When a character in my recent book, “Sweet Tooth,” publishes his short first work of fiction, he finds some critics are suggesting that he has done something unmanly or dishonest. His experience reflects my own. A novella? Perhaps you don’t have the necessary creative juice. Isn’t the print rather large, aren’t the lines too widely spaced? Perhaps you’re trying to pass off inadequate goods and fool a trusting public.

Composers, including those of the highest rank, have never had such problems of scale. Who doubts the greatness of Beethoven’s piano sonatas and string quartets or of Schubert’s songs? Some, like me, prefer them to the symphonies of either man. Who could harden his heart against the intimate drama of Mozart’s G minor trio, or not lose himself in the Goldberg variations or not stand in awe of the D minor Chaconne played on a lonesome violin?

Strangely, the short story never arouses suspicion of short-changing, probably because the form is so fundamentally different from the novel.

I believe the novella is the perfect form of prose fiction. It is the beautiful daughter of a rambling, bloated ill-shaven giant (but a giant who’s a genius on his best days). And this child is the means by which many first know our greatest writers. Readers come to Thomas Mann by way of “Death in Venice,” Henry James by “The Turn of the Screw,” Kafka by “Metamorphosis,” Joseph Conrad by “Heart of Darkness,” Albert Camus by “L’Étranger.” I could go on: Voltaire, Tolstoy, Joyce, Solzhenitsyn. And Orwell, Steinbeck, Pynchon. And Melville, Lawrence, Munro. The
tradition is long and glorious. I could go even further: the demands of economy push writers to polish their sentences to precision and clarity, to bring off their effects with unusual intensity, to remain focussed on the point of their creation and drive it forward with functional single-mindedness, and to end it with a mind to its unity. They don’t ramble or preach, they spare us their quintuple subplots and swollen midsections.

Let’s take, as an arbitrary measure, something that is between twenty and forty thousand words, long enough for a reader to inhabit a world or a consciousness and be kept there, short enough to be read in a sitting or two and for the whole structure to be held in mind at first encounter—the architecture of the novella is one of its immediate pleasures. How often one reads a contemporary full-length novel and thinks quietly, mutinously, that it would have worked out better at half or a third the length. I suspect that many novelists clock up sixty thousand words after a year’s work and believe (wearily, perhaps) that they are only half way there. They are slaves to the giant, instead of masters of the form.

To sit with a novella is analogous to watching a play or a longish movie. In fact, there’s a strong resemblance between the screenplay (twenty odd thousand words) and the novella, both operating within the same useful constraints of economy—space for a subplot (two at a stretch), characters to be established with quick strokes but allowed enough room to live and breathe, and the central idea, even if it is just below the horizon, always exerting its gravitational pull. The analogy with film or theatre is a reminder that there is an element of performance in the novella. We are more strongly aware of the curtain and the stage, of the author as illusionist. The smoke and mirrors, rabbits and hats are more self-consciously applied than in the full-length novel. The novella is the modern and post-modern form par excellence. Conrad’s famous contribution to the tradition is typical. It begins with exquisite artifice, in “luminous space”—Marlowe gearing himself up to tell his story while he and his friends sit in a yacht at anchor in the Thames estuary at dusk. As the light drops, the notion of darkness is set before us, and will be relentlessly pursued through a hundred pages or so.

“Heart of Darkness” is not among my favorite novellas. Conrad falls short of his own prescription (in the celebrated preface to “The Nigger of the Narcissus”) “to make you see” what is at that heart. But those opening pages, the frame, have a self-conscious grace than honors the form.

The poem and the short story are theoretically perfectible, but I doubt there is such a thing as a perfect novel (even if we could begin to agree among ourselves on what comprises a good sentence). The novel is too capacious, inclusive, unruly, and personal for perfection. Too long, sometimes too much like life. It doesn’t need or look for perfection.

“Great” novels are not perfect novels. You might improve “Anna Karenina” by altering the clumsiness of the description of the station master’s peaked cap—a much-discussed example. And I always want to take a blue pencil to Emma Bovary’s overextended death throes (it makes me suspicious that Flaubert wept over her), though I never doubt the novel’s greatness.

But I could at least conceive of the perfect novella. Or, rather, imagine one approaching perfection like an asymptotic line in coordinate geometry. I don’t think the novellas I’ve long treasured (among which, Edith Wharton’s “Ethan Frome,” Tobias Wolff’s “The Barracks Thief,” Italo Calvino’s “The Watcher”) are perfect, any more than my oldest friends are. But the polished, intact, self-enclosed quality these titles share with all good novellas sets them on perfection’s road. One senses it as an aesthetic ambition, in the necessary authority of the opening pages.

The great novella is Joyce’s “The Dead.” A simple binary structure (a party, a hotel room) supports the evocation of an entire social milieu (decorous and fractious by turns) with extraordinary warmth. They seem to play out in real time, the dancing and singing at the aunt’s annual dinner, the family tensions, the barbed exchange about national identity. Then Gabriel and Greta’s exchange in their hotel room, the muted drama of his disappointed ardor, her piercingly sad revelation of a boy who once loved her and died, and at last, Gabriel’s final, drowsy, shamed reflections on his own lovelessness, and on mortality, prompted by memories of the evening’s merrymaking—these are among the most exquisite passages of prose fiction in the entire canon. I’d swap “The Dead”’s concluding pages for any fifteen from “Ulysses.” The young Joyce surpassed himself. I sometimes fantasize that on my deathbed, celebrated phrases from this novella will see me out: “I think he died for me”; “one by one they were all becoming shades”; “the time had come
for him to set out on his journey westward”; snow “softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves”; “snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.’ There could be worse final moments.

I’m certain that, Joyce’s genius apart, it was the particular demands of the novella, the way it lays on the writer a duty of unity and the pursuit of perfection, that brought him to shape in this fashion one of the loveliest fictions in the English language.

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