

# Suspended Sentences

by SCOTT SAUL

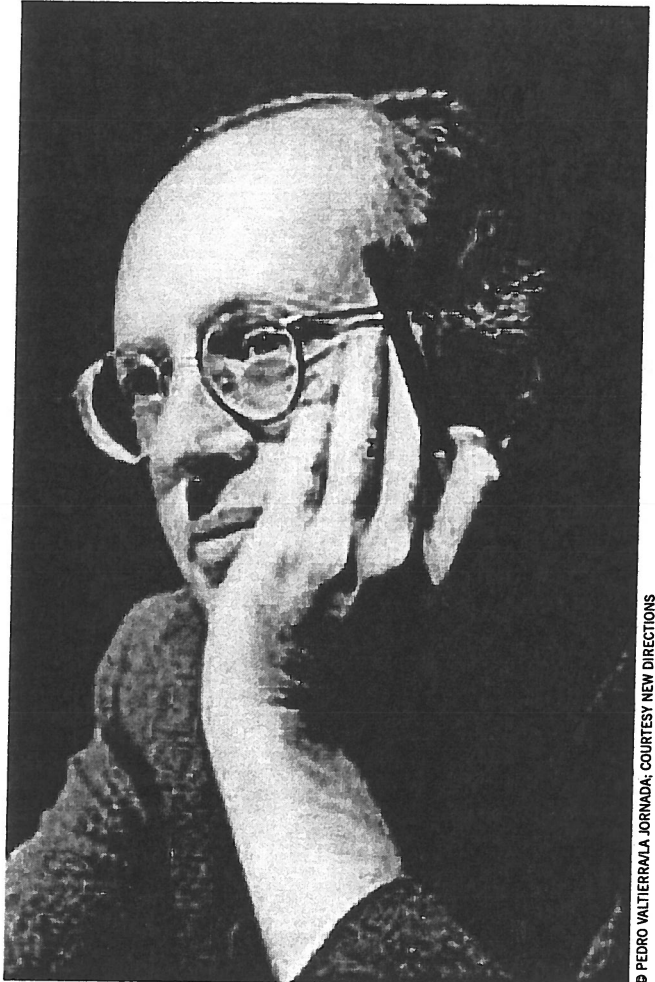
In 2005 the editors of the ecumenical poetry annual *Fulcrum* sent out a questionnaire on “poetry and truth” that ventured to ask the big questions, no matter how self-serious or old-fashioned they seemed: “What is poetry’s essential nature (if any)?” for instance, and “How does poetry relate to the human condition?” For the nineteen poets and critics who responded, including Billy Collins, James Wood, Lyn Hejinian and Charles Bernstein, the exercise was something of a Rorschach test of their comfort with the questionnaire’s elevated tone. Some matched its earnestness note for note (“Poetry, among all arts, probably comes closest to the search for truth since it expresses itself in language, which is the truth medium”—Russian poet Alexei Tsvetkov); some answered it with Steinian riddles (“The greatest poets....accomplish nothing, which is everything”—Hejinian); and some deflated it with absurdist humor (“Poetry is to truth like rubber to the rubber tree: it bounces”—Bernstein).

And then there was Eliot Weinberger, cultural critic and award-winning translator of Octavio Paz and Jorge Luis Borges, who pushed back against *Fulcrum*’s questions about poetry and truth with a story about poetry and the failures of criticism. (It is included in Weinberger’s new collection of prose pieces, *Oranges and Peanuts for Sale*.) In sixteenth-century India, Weinberger’s story goes, a poor but devout farmer enlists the god Shiva to write a poem for him so that he might win a prize of a thousand gold coins promised by the king of Madurai. Shiva does write a love poem, but the royal assembly rejects it for what seems to be a trivial reason: the poem describes a woman’s hair as naturally fragrant and, according to the critic Natkira, the court’s official aesthetic treatise does not allow for such a thing. When Shiva appears at the royal court to argue for his poem—its features, embellishment and sentiment—Natkira is unbending, pointing again to the treatise and its rule on the description of hair. At this point, Weinberger writes,

the god became enraged and revealed his terrifying third eye of flame. The critic said, “I don’t care if you have eyes all over your head. Your poem is no good.” So Shiva cursed him and turned him into a leper.

