Style is the behavioral modification of words by syntax. Words: filed in technical stylistics under the rubric “diction” or “vocabulary” before being subdivided, in whatever order, by tone (low or elevated register), scale (syllable count), lineage (origin and derivation), phonetic stress (sound shapes), figurative quotient (metaphoric or literal). Words: felt in immediate literary motion as the triggers of verbal sensation and its sense.

Words work overtime in literary prose, in themselves and over the course of syntactic time. They both structure and disrupt meaning, build and disconcert it by turns. And even as momentary stumbling blocks, they can seem as paving stones in an alternate route to sense. Vocabulary sets the tone and tenor of a sentence, drawing from a dictionary archive that is ideally revitalized in the process. Tapping the lexicon of a given language, a writer’s mental thesaurus is on call to narrow or sharpen a notion toward its most pointed form. Clarity is a matter of paring down, even as the mot juste can then be loosed into the fuller music of grammatical amplification, where surplus linguistic inference may remain in play beyond the task of exactitude.

It is in this manner that words make the sense of a sentence. They contour the sensory medium of a given prose sequence – the aural and graphic traces of inscription – while generating a semantic yield from its succession. When craftily channelled, the sensorial grows tutorial, guiding our reception of what it brings to mind. In all this, words are the visible minims of prose momentum, with syntax the temporal span of their sequencing. But words have time on their side as well. In prose fiction, for instance, they come bearing histories of their own in telling whatever new story they are sentenced to. These histories are a matter of etymology and allusion, of provenance and other precedents. Whether kept tacit or brought to exaggeration, such histories are braided into the fabric of succession at the time scale of the sentence: the build of sequence itself at the grammatical plane.
In *Senses of Style*, Jeff Dolven lodges a cryptic but intriguing distinction: “Form is vertical. Style is horizontal.”\(^1\) Conceived at the scale of the sentence, this distinction can apply to the formal choices of diction when launched upon a given run of grammar. From the vertical paradigm of word selection (if Dolven has Roman Jakobson’s linguistics in mind), a chosen lexeme – weighed against its close options (*I* rather than *we*, for Jakobson, in the election slogan “I Like Ike”) – operates in structuring the axis of combination.\(^2\) In this sense, words are the fulcrum points where the differential rudiments of form become the variable increments of style: where choices fetched from the stack of formal possibility – including its alternate genealogies – help contour the arc of any phrasal trajectory.

Genealogies, histories: ingrown plots and backstories of the word’s own, yes, but with stray mysteries to boot, odd syllabic byways, and false philological cul-de-sacs. Against the history of morphemic roots and their derivations, for instance, what happy “literary” accident makes *to languish* something like the functional opposite of *to anguish*? Let alone embedding the letters of *style* in the *proselytizing* of many an aesthetic agenda? To put these odd word-couples near each other in a given sentence isn’t to answer the question of their accidental echoes, merely to raise it: to lift phonemes and graphemes (the audiovisual coordinates of minimal semantic function) into undue awareness – exposing those linguistic enigmas slipped into wording on the underside of meaning. Etymology has no genuine foothold here, even in the first pair. *Anguish* comes to us from *angustus* – Latin for “narrow, tight, straitened” – via Old French. By a fluke of antinomy, *languish* arrives via *laxus* for “slackened.” To pitch the one against the other in any imagined syntax would be to defy linguistic form with the license of style.

Novelistic prose sometimes pauses over its own language, even with regard to straightforward grammatical usage. In the demotic London setting of Zadie Smith’s *NW*, simple description can veer into free indirect discourse over the very grammar of word choice in participial common parlance: “Number 17 Ridley Avenue is being squat. Squatted?”\(^3\) Language is never relaxed in Smith’s hands. Beyond grammatical punctiliousness, conversation’s layered immigrant patois in *NW* keeps many an idiom on edge, and can even turn a likely mispronunciation into a telling Freudian slip. In a case of elided syllabification and diverted etymology alike, an asocial addict named Annie is apologized for by her estranged lover (“she’s got this agrophobia”), only to have narrative omniscience immediately intercede with the thought that “his portmanteau version expressed a deeper truth: she wasn’t really afraid of open spaces, she was afraid of what might happen between her and the other people in them.”\(^4\) With his slip evoking
“approach” or “attack” in the Latin etymology of aggress, rather than the more spacious trisyllable derived from “open field” in the root agora, it is as if the protective distance she fears collapsing between her and the world were intuitively performed by the closing in and down of an extra phonetic breathing space. The wrong word goes right to the heart of an epitomizing character sketch. Bad form is redeemed by stylistic extrapolation in a poetics of solecism.

