

Non sequitur.

News from today.

by Pierre Alferi

In Brief.

Our attention is torn between different tasks and multiple activities, divided between duplicate screens, diverted by the incessant allures of commercialism and while our focus disintegrates in the to and fro of urban life it is increasingly difficult for us to concentrate on literary subjects, even if they have a narrative quality. If one casts sly looks at the readers in the underground, one might think that the only impact is the addiction of *suspense* and immersion in chill realities promised by English-speaking and Scandinavian crime stories. That would be to overlook the new styles of reading and portable media that make handbags rather lightweight. On notebooks, tablets, ebook readers and smartphones the latest fashion is for micro-narratives – for *flash fiction* and *twitterature*. This material is circulated on websites (such as the German-speaking www.kurzgeschichten-stories.de) and online journals and newsletters; it is the focus of competitions and exchanged among a semi-public community (with a daily mail-shot to subscribers, for example, at *365tomorrows: A New Flash of Science Fiction Every Day*) and ranges across all genres from fable to science fiction. These extremely concise forms are optimized for new formats of text communication like 140 characters for *tweets*, SMS texts, emails and blogs. Some critics, especially in Latin America, even identify here “the characteristic form of literature for the 21st century”. Yet are they on these grounds the new literary forms *as such*? What are their role models? What is their heritage? What does their success tell us about today’s expectations of a narrative? And about what an incident is for us? About what is worthy of narration? Do these extremely short stories and their ‘fast finish’ styles offer narrative techniques a chance of renewal that corresponds to the current digital revolution? Or are they only the dust into which well-thumbed forms of narrative fiction degenerate, their worst clichés, meaningless trivial literature whose unavoidable destiny is self-destruction like time-limited messages on *Snapchat*? These are the sorts of questions that I would like to invite us to think about today.

If literature had to disappear one day, crushed by its striving for the concise form, its history would form a strange loop. This is because it also began with extreme brevity – with succinctness, set in stone. The short-lived micro-narratives that circulate on social networks are evidence of the comfort of our portable keyboards and the speed of inconsequential distribution on the Internet. The conciseness of inscriptions passed down through the centuries, which epigraphs gather together, reveals the precise opposite, namely, the painstaking technique of stone engraving with the hammer and chisel, the sacred weight lent to every word, the belief in the superhuman perpetuity of what is written in contrast with the influence of time and usage. Keeping it brief never amounted to writing a minimum. In a dedication, motto or epitaph, in a maxim or an oracle the focus was on ellipsis, concentration,

tempo and elegance. In other words, it was about a dynamic economy of meaning where the inner tension gives the decisive note. The Latin *brevitas* is a virtue of discourse for which Quintilian even provides a concise definition: “Not saying less or more than is required”. This is the counterpart of *copia* or ‘fullness’ – that speaker’s device, which can be used at any time, to spin a story to compile a series of examples and platitudes. Erasmus’ extravagant annotated commentary of proverbs in *Adagia* aimed to provide a scholarly example of both. *Brevitas* works wonders when it is used in sarcasm, in attacks on authors of epigrams, yet it is also used among the best historians among whom the aptly named Tacitus ranked highly. Nevertheless, it is also useful even for narrators of stories in the context of morals, in the judgement, sentence or oracle: brevity is the soul of wit.

In fact, the forms of brevity owe most of their success to traditions of wisdom and later to the moralists. Compact, perfected rules stimulate the fantasy and are conveyed in an unbiased fashion.

Do to others, as you would have them do.

Slow and steady wins the race.

