

3 Stylistic Microplots Melville to Miéville

In thinking about style, one is always starting over – with fresh evidence. Freshness, surprise, being often the point. And this can mean beginning, as in this chapter, with endings. Weighed in the balance of imagined action, the value of style can tip the scales in a novel's last moments. Even in verbally adventurous fiction, however, one cannot fully anticipate, early on, the degree of fireworks or fade-out that will be assigned to closure. Style earns its way as it goes, and dividends may be paid – and played – out in many forms. Plot can achieve its vanishing point in a dense horizon of rhetoric or taper off in understatement, closure secured either in the midst of verbal intensity or its wake. Only the narrative's particular verbal journey can set the terms of understanding for its point of rest.

Certainly no novel ever muted its way toward conclusion *less* than Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). Ahab's Pyrrhic victory is complete, the revenge of the whale's death taking the ship down with it. An unattributed choric voice, variant of free indirect discourse, transmits the last human remark: "The ship? Great God, where is the ship?"¹ The answer soon comes into visual focus across the phonic and syntactic interference at "*they through*": "Soon they through dim, bewildering mediums saw her sidelong fading phantom." In a minimally distended periodic suspension of that four-word impedance ("through *dim*, bewildering *mediums*," with dimness inherent ["dim"/"dium"]) in the ocean mists and spray), the combined work of assonance and a further hint of chiasmic syllabification ("dim"/"med") postpones revelation from "Soon they," across "through," to the verb "saw," followed by a sideways elongation of spectral alliterative modification in that "*sidelong fading phantom*." In this brief adjective chain, the pressure of alliteration is only a

further horizontal nudge from the normal comma separation after “dim” to the almost adverbial force of “sidelong.” And in all this, the point of vantage is a satellite craft soon to be sucked down with that ghostly vestige of the ship in a more aggressive whirlpool of phonetic recurrence: “And now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole . . .” (576). Beyond (but rendered somehow more palpable by) the spin of alliteration, a merely graphic “anagram” seems implicit in “concentric circles seized” even before the suction sets in – as all but audited in the cross-word **sibilance** of the whirlpool (“circlesseized”). And the sentence has just begun. For only at this point, in a complex suspended syntax, completing the participial thrust of the roiled grammar so far, is the question “where is the ship?” really answered: there, where this last remnant, the splinter craft, is tending. Thus is the grip of that concentric funnel last seen – heard – in the very moment when its force, “spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex” as it does, “carried the smallest *chip* of the Pequod out of sight” (576). Recalling the fractalized “chips” of shipping in our last chapter’s last passage from Dickens, call Melville’s more dramatic effect a phonetic as well as material synecdoche.

Certainly sound play joins with syntactic byplay in the rest of Melville’s finale. The now Biblical, now Shakespearean, now Miltonic cadences and convolutions of this novel reach their peak in an extraordinary last cadenza, sprung from an unorthodox plural and a multisyllabic adverbial neologism, “as the last *whelmings intermixingly* poured themselves over the sunken head” of the last defiant survivor. At just that instant, “a red arm and a hammer hovered backwardly uplifted in the open air, in the act of nailing the flag faster and yet faster to the subsiding spar” (576). Not the echoic “mast” again (balanced against “faster and yet faster”) but merely its dwindling upper length, a thin remaining “spar”; and not a “backwardly uplifted hammer” but, more unnerving, the syntactically backward (as well as markedly Miltonic) **inversion** of “a hammer hovered backwardly uplifted.”

The mimetic effect of this last assertive gesture is in fact so complete that it stands forth almost as a parable of tragic *loftiness*

itself, a last vertical stand against descent. Accompanying this is the teasing anagrammatic ripple in the “ironical coincidings” of waving flag and ocean waves, where that epithet “ironical” seems designed as much to describe the convergences of a narrative destiny as it is to picture the irrelevant similitude that matches the flapping of fabric with undulating billows. In the process of such undulation, syntax could scarcely be more tightly leashed to action. Another heavily progressive *ing* form now arises out of normal grammatical sequence to secure an inner, graded assonance when the “sky-hawk that tauntingly had followed the main-truck downwards from its natural home” has its wing caught between hammer and vanishing mast. The resulting intensity, passing from animal pain to mortal desperation, is transferred by phonetic osmosis in the materialized affect of echo alone. For it is the living man, not the bird, who is said, in a phonetic bracket releasing its full discharge after an initial assonance, to be “feeling the *ethereal thrill*” in an electric “death-gasp.” This is the bird of “archangelic shrieks” that, with its “imperial *beak* thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship” (576) – but not before the death cry has stretched “iek” out, eked it out from one syllable across two, into its phonetic apotheosis at just the moment of thematic explicitness for this vessel “would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it” (576).

In rounding out an extended passage thus bracketed in its aural whirlpool by “*whelmings*” and “*helmeted*” for this no-longer-helmed ship, a set of gaping vowel sounds is propelled still by the *ing* churn that rims the Pequod’s vortex in the novel’s one-sentence last paragraph, dispatched in a simple semicoloned **compounding**. After a preceding paragraph beginning “And now,” plot has come to its end: “Now *small fowls* flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then *all* collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (576). Now is again forever – and the open-mouthed yawn of vowels has done its sixfold closural work. So, too, transhuman time is sustained in a continuity marked by refused phrasal variation: a raw wavelike recurrence that “rolled on” (the prepositional adverb

of spatial pattern and temporal continuity alike) “as it rolled” – not “had rolled” – five millennia back: more of the immemorial same. At which point the internal rhyme of “thousand” with “shroud” offers only the last shudder of fate, in whose wake the final “as” – not of similitude, but of geological perpetuity – unrolls this last chapter’s last half-dozen nearly neutralized words. The sunken vessel of plot has subsided into style alone: style, with its own alleviating contortions in the imperturbable onwardness, and sudden rhetorical subsidence, of its aural and grammatical undulation.

1851: an *annus mirabilis* in American letters. Witness the simultaneous publication of Melville’s seagoing epic and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s landlocked *House of the Seven Gables*, where, once again, a climactic death scene is a lightning rod for verbal discharge and its static electricity. Rather than sinking the protagonists out of sight in the lethal medium of their quest, this time a climactic moment locks a body tight in a domestic setting of *rigor mortis*. Yet style is no less vibrant in this latter case. This is because style, rhetoric, utterance itself, can sometimes flood a passage in ironic juxtaposition with, and even ontological disjunction from, the putative insentient muteness of its topic. When expressiveness slams up against silence, style *per se* – as the fullest evidence of human utterance – can thereby be thrown into unusual relief. Its value becomes purely differential, figure to the ground of oblivion. That’s what happens in Hawthorne. The novel gives over an entire chapter to the stone-cold body of the discovered Judge Pyncheon: a villainous human form bombarded by rhetoric alone in an overkill of phrasal liveliness around the petrification of his dead body. The longer it takes to elaborate the facets of the judge’s preternatural immobility, the farther style itself leaves his life deservedly behind. One can think of it as a kind of obverse prose mimesis. Paced by the narrator’s extravagantly prolonged harangue over the insensate body, recurrently badgered by **apostrophe** to look to the man’s trusted, indeed fetishized, chronometer and proceed with the busy, greedy day scheduled in his “memoranda,” we are reminded of numerous abrogated plans and appointments.² Among the scenes vainly projected into the mind of the man’s assumed momentary torpor – a mere “odd *fit* of oblivion”

