

Not Enough Too Much: On the Significance of Excess In Fiction

Lily Swanson

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Maya Sonenberg

Nikki Crouse

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Lily Swanson

University of Washington

Abstract

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Lily Swanson

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Maya Sonenberg

Department of Creative Writing

This critical essay positions “excess”—borrowing from the filmic concept defined by critic Kristin Thompson—as a powerful tool for authors of literary fiction to manipulate their readers’ experience of a text. Literary excess is defined in its stylistic and structural form with examples from prominent mid-century authors, then analyzed for its perceptive effect. The core argument of this essay is for a greater appreciation of aesthetics and impulsivity. It posits that a work of fiction’s bewildering qualities (bizarre sentence structure, pointless digressions, distracting characters) force the reader to reject analysis and be transported. Key novels used to support this argument include: Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*, Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* and Joy Williams’s *The Changeling*.

“There’s this colossal deficiency in a beautiful, precise work of art.” — Andrzej Żuławski

Unsolidarity Forever

I have always had a selfish frustration with the axiom “kill your darlings.” Really, any piece of advice advocating to scrap a narrative device, a linguistic flourish, an unfructuous character, ruffles my feathers a bit. How I love pointlessness! May oxford commas spring eternal! I was a stubborn child and I have grown into a stubborn adult. My frustration is probably due to the fact these writing sages with their index fingers hovering ever above “delete” are usually right. Let’s say, about ninety percent of the time. But every now and then, for reasons which are difficult to articulate, I know in my heart that they are *wrong*.

In a creative writing workshop last year, I presented a piece where a woman is in a Miami nightclub on a mission to make contact (and possibly hook up) with a teenage fling who has since become an elusive mainstream celebrity. In the midst of her conversation with him, she is distracted by a sushi chef who wants to show her his perfectly balanced knife. It is unclear why he’s speaking to her, whether or not he is flirting, and that’s more or less the point.

My classmates were uncertain of my motivation here. The sushi chef appears for a few lines of dialogue, compliments the main character’s fingernails, and then vanishes again into the background of the scene. In class and in their notes, they explained they were distracted by his presence. They wondered if he meant violence. He was diverting their attention from the story at large. I tried to tell them that was exactly the point. That I wanted a “breath” in the scene, that it was foreshadowing for the eventual cruelty that the celebrity would show the main character later on.

Truthfully, there was no motivation. I just felt like writing it.

Even still—I could not fathom the scene without the sushi chef. He was both a brief bit of set dressing and an integral part of the whole. This is not to say that the story, or scene itself, should elude criticism. The story did need *a lot* of revision. But this moment in workshop is one I think back on often. Why was I so loath to let that dialogue exchange go? Why didn't I care that my audience was diverted? Why does the unimportant sometimes feel crucial? To address these questions, I'll need to make the jump to film theory for a moment.

Years ago, I was introduced to the concept of “cinematic excess” as defined by critic and theorist Kristin Thompson. Borrowing from the Russian Formalists, Thompson explains: “films can be seen as a struggle of opposing forces. Some of these forces strive to unify the work, to hold it together sufficiently that we may perceive and follow its structures. Outside any such structures lie those aspects of the work which are not contained by its unifying forces—the ‘excess’” (Thompson 487). The film critic (and in a more passive way, the film viewer), then reckons with the tension between these two forces. The struggle to assign meaning to excess corresponds to an altered perception of the overall story.¹ Thompson points out a bird motif in *Ivan the Terrible, Part I* (1944), which becomes inconsequential in the second half of the film, as an example of excess (Thompson 493).

I would posit it is reasonable to assume that it is far more difficult to have disharmony in fiction than in film. First, it is (usually) just one person writing. Second, it is (usually) that same person doing a majority of the editing. Films need a producer, director, writer, editor (sometimes teams of editors), script supervisor, actors, intimacy coordinators, costume and make-up teams,

¹ Important to note here is the Russian Formalist definition and distinction of plot and story. Plot = the presentation of events. Story = the reconstruction of those events in the viewer's mind, in chronological order (Thompson 487).

etc. Without a passionate vision and assertive creative control, the conflicting visions of so many individuals can result in unintended messiness. Not to mention, all of these elements are at play *simultaneously* in any given scene, whereas in fiction, we are experiencing the story word by word. A novel may be messy. But a novel is (for the most part) the executed vision of one mind, and therefore, critics and readers are *doubly* interested in discerning significance in the small details of a literary work than in a film. Other than the occasional typo, when do we see “mistakes” in a published novel or short story? Everything must be, in some way, contributing to the narrative—right?

This “puzzle-solving” is also the predominant *modus operandi* when critiquing a film. Thompson takes issue with this, saying: “The critic and his/her reader must resist the learned tendency to try and find a narrative significance in every detail, or at least they must realize that a narrative function does not exhaust the material presence of that detail. [...] Just as every film contains a struggle of unifying and disunifying structures, so every stylistic element may serve at once to contribute to the narrative and to distract our perception from it” (Thompson 490).

