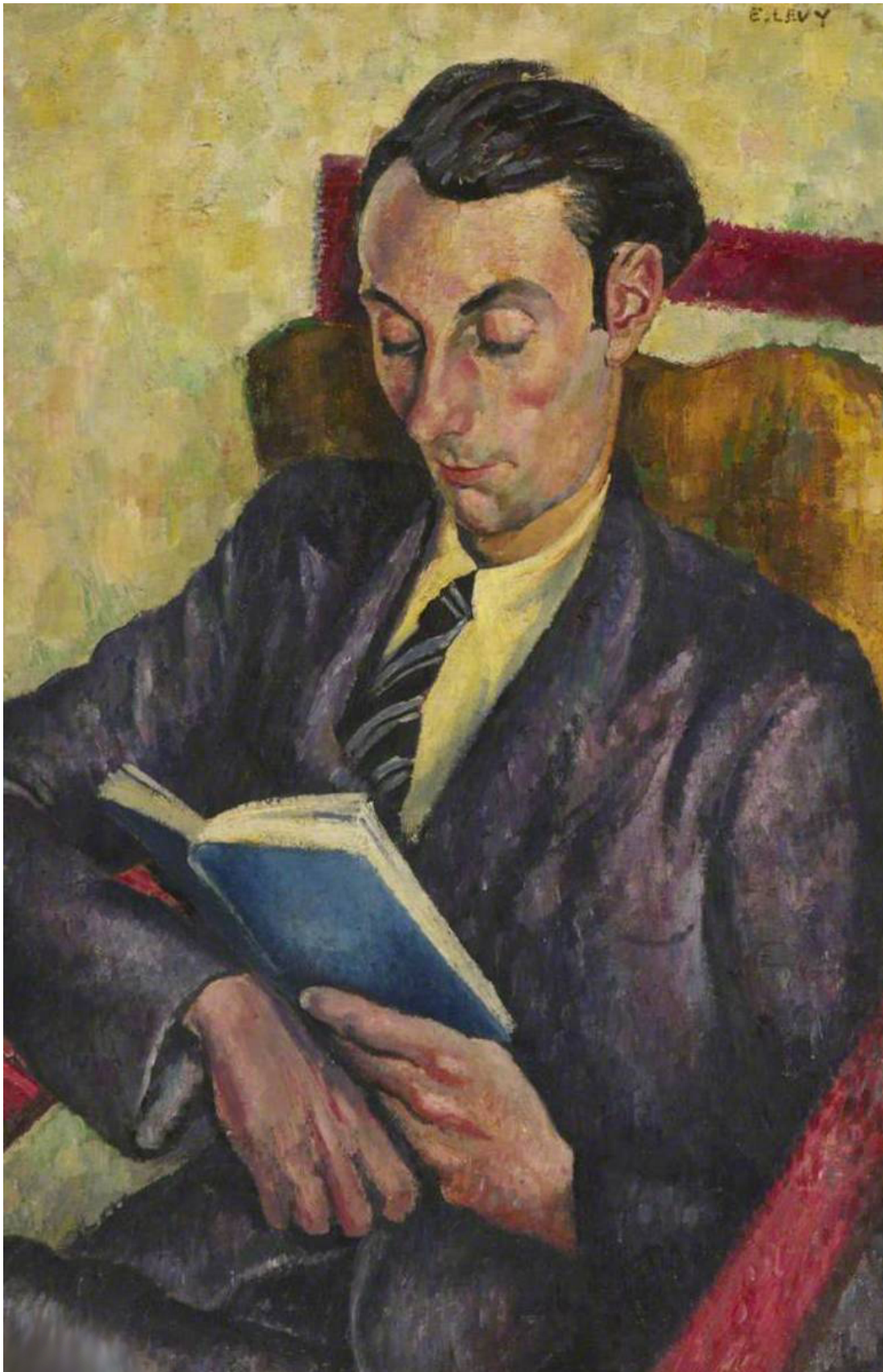


The Decline and Fall of "Literary Fiction"

By [Guido Mina di Sospiro](#) (October 2019)



Man Reading, Emmanuel Levy

When I pick up a book in the "literary fiction" genre I do not perceive the respect towards that ineffable logos that breathes inside us. Language, as a result, is barren, sometimes seemingly synthetic, or at any rate artificial. There used to be a time in which Wittgenstein had such a profound influence on me, I could no longer pick up any text, simply because nowhere did I detect the respect and awe language ought to have inspired in its author. Perhaps all aspiring writers should be fed Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations* as compulsory readings. If nothing else, they would begin to appreciate some of the intricate and ambiguous aspects of language, even ordinary parlance. Did they realize language could imply so much and/or so little at the same time?