(208), as the echoic prose has it – we gather the motive for his doctor's visit, conjured as if in the free indirect discourse of a still living intention: "Why, it is rather difficult to describe the symptoms. A mere dimness of sight and dizziness of brain, was it – or a disagreeable choking . . . – or was it a pretty severe throbbing and kicking" – not just ticking – "of the heart." All the while, in counterpoint to this erstwhile urgency, "the twilight is glooming upward out of the corner of the room" (211), where that mounting, or mounding, of prepositions in "upward out of" seems doing its best – along with the odd intransitive form "to gloom" ("glooming") – to summon a sepulchral, rather than just diurnal, shade. It is a participle worthy of Poe and his suffusive glooms. And the very action of obscurity is now followed by oxymoron. In the diminished light of this rising shadow is glimpsed the comparable darkening pallor of the guessed corpse in "the swarthy whiteness – we shall venture to marry these ill-agreeing words – the swarthy whiteness of Judge Pyncheon's face" (211). Then, too, the only "throbbing" is no longer that of an overstrained heart but that of the heavily metered (or metronomic) beat in "this little, quiet, never-ceasing throb of Time's pulse" (211) that is accomplished and communicated by the unregarded watch. Peter Boxall, in his approach to the synchronization of narrative and human time in *The Value of the Novel* (as discussed in the Introduction, and within a philosophical framework provided by Paul Ricoeur), might well have instanced the judge's body, in contrast to the normal personae of "living" characters, as a sheer materiality made deliberately impenetrable, in this anomalous case, by any sympathetic projection of the reader via the apostrophizing narrator. In this way, the exaggerated exception might be thought to prove the rule of imaged bodies laid open to us across the contours of narrative duration.

As the passage presses forward, its assertion of Time does more than contrast with the pulse-free bulk of the rigidifying body. Indeed, we have already heard the following death knell across the quirk of wordplay in the choice "moment" for "concern": "Time all at once, appears to have become a matter of no moment with the judge" (212), a phrasing folded upon itself across the extra twitch of reversible synonyms. When its focal point is reduced to sheer insentient matter,

that is, time is equally of no matter and no moment. Only the eponymous house seems alive to change, for those elusive symptoms of the thorax, never diagnosed in the missed appointment, seem transferred and depersonalized when the windy night “makes a vociferous but somewhat unintelligible *bellowing*” – and self-instanced iterative belling – “in its sooty throat (the big flue, we mean, of its wide chimney)” (212). A Dickensian **animism** is on tap to foreground the **personified** life of the house against that of the extinguished occupant. After narrative’s nightlong vigil over the never quite acknowledged corpse, there is no resurrection to be had, only the belated wake-up call to beauty: “Rise up, Judge Pyncheon. The morning sunshine glimmers through the foliage, and, beautiful and holy as it is” – *foli/ful ... oly* – “shuns not to kindle up your face” (216). Athwart the rhythm of alliteration, the very word *sunshine*, scrambled and contracted to *shuns*, thereby arrives (somewhere between a phonetic bracket and a partial **anagram**) to shed the further harsh light of certainty on the chapter’s goading diagnosis of the found body, where the impossibility of “up” in one phrasing seems shunted forward to redundancy in another with that contrastive “kindle up”: an illumination only of dead matter. The prepositional cue that seemed to thicken the darkness now also summons the light of recognition.

Poe, Dickens, Melville, Hawthorne: all densely phonetic writers schooled in the sound play of a Romantic aesthetic from which they took their varying lessons and distances. Victorian is, of course, the British name for any number of such stylistic immersions and departures – and mutual influences. But such phonetic intuition follows no rules, no logical progression. Just as in the macroeconomics of social environments, the narrative environs of novelistic prose are characterized by their own version of uneven developments, as we’ve already amply seen – and not just marked by style in this regard, but motored by it. The stiffly authenticating voice that opens *Robinson Crusoe*, all labored subordination in its prepositional pointers, recurs at the start of *Pickwick Papers* over a century later. This is unmistakable – even though the influence, in between, of Romantic sonority on the diction of a writer like Scott (overleaping Austen’s residual classicism) can also be sensed in assimilation in the

assonance/alliteration nexus – the broad-band *sonation*, as it were – of Dickens’s lampooned archival “gloom” in *Pickwick* (and the various sound play of his fourteen novels to follow) as well as of Poe’s yet more obsessive hyperbole. It remains for the likes of Melville and Hawthorne to consolidate such effects of Poe’s when subsumed to a more tragic, rather than gothic, vision that, however fevered, is stripped of all deliberate vocabular neurosis. Conrad’s style can be thought to follow in this vein, rendering sound play ethically productive rather than merely psychosomatic.

TRANSFIGURINGS: THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY

But there are other strains in both senses, tests of coherence and lines of influence, that fill out the roster of nineteenth-century writing in a transatlantic mode of what is loosely called realism – so often admixed, as in Hawthorne most recently, with layerings of the gothic. When backing up just half a decade from Hawthorne and Melville, in order to look, in turn, half a century forward (1848–98), it is immediately revealing to compare two of the most famous first-person narratives – female narrators at that, both governesses – in two very different stylistic keys. Aligning Charlotte Brontë and Henry James in this way can help to appreciate not so much any shared devices of style but, rather, style’s shared leverage in the heightening of prose melodrama.

At the point of crisis in 1848’s *Jane Eyre*, the abyss of bigamy has opened. Rochester’s living wife has been revealed. In recoil, Jane has taken off her own wedding dress, and only then realizes the full change this involves, pivoted around the clumsily, numbly repeated “now” and, in contrast, all that is no longer: “And *now* I thought: till *now* I had only heard, seen, moved – followed up and down where I was led or dragged – watched event rush on event, disclosure open beyond disclosure: but *now*, *I thought*.”³ Brontë’s habit of parallel expansions is seen in full operation in the shift from “event ... on event” – not to the expected “disclosure *upon* disclosure” (with its

tempting prepositional echo of “*up and down*”) but, instead, phonetically as well as phrasally dilated, to the more spatialized vanishing point of “disclosure *open beyond* disclosure.” With the result here, or say “now,” that the speaker must search for her own figurative corpse: “I was in my own room as usual . . . And yet where was the Jane Eyre of yesterday? – where was her life? – where were her prospects?” *Nomen est omen*, in another homophonic variant: Jane *ere* is now no more: “Jane Eyre, who had been an ardent, expectant woman – almost a bride, was a cold, solitary girl again: her life was pale; her prospects were desolate” – a dead metaphor immediately expanded into an extended conceit of the “Christmas frost” that had “come at midsummer” (261), as if in exfoliation of the unsaid metaphor of hopes nipped in the bud.

First-person rhetoric is an obvious means of focalizing sentiment. What one might call the governing perspective of this first-person writing is under stress from its own tropes. And sometimes, as at the climax of Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, the narrative voice can seem so warped by subjectivity that report veers between the febrile and the repressed, with the very diction and syntax so distorted by neurotic intensity that an air of hallucinatory blur invades the entire scene. Terrorizing him to the point of heart failure, James’s unnamed governess wants young Miles to admit his awareness of Quint’s ghost – even as it is only the spreading and encompassing projection of her own phrased consciousness, not the aura of the spectral invader, that appears to engulf their shared space in the very grammar of bafflement. Miles was “at me in a white rage” – a phrase (almost paranoid in its own right) for merely staring “at” me – “bewildered, glaring vainly over the place and missing wholly, *though it now, to my sense, filled the room like the taste of poison*, the wide overwhelming presence.”⁴ Swelling the periodic sentence, in that strained grammatical interruption, is only the welling up of the governess’s own frenetic self-justification. Both **synesthesia** (in that ambient taste of fatality) and alliteration (the cantilevered periodic span from “wholly” to its delayed phonetic traction in “wide overwhelming”) spread out the sense of evil, festering but attenuated, to a mere atmosphere of dread.

