Notes on Mathias Enard, *Zone*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren’t reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

What Does it Mean to Present a Novel as a Very Long Sentence?

The reviews, pre-publication reviews, and endorsements of this novel all focus on the notion that it is a single long sentence. (For example Patrick Reardon in the Chicago Tribune, December 9, 2008, which is included in the publisher’s press pack.)

But this book is not one sentence, for at least four reasons. Two of them are listed in an excellent short survey of long sentences by Tim Park (New York Times, December 24, 2010, in the Book Review, p. 27):

1. The sentence is "compromised" by 23 chapter breaks

2. Three of the chapters are excerpts from an imaginary book that the narrator in "Zone" is reading, and those three chapters are full of periods.

But there are two stronger reasons why "Zone" isn’t a sentence:

3. Énard sometimes gives up commas, so that the prose becomes agrammatical. It's not a sentence if it is a string of sentence fragments.

4. Énard mixes tenses, doesn’t observe parallel constructions, doesn’t avoid run-on phrases, and doesn’t make any attempt to structure his book according to subject, verb, and object: in other words, he only takes intermittent notice of the convention called the sentence.

But it’s hard to see how any of this matters. By concentrating on the supposed single sentence, the publicity engine that has driven readers to this book misses other points.

First is the literary genealogy of the long sentence. It’s a typically modernist strategy, most famously used by Joyce, Faulkner, and Beckett, intended to represent an experience labeled the stream of consciousness. Why, then, should readers in 2011 be interested in the continuation of this particular device? Wouldn’t it at least be interesting to ask why Énard feels that early twentieth-century experiments fit his theme of twenty-first century politics?

Then there’s the problem of the disconnect between the political and historical themes of the novel and its anti-grammatical construction. In the New New York Times review ("River of Consciousness," January 9, 2011), Stephen Burn says that "the lack of formal boundaries permits an openness that counters the protagonist’s obsession with the other boundaries men make and fight over," but that implies that all the "boundaries" the narrator recounts -- and the book is made of hundreds of such stories, from ancient Greek mythology to the wars in Iraq -- are equally well balanced by the tumbling endless prose. Is each act of warfare equally well answered by the missing periods that express it? Is each missing period a small indictment of the boundaries people construct? There’s a mismatch between the specificity of the historical material and the
sameness of the lack of punctuation.

Then there's the carelessness of writing without periods and other punctuation. It's easy to write a version of the prose Énard writes here. It's much easier, in many ways, than constructing long sentences: I would trade this entire 500-page book for the sharpness of a couple of William Gass's fabulous sentences in "On Being Blue."

There is also a disconnect between the prose and the consciousness it is meant to represent. In Beckett's prose, or in Molly Bloom's monologue, there is a reason for the tumbling endless narration. Here, in Burns's words, Énard "leaves the reader floating free in the liquid" of the narrator's mind: but why is the narrator equally angry, equally disoriented, equally atemporal, in respect to each individual moment in history? Even though Énard admires Joyce, Pound, Butor, and others, his mixture of allusions has more to do with Sebald: but in Sebald, different places and stories have differing weight, and require differing degrees of patience and coherence. Énard also admires the Pound of the Cantos, but those are deliberately fragmentary -- another high modernist trope -- while here, everything is melted as if it were the same.

And does it bear saying that the writing, and the allusions, are ponderous, portentous, and humorless? The weight of history has the same leaden quality here that it does in George Steiner. I wonder if what caught the press's attention wasn't the very superficial combination of a gimmick (a long sentence), a leaden world-historical seriousness, and the commonplace rehearsal of Mediterranean political guilt and honor. I notice several of the endorsements are from French television and journalism.

In brief: the book is full of stories, and some of the stories are full of passion, but letting your sentences slump is not a radical strategy: it's a way of not working hard to make language fit its subject.