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BY THEIR EPITHETS  
SHALL YE KNOW THEM

**T**HERE IS AN ancient piece of classroom wisdom that is not entirely misguided when it states: steer clear of adjectives! Editors are unlikely to grumble about a missing adjective, but they will use up their pencils crossing out superfluous ones. When in doubt, leave it out. The critic Wolf Schneider provides an excellent illustration: ‘If the author of *The Linden Tree* had written’—instead of ‘By the well, before the gate, stands a linden tree’—“By the tumbled-down well, in front of the dilapidated, vine-clad gate, stands a gnarled old linden tree”, his poem would not have been set to music by Schubert.’ Quite so. Once the right verb and the right noun have been found, the writer has a full load and can set out for home (or embark on a *Winterreise*). That is the approach of the adjective sceptic. In the words of the poet-diplomat Paul Claudel, *la crainte de l’adjectif est le commencement du style*—fear of the adjective is the beginning of style.<sup>1</sup>

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Hemingway was the most effective propagator of this stylistic purism. As a journalist, he knew the value of concise speech. Every word counted, as each one had to be paid for when telegraphed to the news desk. Every decorative, non-informative adjective should be axed. The revolution detonated by the application of this approach to the novel can scarcely be exaggerated. All authors, especially the Anglo-Americans—Fitzgerald, Cheever, Carver, Ford—are indebted to this legacy, whether they like it or not. The only writers who have sought to distance themselves from it are the conscious champions of the adjective—Nabokov,

Updike and their disciple, Nicholson Baker. Nabokov's masterly use of the adjectival tricolon is on display in *Ada*, when Van stares from the ocean-liner's deck into the 'black, foam-veined, complicated waters' in which Lucette has drowned herself, thanks to him. The use of 'complicated' is a mark of genius.<sup>2</sup> Nor did Borges, a reader with infallible literary judgement, allow himself to be infected by Hemingway, to say nothing of the four oarsmen, Julio, Carlos, Mario and Gabriel, in Daniel Kehlmann's *Measuring the World*.<sup>3</sup>

The critique of adjectival extravagance was already flourishing in German-speaking countries. In 1910, Karl Kraus mocked his favourite target, Heinrich Heine, as the type of observer who compensates in opulent adjectives for what Nature has denied him in nouns.<sup>4</sup> Kraus is here a precursor of Hemingway, but both followed Voltaire in declaring that adjectives are the enemies of nouns. A properly placed adjective must *tell us something*, it is said; if it is something one already knows, the writer should have held back. As they say in Franconia, 'a good *bratwurst* needs no mustard'; nor, by the same token, a good noun an adjective.

## 2

Some authors, however, are fearless in this respect. To slog through Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* in search of an original adjective is like looking for the Blue Flower in the Sahara. Everything is 'graceful', 'charming', 'romantic', 'diverse', 'heavenly', 'indescribable', 'eternal', with the same epithets frequently repeated from one sentence to the next. None of this has been really seen, heard or felt. Novalis could offer a negative case study for a school of style. But cut out the adjectives in

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Claudel, *Journal*, Vol. I, François Varillon and Jacques Petit, eds, Paris 1968, p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, London 2000 [1969], p. 390.

<sup>3</sup> This is Kehlmann's oblique fictional homage to a quartet of Latin-American writers, Julio Florencio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Jorge Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel José García Márquez, the four oarsmen who assist Alexander von Humboldt's survey of the Orinoco River: *Measuring the World*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway, London 2007 [2005].

<sup>4</sup> Karl Kraus, 'Heine and the Consequences', trans. Jonathan Franzen, in *The Kraus Project*, London 2013, p. 45. Originally published as 'Heine und der Folgen: Schriften zur Literatur', *Die Fackel*, 1910.

Stifter or Keller, Proust or Woolf, Joseph Roth or Heimito von Doderer, Rudolf Borchardt or Thomas Mann, and the work is dead.<sup>5</sup> The right adjective—in other words, the adjective that subverts our expectations and stands in tension with the noun—can be the shining pebble that enlivens the whole sentence.<sup>6</sup> And there is nothing better than an adverb or an adjective for teasing out comic implications.