Glossolalia predates language. It is *not* language deranged, or unsyntactic and unsemantic. I suppose one must learn it all, and then throw it all away, much like the poet and mystic Rumi did. Storytelling is cogent only if based on a profound understanding of the metaphysical importance of myth. If not, the whole art of the novel should be declared dead and buried. Anti-novels have proved the point, with James Joyce and Julio Cortázar among their preeminent champions. But their works betrayed a dissatisfaction with the (non)values of the Twentieth Century. Yet, they were unable to offer alternatives, hence, the death of the novel, as deconstructionist critics would like us to believe.

On the other hand, by erring so uncompromisingly on the side of modesty and uniformity, the prose in most works of "literary fiction" appalls me. I wonder: are all these writers ill? Have they all become numb? Are they asleep or catatonic? Their metronomic and synthetic prose reminds me of that distinctly man-made contrivance: the lawn.

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There is nothing like a lawn in nature. At the most, there are prairies, an entirely different notion. A lawn demands herbicides, pesticides, constant mowing, weeding, fertilizing, irrigation where rain is insufficient, sun, but not too much of it, some shade, better if dappled. It is an abstract aberration, definitely not lifelike. So is the prose I object to. It may aim at simplicity, but could not be more contrived—and insipid, standardized, inert, syntactically, semantically, and stylistically barren. It is an outgrowth of the inertia of modernism. The same ghastly, soulless linearity of modernistic architecture. But linearity is an abstraction, it is not lifelike. Poor disoriented modern man: anthropocentric, god-eclipsing, then godless, and finally soulless! Life is eminently non-linear. If you went to a garden shop, you would see that there are more herbicides and pesticides in stock than fertilizers. What has happened to humankind? What's its obsession with killing and repressing? Let us fertilize and be fertilized! The fields of imagination are wide open, and for everyone to explore. Yet, the lifeless lawn. An antibiotic, literally—anti-life.

And yet, intuitively approached, the world appears vibrantly *alive*—every pebble, rock, or tree, feels and lives. Arguably, we are all cells of a giant organism, the Earth, which is in turn a cell of its galaxy, and so on and on, ad infinitum. Again and again, I must draw attention to the obvious: this

beautiful planet, breathable, drinkable, edible, self-regulating and self-maintaining, is *alive*. The Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino maintained that the world is an animal. Yet the Western world explains away purported consciousness in beings other than human as “anthropomorphic.” Judging from the language employed to do so, quite convincingly, too. Prose has been sanitized, “functionalized,” oversimplified.

Poor modern reader—you are sober. I trust that you wouldn't mind being inebriated, from time to time, the same inebriation we feel when we are in love. But you have been forced to sober up. Modernism has left you no choice. And what about technocracy, financial intoxication, international Machiavellianism? And yet you, reader, are rediscovering the awe-inspiring complexities of the jungle. The Cartesian spirit that wants to do away with jungles is the same specter that plagues modern “literary” prose, and the modern mind by and large. Yet you, reader, delight in architectonic masterpieces of the past—temples, churches, cathedrals, castles, palaces, villas and what have you. Somehow, they all have *soul*, regardless of their style. And you, female reader, love jewelry—in its infinite, highly intricate manifestations—and flowers. Much like the prolixity of Mahler's late romantic symphonies was out of control, so is the barrenness of late modern prose. Its obsessive quest for economy has made it severely anal-retentive. Some of it is constipated. Constipated writers differ from the anal-retentive ones in that they would like to be more . . . productive, but cannot. The adjective prosaic aptly, as well as tautologically, describes their prose.

Hence, the impelling necessity for a cosmological reappraisal. While we are living in the “Chaotic Age” and the Theory of

Chaos shows us the fascinating side of intricacy and unpredictability (and no longer merely in mathematical microstructures), too many writers, caught in their watertight compartments (God forbid if a novelist should bother with things scientific), ignore the phenomenally complex reality around them, and stick, out of inertia, laziness, unawareness or plain simple-mindedness, to that modernistic axiom, "less is more." Adventuresome people must endeavor to recognize and befriend the good side of chaos. Graphically put, it's as simple as this. Just a few decades ago, jungles were routinely razed and turned into grazing land for cattle. Within a few years, however, such pastures would become a desert. "Developers" would move on, and leave the desert behind. More jungles would be razed, and so on. The net result: no more jungles, no more pastures, no more cattle. Utter barrenness. Nowadays, jungles are being preserved (at least some of them) and even laypeople are beginning to appreciate the highly intricate, indeed chaotic order—though "harmony" seems more fitting—that governs such a complex ecosystem.