Weinberger was clearly having some fun with *Fulcrum*’s questionnaire: instead of answers, he offered a booby-trapped parable, advising all critics to be wary of the dogmas they subscribe to, lest they find themselves on the wrong end of another summary judgment. But though there is a dash of humor to the parable (the unflappability of Natkira when confronted by Shiva’s exposed third eye; the testiness of Shiva and the quick flick of his punishment), it’s undeniably a revenge fantasy too. Critics often presume to wield control over the fate of artists, but here it’s the artist, unbound by aesthetic and legal convention, who relishes the power to literally flame his critics. Which is fitting for Weinberger: he’s the sort of critic who often takes up arms against other critics, speaking for an aesthetic vision that is like that “terrifying third eye”—normally hidden from sight but incandescent and disturbing when revealed. Creativity and castigation, invention and moral judgment, are the alpha and omega of Weinberger’s work.

For some thirty-odd years now, Weinberger has been carving out his iconoclastic niche in our cultural landscape—or rather several iconoclastic niches. He has long been a sophisticated translator and ambassador of an international avant-garde, bringing innovative Latin American, Chinese and American poetics to a larger au-



Eliot Weinberger

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## Oranges and Peanuts for Sale

By Eliot Weinberger.

New Directions. 254 pp. Paper \$16.95.

## An Elemental Thing

By Eliot Weinberger.

New Directions. 194 pp. Paper \$15.95.

dience; and almost as long, he has been a witty but withering observer of the limits of American intellectual life (one persistent criticism being the lack of interest in innovative world literature). In the past decade, though—the years largely of the Bush regime—Weinberger has invested increasing energy into two other, seemingly disconnected projects. In one vein of work, he writes political commentary largely for export, dissecting and scourging American militarism (“The United States is a Banana Republic with a lot of money”) in publica-

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tions from *As-Safir* (Lebanon) to *Zvědavce* (the Czech Republic). In another vein, he has intensified his experimentation with the form of the essay, bringing it closer to poetry and magical realism. Yet all of Weinberger's writings are held together by his signature style: cutting in its precision and ironic distance, erudite but uncluttered, clean.

Weinberger is best known for "What I Heard About Iraq," an essay that managed to bring together his commentator and experimentalist halves, applying principles of Modernist collage—more specifically the archival collage method of New York poet Charles Reznikoff—to the "truth decay" of the Bush years. Published in the *London Review of Books* on February 3, 2005, the essay went viral, eventually being linked to or reproduced on more than 100,000 websites; later that year it was adapted into a work of protest theater performed in locales as far-flung as Berlin, Calcutta, Durban and Los Angeles. It may be the most circulated piece of antiwar writing to emerge from the Iraq War.

Weinberger's method was to turn the 24/7 spin cycle on the war into a piece of found poetry, one that conjures up the war's absurdity rather than declaring it. Sound bites from global media are isolated, stripped down, then pieced back together—suspended sentence to suspended sentence—so that readers are served up the absurdity of the war in a bitterly concentrated dose. Here's a passage from the second installment of the essay, published January 5, 2006, in the *LRB*:

I heard that, in Fallujah and elsewhere, the US had employed white phosphorus munitions, an incendiary device, known among soldiers as "Willie Pete" or "shake and bake", which is banned as a weapon by the Convention on Conventional Weapons. Similar to napalm, it leaves the victim horribly burned, often right through to the bone. I heard a State Department spokesman say: "US forces have used them very sparingly in Fallujah, for illumination purposes. They were fired into the air to illuminate enemy positions at night, not at enemy fighters." Then I heard him say that "US forces used white phosphorus rounds to flush out enemy fighters so that they could then be killed with high explosive rounds." Then I heard a Pentagon spokesman

say that the previous statements were based on "poor information", and that "it was used as an incendiary weapon against enemy combatants." Then I heard the Pentagon say that white phosphorus was not an illegal weapon, because the US had never signed that provision of the Convention on Conventional Weapons.