In the governess's deranged acquisitive triumph over the force of satanic pollution: "I have you ... but he has lost you forever." Yet that losing, next abstracted in her language as a palpable condition, is transferred to its true victim, Miles himself, constituting a fatal "stroke" of annihilation rather than a triumphant blow struck against the enemy. Prose begins registering Miles himself as "lost" in the maddened hammering metrics of the narrator's delayed recognition: "With the stroke of the loss I was so proud of he uttered the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss ..." (85). Though barely or ambiguously figurative in its own right ("[as if] the cry of a creature hurled"), the loss is further hedged by a seemingly conjectural "might" in the next clause – as if still levitated in simile: "and the grasp with which I recovered him might have been that of catching him in his fall." Within the vaporous subjunctive figuration, she "might" have caught and saved him, but didn't, for the abyss is real enough in one sense, and of her own making. We are returned now to the strictly literal, in fact the tragically material: "I caught him, yes, I held him ... but at the end of a minute I began to feel what it really was that I held," where the eventual "feel" of the rigidifying corpse, unsayable in her panic and grief, and dodged by lugubrious circumlocution ("what it really was that") is more literal than it at first sounds.

The sometimes excruciated nuance of Jamesian style, a fuss verging on obfuscation, an exactitude pursued to distraction, has found here the perfect vessel in the deranged fervor of his narrator. Whereas Brontë has her heroine work to figure an unmistakable anguish in the overt and encompassing metaphor of an unseasonable "frost" and its withering of "prospects," the governing tropes in James serve to buffer with simile and other deflections ("like the taste of poison," "might have been that of catching him") any clarity of mind in the telling. Never is it realized, from within the narrator's obsessive subjectivity, that the "wide overwhelming presence" has no plausible source but in her own projection. The work of figuration in these two governess tales, these two tellings, tends in just these ways to epitomize a radiating intensity of traumatic perception. Yet whereas Brontë has Jane wield a knowing trope drawn from the realm of blighted nature but by no means distorting her heroine's

view of the actual world that environs her grief, James's figure of toxicity, and its implied self-contagion, vitiates reality itself for his governess – and administer a lethal overdose of panic to the boy she would save. Yet again, style is in each case a microplot in its own right – and in the case of *The Turn of the Screw*, almost *the* microplot: miniaturizing the entire logic of the novella in its bitter finish.

Between these two nineteenth-century narratives falls another novella, more neogothic than either, that offers an even clearer case of a stylistic turn operating as plot's concentration and precis. Pivoted around the dead metaphor of "awaken" for *activate*, the resultant double grammar of Robert Louis Stevenson's *doppelgänger* plot in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) sets its central trope off in style's precipitant rush across a **paratactic** comma splice – almost a loosened biomedical suture – that can barely keep the two halves of the sentence, let alone the alternate selves, separate. Grammar lurches from a literal and intransitive description to a half-figurative, half-transitive upshot, taking the monster within as the released "accusative" object of a second verb: "I had gone to sleep Henry Jekyll, I had awakened Edward Hyde."⁵ Leaving consciousness *as* (and then *of*) myself, I spawned my antithesis and secret sharer. The dizzy reversals of this *gestalt* grammar trace syntax's own diagnosis of the split subject, psychic before syntactic. The narrative distillations installed by style are rarely as dramatically compact as this, but they are everywhere.

The last chapter recalled some of the loose and sinewy transforms undergone by style in genre consolidations over literary-historical time. Though far-flung in the remove of its settings and geopolitical tensions, it is not so far-fetched to imagine, as we saw, the rhetorical hyperbole of Conrad's writing, with all its "brooding gloom," drawing on a hybrid strain of psychological melodrama and gothic in earlier writing. And other lines of uneven and roundabout descent, equally dependent on the nuances of diction, grammar, and figure, can help to highlight the continued variances and values of style in the proliferation of narrative form. Before Conrad's flexed complexities of diction and syntax, and earlier in the second half of the Victorian century from which both his and James's prose would beat

their demanding retreats, we note next how fictional rhetoric crosses from Victorian realism into the varieties of turn-of-the-century decadence – and on through impressionism to modernist social critique – according to a similar leapfrogging of stylistic registers. It does so partly in open allusion and irony, always with a texturing impact on the shape of theme. To isolate but three examples of this further unevenness in stylistic experimentation, operating in widening historical arcs, we can look first to Walter Pater's burnished prose as it is sieved through the tighter mesh of Oscar Wilde's all but festering (if partly facetious) aestheticism in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Reaching further back into the Victorian century, while also farther forward, we'll note how John Ruskin's mandarin symmetries, from mid-century, are submitted at the start of the next to the suave sardonic distancing of E. M. Forster. And in a farther-reaching trajectory, the emphatic repetitions in the sounding ethical rhythms that characterize George Eliot's reflective rhetoric, passed through the erotic ontological rhapsodies of D. H. Lawrence and their pulsing iterative beat, can be heard to return, mordantly undone, as if by a reductive compression of grammar and syllabification alike, in the dubious, half-stuttered predication of being in the clone narrative of Kazuo Ishiguro. All told, from Victorian humanist essayism, with its impact on the high realist novel spearheaded by Eliot and inherited by Forster, through the posthumanist libidinal mysticism of Lawrence, to the posthuman angst of Ishiguro's post-postmodernism, more metaphysical than metafictional, is a long reach indeed. And all the more so when we stretch forward as well into the stylistic ambivalence of another sci-fi parable in a work by China Miéville from just under half a decade later than Ishiguro's novel. Such stylistic continuities – or shared malleabilities – are broached here not to trace some eccentric literary history of covert dependencies and debts. Rather, rhetorical affinities and contrasts are raised to suggest how direct or oblique common denominators across writers, whatever one seeks to make of them, make their differential claims on perception through maneuvers of style.

Evaluation, whether in Barthes's sense of typology or otherwise, has in this way a new challenge. Once style has been given a

certain deserved independence from the stories it weaves, a question arises. How far, short of parody, can writing press against its own enveloping effects in isolating them not just as functionally extreme, even downright excessive, but as actually suspect? Nowhere is the question better posed, and tested, than in the decadent moment of art for art's sake (make that style for style's sake) that takes its place in a broad turn-of-the-century phase of baroque prose – counter to naturalism's contemporaneous stringencies – extending from Wilde through James and Conrad to Lawrence and on, more lyrically inflected, to Woolf. The effects in the style of fiction are comparable, in this way at least, to the wrenching densities, as well as colloquial energies, introduced into poetic form in retreat from mainstream Victorianism's lucid verse euphony (Tennyson its standard-bearer), where, for the rival moderns, "make it new" amounted to "make it unrecognizable at first."