Unadventurous writers show us in the greatest detail the shadow side of order. And that is, their own squalid, empty, modernistic non-souls. Ugliness has been conscientiously cultivated and reproduced for over a century. It has shown us its devious charms, at best sensationalistic, never really charming, and quickly *déjà vu*. Existentialism became a pretext for whining, or for drug-addiction, or aimlessness. Everyone was to be blamed—the parents, society, the establishment. Never the individual.

Not so long ago, Sartre wrote that "nature is mute." No, nature is *not* mute, you Gitanes-smoking, trench raincoat-wearing non-philosopher, but many humans in this machine-driven world have become deaf.

Jane Austen, Nikolai Gogol, and many more brought about the transition to 19th-century literary realism by writing about people and milieus with which they were familiar. At the time, focusing on ordinary people and realities must have been refreshing. But we have now had two centuries of increasingly ordinary characters in literature who cannot even be defined "antiheroes". We have seen their X-rays, and learned in the greatest detail about the vices and weaknesses of their unremarkable lives. It has become worse than a cliché, rather like an obsession. Indeed, clinics should be opened that offer rehabilitation for those who have suffered from an overdose of nobodies.

Might average readers have an ambivalent attitude? They may want to read in novels what they are familiar with, to identify with the characters, while, on the other hand, these same people, when they wake up in the morning and look at themselves in the mirror, find that image off-putting. This is modern man. We are all equal, he is told, and all equally insignificant, demanding ever less, never more, from ourselves. Alienation and estrangement are presented as inevitable and inescapable. Everything else is "pretentious" and "pompous", adjectives that, in the realm of "literary fiction", are equivalent to "fascist" and "racist" in politics.

In Act Five of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Edmund Rostand has his hero say, shortly before the end:

"Physicist, Metaphysician, Poet, duellist, and musician, And Voyager to the Heavens, Master of how to

answer-back, A Lover too—but not to his gain! —Here lies Hercule Savinien De Cyrano de Bergerac, Who was all things, and all in vain.”

Shortly before dying he says, memorably:

“But one cannot fight hoping only for success! No! No: it’s still sweeter if it’s all in vain!”

Finally:

“As I go to meet my Deity, I will brush the blue threshold beneath my feet, something I bear, in spite of you all, that’s free of hurt, or stain,

(He springs forward, his sword raised;

“and that’s . . .

(The sword falls from his hand; he staggers, and falls back into the arms of Le Bret and Ragueneau.)

ROXANE *(bending and kissing his forehead):*

“that’s? ...”

CYRANO (*opening his eyes, recognizing her, and smiling as he speaks*):

“My panache.”

That’s it: *panache*, the antidote for modern estranged, alienated and disenfranchised man. *Panache* applies to the mentioned lawn-like prose, too. To think that, at its purest, language is logos, or psychic matter in flux . . .

For some time I was subscribed to the journal of science *Nature*, the British stronghold of Cartesian-Newtonian orthodox science (maladapted to this century, but still popular). Ever keen on language and its infinite manifestations, I would read the *Correspondence*, covering with my hand the writer’s name and address. Almost invariably, I would guess correctly as to his/her nationality. Letters written by British scientists were unmistakably British; those written by their American peers stood out as inadvertent examples of American English. Irish scientists were more difficult to pinpoint by their prose, more ambiguously athwart English and American English, with other less identifiable influxes. Then there were those who wrote in English but were not native English speakers. Not too tricky to detect, though, as these tend to conform to linguistic conventions even more readily than native English speakers. One consideration overall: who is doing the thinking? Their passport?

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Ornette Coleman, the alto saxophonist and composer, took the world by surprise when he burst onto the scene in the early 1960s. His peculiar brand of "free jazz" was so unique, it became a genre in its own right. Some, with Leonard Bernstein among them, welcomed him like the new musical Messiah; most detested his music, viscerally and intellectually alike. Outwardly oblivious to either extreme reaction, Coleman withdrew, away from the stage. His purpose? He wanted to teach himself two new instruments, the violin and the trumpet. Why? His exceptional familiarity with the alto saxophone was increasingly becoming an impediment between the pure music he heard in his mind, and what his fingers made of it on the instrument. Two entirely different instruments could unleash his creativity, the obstruction there being, initially, only unfamiliarity, in his view easier to defeat than overfamiliarity.