The idea that a device in a work of art may serve no function other than its perceptive effects may be a threatening one for critics, which Thompson attributes to the fact that art is said to create a unifying order beyond what is possible in nature (Thompson 490). However, this “unifying order” is entirely arbitrary. It is a fabrication only trying to *appear* logical. Once critics and readers stop prioritizing narrative, stop looking at a film as a puzzle to be solved, a brave new world of experience awaits. “Renewing its ability to intrigue us by its strangeness; it also can help us to be aware of how the whole film—not just its narrative—works upon our perception” (Thompson 498). There are filmmakers who constantly make use of the perceptive effect of excess. I believe there are *even more* fiction writers who are doing the exact same thing,

and we ought to be looking beyond narrative at the strategies they are using to work upon our perception.

In this essay, I would like to look at authors whose work is enriched by their excessiveness. I would like to question the limited framework we have historically used to guide our understanding of what an author can do to manipulate their text's perceptive effects. By using excess in the context of writing, I am broadly referring to stylistic and structural indulgence. Elements of a text which are *disunifying* rather than *unifying*, which is to say that they divert readers from their unconscious task of narrative construction, intrigue us with their strangeness, and pull us even deeper into their world. Put simply, I would like to make an argument for the importance of aesthetic, sensorial experience.

Is this all an attempt to defend my sushi chef? Maybe. But many of my favorite authors are guilty of excessiveness, and I would like to both accuse and defend them here at length as well.

Excess in Action

In his craft essay "A Short Defense of Literary Excess", author Ben Masters lauds the lush, indulgent prose of writers he admires, from David Foster Wallace to Virginia Woolf. Cold, plain prose is in vogue, he explains (or at least, it was when writing in 2000), and can be found anywhere. Writers who embellish their work are fierce individualists who stand the test of time. Of the writers he mentions, Masters says: "[Excess] serves very different functions for each of them, whether as an expression of wonder, adaptability, individuality, free will; or as a means of self-fashioning; even as a survival tactic. But whatever it embodies or performs, the sentence in their hands is expansive rather than constrictive."

Expansive, not constructive. That seems to be in line with what Thompson is talking about in her argument against straightforward narrative construction. To see this in action, let's take a look at this sentence (yes, *sentence*) from Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*:

That grubby dressing-gown, horribly caked with grease-paint round the neck... when Lizzie lifted up the armful of hair, you could see, under the splitting, rancid silk, her humps, her lumps, big as if she bore a bosom fore and aft, her conspicuous deformity, the twin hills of the growth she had put away for those hours she must spend in daylight or lamplight, out of the spotlight, so, on the street, at the soirée, at lunch in expensive restaurants with dukes, princes, captains of industry and punters of like kidney, she was always the cripple, even if she always drew the eye and people stood on chairs to see (Carter 18)

Carter loves a qualifier. A single descriptor rarely satisfies. Fevvers, the “lumpy” woman described in the passage, is a circus performer with massive white wings who claims to be part swan. The wings, wrapped in silk that is both splitting and rancid, are 1) humps, 2) lumps, 3) like a second bosom, 4) a deformity, 5) twin hills. Fevvers must hide her wings when spending time in three varieties of lighting, at three locations, and with four varieties of esteemed guests. So let's look at what is really being constructed here; the plot of this sentence:

Beneath the cheap silk dressing gown, you can see the humps of Fevvers's wings which she must hide when in public with notable people.

The narrative progresses very little. No truly new information is being delivered. But Carter *expands* on what we already know, fills in detail to a level that is not necessary for the plot, but immediately engrosses us in her world. What she is doing, effectively, is holding the

reader to the image of Fevvers' bundled wings, forcing us to consider the various situations in which the bundled wings might appear. Our mental construction of the story pauses, and we are instead receiving the strangeness of the image presented. What follows is the pleasant effect of being transported.

This effect is precisely why I love reading Angela Carter. My own prose arcs towards being cold and sardonic. This is a conscious effort on my part, an overriding imperative to "move the plot along" like "plot" is a commuter train, expected to arrive at act three by 5 o'clock or I will receive some nasty emails from the public. I believe this has worked in my favor when it comes to *short* fiction, but such a limited style can only be sustained for so long. No one wants to be packed in a subway crowd over long distances. Someone open a window. There's a whole world out there.

One does not necessarily need Cater's verbosity to achieve this expansive effect. Take a look at this passage from John Hawkes's *The Lime Twig*:

It was all noise of people wanting to look at the world and a smell of the sea, and the woman was midships with her basket; soon in the shadow of the bow anchor she would be trying to find a safe spot for her folding chair. Hencher winking. A boy in a black suit danced by their table, and in his arms was a girl of about fourteen. Banks watched the way she held him and watched her hands in the white gloves shrunk small and tight below the girl's thin wrists. Music, laughter, smells of deck paint and tide mustard, sight of the boy pulled along by the fierce white childish hands. And he himself was listening, touching his tongue to the beer, leaning close as he dared to Hencher, beginning to think of the black water widening between sides of the holiday ship and the quay (Hawkes 37-38).