The oral tradition is a mode of conservation and proverbs such as those like “immense depth of thought in popular phrases, hollowed out by generations of ants” (Baudelaire in his short fragment *Rockets*) often appear dull to us, like pebble stones that are too heavily worn, scarcely any less like platitudes than old proverbs about the weather. However, it suffices to apply them in a realistic situation and to coat them with our saliva to recognize one of the core elements in them that Jakobson calls the “grammar of poesy” – parallelism with all its asymmetrical effects – and to see how every word deploys the broad spectrum of meanings and connotations that have been deposited in them. The history of the pithy observation is long. It spans from the Greek *gnome* (*gnómē*) to Latin *sententia*, from the apophthegms of great men and characteristics of the moralist to the personal maxim of Chamfort, the philosophical fragment of the Romantics and the Nietzschean aphorism. Of course, contradictory forces are at work during this long history. Polysemy, the adaptability of the proverb and maxim, which are suitable for many purposes, was stifled by reactionary religious morals, when they were ready to merge in a collection of doctrines that is subject to a divine authority. In the *Wisdom of Sirach*, in the *Imitation of Jesus Christ* or the *Surahs* of the Quran, the sentences become laws; their composition fossilizes and their reading becomes a duty. Playing is no longer required; learning is done by heart and by reciting.

However, the sclerotic freezing of meaning is rather the exception than the rule. The conciseness of successfully crafted phrases and their diversity tend to push moral thinking more in the other direction, towards interpretive opening and akin to old wives’ tales and the ethics of the moralists. A phantom doctrine is suspended over collections of maxims or ideas and their outlines are blurred. Long before Plato and Aristotle, the Greeks exchanged expressions of flexible and cautious wisdom, which observed opportunity and fortune, – *kairos* and *tyche*. And long after the establishment of monotheistic dogmas, the scholarly

disorder of the moralists' maxims appealed to every reader's sharp-sightedness and his or her fantasy. Their dispersion was a counterbalance to the intolerant universality of each individual, as if the principles were as abundant as the cases. The collections of these concise forms, for instance, by La Rochefoucault, Vauvenargues or Joubert, give everybody the option of finding his own way through them. Their morality is the morality of a flexible, revisable guideline for behaviour in the world. As is the case in large sections of Chinese aphoristic thinking, it brings into play never-ending casuistry and an art of combination that is sensitive to "the extravagant nature of individually different human beings", as Chamfort states in the *Incipit* of his *Maxims and Thoughts*. And he conceded, "What I learned I no longer know; the little I still know, I guessed." In the realm of ethics and philosophy, concise forms seem rather to correspond to far strewn thinking that is configured like an island group. Their concentration, the high and memorable span of their train of thought is often concentrated playfully in the final words. This is referred to as a 'point'. The sophisticated aesthetics and ethics of the Renaissance period set great store by this. Moreover, the 'point', this principle of thorough reasoning, in which Baltasar Gracian sees the art of genius itself, actually coincides with a tension of meaning that is skilfully applied, albeit in point form to the provisional. There is always a certain ambiguity involved in this case.

Incident (*Événement*)

This excursion far from contemporary narrative fiction was no detour. In particular, when stated in succinct terms, it implies something analogous to the 'point'. 'Micro fictions', which incorporate just a few lines or even only several words, endeavour in the overwhelming majority of cases to emphasize the incident or event that they report. They do so by adding an ironic or paradoxical nuance. A narrative point, which is no longer a 'word figure', but a temporal and causal 'thought figure' corresponds to the rhetorical point of the sentences. *Today my telephone is faulty, my ankle is broken and I have a stiff neck. Today I stepped on my cat while going downstairs. VDM [a micro narrative "FMyLife" on the app Vie De Merde ("Life Sucks")]*

The moon was rising when the blue steel monster started to rock and swung his long pincers high above him. He destroyed several skyscrapers and buildings. A fire broke out. The city turned a purple-red colour; it was beautiful like a sunset. Another idealist who wants to snatch the moon, I thought. (Prix Pépin d'Or 2009).

The websites and journals dedicated to the shortest stories prefer to cite Félix Fénéon and his *Nouvelles en trois lignes* or Hemingway's famous short six-word story, *For Sale, Baby Shoes, Never Worn*.

Unfortunately, neither narratives in the *twitterature* nor the six-word stories, which were available for me to browse on their official websites, are ever on the same level as these admittedly modest examples. As these mini-short stories aim to conclude at all costs on an inventive note, they rush towards their ending that swallows everything. In the minimal space

available to breathe, the meagre writing style is reduced to an art of the punchline that rapidly becomes tedious. Regardless of the comments from enthusiastic managers of the websites committed to these narrative miniatures, texts rarely appear, which a reputable publisher would publish and really successful texts are even scarcer. An experienced writer can certainly draw something from the drastically compact space. For example, Bruce Sterling, who writes for the science fiction anthology magazine *Wired*:

It cost too much, staying human.