With Wilde, however, the distancing is more internal and elusive. Recall the opening of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), with its picture, first, of an aristocrat at his opulent leisure and ease. If judging the passage strictly on stylistic grounds, the undeniable beauty of its fleeting sensations, not obscurantist in the least, is shadowed by uneasiness none the less. Here, from the famous playwright, is a sustained flourish of rhetoric alone, no action, no dialogue, in which language's own massaging of hermetic sensuality turns the whole world into a narrow theater of feeling placed, by sheer style, under an autofocus microscope. Prose's own approximation of a "decadent" affect is, in fact, flagged by allusion to that classic touchstone of *fin de siècle* Victorian aestheticism in Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* (1873), with its celebration of the almost fever-pitch intensity of beauty's cult, a worship both material and spiritual: "To burn always with this hard gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life,"⁶ where the vocalic core of "flame" itself is sustained, in effect, across both syllables of its parallel **infinitives**, first by chiasm ("flame"/"maintain"), then, from within the flanged reversal, by internal rhyme ("maintain"). Yet sound effects like this, though very much under the unshowy control of rhetorical persuasion in Pater's crisp **apposition** and restatement, can, if more lavishly unleashed,

turn indulgent, even tinny – or at least get thinned out to a kind tinsel scintillation.

As follows. In contrast to the self-fueled and self-consuming nature of the aesthetic ideal crystalized and enshrined in Pater, Wilde's ambivalent rendition of its inbred, narcissistic manifestation centers on – or so far, in the opening description, merely circles around – the person, and saturated focalization, of Lord Henry Wotton. This is the character soon to be skewered for the jaded skepticism of his influence over the eponymous hero, where the complacencies of his cynicism are as insidious as they are witty. We are not privy yet, of course, to this satire of the author's own *alter ego* in aristocratic phrase-making when we first meet him. Because meeting him is hardly the word for it. We are voyeurs operating with suspect access to the enhanced vision and audition of his own privacy, those hyper-attunements by which he seems to take in the world through the ephemera of its sensations, draining reality dry like the bees that at one moment casually preoccupy his notice. It is as if, for this inveterate verbal stylist, the world itself, as cognitively received, is all style in the lesser sense, all perceptual decoration.

The flame of unstinting self-realization is still fanned, but its gemlike rigidity has gone limp, as we are soon to discover, with over-indulged sarcasm and lassitude. Before we know any of this, however, we are pointed to Lord Henry's person *in situ*, the sybarite lounging in an artist's studio, a cognizant body not just located at, but musing on – so it would seem, via the implied free indirect discourse – the thin curtained border between nature and culture, each aestheticized to a fare-thee-well. In respect to the garden adjoining his place of respite, the allusion to Pater is almost the least of it, even when overtly summoning – with the intertextual “flamelike” – the lure of “the nearby laburnum, whose tremulous branches” (what else, in prose like this, could a “*laburnum*” be but “*tremulous*”?) “seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flamelike as theirs.”⁷ Otherwise known as the “golden chain tree,” the laburnum is a lush but highly poisonous plant that can induce coma if ingested. These effects are almost, in themselves, rendered symptomatic, by

stylistic association, in the vaguely narcotized aura of the scene, as floated upon the cadences of prose itself.

The passage cannot help but prompt generalizations, which we can anticipate going in – and these directly in light of our evidence across the preceding two centuries of narrative rhetoric and its tonalities. Style is not simply a technical feature, a matter of narrative engineering. It is the interface, both tangible and impalpable at once, between plot and response. To begin with, there is nothing in prose depiction but words. In the end, or more to the point, in process, style is what those words *say* – beyond and beneath what they picture. They are more than the *how*, the means, of depiction. They are its manifested image in the sense of its figuration, its linguistic configuration. Style isn't the residue of setting or scene, of conjured space or action; it is the first layer, the front line, of reaction itself, the very prodding of response – sometimes its virtual model. Not just the representational *how* of constructed episodes, then, style delimits the *how we feel* in advance of what we think – and this very much in line with Altieri's claims about participatory affect in the Introduction.

In Wilde's case, when filtered through his exaggerated lounging surrogate, a sense of unearned satiety is redolent in the lazy libido of the self-pleasuring prose alone, quite apart from (or at least at one rhetorical remove from) its languid anchor in Lord Henry. So it is that the second sentence of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, opening the second paragraph, gives us a prose suffused with the same effete delectation of the senses as the recumbent and half-numbered aesthete it describes. Something is so deliciously right with the world that its whole manifestation seems wrong, unreal, strained to the point of sensory dissociation. And the effect is carried by an odd spectrum of internal repetitions and redundancies that can strike us merely as casual intensifiers until recognized for the minor jolts they instill: first in syntax, then in diction, then in etymology, and then in definition. "From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags on which he was lying, smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton" makes his first appearance. The parallel participial grammar of "lying, smoking" is amplified and jostled at once

by turning “smoking” into an overspecified transitive of duration (“as was his custom ... innumerable”), so that we are seeing not a body in action but a time-lapse image of his addictive torpor. It amounts, as linguistics would designate it, to the **iterative** mood of the participle.

And that time-lapse effect is next rendered visual by figuration and analogy, for this same Lord Henry, as the sentence continues – from his glimpse at the garden beyond the studio – “could,” as anticipated, in the full pull of the flora’s lethal seduction, “just catch the gleam” proffered by that synesthesia of “honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms” (7). Their luscious chromatic “burden” gives way in cognitive sequence, after a semicolon, to a loose cumulative grammar – with every flourish nourished on the insubstantial:

and now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect, and making him think of those pallid, jade-faced painters of Tokyo who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion (7).

Effects thicken as action is forestalled – and even inverted. It is not only the painters who are themselves aestheticized (“jade-faced”) – and so treated even in the subordinate grammar that specifies their skill (in the pallid assonance of “who through”). Further aestheticized is the passing recollection of an art whose uncanny ability to evoke the redundant “swiftness and motion” (stylistic **pleonasm** – as if to imply speed and “commotion,” rush and flutter) is turned inside out, and thus further derealized, when real avian movement beyond the curtain, rendered “fantastic” behind this scrim, is figured to induce the image of its sheer (“tussore”-thin) imitation. Unreality rules, usurping the marginally removed event of flight by its idealized similitude. The truncated rarefaction of such a classic rhetorical effect as **hendiadys** – converting “the world’s (the birds’) swift motion” to its artificial components of “swiftness and motion” – is

deployed here as if in the deliberate transcendence of logic by optic overload.

And if that was not enough to put the seal of decadence, or aesthetic retreat, on these impressionistic flashes, the paragraph is capped with a sentence that picks up, via immediate internal echo, on the earlier “burden” in a now strictly musical usage derived from the low-keyed personification that introduces the following new aura of airborne agents on the scene. Here is the “sullen murmur of the bees” – even the assonant “sullen” feels drawn into the etymologically “imitative” sound of “murmur” (as we recall from Scott) – “shouldering their way through the long unmown grass, or circling with monotonous insistence ...” We seem to hear the buzz in the responsive sibilance itself. Then, too, a kind of torpor is latent in the cause-versus-effect ambiguity of “long unmown” (neglected or lengthy). Moreover, compounding the widening byplay of consonants (via a loose phonetic bracket) from “(un)mown” into “monotonous,” we are then told – we hear – that the “dim roar of London was like the *bourdon* note of a distant organ” (7). The counterpoint of assonance is one thing, linked to the vague oxymoron of “dim roar” – and carried again on a chiasm of assonance (“oar ... don ... don ... or-”) that no sooner brings the distant near than it distances it with simile. Cross-wired sensations shuttled across displaced epithets, blended impressions and oppressions – all converge in this haze of evocation. Beyond mere synesthesia, this is aesthesia rampant. Here is style as agency itself, operating in a sphere of perceptual detachment and rendered merely sensualist by the fumes and wisps – and whisperings – of a sense-making prose whose lucidity is itself diluted by the play and overlay of sound.