Here, Michael Banks, whose third-person perspective we are in, is discussing the details of a horse-racing scheme with William Hencher—one which will ultimately lead to violent tragedy. During this detour in the conversation, time is suspended, and we jump between different figures on the boat. A woman with a folding chair and a boy and girl dancing. And then it's back to Banks and Hencher.

This is a stylistic pattern throughout *The Lime Twig*: dreamlike drifting from action to observation. The purpose of Michael's observations serves little narrative purpose, except maybe to describe his surroundings. Though the scene has already been set at this point. The woman with the folding chair suggests she's worried about theft. The image of the girl's gloves shrunk tight around her wrists suggests some kind of imprisonment. The boy being pulled around by her, this being published in 1961, could signify emasculation? And while we *could* read these tea leaves till the cows come home, it is not an embedded connection to the rest of the narrative which makes this paragraph engaging. In fact, it is the *lack* of a clear connection, a disunification, which causes the reader to disengage from narrative construction and experience Michael Banks's perspective more viscerally.

Despite the claustrophobic third person perspective, there is something expansive about *The Lime Twig* that separates it from a traditional crime novel. As the dark plot unfolds before us, we are pulled into the busy scenes of other people's lives on the boat. We wonder about them for a moment. Thoughts and observations come to Michael Banks, unbidden by narrative significance. Perhaps this is why Flannery O'Connor referred to *The Lime Twig* as a novel one *suffers*, "like a dream." (O'Connor, back cover).

Beyond an expansive narration style, there is also another kind of excess appearing in fiction, which I believe to be distinct from the ones identified earlier. Works in which the central

plot is augmented by secondary, tertiary action so as to obfuscate the easy meaning making we would do in an otherwise straightforward narrative. They work expansively, but on a story level: incorporating scenes and characters who have little bearing on the central plot. Some of these authors may be referred to as lush or excessive on a sentence level, but not all, and not the ones I'll be looking at here.

Among the authors I believe are guilty of this large-scale excessiveness, Hemingway is the most noteworthy example (yes, *that* Hemingway). His second novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, is at its core about journalist Jake Barnes (thinly veiled self-insert) following his emotionally unavailable ex-girlfriend, Brett Ashley, across Spain. But the only moment Brett and Jake have alone with one another occurs in the final chapter of the novel. The majority is long parties and drinking sessions with Jake's "tennis friends" and enigmatic European strangers. His third novel, *A Farewell to Arms* digresses from an action-packed tale of survival in war-torn Italy to a tragic, dour romance with a British nurse in the second half. These remain two of Hemingway's most well-read novels², which I bring up if only to demonstrate that even a man regarded as the most curt, cold writer is capable of expansiveness/disunifying excess in the construction of his plot—and to great success.

There are also plenty of writers who employ this sort of excess on a scene level. Don DeLillo immediately comes to mind. Take this passage from one of the early chapters of *White Noise*:

At home Denise placed a moist bag of garbage in the kitchen compactor. [...] Children walked in and out of the kitchen, water dripped in the sink, the washing machine heaved

² At least, according to their popularity on goodreads ("Hemingway Books").

in the entranceway. [...] Denise listened carefully, making sure the mangling din contained the correct sonic elements, which meant the machine was operating properly.

Heinrich said to someone on the phone, “Animals commit incest all the time. So how unnatural can it be?”

Babette came in from running, her outfit soaked through. Murray walked across the kitchen to shake her hand. She fell into a chair, scanned the room for Wilder...

“We have to boil our water,” Steffie said.

“Why?”

“It said on the radio.”

“They’re always saying to boil your water,” Babette said. “It’s the new thing” (DeLillo 33-34).

Denise, Heinrich, Wilder, and Steffie are the narrator’s children. Babette is his wife. Husband and wife are maligned by a strangling fear of death, for which Babette has been scoring experimental medication. Until the airborne toxic event which appears about a third into the novel, fear of death and the pills are the key driving force of the story—but the oddly wise children are constantly providing thoroughly successful distraction.

Just as we are beginning to wrap our minds around why Denise is so interested in the trash compactor, Heinrich seems to be condoning incest to a stranger on the phone?! Wife enters, we are back in the sensible world of adults and then out of nowhere little Stephanie announces they should be boiling their water. So what is the purpose of all this distraction? Is it the verisimilitude of a hectic life with children? If it was, surely their predilections in this scene would not be so outlandish. There is the broader thematic meaning: that the world is full of noise aimed at distracting us from death, and children (who are not yet versed in tuning it out) are more aware,

more likely to engage with the world around them in an unguarded way. But even this fails to satisfy. Something else is going on here.

