ELLiot PerlMAN MADE a bit of a splash a few years ago with *Three Dollars* (1998). Parts of the novel were underfictionalised in the most blatant way, parts of it seemed to represent nothing more than the fervencies of what Perlman thought (most of it staunch stuff ‘again globalisation), but it seemed undeniable that the life and times of these south suburban Melburnian wine and cheesers represented, in Australian terms, a piece of subject matter worth biting off.

It was a bit ridiculous that a book of fiction of rather manifestly modest literary ambitions should be published as the crème de la crème of literary fiction and then pretty much accepted as such. Perlman’s new book confounds the pretension and makes it well and truly the author’s own by purloining the title of one of the twentieth century’s greatest works of literary criticism and adding insult to injury by calling the protagonist’s dog Empson. One of the only times I have been cut by the *The Age* on the basis of something other than length was when I wrote about William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) — because of the obvious topicality, given the barbarous appropriation — and concluded: ‘So in future, Elliot Perlman, call your dogs something else.’

But then, we live at a time when the latest wannabe fiction is more likely to command reverence than the work of a notable critic and poet. Not the least paradox, though, is that Perlman would be likely to agree.

So is his new novel a dog? Well, as ever, it depends who’s barking. The first forty or so pages of the book represent the most inflated, maddeningly inept and monstrously bombastic writing I have encountered in years, a kind of cartoon of novelistic ambition so wildly in excess of novelistic talent that the upshot makes you want to weep and scream and scratch yourself convulsively. It is not just like a little boy in a bathtub trying to imitate, say, Laurence Olivier; it is like the imitation going for the length of an uncut performance of *Hamlet*.

In fact, as befits a novelist with immature aspirations to greatness, the model seems to be Tolstoy. Perlman is in the process of delineating the woes of a young Simon Heywood (now there’s a made-up name that would have caused a stir in literary and English Department circles a few years back) from the perspective of his Czech Jewish psychiatrist (Klima, wouldn’t you know?). Everything seems to be issuing into the kind of varnished, quasi-epigrammatic sentences that aspire to the condition of wisdom: ‘All happy families …’ and that kind of thing. Except that, in Perlman’s case, they don’t.
They’re callow, they’re silly, they have no generalising power of application and they seem to testify to nothing but the author’s ignorance of life.

Perlman’s style filled me with such torpor that for many weeks I could not read on. When I was forced to, I discovered that there was a slightly different novel lurking inside the husk of bombast and grandeur that Perlman had erected for himself.

Seven Types is a novel about a kidnapping, and it is told, like Ulysses, Wuthering Heights and Wilkie Collins’s The Moonstone, by a series of narrators, that most seductive (because most variegated) form of storytelling. The hero, who seems to be the object of the novelist’s capacity for both infatuation and self-portraiture, is a depressed former schoolteacher who has never got over the girl he went out with at university years before. He is devoted to reading poetry and getting drunk. He communes with a sympathetic prostitute and is haunted by the fact that a primary school child once disappeared when he was looking after him. He kidnaps the child of the former flame in the hope that this will provoke her into saying he is her lover in order to save him from prison. In fact, the prostitute freaks out immediately, the cops kick down the door and the rest of the action is dominated by the suspense of what is going to happen to the seriously upset arthy hero when he is tried for the crime.

If it’s read as a multiple point of view page-turner about a group of people who conglomerate to form a kind of higher soap, Seven Types does take on its fascinations, even though the book can only be apprehended in this way if the reader goes out of her way not to savour the prose: that is, if she reads at breakneck speed for the story, ignoring or skimming over the fact that the novelist says everything at three times its own representation. I agree with Perlman about author’s ignorance of life. They’re callow, they’re silly, they have no generalising power of application and they seem to testify to nothing but the author’s ignorance of life.

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What emerges is a tolerable depiction of human life, conventionally conceived in the light of standard sophistications, and thrown into an improbable cluster of intrigue that will divert the mind, even if it can’t stand too much logical scrutiny. There’s the intelligent, heart-of-gold girl who has to work as a prostitute but ministers to men body and soul. Not only does she love the hero but she relieves the needs of his body and soul. Not only does she love the hero but she relieves the needs of his small. There’s the intelligent, heart-of-gold girl who has to work as a prostitute but ministers to men body and soul. Not only does she love the hero but she relieves the needs of his only does she love the hero but she relieves the needs of his work as a prostitute but ministers to men body and soul.

The Sound and the Fury it is not, though it’s diverting enough to have the action cut up like confetti and then just form, sometimes garrulously, the putty that keeps it together. Sometimes the dialogue or the narrative is like the principles of logorrhea at work in a David Mamet play applied to cardboard cut-out sensibilities derived from contemporary liberal journalism. The upshot will keep you going as pseudo-style and pseudo-thought, but don’t be surprised that its upshot is no better than it should be. This is a novel so modest that it wants to conquer the world. With a few murders and car chases (as well as courtroom surprises), it might have a better chance. It would also, in its way, be a better book.