However, these ‘new short forms’ seem to me in the first place a sort of refuge for light and childish illusions, slightly naive fiction and clumsy jokes that would not be acceptable elsewhere.

The effects of the ‘short turn’ in narrative fiction are thus not comparable with those of *brevitas* and the moral register. Often, they are even their caricatures. The micro fictions, which are entirely obsessed with the ‘point’, generally succumb to a simple punchline. The risk in this case is that a joke is the only memorable thing. In the best cases, on a small scale they integrate the classic narrative patterns of the short story and anecdote. The *short-short story*, which is also known as *flash fiction* (or also *smokelong story*) and only spans one or two pages is incidentally a short novella or short story or anecdote that already existed at least since the early 20th century. These two genres, which are generally widely respected, were defined in aesthetic terms and recently also statistically on the basis of their treatment of the incident (*l'événement*). The novella, which was mentioned by Boccaccio, thought through by Goethe and dismantled by Robert Petsch, narrates a single incident through a series of different scenes. The anecdote, originally justified by the renown of its protagonist, nowadays refers to every treatment of an incident in a single scene. The narrative challenge for the related short forms lies in maintaining the probability (*probabilitas*) of a plot sequence on a reduced scale. The associated disadvantages, that is, for deploying any word art, as Poe correctly explained, are compensated for by the unity of attention and thus by the impression of a quasi-simultaneity of all elements.

Yet which ‘unique incident’ is actually meant here? What deserves to be narrated, even if this is only in three lines? Our old narrative traditions – in literature just as elsewhere – set out substantial restrictions for the domain of the incident. In this context, the incident concerns a human action, which is preferably extraordinary; it is always uplifting in some way and mostly overcomes obstacles. In the basic arrangement emerging from this restriction the beginning creates an expectation that only the ending will fulfil. It poses a question whose answer it postpones. After two-thirds of the narrative a test or contradiction produces a disruption of the balance, an upset or a turning point (*Wendepunkt*). This central peripety – the decisive incident, the only one in the case of the short story or anecdote – leads to the resolution of the conflict due to the success (and more rarely the failure) of the hero. Actually, this scheme can be identified everywhere, as idiot-proof as it may be – and scholars of storytelling count thirty-six versions of it, divided into three, five or seven episodes, which can be altered in genres of conflict- and basic behavioural patterns. Although all literary narratives, which are

worthwhile reading, deviate from this scheme, if they don't entirely turn their back on it, it continues to structure the vast majority of published narratives whether short or long. The underlying conception of the incident merits further questioning more than the detail of its construction that merely interests screenplay authors. Hence, there is a human, unusual and instructive action, yet for peripety and resolution to occur, it must precisely follow the laws of causality and the linear continuity of time. The incident is just another element in the iron chain of causes and effects that merely stands out a little more. The narrative 'point', which ultimately embellishes it, is a material irony that has settled in it: a boomerang – whoever digs a hole for others will fall into it himself – or an unintended effect, a reversal of roles or a counterproductive act.

Our *flash fictions*, short stories or anecdotes are overwhelmingly based on precisely this non-reflected concept of the incident, this overvaluation of human action and this laboured causalism. Rather than demanding experiments, its brevity generally exposes the old frame better than ambitious novels that allow the stereotyping of their narrative logic to be slightly overlooked due to the duplication of sub-plots. The perplexity arising from the punchline of the short stories published on flourishing websites over the past ten years is probably due to its mechanical aspect: the 'point' of these stories is too blunt.

Assassination.