This “something else” mirrors what Roland Barthes calls the “third meaning.” In his essay of the same name, he analyzes a still shot from *Ivan the Terrible*³ where two heavily costumed and stylized courtiers are pouring gold over the young czar’s head. He identifies three levels of meaning in the scene. 1) The informational level, or what is visibly taking place. 2) The symbolic level, or what is signified in the viewer’s mind. The obvious meaning. 3) The obtuse level, meaning/effect which cannot be easily pinned down, but is certainly there. For this, he identifies the gaudy makeup of the two courtiers, how pale they are, the clear presence of the wigs. Like *White Noise*’s odd children, it is all “too much” to be justified by narrative significance. But Barthes acknowledges it *is* doing *something*:

As for the other meaning, the third, the one 'too many', the supplement that my intellection cannot succeed in absorbing, at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive, I propose to call it the obtuse meaning. The word springs readily to mind and, miracle, when its etymology is unfolded, it already provides us with a theory of the supplementary meaning. *Obtusus* means that which is blunted, rounded in form. Are not the traits which I indicated (the make-up, the whiteness, the wig, etc.) just like the blunting of a meaning too clear, too violent? Do they not give the obvious signified a kind of difficult prehensible roundness, cause my reading to skid? (Barthes 55)

In the passage from *White Noise*, our work of creating a symbolic or obvious meaning (that children create a chaos which protects us from thinking about our mortality), is skidded by

³ Thompson is basing her argument on Barthes’s essay, which is why the *Ivan* example appears there also.

Heinrich's mention of incest. It is "too much" as Barthes calls it earlier (Barthes 54). If they are "too much," why do these distractions work so well to pleasantly transport us into the author's world? What, mechanically, is going on in our heads when presented with a moment of excess?

Painting In Our Minds

It is not lost on me that the term "excess" almost always carries with it a negative connotation. Excessive violence, excessive sex, excessive use of adverbs. These are widely regarded as artistic sins. Thus far, I have spoken about authors for whom excess and indulgence is a matter of *style* and *construction*, not subject. When I say "devices in literature which draw attention beyond their narrative function," you may immediately think of less savory examples from classic novels where the author's obsessions provide a lengthy diversion from their plot. Plodding descriptions of the Paris sewer system in *Les Miserables*, or the extensive and often incorrect description of whale anatomy in *Moby Dick* (whales are not, in fact, a kind of large fish).

I would argue that every author, to some degree, is prone to obsession with a certain subject. Something they care about or believe they understand more than their audience. Sewers and whales being fairly innocuous examples. I would even slate particular male authors' lengthy and anatomically suspect descriptions of women as "excessive."

But for every ten readers of *Les Mis*, you will find one who thinks Victor Hugo's obsession with revolution-era water and waste removal is profoundly interesting. And doesn't Herman Melville's extensive, and now bunk, research provide a curious window into 19th century biology? Isn't it irresponsible to glaze over an unsavory paragraph about a woman's physical appearance, to sweep it under the rug like an embarrassing mistake on the part of the

author when surely some Joe-Shmo is getting his rocks off? Do these things not also play upon our perception, cause our reading to skid?

I am not here to argue that excess *automatically* elevates fiction. I only believe that it is irresponsible not to consider the excessive qualities of a novel as serving some kind of perceptive function when analyzing the work as a whole.

Sometimes I think it would be helpful if we looked at a work of prose the same way we look at a painting: a singular object, an attempt to capture a feeling, an experience. But a novel is experienced word by word. And the “painting” happens in our minds. Still, is it not important then, to study the techniques an author uses as a kind of palette?

Let’s return again to film. When thinking about the uses of excess, there is no more obvious example than the late great director David Lynch, whose films are filled with disturbing, dream-like sequences which often have little bearing on the given plot, but are a great part of what makes his work so strange and memorable. In an interview with the BBC, Lynch explains a metaphor he uses to justify the insertion of such odd, disjointed moments in the structure of his films, which he calls “The Eye of the Duck”:

In painting, you’re working within a certain shape canvas, and there’s many things that one does intuitively to move the eye. There’s repetition of shape, repetition of color, but when you start looking at a duck, you notice your eye moving in a certain way. And you see textures and colors and shapes, and you start wondering about a duck. [...] It always is interesting that the eye is in the perfect place. If you move it to the body, it would get lost. If you move it to the leg, or the beak, it’s two kinda fast areas competing, even though the eye is the fastest—it’s the little jewel (BBC 0:52-1:50).

In Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), we could consider the lip synched "In Dreams" sequence to be an "Eye of the Duck" moment: an odd and otherwise inconsequential scene inserted consequentially into the center of the action. A disunifying jewel. In other words, a moment of excess. We "skid" in our perception of the film, and experience what follows more viscerally.

What is interesting to me here is the way Lynch speaks about manipulating the eye of the viewer. By "fast" we can assume he means expressive, flashy (a little jewel). These incongruous, flashy moments can be dropped in, rearranged to alter perceptive effect—what the audience is paying attention to and how intensely. Following Lynch's (admittedly obtuse) metaphor, I would posit that sometimes, it is necessary to include a moment in excess of narrative in order to achieve a desired response from one's audience.