Jon Stewart and the creative team at *The Daily Show* have broadcast this sort of media critique—illustrating how the corruption of language follows the corruption of power—to millions on a nightly basis. But "What I Heard About Iraq" is more disquieting than *The Daily Show*, partly because it doesn't offer the safety valve of shared laughter, and partly because it mirrors an almost shameful passivity. It tracks the twisting of the truth but is reticent on what to do about it; the narrative voice is a vacuum chamber that, registering all, is also unsettlingly inert. In fact, this may be the secret to the piece's success: unlike much agitprop, which calls upon its viewers or readers to do something, "What I Heard About Iraq" crystallized the feeling, shared by millions around the world, that the war was built on lies but that the truth was poor consolation to those, in Iraq, suffering in its grasp. The pathos of the war protester, alone and agape in front of the latest outrage on his or her computer screen, had found its literary form.

The pieces in *Oranges and Peanuts for Sale* cover a wide range of topics—the arts under the Bush administration, Obama's presidential campaign, ancient and contemporary Chinese poetry, the color blue, exoticism, the relationship between Samuel Beckett and Octavio Paz—but are knit together by a sensibility that prizes exactitude in its formulations yet is open to the unpredictable complications of the larger world. Put another way: weak prose and parochialism are two of Weinberger's chief enemies. One of the delights of reading his essays is that they reveal the interconnections between the two; the Wittgensteinian idea that the limits of one's language are the limits of one's world becomes, in his hands, a tool for revealing the blind spots common to our culture.

Or our critics. In *Oranges and Peanuts for Sale*, the self-assured yet clueless critic appears in various guises, only to be cut down to size by Weinberger's sharp pen. In his appreciative but tart assessment of Susan

Sontag, he applauds her political courage and the cultural shift brought on by her *Illness as Metaphor* but comes down hard on her self-seriousness and the Eurocentricism of her critical imagination: "Like the old joke about the Oxford don, she knew everything, and nothing about everything else." Reviewing Robert Alter's new edition of the Psalms, Weinberger makes the renowned scholar seem arrestingly blinkered: "Based on the evidence here, Alter seems to know very little about the last hundred years of English-language poetry." Weinberger tends to use his own wide-ranging erudition as the stick by which other writers are measured, found wanting, then roughed up a bit.

Yet the attacks are not personal so much as cultural, a way to question what we value in our critics. The attack on Alter, for instance, is part of a larger, and welcome, brief against the fetish for "fidelity" among academic translators ("the primary task of a translator is not merely to get the dictionary meanings right—which is the easiest part—but rather to invent a new music for the text in the translation-language"). And the review ends evocatively rather than tendentiously, with a panoramic sketch of how the Psalms, in translation over the past five centuries, have set the paradigm for what ecstatic poetry should sound like. There's a refreshing current of irrelevance that runs deep through Weinberger's polemics, a Robin Hood-like ethic that has him taking from those with cultural capital to give to those without it: Sontag and Alter may be taken down a few pegs, but less-known figures like Vicente Huidobro, Hans Faverey, Lorine Niedecker and Kenneth Cox are treated, conversely, with handsome admiration.

To be fair, there are moments in *Oranges and Peanuts for Sale* when Weinberger's assuredness fails him—when he seems to drop his ordinarily careful presentation of a critical case and shift into polemical overdrive. Given the task, in 2002, of introducing E.B. White's 1948 essay "Here Is New York" to the German readers of *Lettre International*, Weinberger took the occasion to meditate on how White's winsome style reflected his limitations and those of his longtime employer. Weinberger begins by observing that White's New York is "geographically minute"—much of it confined within a fifteen-block radius of *The New Yorker's* offices on West Forty-third Street—then connects the smallness of White's tour to the small-mindedness of the magazine that published him. *The New Yorker*, Weinberger observes,

is permanently fixed in an air of bemused detachment, which it expresses in a style whose sentences are pathologically rewritten by its editors, "polished" (as they call it) until every article, whether a report from Rwanda or a portrait of a professional dog-walker, sounds exactly alike, driven by domestic similes and clever turns of phrases that mix colloquial speech with unexpected synonyms. E.B. White was a master of the style, and it is a sign of the magazine's petrification—if it was ever not petrified—that his sentences from fifty years ago might have been published in last week's issue.