The British scientist writes to *Nature* in plain English, yet, without realizing it, he is being British enough for me to guess, correctly, his nationality. The passport is doing the thinking; the FBI would not have to engage in "linguistic forensics" to realize it. The saxophonist wants to get away from his favorite instrument from excess of familiarity with it. He has realized that sometimes it is the familiar fingering patterns, not his mind, that are doing the playing.

True, a scientist's priority is not his/her prose, but the things conveyed through it. However, even novelists are not immune from the same linguistic recognizability. In their case it is often, and even more blatantly, the passport to do the thinking and, unlike the above mentioned jazzmen, they are not aware of it. It is a problem common to all monolingual speakers—their language conforms too much to itself, in whatever local apperception. That cannot but result in a conventional turn of the phrase, choice of words, idiomatic expressions, etc. Not at all a mind-expanding proposition; rather, mind-contracting. How often are novels published by a writer who knows only one language and confines his/her thematic excursions to what he/she knows firsthand? Perhaps no one has told them that monolingualism is to the 21st century what illiteracy was to the preceding centuries.

While on the subject, does any writer of “literary fiction” bother with the classics? Does anyone of them study Latin and Ancient Greek? We are told that they work so very assiduously on their “craft” (that is, their seventh-grade prose awash in clichés and common places) most probably without realizing that, say, the Nine Melic Poets or the Latin Neoterics or *poetae novi* have existed and could teach them a thing or two. For example, Catullus's famous Carmen 85, *Odi et amo*, a down-to-the-bare-minimum elegiac couplet (a hexameter followed by a pentameter):

Odi et amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse requiris?

nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

I hate and I love. Why would I do that, you may ask?

I don't know, but I feel it happen and am torn apart.

The second verse is made up by a chiasmus, a rhetorical figure in which, in order to make a larger point, two clauses are related to one other through a reversal of structures, thus in a reverse parallelism. In this instance a passive verb form followed an active verb form: *nescio* (active) – *fieri* (passive), and again: *sentio* (active) – *excrucior* (passive). Adding to the grammatical subtlety is the fact that some Latin verbs, although active, are conjugated in the passive form. That is to illustrate that, even in such a short composition, Catullus displays magisterial technique, and command.

“Literary fiction” makes me think of Thomas Mann, Aldous Huxley, Hermann Hesse and other such authors. But today by “literary fiction” the publishing industry means those navel-gazing novels hinged on suburban angst, an extraordinarily claustrophobic *Weltanschauung*, if any, all sprinkled by a substantial serving of alienation—from the world, from one's family and from oneself. As I write as much, my beard grows longer at an alarming pace.

Writers no longer lead contemplative lives, and their books suffer because of that. The ephemeral is harmful to a writer. It is too contingent. Contemplating is the first step. To contemplate derives from the Latin *com-*, with; *templum*, space for observing auguries. Precisely what I need to be in—a temple of a special sort, one in which to receive revelations. Much like a shaman who retires into a cave and won't come out of it until he's received his revelations. An inborn aptitude—a daimon within—and years of training are necessary to become a shaman—and a writer? Paleoanthropologists and archeologists have argued, in my view convincingly, that

during the Paleolithic Age the shaman and the storyteller were the same person.

Materialists may say that I am a mythomaniac. While I do not concede it, I see no harm in that. We *all* need myths to live by. The sin, in the view of the materialists (who of course are also atheists and nihilists), is for people to take themselves seriously. They are “pretentious”. Well, think for a moment of the inherent self-aggrandizing pretentiousness of the English language, in which the pronoun “I” is as a matter of course capitalized. They will also say that too much knowledge renders the writing ponderous and pedantic—not in the hands of a truly accomplished writer, though, who knows how to strike a balance. Lastly, while in-spiring, one must give himself up, body and soul, to the Muses. Why should the Muses speak to people who don’t care to listen? Or who don’t know *how* to listen? Undereducated, autobiographical, monolingual, small-minded “literary fiction” writers? The Muses shall have nothing to do with them. Of course, the latter will say they don’t need them. “Muses? Inspiration? A study, a tower, a *sanctum* (what the hell does that mean?) in which to . . . contemplate? Nonsense! Has he heard himself, that pretentious fart? What could be wrong with our modest pursuits? They are so genuinely modest. We just write about what we know. That’s the best writing, the most genuine. And so satisfying for the reader, too. Yes, keeping modest is definitely the best policy.”