In her surreal and fantastical novel *The Changeling*, I believe Joy Williams is doing something similar with the eye of the reader: though in this case, it is the reader's inner eye of imagination. The book opens with the main character, Pearl, sitting at a hotel bar in Florida with her newborn son. She is contemplating her recent escape from the island her mysterious husband has been imprisoning her on. There is some description of the bar, her baby, but overall we may call it a relatively "slow"⁴ scene. Then, an odd moment injects a flash of energy:

In the mirror, a couple appeared to be sitting beside her with a small alligator on the table between them. When Pearl turned and saw the actual table, she saw that it was so. The alligator was of the size one usually finds deceased in southern gift shops, next to the kumquat jellies. This one was dully alive. Its small feet made a gentle, rustling sound, like leaves.

⁴ "Slow" should not be mistaken for "boring". Here, I only mean "low energy". *The Changeling* is anything but boring, cover to cover.

“You’re just too much, Earl,” the woman said.

“It’s got a dong in it big as its whole self, you know that?” Earl said.

“Goddamnedest thing” (Williams 18).

As you can probably guess at this point, no, Earl, his wife, and their alligator do not appear again in the text. This “fast” or energized/expressive moment of humor creates balance in the scene, in addition to enduring us to the strangeness of Williams’s world. Our “eye” is manipulated by the image of the small alligator, the question of a “dong big as its whole self.” We turn away from Pearl’s thoughts and fears and out into her surroundings. There are simpler ways to do this. Williams could have offered us a bold description of a couple seeming to argue near where Pearl is sitting. But she is bold and expressive past the point of propriety: the couple is seen through a mirror with a real-life baby alligator! If we think of the scene as a canvas, this instance is a bright red dot, around which the rest is recontextualized.

This is the strongest argument I can make for excess: if nothing else, it grabs our attention.

Literary By-Products

Lynch is far from the first to make the argument that artists work intuitively. I believe that all authors, to varying degrees, work primarily on intuition. Writer Robert Boswell uses the metaphor of “Narrative Spandrels” in his essay of the same name, to explain the significance of insignificant details an author often creates to fill space in a story. Spandrels—the by-product of placing rounded arches side by side—are frequently filled in with ornamental artwork in classical cathedrals: mosaics, reliefs, paintings. Says Boswell:

It seems to me that spandrels are often [...] the key to creating an elaborate, harmonious, and purposeful story. While the writer must toil away on the primary structures (those literary arches), in the process she inevitably creates spandrels (by-products), and very often these spandrels come to guide and shape the story, and give the writer the opportunity to create a beautiful and meaningful whole (Boswell 51).

By bringing up Boswell's argument here, I suppose I'm saying that often what become key symbols, metaphors, motifs, in a particular story, the material that binds the "literary arches" of plot and arc together, begin as excess. Something adjacent to the important action of the scene. The evolutionary drive to fill space with something *unique* and *interesting* which will hold the reader's attention.

Let us turn back to *The Changeling*. A large part of what makes the novel so enchanting and fantastic (despite the very real and literal magic) are such by-products. There is something breathless in the way Williams fills space with magnetic yet unimportant detail, which then repeats or is revisited in later moments. Take another instance from early in the novel for example:

Pearl went into the kitchen and boiled some water for tea. She was twenty years old and didn't know anybody. Her parents were dead. The only relative she had was an elderly aunt who had been living in the Polynesian Village Hotel somewhere in Arizona for two years. It was expensive, she wrote to Pearl, but she loved it. Outside her window was a hedge pruned into the shape of the Polynesian God of Happiness. The place was highly organized and much more comprehensive than life. The aunt sent Pearl recipes (Williams 24).

Here, the “literary arches” being constructed are Pearl’s struggle to adjust to domestic life and the single familial connection she has remaining. The aunt, the striking detail about a hedge pruned into the shape of a God, is the ornamental mosaic filling our spandrel. Our bright red dot on the canvas. Then, a page later, the image returns, this time with more significance:

She felt ghostly with her solitude. The hedges outside her window were in the shape of dying hedges. It was a woman, it must have been, back in the beginning of things who decided death should be a part of life. A man wouldn’t have thought of it. Women chose death so that they would always feel sorry (Williams 25).

The hedges are no longer a bit of set dressing. They become an embedded metaphor for Pearl’s morbid dissatisfaction with her married life. The Polynesian God is invoked again, in the form of an imagined, dying female deity. It becomes a leaping off point for Pearl’s lyrical reflection of women’s unique misery.

It is not pure conjecture on my part that Joy Williams works through impulse and intuition. In her essay “Uncanny the Singing That Comes From Certain Husks,” she restates the idea that a story exists in some way forever out of the reader’s grasp: “The significant story possesses more awareness than the writer writing it. The significant story is always greater than the writer writing it. This is the absurdity, the disorienting truth, the question that is not even a question, this is the koan of writing” (Williams, “Uncanny”). It’s not too much of a leap to assume that the detail of the shrub in the shape of the Polynesian God of Happiness was a kind of happy accident, an impulse in excess of her current understanding of the story.

