaking, the realist tradition. And there are the writers of infinite expansion – Joyce, Proust, Musil (the latter two never finishing what were already sprawling books), and whose works, no matter how large, resemble enormous fragments, like boulders thrown up by volcanoes.

An artwork such as a novel can always be seen as a fragment, no matter how complete it might aspire to be. When a painter stretches a canvas, s/he cuts a rectangle from an endless bolt of cloth. When a writer creates a new document, s/he creates a series of rectangles from a potentially infinite supply to fill with words. And the world created with words is a world cut and shaped, sized and sectioned from another infinity. Dramatic events are events shaped from the potentiality of all possible events. The moment of writing is the moment of order-giving, no matter how fraught it might be. It is the creation of templates, the vehicles for artistic expression, the common formal language agreed between reader and writer, and that any ambitious writer tries to contest, and that any curious reader wants to have contested. In a sense, this is what we do as writers; we pour intensities into the template. That's what sentences, paragraphs, chapters, are. Grooves, runnels, grids, matrixes, into which we pour the intensities of human subjective experience.

Endnotes

1. 'Joyce's words, accurately described as having "multiple roots", shatter the linearity of the word, even of language [...]' (Deleuze and Guattari 1985: 6).
2. 'According to G. Genette (Figures, 2:38), the paragraph is the "rhetorical cell" out of which essays are constructed, a unit defined by its function in the overall plan' (Dupriez 1991: 317).

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