

# Obeying the Speed Limit

CHRIS FRANK

I wake up. I sink into my chair and glance at my email, but I do not respond, and I don't really read—I'm busy remembering bed. I look at a few of my favorite weblogs without thinking about what they say. They come at me so fast it's far harder to contemplate one than to just move on to the next. I sign into Facebook.com, intending to see what new photos a friend has posted from Madagascar, but I get stuck, as always, in the net of the "news-feed." It's a bite-sized, self-updating list of all the recent online activity of my five-hundred or so Facebook Friends, and it's impossible to ignore. I cannot see my own to-do list when there's this one, rapid and dynamic, presented to and generated just for me.

Eventually, finally, thankfully, I get restless and can no longer ignore an urge to do something with my day. I start by taking a shower, though I am already pretty clean. The water is warm, wonderful, and it cleanses me of the time I've just wasted. I set about making some breakfast and turn on HBO for company. *It's not TV, it's HBO*, they like to remind me. This morning's movie is one I'd never intended to watch, but it's here and it's in Hi-Definition, and I may as well. They air another movie immediately afterwards, one I've been meaning to see, and I watch it too, which saves me the trouble of thinking about the first one. When lunch time arrives it's a surprise, and I browse the *New York Times* online over a sandwich. They spread their stories over many pages to make space for more advertisements. I rarely read past page one. Here at this digital window, it occurs to me that no one would ever, ever build a real window this small.

I am a product of what Sven Birkerts calls "the Electronic Millenium," a subject of a public discourse that runs on "bite-speak" (472). Bite-speak is the natural result of replacing our libraries of books with digital libraries of bytes: the internet, the email, the television, the LCD screen. Bite-speak moves quickly, "driven by jump-cut increments," built of rapid-fire sentences and paragraphs "flattened by the requirements of communication over distances" (472, 474). It caters to the lowest common denominator in a television audi-

ence, “more telegraphic” than literary, and it will, according to Birkerts, spell the end of intelligent language (474).

Uh-oh. The full text of Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* might be stored on a hard drive, but I’m not going to browse it chronologically, not going to *read* it, when I can type in a few keywords and let the computer generate a list of bites for me. “I don’t like Hobbes,” a former teacher of mine once told me. “Too depressing.” And sure enough, if you ask the computer with that in mind, you will learn that *Leviathan* advocates our surrender to an absolute sovereign, to save us from the “natural state of man,” wherein life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (84). But that is only Bite-Sized Hobbes, stripped of context, and though Hobbes does indeed say that life can be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short, *Leviathan* in its entirety is not at all depressing. It’s a realistic examination of an imperfect world, a guide to making the best of it, and a helpful, hopeful, brilliant work of political philosophy. And, though this often goes entirely unmentioned, it’s also a masterful biblical exegesis and deconstruction of the Christian religion.

But one cannot know that from a list of bites. A list of bites is presented out of time and out of place, Birkerts argues. Every bite is at surface level, “pruned and glossed,” even if the ideas each one was supposed to present belong buried in context (474). Once upon a time, a given sentence’s meaning could be, was *supposed* to be, shaped by the sentences that came before it. Today, in a list of bites, that sentence can no longer mean the same thing. Where a book is a “forward moving succession, with earlier contents at every point serving as ground for what follows,” bites have no “time-axis” at all (471). They stand rank-and-file, “laterally associative rather than vertically cumulative,” an army ousting logic and order to replace them with “impression and image,” eroding my ability to follow an idea from here to there (472). And when *that* goes, everything else goes with it. Not just our literature, but our painting, music, film, theatre . . . all of the arts together. They are suffering a “deep crisis of relevance,” because in an army without order or context they can say little but *Sir, yes sir* (472).

My ears have me at attention. David Byrne has taken the stage with no band and no guitar. He’s found the theatre’s box of marquee letters and wheeled it out with him for a unique game of Scrabble. From my seat in the balcony I’m unable to participate, but I watch as he calls fourteen people from the audience, as each draws a letter and split into two groups of seven. Whichever group can spell the best word will win. I know to expect the unexpected from Mr. Byrne, but I did not expect this. Tonight he is performing

not for us, but with us. Ultimately neither team can spell a legitimate word from their letters, and Byrne seems slightly disappointed, though still amused by his experiment. He lets the audience volunteers retreat to their seats, and suddenly the show begins in full force. I have seen my share of wonderful concerts. From the first note of the first song, I suspect tonight's will be the best I've ever seen.