My argument so far has mainly been directed towards readers and critics, not necessarily towards writers, to expand our idea of what is “significant” in a story. This is, in a way, me

bucking against a form of critique and study of writing which I know, from my own experience as a writer, is misguided. Boswell explains this best in the latter half of “Narrative Spandrels”:

In college literature classes, English professors often begin the analysis of a novel by talking about the book’s symbolic and thematic content. Creative writing courses that discuss the same novels almost never start with these elements, as they are spandrels; and despite their harmonious and purposeful presence, they are by-products and so—for student writers, at least—the wrong place to start. (An extrapolation of this argument will make the following evident: the study of literary theory may confound a young writer because it inverts the proper path of analysis) (Boswell 58).

Boswell grounds his argument with the assertion that fiction writing ought to be studied in a similar way to evolutionary biology: as a product of circumstance, not some intended directive. As a young writer myself, the idea that everything must be significant weighs on me heavily. I find myself drafting and deleting images and anecdotes about characters because I worry that they are too distracting. There is something encouraging to the idea that following intuitive interest, the gut instinct to insert a bush the shape of a lost god, a baby alligator, a mildly-threatening sushi chef, may be part of the built-in biology of a fiction writer. And if these things do not end up becoming key, load-bearing symbols when the story is finished, when all is said and done, hey, at least I had a good time.

Heart Before Brain

Two of the works I have mentioned thus far, *White Noise* and *The Lime Twig*, have been labeled as “Hysterical Realism”—a term coined by critic James Wood in a review of Zadie

Smith's *White Teeth*.⁵ In her response in *The Guardian*, Zadie Smith admits that she finds the term "Hysterical Realism" to be a fairly accurate assessment. Explaining her desire to remain disorienting, and "obtuse" in her fiction, Smith says:

I want to defend the future possibility of some words appearing on pages that will be equal to these times and to what I feel and what you feel and what James Wood feels; that is, this fear that has got us all by the throat. He argues against silence and against intellectual obfuscation. He says: tell us how it feels. Well, we are trying. I am trying. But as DeLillo dramatised (again, in *White Noise*), it is difficult to discuss feelings when the TV speaks so loudly; cries so operatically; seems always, in everything, one step ahead. Yet people continue to manage this awesome trick of wrestling sentiment away from TV's colonisation of all things soulful and human, and I would applaud all the youngish Americans - Franzen, Moody, Foster Wallace, Eggers, Moore - for their (supposedly) small but, to me, significant triumphs. They work to keep both sides of the equation—brain and heart—present in their fiction (Smith).

Life is excessive. It is all too much all at once. Perhaps the only way to honestly represent the 21st Century is to give in to digression, noise, chaos. Become as hysterical as the world. Perhaps this is how we humble fiction writers remain relevant in a bloated attention economy. I'll admit that I'm pessimistic about this idea, but as Smith points out, the "hysterical" style of the authors mentioned is part of an important experiment in keeping "heart" a part of the equation.

⁵ I should note that Wood's term was initially intended to be disparaging. (Smith)

I would argue the foremost power of literary excess is that it forces the reader to put “heart” before “brain.” In *The Lime Twig* for example, the distracted, frenetic narration means that whatever horrors befall the Bankses, we experience them sensorially, and without the distance of intellectualizing or moralizing. The irony is not lost on me that I am a self-proclaimed marxist making an argument *for* phenomenology. But the fact of the matter is, readers enter a text heart-first, brain-second. Shouldn’t criticism follow a similar trajectory? Shouldn’t the writer consider this when constructing their story?

In her essay “On Style” in *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag explains that “Art performs [its] ‘moral’ task because the qualities which are intrinsic to the aesthetic experience (disinterestedness, contemplativeness, attentiveness, the awakening of the feelings) and to the aesthetic object (grace, intelligence, expressiveness, energy, sensuousness) are also fundamental constituents of a moral response to life (Sontag 24-25). At least in Sontag’s view, aesthetic experience and emotion are what allows for a work of art to bring across its moral framework. While I’m inclined to side with her here, I’m not certain a heavily “stylized” or excessive work of fiction is capable of the same moral awakening she’s implying—at least, not to *all* readers.

Just as excess skews our narrative perception of a text, it also skews our moral/ethical perception. Traditional signifiers of good and evil, humane and inhumane, can get lost in the noise. And while the more media-literate amongst us may baulk at teenagers who unironically idolize *Fight Club*’s Tyler Durden, can we blame them for their shallow interpretation of a film based on a book which prioritizes aesthetic and noise over narrative? Once in college I went to a Theta Chi party called “The Great Fratsby.” My friends and I drank to excess and ended up, would you believe it, fully clothed in a swimming pool with our little flapper dresses waving around in the water. My point is that it doesn’t take much thought to *experience* a text. It is much

harder to discern meaning in it.⁶ The “obtuse” layer excess places over a work of fiction makes that task even *more* difficult.