Félix Fénéon's *Nouvelles en trois lignes* on the other hand aroused hopes of something entirely different and in the gap that they made in the narrative prose they opened up a view of something entirely different. This was to be nothing less than a new narrative art, and brevity was to be the lever, or as his friend Mallarmé also expressed it, its "explosion". Indeed, this concerned an 'explosive' element from which something follows that I will call an *anarchistic caesura* in the history of the short story. In 1892, after banal clashes between activists and police officers in Clichy a first wave of assassinations shocked Europe. The bomber and anarchist Ravachol was arrested and was guillotined in July of the same year. The following year it was Vaillant's turn; he committed a bomb attack on the French Chamber of Deputies. One year later a nineteen-year-old Italian anarchist stabbed and murdered the French President, Marie François Sadi Carnot, because he had not pardoned Vaillant. (The weapon's handle was red and black.) As is widely known, it was this era – which drew to a close as the police stopped the Bonnot Gang in 1913 – that led to the emergence of an embodiment of the devil, which lost nothing of its phantasmal aura, namely that of 'terrorists'. However, it is less well known that anarchism was fashionable at that time with a section of the literati and artist milieu – the same circles from which the avant-garde emerged in the 20th century. As diverse writers as Oscar Wilde, Maurice Maeterlinck, Paul Verlaine, Octave Mirbeau, Émile Zola and even the barely progressive Frédéric Mistral openly announced their support for this. The anarchist magazine *La Révolte* attracted prestigious writers at the very moment when Laurent Tailhade wrote a commentary in his supplement about the attack on the French Chamber of Deputies and entitled this with the famous phrase, "Who cares about the victim, if the gesture

[of the violent act] is beautiful”? Although this literary fashion did not last long, in his chapter on the “Poetics of the Bomb” in his remarkable book *Fictions de l’anarchisme* Uri Eisenzweig convincingly explained how the intellectuals did not give way *in spite of*, but *because* of the murderous assassination attempts. In fact, this was never stronger than at the culmination of the attacks around March 1892. How can this be explained?

Sympathy for anarchism was even more pronounced when it went hand in hand with aesthetic decisions. Fénéon invented the shortest story anew by treating the *fait divers*, the incident that was reported in the papers under the ‘sundry events’ or ‘filler’ reports, like a meteor, like a small unforeseeable and inconsequential explosion. The *Nouvelles en trois lignes* or ‘news in three lines’ column published in the newspaper *Le Matin*, contains genuine miracles of ‘emaciated prose’.

- *The insolent soldier Aristide Catel with the 151st regiment aped the gestures of Corporal Rochesani. The military council of Châlons sentenced him to two years in prison!*

The conciseness stimulates his inventiveness in expressive punctuation and rhythm.

- *As the Lemoine from Asnières got into arrears with payments, the landlord dismantled the stairs: the fall of the children, – several metres.*

The *fait divers* becomes a social hieroglyph: a striking, figural sign that remains enigmatic.

A young woman jumped from Saint-Cloud Bridge into the Seine. She regretted being fished out again and didn’t give her name.

The symbolists were aficionados of the *fait divers* or ‘sundry’ reports. Like Roland Barthes a century later, they read in them “signs whose meaning remains uncertain, [...] rich in causal deviations”. André Gide inherited this fascination when he wrote legal chronicles or even Robert Musil with the arbitrary literary beginning of *The Man Without Qualities*. Yet it is Mallarmé who supplies the key to this fascination in his *Grands faits divers* (1897). He declares scandalously, “Let us go straight to the future assassination”, since the assassination like the *fait divers* seems to occur outside of causality like an absolute event. It happens somewhere and sometime, arbitrarily. Its murderous violence destroys it – he confesses his pity for the “maimed onlookers”, yet he praises the light of epiphany, the non-causal brightness that a bomb casts over the city. In a reversal of perspectives, which one may call idealist, the implacable rejection of social laws, which anarchist assassination expresses, is for him merely the picture of rejecting aesthetic conventions that are the basis of their practice. For the author of concise prose, which he was too, this rejection is precisely one of causalist, heroic or naturalist narration aimed at morality; a rejection of representation both in art and politics and of what he calls “redactions”. Enough of the novelist *mimesis*, of these linear narratives and the leaked descriptions that have a whiff of history and geography lessons! More space for the incident (*l’événement*), the pure incident!

No story.