Two tiny examples. At the climax of Thomas Mann's *Joseph* tetralogy, Joseph, who has risen to become the Pharaoh's right-hand man, has succeeded in luring his brothers—who had earlier thrown him down a well—to visit him in Egypt. The brothers do not recognize him in his new grandeur, but they are already feeling queasy. What does he want with them? Judah is questioned, and reports on the situation of the family back home. When Joseph hears that his youngest brother, Benjamin, has already produced eight children from two different wives, he bursts out laughing without even waiting for the translation. The Palace officials laugh along, obsequiously. 'The brothers smiled anxiously', Mann tells us—the 'anxiously' striking a comic note, because of its incongruity with the verb.<sup>7</sup>

Or take the explanation Borges gave for abandoning the Oriental studies he had begun around 1916:

Working with enthusiasm and credulity through the English version of a certain Chinese philosopher, I came across this memorable passage: 'A man condemned to death doesn't care that he is standing at the edge of a precipice, for he has already renounced life.' Here the translator attached an asterisk, and his note informed me that this interpretation was preferable to that of a rival Sinologist, who had translated the passage thus: 'The servants destroy the works of art, so that they will not have to judge their beauties

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<sup>5</sup> Borchardt understood the need to be both apt and sparing in the use of adjectives. See his description of 'the dead, glassy way' in which Walther Rathenau, Foreign Minister of the Weimar Republic, treated women: *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelbänden: Prosa VI*, Berlin 1990 [1957], p. 257.

<sup>6</sup> See also the slightly avuncular but not inaccurate comment by Peter Sloterdijk on the secret of good style: 'The adjective must be the rarely seen mistress of the noun, and not the wife who always trots by his side': *Neue Zeilen und Tage*, Berlin 2018, p. 260.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Mann, *Joseph and his Brothers*, trans. by H. T. Lowe-Porter, New York 1999 [1933], p. 1065.

and defects.' Then, like Paolo and Francesca, I read no more. A mysterious scepticism had slipped into my soul.<sup>8</sup>

Here, it is the 'mysterious' that hints at the comic, or registers it.

## 3

Where concision is essential, the adjective comes into its own. Consider the role it must play in stage directions. This is an interesting intermediate genre, because the playwright's directions remain invisible to the audience. Their function is to tell the theatre director how the characters should be envisaged. Every word must hit the mark with the brevity of a command. Take Schiller's *dramatis personae* for *Fiesco*:

ANDREA DORIA, Duke of Genoa, a venerable old man, eighty years of age, retaining the traces of a high spirit: the chief features in this character are dignity and a rigid brevity in command [*sic!*]. GIANETTO DORIA, nephew of the preceding, and pretender to the ducal power, twenty-six years of age, rough and forbidding in his address, deportment, and manners, with a vulgar pride and disgusting features. FIESCO, Count of Lavagna, chief of the conspiracy, a tall, handsome young man, twenty-three years of age; his character is that of dignified pride and majestic affability, with courtly complaisance and deceitfulness. MULEY HASSAN, a Moor of Tunis, an abandoned character, with a physiognomy displaying an original mixture of rascality and humour. JULIA, Countess dowager Imperiali, sister of the younger Doria, aged twenty-five; a proud coquette, in person tall and full, her beauty spoiled by affectation. At once dazzling and unpleasing, with a sarcastic maliciousness in her countenance; her dress black.<sup>9</sup>

## 4

In the realm of poetic experience, meanwhile, to pluck out the adjectives would leave a wasteland. Let's try and experiment. Imagine that Hemingway had come across the passage from Joseph Roth's *Job* describing Mendel's memory of his childhood. If Hemingway had decided to

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<sup>8</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 'An English Version of the Oldest Songs in the World' [1938], in *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, New York 1999, p. 190.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Burkhard Müller, *Der König hat geweint. Schiller und das Drama der Weltgeschichte*, Springe (Hannover) 2005, p. 19.

rewrite it according to his own rules, the result would have been something like this:

Mendel remembered the snow that edged the pavement of the sidewalks at this time of year in Zuchnow. He remembered the icicles which hung from the faucets; the rains which sang in the gutters of the eaves the whole night long. He remembered the thunder rolling far away behind the fir forest, the rime which decked each morning. He remembered Menuchim, whom Miriam had stuck into a vat in order to get him out of the way, and he remembered the hope that in this year the Messiah would come.