Weinberger's essay on White valuably broaches the costs of *The New Yorker's* cleverness, the mysteries that it can screen out with its likably crisp prose; one wonders how American journalism might have evolved over the past decade if W.G. Sebald, rather than Malcolm Gladwell, offered the most lucrative working model. Yet Weinberger's conclusions also seem exaggerated. Can one essay encapsulate the whole of the magazine's history (especially when the essay in question was published not in *The New Yorker* but *Holiday*)? Is the house style of *The New Yorker* so uniform? (Ask the ghosts of John Updike and Pauline Kael.) And are Jane Mayer's articles about torture, Seymour Hersh's reports on military affairs and Jon Lee Anderson's dispatches from the outposts of the American empire all signs of "petrification"?

Perhaps inevitably, Weinberger the polemicist is a lumpier rather than a splitter; sometimes, though, the lumping seems to come merely from his detached, bird's-eye vantage point rather than from an engagement with the complexity of the problem in question. In several essays Weinberger argues that academics in the humanities have lost their way, focusing on critical theory and bean-counting curricular reform at the expense of practical political engagement and aesthetic pleasure. And American writers, partly because of their ties to academia, are no better as citizens of the world:

We are where we are in part because American writers—supposedly the most articulate members of society—have generally had nothing to say about the world for the last thirty years....

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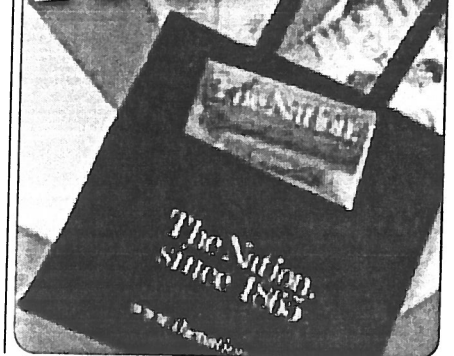
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# Nation Mart



and knee-jerk demography and the personal as political and the impersonal as poetical, American writers now [in 2003] have the government we deserve.

Certainly this conclusion packs a wallop. But it also seems questionable, given that the “globalization” of the American novel has accelerated ever since, say, Russell Banks’s *Continental Drift* (1985), which put an American working-class family and a family of Haitian refugees on an unforgettable and fatal collision course. Whatever one might think of such bestselling literary novels as Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, they have more than “nothing to say about the world.” The conclusion is even more questionable since it’s presented without much evidence to support it: here Weinberger lets his adversarial tone do all the work of establishing the authority of his argument. (Even Natkira took the trouble to point to a treatise.) He becomes, as he says of E.B. White, a “prisoner of his style”—bound to present himself as the Last Broad-Minded Man in America, bearing lonely witness to the world. Those who already agree with him will nod with pleasure at these takedowns of the American intelligentsia, but those who disagree will be unmoved.

Like an opera singer who can also belt the blues, Weinberger the polemicist has cultivated another, more enigmatic side, best illustrated by the prose poems of *An Elemental Thing*, which take folklore, cultural history and the anthropology of religion into the realm of magical realism. A short list of the subjects addressed in *An Elemental Thing* might include the four seasons, the wind, ice and the stars; animals from wrens and lizards to tigers and rhinos; the singing of New Zealand’s Kaluli tribe and the dream language of a people indigenous to Chiapas; holy people from the prophet Muhammad to a seventeenth-century Catholic saint; and a woman who turns into a tree of flowers so that she might furtively make love to her husband. Weinberger considers *An Elemental Thing* a “serial essay,” and there are motifs—the quest for spiritual purity, the fragility of the natural world, the cruelty of the powerful—that loosely link its individual essays to one another.