This is not a dance hall. Audiences here are attentive, engaged, and seated. But tonight feet are already tapping, heads are bobbing, and people are starting to smile. Soon their hips join in and by the seventh song the entire audience has risen from its seats, all of us moving in time. The balcony shakes noticeably, and through my enthusiasm I wonder if it will hold. Overflowing onto the streets would be exciting, but falling through this balcony would not. In fact it does hold, but by the twelfth song I'm at floor level anyway, in front of the orchestra, dancing my self away in a thick crowd of ecstatic listeners. Byrne is still building momentum. None of us had any idea music could be this good. He slows down only once, for a surprising version of "Un di Felice" from Verdi's *La Traviata*. He introduces it as "an old Italian pop song." I laugh. Here is history revisited, back and better than ever. If there is a Heaven, there is a band in it, and I hope it's this one.

When I imagine Sven Birkerts, I see a lone professor shut in his study where there is no heat because the universities have no money, where he struggles to keep warm in his tweed jacket, smoking his pipe and scribbling furiously with his fountain pen, desperately trying to say what he can before they stop manufacturing ink. Where television, email, and the Internet reduce the word to a "signal, a means to an end," Birkerts declares that the printed page "exalts the word, fixing it into permanence" (472). Print is the Holy Medium, and he clings to it like a dying priest. But while Birkerts is looking forward, transfixed, he forgets the history behind him. In 1946, before the rise of television, George Orwell imagined a rather different sort of professor struggling to offer a defense of the era's indefensible Russian government. Unable to say "I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so," Orwell's professor utters this garbage instead:

While freely conceding that the Soviet regime exhibits certain features which the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods, and that the rigors which the

Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement. (520)

This is printed word, but it's ghastly English. It uses sixty-three ambiguous words to express poorly what sixteen simple words expressed well. And according to Orwell, language like this abounded in the prose of his generation. Print alone does not make for clear language or clear thinking. Even print can encourage us to surrender to the words and let them do our thinking for us. "It is easier—even quicker, once you have the habit," writes Orwell, "to say 'In my opinion it is not an unjustifiable assumption that' than it is to say 'I think'" (518). It is hard to say "I think" because it is hard *to* think, and the media's bites hitting harder and faster certainly do not make it easier. But Orwell fought the notion that our poor language was merely the inevitable product of our slovenly thinking, and encouraged us to realize that each shapes the other. If we can take steps to improve our language, then those same steps will better our thinking, no matter the medium (514). Birkerts offers us no solution by placing his faith in print. Before the arrival of the technologies Birkerts fights against, Orwell had already declared the distinguishing characteristic of English prose to be its "mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence" (515). There is more we must do, then, than throw away our computers.

Byrne is nearing the end of his set. "You're talking a lot, but you're not saying anything," he quips during a glorious rendition of "Psycho Killer." "When I have nothing to say, my lips are sealed." And here Birkerts is right to worry—modern media do make it easy to talk much and say little. If this essay were an email, I might have sent it long ago, unedited (unfinished), and let its unfortunate recipient respond with questions. Questions would be inevitable. They are the necessary next step of thinking rooted in the phrase 'I may clarify later.' But thanks to the speed of the medium, those questions from my correspondent would come quickly, as would my own reply in turn, and through a series of calls and responses we might finally arrive at some realized conclusions. That wouldn't be so bad after all. But, although coherent, the dialogue I'm imagining is impossible in practice. One of us, habitually reading the morning's new emails, would one day grow weary of plodding through the mud and simply stop asking questions. All ideas would lie there, stagnant, as good as dead. Never before have we been able to say nothing with such speed over such distance. We are talking a lot, more than we ever have, but we're not saying anything.

The problem with the modern media is not that they are inherently evil, it is that they have no inherent speed limit. Writing this with pen and paper, my words are limited by the speed of my hand, and still I must fight them from thinking for me. A skilled typist's words are limited only by the speed of his or her own mental monologue, and mental monologues stop making sense early and often. Birkerts sighs and settles in for his fight to the death against the seemingly inevitable. But there is hope, Professor. There is hope for us yet.

