

Fenimore Cooper's Further Literary Offences: Cooper's Prose Style

Mark Twain

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YOUNG GENTLEMAN: In studying Cooper you will find it profitable to study him in detail-word by word, sentence by sentence. For every sentence of his is interesting. Interesting because of its make-up, its peculiar make-up, its original make-up. Let us examine a sentence or two, and see. Here is a passage from Chapter XI of *The Last of the Mohicans*, one of the most famous and most admired of Cooper's books:

Notwithstanding the swiftness of their flight, one of the Indians had found an opportunity to strike a straggling fawn with an arrow, and had borne the more preferable fragments of the victim, patiently on his shoulders, to the stopping-place. Without any aid from the science of cookery, he was immediately employed, in common with his fellows, in gorging himself with this digestible sustenance. Magua alone sat apart, without participating in the revolting meal, and apparently buried in the deepest thought.

This little paragraph is full of matter for reflection and inquiry. The remark about the swiftness of the flight was unnecessary, as it was merely put in to forestall the possible objection of some over particular reader that the Indian couldn't have found the needed "opportunity" while fleeing swiftly. The reader would not have made that objection. He would care nothing about having that small matter explained and justified. But that is Cooper's way; frequently he will explain and justify little things that do not need it and then make up for this by as frequently failing to explain important ones that do need it. For instance he allowed that astute and cautious person, Deerslayer-Hawkeye, to throw his rifle heedlessly down and leave it lying on the ground where some hostile Indians would presently be sure to find it—a rifle prized by that person above all things else in the earth—and the reader gets no word of explanation of that strange act. There was a reason, but it wouldn't bear exposure. Cooper meant to get a fine dramatic effect out of the finding of the rifle by the Indians, and he accomplished this at the happy time; but all the same, Hawkeye could have hidden the rifle in a quarter of a minute where the Indians could not have found it.

Cooper couldn't think of any way to explain why Hawkeye didn't do that, so he just shirked the difficulty and did not explain at all. In another place Cooper allowed Heyward to shoot at an Indian with a pistol that wasn't loaded—and grants us not a word of explanation as to how the man did it.

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No, the remark about the swiftness of their flight was not necessary; neither was the one which said that the Indian found an opportunity; neither was the one which said he struck the fawn; neither was the one which explained that it was a “stragglng” fawn; neither was the one which said the striking was done with an arrow; neither was the one which said the Indian bore the “fragments”; nor the remark that they were preferable fragments; nor the remark that they were more preferable fragments; nor the explanation that they were fragments of the “victim”; nor the overparticular explanation that specifies the Indian’s “shoulders” as the part of him that supported the fragments; nor the statement that the Indian bore the fragments patiently. None of those details has any value. We don’t care what the Indian struck the fawn with; we don’t care whether it was a, struggling fawn or an unstruggling one; we don’t care which fragments the Indian saved; we don’t care why he saved the “more” preferable ones when the merely preferable ones would have amounted to just the same thing and couldn’t have been told from the more preferable ones by anybody, dead or alive; we don’t care whether the Indian carried them on his shoulders or in his handkerchief; and finally, we don’t care whether he carried them patiently or struck for higher pay and shorter hours. We are indifferent to that Indian and all his affairs.

There was only one fact in that long sentence that was worth stating, and it could have been squeezed into these few words—and with advantage to the narrative, too: “During the flight one of the Indians had killed a fawn and he brought it into camp.” You will notice that “During the flight one of the Indians had killed a fawn and he brought it into camp,” is more straightforward and business-like, and less mincing and smirky, than it is to say, “Notwithstanding the swiftness of their flight, one of the Indians had found an opportunity to strike a stragglng fawn with an arrow, and had borne the more preferable fragments of the victim, patiently on his shoulders, to the stopping-place.” You will notice that the form “During the flight one of the Indians had killed a fawn and he brought it into camp” holds up its chin and moves to the front with the steady stride of a grenadier, whereas the form “Notwithstanding the swiftness of their flight, one of the Indians had found an opportunity to strike a stragglng fawn with an arrow, and had borne the more preferable fragments of the victim, patiently on his shoulders, to the stopping-place” simpers along with an airy, complacent, monkey-with-a-parasol gait which is not suited to the transportation of raw meat.

I beg to remind you that an author’s way of setting forth a matter is called his style, and that an author’s style is a main part of his equipment for business. The style of some authors has variety in it, but Cooper’s style is remarkable for the absence of this feature. Cooper’s style is always grand and stately and noble. Style may be likened to an army, the author to its general, the book to the campaign. Some authors proportion an attacking force to the strength or weakness, the importance or unimportance, of the object to be attacked; but Cooper doesn’t. It doesn’t make any difference to Cooper whether the object of attack is a hundred thousand men or a cow; he hurls his entire force against it. He comes thundering down with all his battalions at his back, cavalry in the van, artillery on the flanks, infantry massed in the middle, forty bands braying, a thousand banners streaming in the wind; and whether the object be an army or a cow you will see him come marching sublimely in, at the end of the engagement, bearing the more preferable fragments of the victim patiently on his shoulders, to the stopping-place. Cooper’s style is grand, awful, beautiful; but it is sacred to

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Cooper, it is his very own, and no student of the Veterinary College of Arizona will be allowed to filch it from him.