My hypothesis is that the new art of the short story, which was borne of this violent incision (or this C-section) of anarchist terrorism, is an art of the *non sequitur* – an art of narration of events without any cause and without any final purpose. Fénéon's work was merely the embryo of this. To release oneself simultaneously from every aetiological belief and every moral intention will always be determined by a risk, almost insanity. It means a veto of every story. "There are no stories. There have never been stories. There are only situations, having neither head nor tail; without beginning, middle or end." Jean Epstein's dictum has been appropriated by all, or almost all 20th century avant-gardists in art. All of them, or almost all, were against the novel. This didn't especially disturb the novel, like a weeble toy, it is always ready to begin with another lurch forwards. Yet the avant-gardists were at least mistrusting of long, continuous narratives because they were better than society as a whole at judging the traumatic and powerless nature of historical experience that was peculiar to the 20th century from the second decade when an assassination heralded a catastrophe. Teleology, the light at the end of the tunnel fades, when the replay of an event is no longer concerned with the transmission of a useful experience. "Experience", wrote Walter Benjamin in 1933, "has been devalued and that in a generation which in 1914–18 had one of the most monstrous experiences of world history."

Although they look like fables there is nothing less uplifting than Kafka's short stories, perhaps with the exception of Walser's *Berlin Stories*, which Benjamin instantly understood as convalescent, indeed, post-traumatic. There is nothing less like a novel, insofar as one does not suspend it, as he later attempted, than the *Epiphanies* written by Joyce in the early 20th century to narrate the emergence of a consciousness in the violent chain of a simultaneous stream of feelings and thoughts. The absence of any kind of final purpose even became a demand in Beckett's *Stories and Texts for Nothing* and his late short prose writings. These new-fangled short forms unify seemingly contradictory qualities from the viewpoint of meaning, which Barthes identified in the *haiku* and its narrative cousin, which he calls the *incident*. They are immediately clear, but they also suspend 'meaning' in the elevated sense of significant importance and final purpose. By emphasizing the ridiculous aspect of their content, they complete an epoché, a suspension of anticipated meaning. According to Barthes they are anti-allegorical forms.

It is not enough to erase purposefulness above the event to expose it. One must again short-circuit the partial or contorted causality that, in giving it the appearance of necessity, instils in us the illusion that it was predictable. Charles-Albert Cingrias's drifting off, digression, indeed even going astray serves to do so just as much as those practices of his idiosyncratic predecessors, the advocates of long walks and meandering discussions with unknown persons: Dorothy Wordsworth and Thomas de Quincey. Each *Air du mois* that covered a few pages and that Cingria entrusted to the *Nouvelle Revue Française* anticipated narrative logic. He jumped – often on a bicycle – from one hour, one subject, one incident to another with amazing grace

and simplicity. Sometimes the real incident of the narrative happened outside, in the hiatus between two sentences, and one only experienced it afterwards, following an emergency stop. Antonio Pizzuto achieved the causal drives of language itself much more artfully, more acrobatically and ostentatiously from his hyper-concentrated, most concise prose that he devoted himself to at the end of his life. From his *Pagelle* and *Paginettes* of a single piece conjugations, articles and conjugated verbs progressively disappeared and made space for an explosive stage on which objects, persons and actions collide with each other and from one another on an equal footing.

These accelerations, concentrations, clever interruptions are perhaps the “future assassination” divined by Mallarmé. In contrast to the anarchist bombs, they didn’t arouse any attention; many individuals in the literary field know nothing about their existence. They only reported events that were hardly memorable. The canary died in his cage. A boy gave his neighbour a persimmon fruit. It rained for three days without stopping. In Soseki’s ‘prose haikus’ or later in Kawabata’s *Palm-of-the-Hand Stories* the event, which has no moral or causal importance whatsoever, was no longer even embellished with the ornament of the extraordinary or important. For it happens in everyday life. It is hidden. It passes by incognito, like everything that happens in life, except in the eyes of a few novelists like Emmanuel Bove or Henry Green who really show curiosity for small, banal incidents. At first sight they appear disappointing, though they are perhaps the invaluable secret of the everyday, of what Georges Perec called the ‘infra-ordinary’. Something miniscule, inconspicuous and ridiculous, something that is not perceived or only unclearly – something has happened. An event that belongs to everybody and nobody and which all have in common.