A very different and more explicit consideration of style puts into alignment, not Pater and Wilde, but an earlier Victorian aesthete and a later Edwardian ironist. In any attention to the valuation of style, one needs therefore to note, as we’ve just done, that there are moments in which, not by quotation but by performance, style can be in its own right tacitly – and sometimes openly – devalued: held to sudden account, shown wanting, or indulgently overextended. Dated habits of literary practice are certainly ripe for send-up in

this respect. Dickens could blatantly lampoon the former mode of the “found manuscript” in all its lumbering editorial verifications. Beyond any such broad comedy, modernist writers may at any turn parody – by actual pastiche, as well as by “aesthetic distance,” even ethical distance – their Victorian forebears. This happens when E. M. Forster, obviously gone to school with Ruskin in the formal symmetries and syntactic elegance of his own prose, puts the Master to a new test – at a far greater historical distance, of course, than Wilde’s from Pater.

In the early phase of Forster’s novel in which it appears, the cameo of Ruskin’s prose is made to seem out of place in an unblinkered realist depiction of lower-class life hanging on over the abyss of civic nonentity. What is borrowed, trussed up, and then gutted in Forster’s acerbic allusion rounds out an episode in class analysis that is actually an embedded essay on the social registers of English prose. A mistaken apprenticeship in Victorian High Style for one of his characters becomes, in recoil on Forster’s part, a counter-primer of modern writing and its ironic revisionism. Where Pater comes dubiously bearing down, by intertext, on the sensory profusion of *Dorian Gray’s* first scene, or first setting, so does that other burnished Victorian essayist, Ruskin, intercept the literary ambitions, as well as social abjection, of Forster’s character Leonard Bast, underclass counter-hero of *Howards End*. Unlike the open allusion to Pater in Wilde, this turn in Forster’s 1910 novel involves, finally, a sly bypass of citation so complete as to prove its internalization in the free indirect discourse of the character – and thus to close off its resonance in the echo chamber of a defeated sensibility. Yet the metastylistics of its irony, at this turn in the novel’s prose, lays as many claims on attention as does the sadness of its plot.

The canonical backstory, from chapter two, book two, of *The Stones of Venice*, involves the surprising dead wall of the Venetian cemetery where one would expect, instead, an expansive lagoon vista, so that the venerable church of the “Misericordia” is abutted in the sentence, one phrase away, with its etymological echo in “a line of miserable houses”: both an eyesore and an occlusion of the view.⁸ Ruskin is no stranger to the syllabic principle that misery, like other

word forms, loves company – and this euphonic understrain becomes an actual ethical strain in Forster's recycling of these crafted sentiments. For what we are to find in reading further into the Ruskin – and in this case to find ruminated at one remove, and regurgitated, by Forster's character – is that the Victorian writer is out to celebrate the fact that no squalid blight on the Venetian prospect, indeed no unabashed place of burial and grieving in a nearby graceless cemetery, can spoil the thrill of it all. Forster comes to this by allusion. The pivot point, in the subsequent transit from Torcello to Murano at the start of the essayist's third chapter, turns on the mandarin anaphora of this quintessential Ruskinian period: "Yet the power of Nature cannot be shortened by the folly, nor her beauty altogether saddened by the misery, of man" (33). How can polished symmetry like this, half a century later, find its way into the ramshackle life of a clerk in the squalid London precincts of Forster's novel?

Only by further discomfiture and literary misapplication. At a low point of frustration for Leonard in his dreary urban flat, even Forster's own prose seems off: "He drank a little tea, black and silent, that still survived upon an upper shelf."⁹ Intake is as stale and "black" as his mood in this strangely divided compound, style itself out of sorts. Prose is beginning to dissociate from its circumstances even before, in a quite literal sense, Leonard loses himself – or wishes to – in his reading, studying the very different cadences of Ruskin as a model for his aspiring status as a creative writer rather than a mere scribing clerk: "Leonard was trying to form his style on Ruskin: he understood him to be the greatest master of English Prose," capital P. "He read forward steadily, occasionally making a few notes" (61). Then citation kicks in: "Let us consider a little each of these characters in succession, and first (for of the shafts enough has been said already), what is very peculiar to this church – its luminousness" (Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, II, ii, 23). But the Ruskin is immediately submitted to a mordant distancing by Forster in a passage of keen black comedy: "Was there anything to be learnt from this fine sentence?" (62). If so: "Could he adapt it to the needs of daily life?" In writing to his brother, for instance, a "lay-reader" in the clerical sense, might he say "Let us consider a little each of these characters

in succession, and first (for of the absence of ventilation enough has been said already), what is very peculiar to this flat – its obscurity"? No, even the capping assonance ("peculiar ... obscurity," as if in echo of Ruskin's "peculiar ... luminousness") rings hollow: "Something told him that the modifications would not do; and that something, had he known it, was the spirit of English Prose." This time, the *spirit*, not the letter – which adapts to need: "'My flat is dark as well as stuffy.' Those were the words for him" (62).

"Style is the man himself," famously wrote, as noted earlier, the eighteenth-century *philosophe* Buffon. And the man, variously circumstanced, has, therefore, no final choice in his style. Ruskin wrote the way he did, saw the world in those euphonic symmetries, out of the lens (and filters) of privilege. It won't do for the Gissing-like naturalism to which Leonard might aspire as writer. Still focalized through Leonard's reverence for Victorian formality, however, we hear by further allusion, with Ruskin reduced to sheer "voice," how that "voice in the gondola rolled on, piping melodiously of Effort and Self-Sacrifice, full of high purpose, full of beauty, full even of sympathy and the love of men" – full of it, as we might now be tempted to say – "yet somehow eluding all that was actual and insistent in Leonard's life" (62). In the waterborne lapping of such effortless syllabic spans – *lof / lof / lev / lov / lif /* – one can perhaps hear a regrouped monosyllabic *love* sneaking in, by cross-word play, before being explicitly sounded and sidelined: a leisured love radically curtailed in its empathy, separated from the harder vowel of "life" and its deprivations. "For it was the voice of one who had never been dirty or hungry, and had not guessed successfully" what these conditions might really be. The slightly fastidious syllabics of that sibilant demurral prepare us, in fact, for a plunge from contingent modifiers to the intractable categories themselves (as abstract nouns), including their own more urgent and jarring off rhyme – "never guessed," that is, "what dirt and hunger are" (62).

The Spirit of English (now post-Victorian) Prose is on the verge of its clinching irony at this turn, where the whole logic of free indirect discourse is wryly but stingingly reversed. We don't have to know, still less remember verbatim, the original passage from Ruskin to

recognize its sheer sound. Ruskin is still afloat: "It occurred to him, as he *glided*" (together with the phonetic glissades of Forster's interpolating prose) "over the whispering lagoons," – and here a descent into actual recycled syntax – "that the power of Nature could not be shortened by the folly, nor her beauty altogether saddened by the misery, of such as Leonard" (67). Nature's sublimities diminish and outlast the lives of the powerless and squalid. So it is that the quest for stylistic imitation with which the Eminent Victorian has until now been read by the Edwardian acolyte in Leonard is converted to a reverse narcissism, excluding the apprentice reader from the sympathies of his favored text. And it is the tongue-in-cheek style of Forster's tweaked allusion that secures the point of both ethical and literary-historical irrelevance. It is no exaggeration to say that we find in this layered passage, in all its rhetorical sedimentation, the tacit archaeology of stylistic change itself.