And here is what Roth actually wrote:

Mendel remembered the ageing grey snow that edged the wooden pavement of the sidewalks at this time of year in Zuchnow. He remembered the crystal icicles which hung from the faucets; the sudden soft rains which sang in the gutters of the eaves the whole night long. He remembered the distant thunder rolling far away behind the fir forest, the white rime which tenderly decked each bright blue morning. He remembered Menuchim, whom Miriam had stuck into a roomy vat in order to get him out of the way, and he remembered the hope that, at last, at last, in this year the Messiah would come.<sup>10</sup>

There can be no doubt that Roth's version is superior. Each adjective makes the memory more precise, the picture a little sharper. Wooden pathways resurrect a vanished epoch; the sudden soft rains and the bright blue morning, a vivid childhood world; the repeated 'at last', the endlessly extended wait for the Messiah finally to appear.

Another sentence from *Job* consists almost entirely of adjectives. It is Mendel's first night in New York: 'As was his custom, he immediately stepped to the window. There he saw for the first time America's night close at hand. He saw the reddened heavens, the flaming, sparkling, dropping, glowing, red, blue, green, silver, golden letters, pictures and signs.'<sup>11</sup> Do we wish Roth could have left the adjectives out? In *The Radetzky March*, Roth is just as extravagant with epithets, but also more humorous; indeed, the comic salt lies largely in the adjectives. The desk at which the freshly ennobled von Trotta tries in vain to write a letter to his father, before 'propping his sterile pen against the inkwell', is

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Roth, *Job*, trans. Dorothy Thompson, London 2013 [1931], pp. 184–5.

<sup>11</sup> Roth, *Job*, pp. 213–4.

‘abundantly notched and carved by the playful knives of bored men.’<sup>12</sup> And so it goes for three hundred pages—an effervescent celebration of adjectives. Poor Hemingway! Lucky us.

## 5

Robert Walser was another who revelled in adjectives. In *The Assistant* (1908), the town is bedecked with flags for Switzerland’s national day:

A large beautiful flag was fluttering at the top of Joseph’s tower. Depending on how the wind was blowing, it would execute a bold, proud arc with its light body, or else would double over on itself, abashed and weary, or curl and wave flirtatiously about its pole, whereby it appeared to be basking and admiring itself and its own graceful motions. And then all at once it would be blown high and smooth and wide, resembling a victorious warrior princess—a strong protectress—only to collapse again little by little, touchingly, caressingly.<sup>13</sup>

What could be a more graphic picture of a flag’s reactions to the changing wind? The passage is an example of extraordinary adjectival richness, for here the epithets assume the active role. They are the substance of the matter, the thing itself. It is the adjectives that flutter and flap and curl—or, as in Hölderlin’s tower in Tübingen, while the walls stand ‘speechless and cold’, the weathervanes ‘rattle in the wind’.<sup>14</sup>

## 6

A final example leads us away from the poetic to the misery of a traumatized figure. In Herta Müller’s *The Hunger Angel*, the central character Leo Auberg, a gay, 17-year-old ethnic-German Transylvanian, is sent to a Soviet labour camp for five years in 1945. Müller based the character on Oskar Pastior, a Romanian poet deported to the USSR along with other

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Roth, *The Radetzky March*, trans. Michael Hofmann, London 2003 [1932], pp. 6–7.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Walser, *The Assistant*, trans. Susan Bernofsky, New York 2007 [1908], p. 75.

<sup>14</sup> The reference is to the tower overlooking the River Neckar, where Friedrich Hölderlin wrote his despairing poem, ‘At the Middle of Life’.

ethnic Germans; he would later be the only German-speaking member of Oulipo. In old age, the shattered Auberg describes himself thus:

My proud inferiority.  
 My muttered fear-wishes . . .  
 My defiant compliance. I acknowledge that everyone is right so I  
 can hold it against them.  
 My bungling opportunism.  
 My polite miserliness.  
 My wearied envy of yearning, of others who know what they want  
 from life . . .  
 I'm utterly drained, hard-pressed on the outside and empty on the  
 inside, ever since I no longer have to go hungry.<sup>15</sup>

Without these adjectives, this ravaged psychological landscape, this rubble-and-karst field, could not have been described. Pastior as a man was perhaps never so accurately caught, and the psychogram is composed of adjectives. Each stands in tension with its noun, and gives a different turn to its meaning. More accurately: it is the adjective that renders it possible to turn the noun in this way. We might say that it makes the noun three-dimensional.

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<sup>15</sup> Herta Müller, *The Hunger Angel*, trans. Philip Boehm, London 2013 [2009], p. 283; translation slightly adapted.