However, one must say that these silent explosions have had effects on the best popular writers of short fiction since the 1950s. In Salinger’s texts with all his chance encounters with children. In Carver, in his sad marriage scenes. In Brautigan when *In Watermelon Sugar* he masses together miniscule peripeties thanks to this random and sticky binding agent. These are rare and already old examples. Not so long ago in an underrated book Michelle Grangaud joined together several hundred shattering micro-events, gestures that became a *gesture*, an epos of the everyday. However, that remained an isolated case.

The extremely sparse emergence of these narratives, which are not unscrambled and not resolved particularly in the genre of contemporary *flash fiction* leads me to conclude with two questions. The first is a slightly angst-ridden question: where are today’s short stories? Where are the ‘concise’ texts that accept this challenge of the bare event, of the event disrobed of its old heroic prestige and reproduced beyond any fatal linking and any moral lesson? It will not have escaped you: the more precisely that the idea of *today’s short story* is composed, the more the difference is minimized with the prose poem. True, it can and is no longer admissible as an allegorical work like the prose poems *Treasurer of the Night* (*Gaspard de la Nuit*) or *Paris Spleen* (*Le Spleen de Paris*). Above all, it would still be a narrative, even if this must be a betrayal of Maurice Blanchot, who ended his last story with the words, “A story? No. No stories. Never again.” However, I believe that the essential genre distinction between the shortest story and the prose poem is basically ineffective and even damaging for poetry as

well as for the narrative. Some fledgling magazines like *Double Room*, which are actively working for its elimination, produce texts that are more stimulating than all *smokelong stories* and perfect their plot and punchline in vain. Today's short stories tend to be found more in the unspecific, hybrid and broken forms than in the polished miniature novels that are trimmed to a specific text length for social networks.

My second and final question relates to the chain, the series of these shortest stories – the *fix-up*, as they say on *flash fiction* websites. This is obviously less serious. Creating a book, compiling an anthology is by no means of crucial importance. By definition abundant media forms are suited for conciseness. Posted, thrown on the Internet, co-aligned in magazines, read aloud in less time than it takes to smoke a cigarette, they can assert their lightness to ensure the “evanescent thoughtfulness” that according to one expert is typical for readers in the underground. Nevertheless, their assembly can equally produce a new form, or rather a new experience. The juxtaposition of autonomous short stories results in an unsystematic complexity that inspires imagination and thought. The collections of classic short stories promise a genre of symbolic or thematic unity. But other collections can sketch a landscape, a fresco, a mosaic, a puzzle, a more or less close-meshed web, a constellation, a fractal or net-like structure; ultimately, the map of a world in which incidents happen everywhere without cancelling it, a world in which *suspense* has withdrawn behind suspension or leaving things in suspense. Exactly one hundred and fifty years ago somebody had a precise premonition of the paradox of such tortuous fantasies, namely, Baudelaire in his dedication in *Paris Spleen*:

My dear friend, I send you here a little work of which no one could say that it has neither head nor tail, because, on the contrary, everything in it is both head and tail, alternately and reciprocally. Please consider what fine advantages this combination offers to all of us, to you, to me, and to the reader. We can cut wherever we like – me, my reverie, you, the manuscript, and the reader, his reading; for I don't tie the impatient reader up in the endless thread of a superfluous plot. Pull out one of the vertebrae, and the two halves of this tortuous fantasy will rejoin themselves painlessly. Chop it up into numerous fragments, and you'll find that each one can live on its own. In the hopes that some of these stumps will be lively enough to please and amuse you, I dedicate the entire serpent to you.”

(Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen and La Fanfarlo*, translated by Raymond N. Mackenzie, Indianapolis 2008, p. 3).

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Non sequitur. The garbled story of presence

Lecture of **Pierre Alféri** (Paris). The keynote lecture of the International Literature Festival Erich Fried 2015 on the theme of “Facts and Fiction. Literary Reportages”, 6 to 11 October 2015, was commissioned as a cooperative initiative of the Internationale Erich Fried Gesellschaft / Literaturhaus Vienna und ELit Literaturehouse Europa/ELit Literaturhaus Europa. The text will be released online (in English) in the Observatory for European

contemporary literature, as well as in print form in the October Festival special edition of the literary magazine “kolik” (in German).