At a different scale, of course, do we find the changes rung within a given passage – rung or refused, including the literary history that can sometimes be traced through the latter choice of invariance. Allusion, of course, is a form of repetition with a difference. Forster's summoning those formulations from Ruskin, in their sardonic discrepancy, is one deliberately vexed example. Other stricter iterations within a single prose episode call on other levels of recognition. Major writers at the height of their powers don't, at least at the sentence level, repeat themselves for no purpose. If there's a rhyme there's a reason. Style is its own mode of reasoning, and prose repetition its own mode of rhyme. And this is true no matter how blunt the chiming.

A philosophical novelist with an ear more for ideas than for music, or at least for the music of ideas rather than sheer grammatical melody, George Eliot is still willing to put unusual echoic strain on her prose at moments of spiritual intensity. Hers are likely to be repetitions-with-variation, the refaceting of a thought: often echoes with a second edge – even a homophonic pun in the least comic of circumstances, as when heroine and her estranged brother in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), thrown together in the face of death by flood, have been emotionally reunited. In the moment of its own expenditure,

a paradoxical sob of joy is expanded by the heavy emphatic elevation brought on by two appearances of *that* (one demonstrative, one subordinating) and a further phonetic echo – in a single sentence given over to a paragraph all its own: “Maggie could make no answer but a long, deep sob of *that* mysterious, wondrous happiness *that* is *one* with pain.”¹⁰ The sentence chokes up with three accented monosyllables, then swells through the overstressed *ious/ous/ess* repetition, subsiding again into the last five monosyllables in their tightening from anapest to iamb.

Less melodramatically deployed than in *The Mill on the Floss*, an insistent lexical recurrence can, as later in *Middlemarch*, strike emphatic high notes in a sustained thematic of the moral imagination – and, in this respect, can look far ahead to an erotic solemnity of transcended self-interest in the very different but comparably iterative style of D. H. Lawrence. Across a broad gap between Victorian mores and modern sexual expressiveness, between Eliot’s delicate if cerebral tact and Lawrence’s percussive rhapsodies, these two disparate representatives of F. R. Leavis’s *The Great Tradition* (1948) – its major standard-bearer among the Victorian sages and its wild outlier in modern sexual mythography – do meet after all on the common if unstable ground of a purposefully shifting grammar and its vocabular insistence. In each case, iterative prose operates to torque expectation into an emotional epiphany.

So it is that a late transfiguring moment from *Middlemarch* (1872) has its oblique way of prefiguring a quintessential node of transcendental sensuality half a century later in Lawrence’s *Women in Love* (1922). The passage in Eliot conjures another and very different figurative “shipwreck” from that of her earlier novel. Drowning is here a strictly figurative trope for intense interpersonal immersion. The vain Rosamond Vincy, confronting the intuitive empathy of Dorothea Brooke in the famous Chapter 81, is released, under the magnetic pull of this nobler spirit, into the uncharted waters of self-sacrifice (Rosamond admitting that Will loves Dorothea, not her). Prose surges forward ambiguously for a moment – despite the grammatical earmark of punctuation – in evoking an impacted and transfusing newness: “Rosamond, taken hold of by an emotion

stronger than her own – hurried along in a *new* movement which gave all things some *new*, awful, undefined aspect – ...”¹¹ An emphatic innovation of sentiment signals a moral uplift, but it is all too new a feeling to be given “definition” beyond its awestruck lack of precedent. All Rosamond can do, in letting it wash over her, is to go with the flow, though not quite. She is not the agent of the verb, it turns out, after all. Punctuated otherwise, the thought could have ended there, as quoted above. Smitten and inspired, she plunged into the moment and hurried forward: that would have been the sense. Instead, this serial and incremental grammatical insert on headlong motion, rounded off now in the remaining citation, gives way to a functional main verb after the realized passive format just before: “... *could find no words*, but involuntarily she put her lips to Dorothea’s forehead which was very near her, and then for a minute the two women *clasped each other as if they had been in a shipwreck*” (491). It is as if the unsaid, propulsive *flood* of feeling has been figured retroactively by that crowning simile of survived drowning – derived as well from the “waves of her own sorrow” attributed to Dorothea just before, with that phrase’s further tortured subordination in the tripled prepositional vector of “*from out of* which she was struggling to save another” (491).

In just this way, Eliot’s prose has had to find the “words” for both women – and has done so, in part, by floating the momentary syntactic possibility of a spiritual impetus internalized in Rosamond’s propelling herself forward with the energy of unwonted feeling. But the controlling grammar is immediately clarified as passive in its transfiguration at that point, with her newfound empathy being borne ahead involuntarily: “hurried,” rather than hurrying, by the wavelike influx of another’s emotional power. In fact, Rosamond is propelled so fast, into realms so untested, that even the adjective “new,” as we’ve seen, can find no elegant variation – and is flatly (yet emphatically, transformatively) repeated in its registered cresting into feeling of the previously unforeseen. We may think of this as the stylistic rut of breakthrough itself. And measure its power, value its rhetoric, by how many words of commentary it takes to do any credit to the slippery compression of its momentary, if deceptive, double grammar.

Such repetitions and slippages are certainly the stock-in-trade of transfigurative rhetoric in the novels of Lawrence, where prose is often explicitly modeled on a mounting erotic tension and release. Half a century after *Middlemarch*, the intensity associated with such an enrapturing “newness” as Eliot conjures can seem not just revelatory but almost unhinged – even when phrasing the unfixed supple bond between lovers that is a given passage’s rhetorical (that is, persuasive) burden. An overmastering emotion, as portrayed by Eliot, can certainly seem pitched to the brink of syntactic chaos in Lawrence – and held together only by an internal dialectic bent on enacting the erotic equipoise it strives to abstract and depict. The searing “newness” of affect has gone over entirely to a radical stylistic innovation, as if psychology and writing were equally obliged by Ezra Pound’s imperative, not just to make it new, but to say so. Yet such is the flexibility of style that not just a similar device, but the very same word pattern, even when itself repeated, can generate a contextual freshness.

So it is that the redoubled “new” glimpsed symptomatically in *Middlemarch*, indexing a transformative experience too unprecedented and convulsive to be called anything else, is subsequently recruited by Lawrence to celebrate an erotic rather than – as in *The Mill on the Floss* or *Middlemarch* – a sibling or more vaguely sisterly bonding. This is the passionate affair, about to be celebrated by marriage, but first in the ceremony of prose itself, between Rupert and Ursula in *Women in Love*, as focalized mainly through the male partner’s free indirect discourse. Interpersonal astonishment in *Middlemarch*, loosening the shackles of self-interest, and ultimately of self, now takes the form of coital liberation. “How could he say ‘I’ when he was something new and unknown, not himself at all?”¹² Carnal knowledge is only a new mode of mystery. With “knew and” hovering there like a canceled phantom echo (“knew”) – a fleeting homophonic pun slung across the chinks of syntax, active even while not activated – the “new and unknown” is recapitulated at exactly the point of lift-off in the famous (notorious) next paragraph, begun in inflectional italics.