In one of his chapters Cooper throws an ungentle slur at one Gamut because he is not exact enough in his choice of words. But Cooper has that failing himself, as remarked in our first lecture. If the Indian had “struck” the fawn with a brick, or with a club, or with his fist, no one could find fault with the word used. And one cannot find much fault when he strikes it with an arrow; still it sounds affected, and it might have been a little better to lean to simplicity and say he shot it with an arrow.

“Fragments” is well enough, perhaps, when one is speaking of the parts of a dismembered deer, yet it hasn't just exactly the right sound—and sound is something; in fact sound is a good deal. It makes the difference between good music and poor music, and it can sometimes make the difference between good literature and indifferent literature. “Fragments” sounds all right when we are talking about the wreckage of a breakable thing that has been smashed; it also sounds all right when applied to cat's meat; but when we use it to describe large hunks and chunks like the fore and hindquarters of a fawn, it grates upon the fastidious ear.

“Without any aid from the science of cookery, he was immediately employed, in common with his fellows, in gorging himself with this digestible sustenance.” This was a mere statistic; just a mere cold, colorless statistic; yet you see Cooper has made a chromo out of it. To use another figure, he has clothed a humble statistic in flowing, voluminous and costly raiment, whereas both good taste and economy suggest that he ought to have saved these splendors for a king, and dressed the humble statistic in a simple breechclout. Cooper spent twenty-four words here on a thing not really worth more than eight. We will reduce the statistic to its proper proportions and state it in this way:

“He and the others ate the meat raw.”

“Digestible sustenance” is a handsome phrase, but it was out of place there, because we do not know these Indians or care for them; and so it cannot interest us to know whether the meat was going to agree with them or not. Details which do not assist a story are better left out.

“Magua alone sat apart, without participating in the revolting meal” is a statement which we understand, but that is our merit, not Cooper's. Cooper is not clear. He does not say who it is that is revolted by the meal. It is really Cooper himself, but there is nothing in the statement to indicate that it isn't Magua. Magua is an Indian and likes raw meat.

The word “alone” could have been left out and space saved. It has no value where it is.

I must come back with some frequency, in the course of these lectures, to the matter of Cooper's inaccuracy as an Observer. In this way I shall hope to persuade you that it is well to look at a thing carefully before you try to describe it; but I shall rest you between times with other matters and thus try to avoid overfatiguing you with that detail of our theme. In *The Last of the Mohicans* Cooper gets up a stirring “situation” on an island flanked by great cataracts—a lofty island with steep sides—a sort of tongue which projects down stream from the midst of the divided waterfall. There are caverns in this mass of rock, and a party of Cooper people hide themselves in one of these to get away from some hostile Indians. There is a small exit at each end of this cavern. These exits are closed with blankets and the light excluded. The exploring hostiles back themselves up

against the blankets and rave and rage in a blood-curdling way, but they are Cooper Indians and of course fail to discover the blankets; so they presently go away baffled and disappointed. Alice; in her gratitude for this deliverance, flings herself on her knees to return thanks. The darkness in there must have been pretty solid; yet if we may believe Cooper, it was a darkness which could not have been told from daylight; for here are some nice details which were visible in it:

Both Heyward and the more tempered Cora witnessed the act of involuntary emotion with powerful sympathy, the former secretly believing that piety had never worn a form so lovely as it had now assumed in the youthful person of Alice. Her eyes were radiant with the glow of grateful feelings; the flush of her beauty was again seated on her cheeks, and her whole soul seemed ready and anxious to pour out its thanksgivings, through the medium of her eloquent features. But when her lips moved, the words they should have uttered appeared frozen by some new and sudden chill. Her bloom gave place to the paleness of death; her soft and melting eyes grew hard, and seemed contracting with horror; while those hands which she had raised, clasped in each other, towards heaven, dropped in horizontal lines before her, the fingers pointed forward in convulsed motion.

It is a case of strikingly inexact observation. Heyward and the more tempered Cora could not have seen the half of it in the dark that way. I must call your attention to certain details of this work of art which invite particular examination. "Involuntary" is surplusage and violates Rule 14. All emotion is involuntary when genuine, and then the qualifying term is not needed; a qualifying term is needed only when the emotion is pumped-up and ungentle. "Secretly" is surplusage, too; because Heyward was not believing out loud, but all to himself; and a person cannot believe a thing all to himself without doing it privately. I do not approve of the word "seated" to describe the process of locating a flush. No one can seat a flush. A flush is not a deposit on an exterior surface, it is a something which squishes out from within.