The high school teacher who first introduced me to Orwell was terrifying in the intensity of his thinking. Say something careless, and he would tear it to pieces. He assigned his students Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" early in the year, sparing us all some embarrassment. "If you simplify your English, . . ." Orwell advised me, "when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself" (522). My teacher's thoughts and prose were not always beautiful, but they were always clear, concise, and never ugly. He was exactly the kind of writer Orwell encouraged sixty years ago. I introduce him now because my teacher is much, much better off for living in Birkerts's Electronic Millenium. The tools and outlets now available to him surpass anything in human history. There are still pens and paper aplenty if he should like to begin there. Later, on a word processor, he can attack his own sentences viciously, repeatedly, until they are strong enough to fight back. When he is finished he can present his work in an elegant, professionally type-set form without depending on someone else's printing press. There will be no errors of transcription, and scholars will never have to quibble about whether he wrote this word or that as they do with Melville and other writers past who were subject to the legibility of their manuscripts. He can send his work to anyone (almost) anywhere in the world in less than a minute. For anyone with something to say, this is a miraculous, magical time to be alive. What we must learn is the discipline to use the available speed when it's useful, and to fight it when it's not.

Most of the cars on the highway are completely capable of speeds over 65 mph, but it is often unsafe to travel so quickly. On the highway there are enforced, immediate penalties for breaking the law. Good writers know they must set their own speed limits, that their sentences almost never come out right the first time. "The word processor," writes William Zinsser, "has made good writers better and bad writers worse" (xi). Free of the pen, good writers use the available speed to put more work into their sentences. Bad writers use it to write more quickly—tremendous volumes of fast-paced nothing.

Sven Birkerts is a good writer. Enamored by the (potential) elegance of language, he is terrified that bite-speak will erode that elegance past a point of no-return. But that is not all Birkerts should be afraid of. Orwell expounded on the permanent link between thought and language. This is not just a war on language in which we find ourselves. It is a war on thought itself. And it is a hard war to fight because it is never clear who fights for which side. The new media and the printed page and the people who use them are all allies and enemies at once. Some days I spend with good books, thoughtful emails, and home recordings on my laptop of my songs in progress. Some nights I spend with my television and a few beers.

The media of the Electronic Millennium surround us, connect us, and compress distance over spacetime. Birkerts shudders. But for me (on my good days), for Birkerts (if he'll give it a chance), for Orwell (if he were not dead), and for anyone else who's interested, this compression is a tremendous gift. Orwell's vicious cycle of language eroding thought eroding language eroding thought works in reverse! If I surround myself with strong language, it will build strong thinking which will build strong language which will build strong thinking, ad infinitum. The wonderful thing about living in the Electronic Millennium is that even if only a few people are writing well, I can still surround myself with strong language. It's incredibly easy for good writers to find each other, share with each other, and challenge each other to write better. Our number and locations are now irrelevant. The tools Birkerts is afraid of are just that, tools, and he forgets that we can use them as we like. All ideas should live in notebooks a while, and some of them should probably stay there forever, but the good ones should be let out, let loose to wrestle with as many minds as possible. That is easier now than ever.

No one will write me a ticket for breaking the speed limit in my writing, but I am learning by the examples of other people all over the world to obey the speed limit on my own. All each of us must do is find a bit of food for thought, so we can talk a lot *and* say a lot. I happen to feed on the arts, and Birkerts worries they are losing their relevance. He must be confusing Byrne and Björk with Spears and Timberlake, Michel Gondry with James Cameron, art with entertainment. For while today I linger on a David Byrne concert from 2004, and over the countless shows and plays and books and films I've enjoyed before and since, I do not remember what was on the Facebook news-feed this morning or what was on TV last night. Entertainment is passive, and it passes time. The arts are active—at their best they are *interactive*—and they push me, hard. They remind me that the time in a day is a gift, that there isn't much, that someday instead of having more time, I will have

only stories of how I spent the time I had. The arts help me make full use the tools of the Electronic Millennium. Birkerts finds his food for thought in his fear of those same tools, and though he writes very well, I'd encourage him to look on them more openly. Come step out of your office, Professor, and see what else you can make of the tools at your disposal.

---

## WORKS CITED

- Birkerts, Sven. "Into the Electronic Millennium." *Occasions for Writing*. Ed. Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy II. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007. 469-76.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996.
- Orwell, George. "Politics and the English Language." *Occasions for Writing*. Ed. Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy II. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007. 514-22.
- Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well, 30th Anniversary Edition: The Classic Guide to Writing Well*. New York: Collins, 2005.