Let analysis take its own deep breath in tracing the contours of this syntax. “In the *new*, superfine bliss, a peace superseding

knowledge" – with intensity stretched, across those unabashedly returning "super" prefixes, from qualitative fineness to quantitative overreach and run-on release – "there was no I and you, there was only the third, unrealised wonder." Under lexical pressure here, "unrealised" carries the sense both of previously unknown and of still inchoate, and this in a mounting phrase continued by an appositional repetition (that might have been borrowed directly from *The Mill on the Floss*) as "the wonder of existing not as oneself." Such is the won-der, in undertone, of the non-one, a fulfillment not as or of "oneself," that is, or even one self, "but in a consummation of my being and of her being in a new one, a new, paradisaic unit regained from the duality." In the byplay between "being" as gerund and participle at once, even before the ambiguity of "new one" (as new "being" or new "oneness"), the genitive preposition arrives, in its double sense, to equivocate a phrase meaning both "a consummation made possible by our being separately transcended" and a "consummation of each of our singular beings achieved in just this transcendence." The former is a case (a grammatical case) – in Lawrence's actual phrasing, that is ("a consummation of my being and of her being in a new one") – of what is called, again, the equative genitive: a grammar not of action but of constitution, as in, say, the "passion of sex" (the passion that is sex). Fulfillment, in this sense, is defined as an achieved copresence in the new. This grammar's alternative, on offer in that same bivalve phrasing, is the more common "objective genitive," the consummation that takes (and remakes) its paired objects. Such is a self-exploding rapport between bodies in a new – who knew? – fusion of being, with the question still left hanging, grammatically, whether being is an entity (noun) or a process (participle). There is no telling – except for the reconfigured force field of style itself, which makes the new known on its own pulsing terms. It is in this way that two senses thus suspended in a double grammar, thrusting toward the resolution that syntax itself holds in abeyance, can enact – as microplot, yet again – the transcendental balancing act under investigation. There are no words for such a sexual moment, and nothing left but words, even as the pronouns that would anchor any predicated liberation dissolve before our ears.

CROSSING THE MILLENNIAL DIVIDE

The performative measure of prose amounts, in such cases, to a sense of writing's doing more with words than they seem to denominate: again, to their saying more than they mean. This can involve a rhythmic energy that ends up imitating, in Lawrence, for example, if not the actual rhythm of intercourse, then the building urge for an elucidating discourse about it – or, equally in Eliot, a search for the pulse-beat not just of speculative abstraction but of an ethics of the ineffable. It is in this way that style can be compared across quite disparate masters of its deployment for its funding energies themselves, whether manifested in the syncopated orchestral harmonics of a Victorian realist or a modernist erotic visionary – or held, elsewhere, in the examples coming, to the thinnest edge of effect in a more stringent reduction of affect. Let us say that the long nineteenth century has seen through to one asymptote of its humanist transfiguration in the orgasmic lyricism of D. H. Lawrence, with unstinted sexuality valorized on the altar of a humanism sacrificed to its new order of being. How can style, its grammar all but disintegrated in such a transfiguration, continue to follow the vicissitudes of “being” after a rhapsodic deconstruction like that? What is left for *logos*, for the work of wording, in grappling with a posthumanist ontology? In imagining such horizons of fictional prose, we can leap ahead to one post-postmodernist answer, or at least instance, in the mordant understatement of a contemporary fiction about artificially duplicated rather than transfused humanity. And in this respect, we can find in its exploration of cloning's depleted human autonomy a stylistic bifurcation not unrelated, in its grammatical waver, to the doubling of Dr. Jekyll by Mr. Hyde.

Repetition with a difference: the transformative power of ethical, sexual, and, here, biopolitical plateaus of human(oid) duration and finitude. We've so far seen how the monosyllable “new” can repeat itself without diminishing semantic returns, marking the limits of language to render without precedent, to name the unforeseen, to exceed all antecedence. Style is equally ready, in its minimal increments, to clock a passage toward its own foreclosure rather

than breakthrough. No parts or particles of grammar are too minute or routine to be excluded from *participation* (the root sense) in the stylistic drama of fiction. In our probing the complexities of *Moby Dick's* bravura finale at the start of this chapter, there was reason to mention the very different mode of closure that tapers and tails off, in style as well as content. We now have occasion, along an axis of existential dubiety, to instance it. The simple infinitive, the *to* form of the verb – identifying an action or condition isolated from time past, present, or to come, awaiting temporal specification in this way – can in the right context work to question both action and condition, agency, and being. This is especially the case when it is set off by other *to*-forms in the prepositional mold: thrown into relief, as it were, by false echo. Roman Jakobson's sense of equivalence projected into sequence, as the nature of the poetic function – a shaping of pattern beyond the needs of communication, turning the message back on itself as medium – is seen in the following passage from a renowned contemporary novel by Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005), about the medium of DNA itself and its implications for genetic repetition. One might say that, in a last split-second pattern delivered under wraps in the last three words of the novel, the metaphysics of its premise is blueprinted by the grammar of predication itself: another microplot in action.

The fact of cloned lives shut down in their prime by premature "completion" (the technical term in the plot) is not only a trauma for these biological subjects but a challenge for closure in the novel form. The book in fact ends with the female narrator, stopped in the middle of nowhere, allegorizing a scene of trash and loose vegetation found collecting against a windswept fence as if this untraversable barrier figures the point of no return for the snagged, glimpsed details of her vanishing life. There is no crossing over to retrieve it, nor them – neither the life, nor its random details. Altogether, there is no going back. In contrast, the going forward feels not just spatiotemporal, but ontological – and potentially evacuated, or at least equivocated, as such. In the last sentence, with the heroine not knowing "where I was" exactly at this point of reverie, "I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be."¹³

The downbeat flatness of this finish has an extra beat or two of suggestion when reread, as it almost inevitably will be, the sentence thrown back on its own resources by the sudden truncating blankness of the remaining page. In the flexion of that prepositional phrase giving way on the slant to the *to* of the infinitive, the stumble of the grammar momentarily disrupts a reader's sense of rhythm and direction, its affectless lumpiness capturing in turn the frailty of the cloned *self* as well as the arbitrary contingency of her obligations. Plot is over, as we can tell from the looming blank space beyond the last line of print. What is left pending, exactly? Is the aftermath intended in the form of *to drive ... to wherever ... I was next, in the scheme of things, meant to be*? What about the momentary warp induced by "to drive to wherever *it was I was ...*"? Is this rightly felt as a symptomatic glitch in the iterated verb of being? And in that case doesn't "wherever I was supposed to be" convey the merely conjectural nature of her being in the first place – with existence for this derivative organism being only dubious and suppositional ("supposed to be") at best? The only answer: the blank space of the unwritten stretched out after *to be*, backed up as this infinitive is against the no longer inbred, but instead genetically engineered and strategically truncated, fact of organic finitude.

And after our long arc forward from intermixed forms of melodrama and gothic to an austere and cerebral science-fiction novel like *Never Let Me Go*, we can close with another and more mysterious variant of the genre, even more dependent for its initial clues on the prestidigitations of style. In contemporary British writer China Miéville's multi-awardwinning 2009 novel *The City & the City*, the ampersand has a way of inscribing the involute nature of the titular conjunction: a mostly impervious reciprocal relation between the alternate realities of the European metropolises of Beszel and Ul Qoma. These are densely inhabited spaces geographically coterminous with, but typically invisible to, each other in their separate languages and "crosshatched" urban zones. None of this is known to the reader, or even glimpsed in embryo, for most of the first chapter. Only just before the chapter closes – and the plot thickens, the microplot with it – does the return of the narrator's own repressed knowledge

of the doubled Other begin to surface. It emerges precisely at the cusp between “protuberance” (or “protub,” where one world bursts into the consciousness of the other) and sheer hallucination, for only at the bulging forth of alterity into present continuity is the ghostly presence of the parallel reality made known. The terms by which to understand this come forth only later. So far, it is the work of style alone to adumbrate this “breach” of the “interstice” (key terms for the bizarrely coupled ontology of these worlds). The first chapter closes, that is, by doing no more than opening faintly upon the uncanny nature of this (un)heimlich (yet weirdly hometown) doubleness. Yet by way of normalizing the mystery or explaining away its preternatural qualities, we’re not in the least closer to a rational explanation by the closing sentence of the whole novel: “I live in the interstice yes, but I live in both the city and the city.”¹⁴ Affirmation is all there is of bilocation, hence the unpunctuated “yes,” with its further over-tone of some twice-sounded elongated plural (“interstice[sye]s”) for the many transgressive interspaces of the novel. With this phrasing followed there, as it is, by that quotidian discursive touch of “both ... and,” we recognize a logical formula that hardly does justice to the destabilized neither/nor of the plot’s reversible virtualities.