I cannot approve of the word "new." If Alice had had an old chill, formerly, it would be right to distinguish this one from that one by calling this one the new chill; but she had not had any old chill, this one was the only chill she had had, up till now, and so the tacit reference to an old anterior chill is unwarranted and misleading. And I do not altogether like the phrase "while those hands which she had raised." It seems to imply that she had some other hands—some other ones which she had put on the shelf a minute so as to give her a better chance to raise these ones; but it is not true; she had only the one pair. The phrase is in the last degree misleading. But I like to see her extend these ones in front of her and work the fingers. I think that that is a very good effect. And it would have almost doubled the effect if the more tempered Cora had done it some, too.

A Cooper Indian who has been washed is a poor thing, and commonplace; it is the Cooper Indian in his paint that thrills. Cooper's extra words are Cooper's paint—his paint, his feathers, his tomahawk, his warwhoop.

In the two-thirds of a page elsewhere referred to, wherein Cooper scored 114 literary transgressions out of a possible 115, he appeals before us with all his things on. As follows; the italics are mine—they indicate violations of Rule 14:

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In a minute he was once more fastened to the tree, *a helpless object of any insult or wrong that might be offered. So eagerly did every one now act, that nothing was said.* The fire was immediately lighted *in the pile, and the end of all was anxiously expected.* It was not the intention of the Hurons *absolutely* to destroy *the life of their* victim by means of fire. They designed merely to put his *physical* fortitude to the severest proofs it could endure, short of that extremity. In the end, they fully intended to carry his scalp into their village, but it was their wish first to break down his resolution, and to reduce him to *the level of* a complaining sufferer. With this view, the pile of *brush and* branches had been placed at a *proper* distance, *or one* at which it was thought the heat would soon become intolerable, though *it might not be* immediately dangerous. *As often happened, however, on these occasions,* this distance had been miscalculated, and the flames *began to wave their forked tongues in a proximity to the face of the victim* that would have proved fatal in another instant had not Hetty rushed through the crowd, armed with a stick, and scattered the blazing pile *in a dozen directions.* More than one hand was raised to strike the *presumptuous* intruder to the earth; but the chiefs prevented the blows by reminding their *irritated* followers of the state of her mind. Hetty, herself, was insensible to the risk she ran; but, *as soon as she had performed this bold act,* she stood looking about her in frowning resentment, as if to rebuke the *crowd of attentive* savages for their cruelty.

“God bless you, dearest *sister,* for that brave and ready act,” murmured Judith, *herself unnerved so much as to be incapable of exertion;* “Heaven itself has sent you on its holy errand.”

Number of words, 320; necessary ones, 220: words wasted by the generous spendthrift, 100.

In our day those 100 unnecessary words would have to come out. We will take them out presently and make the episode approximate the modern requirement in the matter of compression.

If we may consider each unnecessary word in Cooper's report of that barbecue a separate and individual violation of Rule 14, then that rule is violated 100 times in that report. Other rules are violated in it. Rule 12, 2 instances; Rule 13, 5 instances; Rule 15, 1 instance; Rule 16, 2 instances; Rule 17, 1 or 2 little instances; the report in its entirety is an offense against Rule 18—also against Rule 16. Total score, about 114 violations of the laws of literary art out of a possible 115. Let us now bring forward the report again, with most of the unnecessary words knocked out. By departing from Cooper's style and manner, all the facts could be put into 150 words, and the effects heightened at the same time—this is manifest, of course—but that would not be desirable. We must stick to Cooper's language as closely as we can:

In a minute he was once more fastened to the tree. The fire was immediately lighted. It was not the intention of the Hurons to destroy Deerslayer's life by fire; they designed merely to put his fortitude to the severest proofs it could endure short of that extremity. In the end, they fully intended to take his life, but it was their wish first to break down his resolution and reduce him to a complaining sufferer. With this view the pile

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of brush had been placed at a distance at which it was thought the heat would soon become intolerable, without being immediately dangerous. But this distance had been miscalculated; the fire was so close to the victim that he would have been fatally burned in another instant if Hetty had not rushed through the crowd and scattered the brands with a stick. More than one Indian raised his hand to strike her down, but the chiefs saved her by reminding them of the state of her mind. Hetty herself was insensible to the risk she ran; she stood looking about her in frowning resentment, as if to rebuke the savages for their cruelty.

“God bless you, dear!” cried Judith, “for that brave and ready act. Heaven itself has sent you on its holy errand, and you shall have a chromo.”

Number of words, 220—and the facts are all in.