Still, it’s the narrative point of view, rather than the subjects themselves, that

lends *An Elemental Thing* its powerfully double sense of coherence and elusiveness. While the American essay, as a genre, is dominated by the “personal investigative essay”—the story of how the narrator came to learn something about himself, or his mother, or the giant squid—Weinberger is experimenting here with the “impersonal investigative essay” in which there is no “I” to frame the knowledge revealed and relate it to our time. His narrative voice is always felt but never easy to pin down.

Take, for instance, Weinberger’s essay on Muhammad, which begins as a creation myth (“Four hundred and twenty-four thousand years before the creation of the heavens... God created the Light of Muhammad”), then recounts, in short and disconnected paragraphs, the incidents of the prophet’s life. In Weinberger’s telling, the Koran opens onto a magical, animistic world, both sublime and matter-of-fact:

[Muhammad] split the moon in two and put it back together again. He made the sun rise just after it had set. He put a small stone in the middle of the road that no person or animal ever accidentally kicked.

Another stone, lying on the mouth of a well in a garden, saluted him, and asked that it not become a stone in hell, and Muhammad prayed on its behalf.

A camel complained to the prophet that he worked hard but was given little to eat. Muhammad summoned the camel’s owner, who admitted it was true.

By withholding his own judgment in his poetic biography, Weinberger forces his readers to weigh for themselves the charisma of this Muhammad, who is part cosmic god, part St. Francis—and not so much a psychological person in his own right or a moral guidepost for the faithful. (Weinberger, one notes, has stripped out any commentary on the meaning of Muhammad’s actions.) Rather, he makes Muhammad the occasion for a beguiling set of stories; he has largely taken Muhammad out of the realms of history, ethics and psychology and placed him in the world of literature. Muhammad’s life becomes—to use one of Weinberger’s favored tropes—a vortex, made up of fragments that converge and whirl without ever settling into a single pattern.

It may seem odd that a politically engaged critic like Weinberger is also a de-

fender of the literary as a space of disjunction and ambiguity. But he advertises as much, in *Oranges and Peanuts for Sale*, when he offers the figure of Peruvian poet César Vallejo, who wrote both “propaganda prose” and avant-garde verse, as a model for his own career. Weinberger’s political essays are exposés of fraudulent worlds; his prose poems are explorations of alternative ones, rich in their capacity to inspire wonder and complicated in their struggles with such “elemental things” as pain, death and the limits of an individual life. A song from Greenland voices a barren sense of the self:

What lives within me?  
The great ice.  
I wish it would split in two.  
What lives within me?  
What lives within me?  
I wish it would go away.

In recovering Arctic poetry from another era, Weinberger has uncovered a sort of surrealist lyric, plangent in our own.

Yet Weinberger often makes these alternative worlds as violence-soaked as they are spellbinding. *An Elemental Thing* begins by throwing the reader into the Aztec time of the apocalypse—a year, repeated every fifty-two years, when the world threatened to end if the correct rituals were not observed. Everyone climbed onto rooftops and terraces so that no feet would touch the ground, and all eyes fixed on a hilltop temple, where priests sacrificed a prisoner, an individual free of blemishes, by slitting open his chest, pulling out his heart and setting it in a pyre. Afterward, people lunged at their own fires so that they might “be blessed with blisters.”

The next day, the renewal of the world was welcomed with a confounding mixture of civility and brutality: “new mats were spread out, new hearthstones placed, incense lit, and honey-dipped amaranth seed cakes eaten by all. Quails were decapitated.” It’s hard to know what to make of this ritual, which is both successful on its face and disturbing in its reliance on innocent scapegoats, like those poor decapitated quails. Could it be that this Aztec world, rather than being an alternative to our world, simply cuts a surprising window onto it? That the victims sacrificed at the Aztec altar are not that far from the innocent civilians killed by white phosphorus rounds in Iraq? One thing is certain: no matter how many times you read *An Elemental Thing*, Eliot Weinberger won’t be telling. ■