If style is our guide here, it lures us into the imponderable at the level of the most everyday turns of phrase and cognition. Earlier in the novel, we have seen the time/space interleaving of the two civic zones figured in explicitly grammatical terms, where “Copula Hall” – as transit point between realms (“copula” the verb of being itself, often a so-called “linking” verb) – is “shaped like the waist of an hour glass”: a “funnel” of “ingress” and “egress” alike, “letting visitors from one city into the other, and from the other into the one” (70). The thought was complete before those last seven words, whose redundant version of “the latter into the former” – with words as redundant to each other as the two cohabiting populations – collapses instead into the oxymoronic ontology of two-as-one. It is as if words are permitted to play subliminal tricks on consciousness that grow comparable to, and perhaps help model, the double vision necessary to accede to the novel’s tacit sociopolitical premise: the lapse of mutuality and recognition in modern communal existence. At a moment like this, the

sense of a warped idiom from a narrator communicating in a language not native to him, an English far less “polysemous” in its diction that his mother tongue (Beszt), makes every linguistic wrinkle all the more responsive to the plot’s metaphysical double fold.

In the spirit of our Introduction, again we may ask, and perhaps never more pointedly than with such a fiction: *style as opposed to what?* A fiction, that is, where even the technical term “polysemous” bears overtones of a syllabic pun on a sutured and *cross-seamed* reality in a theater of collective denial. The least little tucks – even ruptures – of style can make this metastylistic dimension seem unmistakable. In leaving the police interview at the end of the opening chapter, the narrator is walking down a street with trash at the far end. “It might be anywhere” (12), this debris, since rubbish, we later find out, is all that these twin cities openly share, rendered indistinguishable as to source or ownership in the very process of its decomposition. But now the alternate human reality obtrudes, protrudes, penetrates. This happens when an “elderly woman was walking slowly away from me in a shambling sway,” where the expected “way” appears varied, doubled, by the alliterating “sway.” Split vision seems inculcated at the level of diction *per se* in its tracked syntactic sequence. When she looks in his direction, as if knowingly *at* him, he is “struck” – ordinarily the deadest of metaphors, if not quite here – by her motion, “and I met her eyes.” English colloquialism is foregrounded and estranged just slightly, yet again. Rather than the idiomatic reciprocity of “our eyes met,” the actual phrasing (“I met her eyes”) seems a balked **synecdoche** for human encounter. There is certainly nothing markedly rhetorical about this prose; all operates in the vein of police procedural, if not quite in the mode of a hard-boiled detective genre. Yet surprises happen, as with this meeting without greeting, this exchange where certainly “no I’s met” – across how wide, or how infinitesimal, a gulf, we are still, in the first chapter, left guessing.

Hints mount stylistically, however, including the coming first appearance of an Orwell-like version of Newspeak in the negative of notice (to “unnotice”). Nothing rhetorical here, either, but verbal tension is exerted at precisely the highlighted border between syntactic election and grammatical license. “In my glance I took in her

clothes, her way of walking, of holding herself, and looking" (12). The stair-step **parallelism**, a kind of broken anaphora, condenses toward that third, awkwardly freestanding gerund, without the previous guiding preposition. The effect is thus to stress again, by indirection, the juncture of subject and object in a momentary "looking" that must soon be undone, since "I *shouldn't* have seen her": a subjunctive both epistemological and societal, given the political mandate of mutual oblivion on both sides of the "Copula" – or, as we're beginning to sense even here, on both sides of the very predication of being at the Beszel/UlQoma interface. For this is where people project onto their urban *alter egos*, even in moments of transgression, with the vigilance of cinematic disavowal, thus requiring the continuous veto – or at least rapid deflection – of any acknowledged gaze across the invisible fourth wall.

The next paragraph lurches back with a double abruptness, narrative and grammatical: "Immediately and flustered" – the modifiers oddly abutted – "I looked away, and so did she, with the same speed" (12). We don't say the likes of "Eagerly and flabbergasted, I accepted her offer." At least a disjunctive "but" would be necessary to standardize this. Grammatically acceptable though it may legally be, the syntactic logic of "immediately and flustered" bestrides a miniscule chasm that has fashioned itself rather directly on theme. Phrasing appears here as a muted version of **syllipsis** in modification rather than predication, where, instead of two senses of a verb forking between separate objects, in this case the syntactic division of labor (and this at an interface between incompatible topographies) is between adverb and past-participial adjective. The very moment must be curtailed and buried, with the chapter then closing in an interstitial grammar all its own, as we'll see next: unpunctuated precisely to speed its phrasing under the wheels of erasure almost as soon as a given possibility is formulated. The split universe of alternately realized city-states has found its linguistic allegory – its microplot – not just in "polysemous" diction but in the shunts of double grammar itself and the skewed idioms it recruits.

Ishiguro on the cloned organism; Miéville on the cloned social subject – each in their cloven realities (like syllipsis given material

form) forking open a conceptual space in existence itself. So the question abides: style as opposed to what? We've noted before, when prompted by evidence, the operation of grammar as figure, including its directly mimetic dimension. Here, in Miéville, linguistics figures ontology at a deeper level: the being of language all told, in its very multi-ply nature, serving the split language of being. Including the rudimentary grammar of negation, in the now-you-see-it-now-you-don't mode. Triggered at this turn is that Orwellian negative anticipated above – an unflagged neologism in its own right, easy to miss on first reading, given its counterintuitive grammar: "When after some seconds I looked back up, *un*noticing the old woman stepping heavily away, I looked carefully instead of at her in her foreign street at the *facades*" (emphasis added) of the buildings: a facingness safer than the alien face. If the assonance of "stepping heavily" prepares for "instead," nothing prepares for the grammatical kink of the latter's own deployment. The normative "I looked carefully instead at" is reformatted by a long adverbial interruption, unpunctuated, unpunctual – disruptive and thus immediately beaten back – across the breached cadence of "I looked carefully *instead of at her in her foreign street* at the *facades* ..." Rather than a controlled pause, here again is a more drastic "protub" in a small-scale periodic grammar of the overtaxed interstice. Never, perhaps, has a simple awkwardness of syntactic pacing, or call it a warp in syntactic timing, done more work.

Thus does the first chapter of *The City @ the City* begin to let loose its mystery – in the slackened or knotted ligatures of prose before the further revelations of narrative. In many earlier examples from the phrasal microplots of our present chapter as well, from centuries one or two back, the effects taken under advisement by response and analysis – pulled as they are between rule and extruded departure, doxa and eccentricity, normative verbal "façade" and its resistant interface – have been quite literally *telltale*. Plot's least, if not always first, moves can seem generated when a given phrasing, often playing upon its own phonetic basis, is taken to vacillate in just these ways between law and license, system and deviance, language base and instanced phrasing, the grammar and the syntax.