Rilke wrote, “If I don’t manage to fly, someone else will. / The spirit wants only that there be flying. / As for who happens to do it, / in that he has only a passing interest.” And, “Maybe birds will feel the air thinning as they fly deeper into themselves.” The “modest” writers ought to read the following carefully, and meditate (again by Rilke): “All

wants to float. But we trudge around like weights. / Ecstatic with gravity, we lay ourselves on everything. / Oh what tiresome teachers we are for things, / while they prosper in their ever childlike state.”

It's a vicious circle: aspiring writers attend, say, the Iowa Writers' Workshop, at the University of Iowa. In a roundabout way, to justify the tuition costs, they are told, A, Less is more and, B, Write about what you know. From the standpoint of a traditionalist, hardly anything could be more anti-initiatic: do not strive to transcend yourself; rather, wallow in your insignificance. Since in most cases the would-be writer is very, very young and knows very, very little, (s)he is only too willing to indulge their teachers' dogmas. Some of these (un)knowers manage to dish out a novel by adhering to such dogmas, and by utilizing all the attendant tools for non-thinking provided to them so very alacritously. Sometimes, they break into print: another brilliant work of “literary fiction” on the market, another brilliant career inaugurated. It is a close-knit clique: graduates from schools of literary enlightenment go on to become not only writers, but editors, literary agents and/or scouts, professors and critics/reviewers. They gingerly position themselves within the publishing industry, where not only do they know one another, but they readily recognize newcomers by their mindset and adherence to those two dogmas. Consequently, the writer need not bother with research. A celebrated “literary fiction” author has the following to say about research: “People have this funny notion that you can do research, then put all the results in a blender, mix it, and out comes the novel.” So, he never researches.

No wonder fantasy novels sell by tens of millions of copies: most readers want *larger* than life. For modesty and

uneventfulness they already have their own life. And what of the vicarious pleasure of adventure traveling? The reader is right there where the action is, taking part in the most astonishing adventures, yet with none of the risks.

In contemporary "literary" novels we are fed an endless sampling of the fetishizing of human relationships. The much trumpeted sexual revolution has contributed to this, and now it seems that the "energy" is only to be found in the relationships among humans. But, when considering the more-than-human out there, that one hundred billion galaxies in the observable universe, we humans are not all that important.

Multiplicity in scope and range, and the inherent unbounded versatility of the mind, must not be confused with the Baroque, or with an exercise in overindulgence. Balance—structural, stylistic, semantic and otherwise—must come into play, and non-linearity can thrive on leanness of touch. Maximalism and minimalism, when felicitously employed, are equivalently powerful.

I am not advocating the cause of unreadable novels, far from it. Away from *lettres classiques* and *belles lettres*, into communicability. But communicability must arise spontaneously as the result of a "totalizing" approach, because nothing in the realm of the knowable is alien to us humans, as Terence would have it.

To all writers who write without the necessary humility to study and absorb what has already been written; to all writers who, born incurious and therefore unsuited to being initiated,

impose their non-curiosity on us all by writing “about what they know” (id est, nihil); to all who indulge in hackwork by applying *ad nauseam* the two dogmas they have learned in their “creative writing” programs, I say: please, do not write.

Rather, do the following: start by buying yourselves the eight volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published by MacMillan and the Free Press. Read and metabolize those 2165 pages, bearing in mind that they are just an introduction. Still, at least you will realize that there is such a novelty item as . . . the history of thought! That, in fact, down the centuries all sorts of thoughts have been entertained and philosophical systems developed by minds infinitely superior to yours; and that you don’t have a single original thought to save your soul (which you don’t possess anyway, since you are a fully paid-up materialist). What you write, those paragraphs you work so hard to compose, are an inventory of banalities, clichés, and common places laced together in a roundabout way with the prose of a seventh-grader.

If jackasses never come in contact with a horse, in the long run such champions of self-unawareness will believe they are thoroughbreds. In the contemporary western world that distinct brand of blindness is called “self-confidence.”

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Guido Mina di Sospiro was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, into an ancient Italian family. He was raised in Milan, Italy and was educated at the University of Pavia as well as the USC School of Cinema-Television, now known as USC School of Cinematic Arts. He has been living in the United States since the 1980s, currently near Washington, D.C. He is the author of several books including, [*The Story of Yew*](#), [*The Forbidden Book*](#), and [*The Metaphysics of Ping Pong*](#).

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