Notes on Sergio De la Pava, *Naked Singularity*

(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!)

Limits of Wit and Plotting in Maximalist Novels

A tremendously perplexing novel. The first four hundred pages are, more or less, out to match "Infinite Jest." They are written at De La Pava’s best pitch of cleverness and complexity, with asides, chapter-long irrelevant distractions (sometimes insouciantly declared, by the author, as irrelevant), philosophical interruptions, and compulsively micromanaged descriptions, all in the service, apparently, of a vast and continuously enlarging cast of characters and situations that can just barely be remembered by the ideal assiduous reader. This is done with the help of sharply written courtroom slang, strongly reminiscent of, and probably competitive with, The Wire or Richard Price himself.

A reader who stops after four hundred pages might do so because she is exhausted by the prospect of another David Foster Wallace, even if that prospect is spiced by bleeding-edge contemporary urban conversation, larded with solecisms, misspellings, travesties against grammar, and “em” and “ums” and “...s.” (That is: ellipses marking where the interlocutor doesn’t speak: an invention, I think, of DWF’s.)

In next hundred pages things tighten up, and a reader will realize that there is a single plot after all, and that the novel might in fact even be driven by this plot. At that point—somewhere in those roughly one hundred pages—my interest peaked, because then I thought De La Pava was trying to pull off a new hybrid form of fiction, mingling the overspilling and intentionally excessive plays with language that mark the DFW mode with the plot-driven intricacies of, say, Law and Order. But I became perplexed when I began to see that despite De La Pava’s characters’ unremitting, hypertrophied self-awareness, which involves mandatory long chapters discussing fate, causality, and freedom, with examples drawn from Wittgenstein, Hume, and other staples of the undergraduate college curriculum, he (the author) was entirely unaware that a large part of the appeal of his book would, in fact, be the suspense generated not by the turn to a policier plot, but by the possibility that he might pull of this new fusion of genres. He seems to have written the book in the grip of the commonplace feverish admiration and ambition generated by DFW and McSweeney’s, and he seems to have thought he could unproblematically use those
fictional techniques to write a truly great crime story. But that, to me, is a misunderstanding of the stakes of the entire DFW project, and the author’s obliviousness to those stakes made me rethink the reasons for his attachment to perfectly pitched, hyper-eloquent minimalist dialogue and perversely overstuffed maximalist description.

The last two hundred pages plunge into crime and courtroom drama. There are exactly three concurrent plots: the narrator, a public defender, is under investigation; he has participated in a robbery; and he is trying to get a stay of execution for a death row inmate. Each of these is treated with a maximum of drama. When the narrator talks to his death row client, the prose is suddenly, frighteningly maudlin, Oprah style, including a tearful scene in the jail. (“Your eyes are funny now,” the simple-minded inmate says to the narrator, implying that the narrator, and potentially also we readers, have been crying listening to the inmate’s pathetic story; p. 491.) Then, when the narrator robs some drug dealers, the scene is edge-of-your-seat exciting for a good thirty pages (starting abruptly on p. 516). That kind of writing has absolutely nothing in common with the prose experiments of the preceding four hundred pages, and the fact that the author does not notice the significance of that mismatch—he certainly understands that there is a mismatch, but not what it means in terms of the self-understanding of genres and writing projects—made me intensely disappointed.

So: given that the novel is a hybrid, in the pejorative sense of that word, meaning that it is an attempt at mixture where mixing remains the principal issue, what can be said about the writing itself? When the narrator and his legal colleagues talk, their speech is relentless in its cleverness, and when the perps talk, their speech is consistently surprisingly realistic and entertaining. Blending those two modes is the novel’s real accomplishment. But when the educated characters and think or speak, then it’s DFW territory, and that part is problematic. There’s a line to be drawn between writing that is tortured in order to be expressive, and writing that is tortured because the author is a compulsive torturer of language. Here are some lines I experience as compulsive, non-expressive cleverness. They might redouble my admiration for the author, but they don’t add to the scene, the characters, the mood, or the story.

1. From the recounting of a corner store robbery caught on videotape. Two men, Rane and Cruz, have been stalking the store. "Now Rane signals Cruz with his chin and they rhyme toward the counter, and the near-future decedent." (p. 77) “Rhyming” to the counter is clever and visually effective, but “the near-future decedent” is a needless complication of “the man they were about to kill,” intended, presumably, to keep us in mind of the legalistic context, and to foreshadow the mangled language that would be used at the trial. But here it’s supernumerary, distracting because it points for the hundredth, or thousandth, time back to the author’s wit.
2. “I recently began my thirtieth ellipse around our sun, an anniversary that as you can imagine barks louder than the usual ones.” (p. 95) Again, “my thirtieth ellipse” is clever, and expresses the speaker’s resistance to acknowledging his age too directly; but “barks” distracts by bringing me back to the author and his wit.

Overall, too much of the writing is of this sort, and that is, I think, the novel’s real failure. Sentence sparkle is not the unproblematic virtue the author hopes it appears to be: it’s a symptom, a sign of anxiety about straightforwardness, a sort of fear of the plain style, a tic, a compulsive complication with a life and logic of its own. In “A Naked Singularity” wit is intense: not so much intensely expressive as intensely compulsive. The issue is whether that compulsion is experienced as such by the author, thematized, explained by context and purpose, pondered, used for expressive purpose—or simply expressed the way a patient expresses a sign of illness. Wit, as DFW realized very deeply, sincerely, and ineffectually, is a problem as well as an accomplishment.