This is the slipperiness of placing aesthetics before content. When excessive violence, lyricism, imagery takes over, when it is no longer clear what the author is telling us to think or what questions we should be asking, we are not all going to end up in the same place. But I do not necessarily think it is an author’s responsibility to shepherd us towards a shared conclusion.

Just because an author (or filmmaker) uses excessive violence, beauty, or peoples their world with problematic, noisy characters doesn’t mean their moral/ethical framework isn’t there. The impetus is on *us*, the audience, to parse out our own understanding of what they’re trying to say. Which is, more often than not, unique to each individual. This is a process I find extremely gratifying, sifting through distraction to find the golden nugget of meaning inside.

Yes, there are times when excess is *truly* too much for me. Reading *Lapvona* by Ottessa Moshfegh was such an experience. The violence and depravity of a suffering medieval fife was justified only by Moshfegh’s admittedly gripping prose and moments of disparagingly dark humor. I felt nothing after finishing the book except the morbid sense that I was guilty of looking at a callously organized freakshow. But I finished it. And even as a certified Moshfegh-hater, there is an originality to her stories which I am deeply envious of. And perhaps this is my own moral/ethical failure as a reader, but I would always, *always* prefer to find no political purpose or truth at the end of a riveting tale than a profound realization at the end of a dull and plodding one.

⁶ To understand that Jay Gatsby was not, in fact, a “cool guy who threw epic parties,” but the eternal cuckold who died chasing a false American dream.

Genre Trouble

I have used, up to this point, examples of acclaimed works of fiction known for affecting some kind of moral insight or stylistic innovation. These are the attributes that (for academics, at least) separate “literary” fiction from the rest of the swill. But so far I have almost completely ignored “genre” fiction (whatever that elusive term means to you): Science-Fiction, Fantasy, Romance, Horror, and so on.

I am a lifelong lover of the speculative and the fantastic. My first forays into fiction writing were sprawling medieval soap operas. These adolescent stories were full of over-heightened emotion, overwrought political drama, sensationalized violence. They were, in a word, excessive. As I entered my late teens, was exposed to more and more of the short-fiction being published in *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*, I began to write for what I termed a “serious” audience. My writing improved greatly (at least, I certainly hope so!), but it also got colder, sarcastic. Writing it became less and less *fun*. Not to say I don’t still have my moments, but on the main, I’ve been chasing the high of my dragon riders and faerie forests since the sixth grade.

Sometimes I think returning to these non-literary genres, a hotbed for excess, would reinvigorate the process for me. Or at least, free up my use of language. Perhaps I could find a happy medium between indulgence and efficiency. But I am, for whatever reason, constantly afraid of being expansive, romantic, or “cringe.” A sort-of manifesto of expansive style, Charles Baxter’s essay “Lush Life”, provides an explanation for why I, and other writers, are drawn towards producing reserved, plain-style work: “Lushness is contaminated, everyone thinks, by its association with mindless emotion and the worst of romanticism; furthermore, because lushness is typically a “hot” style, it can seem sweaty, uncool, violent, sexy, weepy, and naked—in a

word, embarrassing” (Baxter 289). Baxter is dead on. To properly read an excessive work of fiction (in accordance with Thompson’s theory) requires us to turn off the lit-analysis part of our brains that asks us to do the meaning-making “cold”⁷ fiction does, and give ourselves over to holistic experience. This presents an engrossing reading experience, but also a sort of cringey, embarrassing exposure.

For this, let me pull out my dogeared copy of the most mindlessly emotional, embarrassing, cringey book I can think of: Anne Rice’s *The Vampire Lestat*.

In the following passage, the only crucial information is that Lestat, our narrator (and canon author of the book), has just been reunited with Louis, who believed he was dead for nearly a century. Oh—and they’re vampires in love. That’s also crucial:

We embraced the way we never had in the past. [...] And then I ran my hands over his hair and his face, just letting myself really see him, as if he belonged to me. And he did the same. Seems we were talking and not talking. True silent voices that didn’t have any words. Nodding a little. And I could feel him brimming with affection and a feverish satisfaction that seemed almost as strong as my own (525).

What exactly is going on here? There’s a strange description of bodies and arms and faces intertwined for an over-long moment. Removed from the greater context of the novel and series, this is exactly the sort of pulpy sap Baxter warns us about. I will not stand here and say that Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles* should be placed among the greatest of the American literary canon, but her saccharine writing works on me in ways few books have. As skeptic,

⁷ Assuming that by “cold” Baxter is referring to economic writing with relatively little flourish and emotion, and by “hot” he means the opposite.

ironic, and “literary” my pretensions are, in my heart, I have *infinitely* more fun writing and reading the syrupy, imperfect, and melodramatic.

