



The Fallacy of Minimalism and Transparent Style

*See
Dick
Run...*

Anyone who's had the tremendous good fortune to read some of my work knows quite well that I'm no minimalist. I admit it. I like adjectives. I relish detail. I dive head-first into lush description, into image-rich passages that envelop me in locales steeped in atmosphere. I love it when language transports me, when an author takes the time to paint scenes in Technicolor. This is what I like to read so -- go figure -- it's how I tend to write. But for the last several years now I've heard mutters, grumbling that this kind of writing is not "economical", that it is not sufficiently "transparent."

There are two mistaken premises here. The first is that minimalism is a somehow optimum stylistic choice. The fewer words, these advocates of Spartan verbiage proclaim, the better. They point to Strunk & White's categorical imperative, "Omit needless words." The problem is that these minimalistic absolutists have a deeply draconian sense of what constitutes a "needless" word. Adverbs are to be rejected out of hand; adjectives should be regarded with the utmost wariness. Were we to follow their mandate to its logical extreme, we wouldn't bother to write novels or stories at all -- we could simply read outlines of stories. A good synopsis can distill the essential plot and character development of a 200,000 word novel into a few pages. Doesn't all the rest then constitute nothing but "needless" words?

But, you say, that wouldn't be real writing! Sure the characters and the events would all be there, but they would lack all the color, all the nuance and depth that makes it worth reading their story in the first place.

Just so.

There's another old axiom in creative writing: Show, don't tell.

Consider the following.

Bob felt angry.

Compare this to:

Bob's jaw clenched, his dark eyes narrowed.

The first is as spare as can be, and conveys the essential information that, well, Bob felt angry. The essence of minimalist extremism. But it's dead, a phrase with absolutely no impact whatever. The second phrase gives Bob a bit of life. It makes it fairly clear that Bob's angry by **SHOWING** us Bob. We can quite literally read the anger on his face. The inclusion of what a minimalist might call an extraneous adjective -- "dark" -- not only sharpens the visual image, but contributes to the mood of the scene.

This is not to say that it can't be overdone. Anyone who'd brushed up against Dickens at some point has no

doubt had to wade through waste-deep description that suggests beating a dead horse. Well, Dickens was paid by the word, after all.

Just the same, this notion of linguistic economy is frequently misunderstood. Rest assured: there's no shortage of words in the world. If you use a million of 'em you still haven't deprived me of a single one. They won't run out. Strunk and White aren't talking about using the minimum possible number of words, they're talking about using the minimum necessary number of words. What constitutes necessity is up to skilled writers -- not minimalistic fundamentalists -- to decide.

Which brings me to the second flaw in that "transparent minimalism" -- the notion that the language of a story should be as unadorned as possible so as not to call any attention to itself. That's the essence of "transparent" style -- that the reader should be so enrapt by the events and characters within a story that she never notices how the author uses words. The assumption is that a style should be wholly subservient to the message (and I mean this in a broad, non-polemic sense).

One of the problems here is that astute readers will notice an author's literary voice however spare it might be. Minimalism is itself a stylistic choice, just like any other. Think Hemmingway. Hemmingway's bare, monosyllabic voice is grade-A minimalism -- and impossible to miss. I would go so far as to suggest that this brand of minimalism actually gets in the way of the narrative -- just the thing stylistic transparency is meant to avoid.

Consider that oft-used phrase in For Whom the Bell Tolls: "It rained." Textbook minimalism. But as an image, it's devoid. Are we talking hard, driving rain, or sullen drizzle? Clean, cleansing rain, or cold gray winter rain? Because Hemmingway avoids saying, there's no real image here at all. As such, it takes on no sense of reality but stands out as an obvious literary device. It's a comment on the situation of the novel and its characters. But it's not real rain. You can say what you want about each reader conjuring up his own idea of rain, but that strikes me as a copout. Specificity is almost always a virtue in fiction because it deepens the terrain of a story. Telling someone that "Maria sipped cognac from a crystal snifter" reveals a lot more about Maria and her circumstances than just saying "Maria drank." Similarly, a "sullen drizzle" is a more distinct, specific image, which not only contributes a clear comment on the situation of the characters and their world, but also conjures a much more distinct visual image. This is rain readers can relate to as something more than a literary device.

The bigger problem with the new school of writing, though, is the assumption that writing alone among the arts should employ "transparent" style. Consider other forms of artistic expression. We tend to be drawn to painters, for example, precisely because of their styles. Look at a Picasso and the first thing that strikes you is apt to be the cubist style. Take in a Van Gough and you can hardly miss the post-impressionist style. Consider music. Think of jazz artists like Ella Fitzgerald and Charlie Parker -- their distinct styles of expression are exactly what marked them as brilliant. Choose your art form -- style is undoubtedly at its heart. And far from concealing or distorting the message, style is its part and parcel. Try separating Magritte from his surrealism or Hitchcock from his voyeuristic *mise en scene*, Billy Joel from his urban rhythms -- or e. e. cummings from his lowercase and his frantic enjambment.

A writer's style is hopelessly bound up with what he wants to say. The hardboiled school -- Chandler, Hammett, Cain -- wanted to depict a harsh, often brutal world, and so adopted a tone that conveyed that as clearly as the stories they told. Nabokov, in Lolita, strives to put his readers inside the mind of a sharp and twisted academic, and so writes with an erudite, rationalizing wit. Twain conjures tales of life on the Mississippi with a down-home narrative voice that's all slang and twang. Bradbury writes fantasies straight from the heart, and uses poetic tones that are almost like song. Poe gives life to lush dark nightmares by using equally lush, dark language. Browse through anything at all by your favorite writer, and you're sure to find that her or his style is

nothing like transparent -- it EXPOSES its message not by trying to hide its style or banish all visible traces of style, but by choosing a style that fits the aim.

All of which just comes to this: don't believe this myth of the minimalistic transparent style. Minimalism fits some messages, but fails lots of others. The only firm rule is that language must be used to achieve the maximum possible effect -- should be chosen with an eye toward emotional impact, toward revealing characters, toward drawing readers into the world in which the story takes place. A skilled writer always matches the style -- spare or lush, clinical or poetic -- to the intent. Some styles may call more attention to themselves than others, but the only truly transparent style would be no style at all. And while some have tried, I have yet to discover such a story.



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