I would posit that, like lyricism, an excessive style becomes necessary when the subject matter is so overwhelming or so traumatic that words fail, and so too does linear storytelling. Romance and Horror writers understand this implicitly (Anne Rice happens to be both). Our experience of these genres is embodied in a way intellectual and/or realistic fiction often isn’t. Phenomenological readings of a text are not as valued in analysis as the thematic, the political, and the symbolic (unless you’re a weirdo like David Lynch). It is different for each individual reader and therefore cannot be easily discussed. But the way a story makes you *feel* as you experience it is arguably the most important function of fiction.

So why do I cringe at Anne Rice’s prose and not Angela Carter’s? I would argue that since Romance and Horror are genres which value sensorialism over intellectualism, they run against what we are taught to value in art. We are taught that art is important because it is political. Art is important because it communicates ideas. These things are absolutely true, but when we devalue the emotional, the sensorial impact of art, we strip artists of their greatest power, and audiences of their greatest pleasure.

In “Lush Life”, Baxter points out that an extravagant style, “is taboo unless someone famous and above suspicion employs it, like Gabriel García Márquez or Toni Morrison” (289). He continues: “[Every] style wants something from you. If you want to be cool, however, you can’t be lush. You can be one or the other but not both” (290). When critics teach readers that the only fiction with “literary” value is work with a clear-cut, economic style, we create a class of writers who produce unoriginal, cold fiction for fear of being seen as unintellectual, or cringe. We become less risk-taking, less engrossing, less *ourselves*.

When I see excess in a work of fiction, regardless of genre, I feel as if I am being invited to something new and original, something exciting, and I am all the more ready to pay attention to whatever intellectual or political concerns the author has to express.

A Different Shark

Why am I so enamored with excess? Why am I drawn to it, even if it is something I cannot intentionally reproduce? The answer, I think, lies in its inability to be quantified. Imperfections, imprecision, remind us that there is a *human being* behind every (worthwhile) work of art.⁸ An imperfect, imprecise, soul.

I once overheard a man in a coffee shop say, “the great thing about Jazz is it’s a social music.” What a pretentious bastard! Is there such a thing as “anti-social” music? An “anti-social” art? I would argue that the entire point of making art is connection—to communicate to your audience an idea, and moreover, invite them into a shared *feeling*. When I see imperfection in a story, I am reminded that someone has felt something so strongly they created a reality in their minds and put it to page through long, difficult hours, so that someone else might feel it with them. Is that not the purest expression of love?

When I listen to “Space City” by Drive by Truckers, and the singer’s voice cracks at all the high notes, I know there is a person on the other side of my headphones, and no amount of tinny, autotuned country can affect the same intensity of feeling. Like when an author goes wild

⁸ Partial credit for this realization goes to my professor, David Bosworth, who told us about a live-recording of an orchestra where you could hear the conductor shushing the audience. It fascinated him, he said, because it reminded him there was an artist who desperately wanted his music to be heard.

with syntax, throws in curveball scenes, characters, unimportant but spectacularly rendered trash, they subconsciously remind us that what we are reading is a *construction*. What matters is experience—analysis can wait.

Think of a book you loved when you were young. Ideally, 8-13 years old. Maybe, like me, it was something fantastical, fairies, mermaids, dragons. Maybe something closer to earth. Nancy Drew. The Boxcar Children. Warrior Cats. Don't think of the details, think about how you *felt* while you were reading. Maybe you were on your mom's couch or the public library, and then suddenly you were transported. I'm willing to bet you've been chasing that feeling ever since. Maybe you even tried to reproduce it, and that's why you're a poet or screenwriter or (putative) novelist now. But you keep failing. You keep writing, hoping you'll get lost in your world, but something's *not quite there*, something's lacking.

What I've learned from excess, is that you won't be able to get that feeling back by studying plot structure, the economy of words, or perfecting your syntactical clarity. These things are the *foundation* of good fiction, but they are not the *magic* of it. The magic happens when you *indulge*. Go insane. Be as heartbreakingly strange as the spirit calls for. I have spent so much time trying to be "good" or "important", re-re-producing cold New Yorker pieces I read ten years ago, that I have completely lost sight of why I began writing in the first place.

Writers with an excessive style and structure to their work fascinate and frustrate me. They seem to be freer than I am. The horizons of their work expand beyond typical limitations of plot and style. I am fascinated with excess because I want to write stories that sit just outside the reader's understanding in a way that is gratifying. I want to confuse my audience just enough to keep them in a dreamlike state, to throw something terrible and strange in their path and grab

them by the hand just before they turn away. I want to be like the David Lynches of the world. I want to bewilder, I want to stun, I want to be strange and wonderful.

When I think of the kind of writer I want to be, I think of what Joy Williams once said to Don DeLillo, a writer she greatly admired: “I said that he was like a great shark moving hidden in our midst, beneath the din and wreck of the moment, at apocalyptic ease... Why do I write? Because I wanna be a great shark too. Another shark. A different shark, in a different part of the ocean. The ocean is vast.” (Williams, “Uncanny”)

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