And what about the covert phonetic anagrams by which descriptors seem to coagulate in the most sonorous of prose, as, for instance, in Smith’s own “aquamarine of the minaret”? Or, more thickly entwined yet in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, there is the erotic vision of a “fair bird-girl girdled in veils” — as if the very word girdle, enwrapped by the assonant alliteration of fail/vei, were always related to girl in the substrate of language, enclosing her tightly: a syllabic constriction teased into the open in this compressed move from lexical form to style. (This, rather than being heard descended, as the word actually is, instead, from girth and gird.) To rule out these virtualities in philological terms is not to defuse their literary charge. Nor is it to mute our regret when prose has squandered all freshness or surprise, strangled by the precut yardage of sheer verbiage — a condition closely excoriated by the pen of a famous writer in essay and novel alike.

**Proselytizing Prose Style**

George Orwell is the author of two merciless dissections of impoverished writing in its rhetorical and hence moral decline. In separate lines of attack, first essayistic, then fictional, he skewers a discourse rendered in two different senses rankly utilitarian, either by the carelessness of sheer verbal filler or by a totalitarian constraint on expressive energy. Orwell’s charge against the normal morass of contemporary writing, in “Politics and the English Language” (1946), diagnoses the bland malaise to which writing has succumbed in the piling on of words. Malaise: a word he’d never use, too French a borrowing. Say, rather, a pervasive virus of blather. What he finds everywhere in published prose (examples coming) is a crisis of lazy phrasing whose wordiness is in fact a misjudged convenience, a depleting facility. More notoriously yet, three years later, there is his novelized version of totalitarian language reform in the near-futurist 1984: the nightmare of Newspeak, with that buzzword’s own self-exemplified compaction of verbal act (to speak) into stunted noun. An inadvertent sloppiness of phrase is the earlier diatribe’s target, whereas a studied reduction — and corruption — of linguistic scope centers the novel’s later satire.
In “Politics,” it is the otherwise healthy word – especially the Anglo-Saxon word not crowded out by the Latin and Greek pretension Orwell detests (e.g., “ameliorate,” “clandestine,” “subaqueous”), the word in its native vigor – that falls victim to unexamined phrasal annexations, swaddling itself in twaddle, bulked up by flimsy window dressing. In the coming dystopian novel, the crisis goes deeper. In 1984, it is the word itself that has been shrunken, gutted, or grafted with noxious adjuncts, robbing it of any force but that which polices it. Exposed in these paired works is a degradation of the word as communicative unit: the one habit a rampant complacency of civic speech, the other a barbarism actively enforced by regimes of terror. The perverse lexical revisionism of 1984 is deliberately meant to shrink the thought quotient of words, shriveling all invention. In “Politics,” by contrast, it is the word before capture by robotic phrase – in its potentially invigorating precision – that is spoiled by association with others automatically brought along in unthinking tow, weatherworn phrases hauled past in tatters (e.g., “ride roughshod over,” “fishing in troubled waters”). At stake, then, is the enforced rot of the lexicon versus the single word’s unguarded sloppiness in combination.

Verbal decorum appears to Orwell everywhere dishevelled in mid-century prose, unkempt, slapdash, even when ponderous. Orwell’s term instead for this phrasal neglect, twice said: “slovenliness,” four lumbering syllables, in low country derivation, set against the mandarin bombast Orwell satirizes. Even when citing another’s lament over certain colloquial formulas, Orwell is unforgetting, deriding the critic’s flaccid metaphors as much as the inflated phrasing. The culprit: “Above all, we cannot play ducks and drakes with a native battery of idioms” whose tendency “prescribes egregious collocations of vocables” – this last echoic thicket, even if parodic, a wasteful phrasing of the term phrases. Wasteful, yet lethally tempting. To Orwell, such “lumps of verbal refuse” come not just easily, but with a facile music that is one lure of wordiness: “If you use ready-made phrases, you not only don’t have to hunt about for the words; you also don’t have to bother with the rhythms of your sentences since these phrases are generally so arranged as to be more or less euphonious,” with that final honorific epithet all but sticking in the craw of his contempt.

Orwell seems little smitten with the phony euphonies of alliteration and assonance, having no sympathy (in an essay satirizing the effete standards of BBC English) with even a tongue-in-cheek chime regarding the verbal “languors of Langham place.” Near the end of “Politics” is an important disclaimer: “I have not here been considering the literary use of language, but merely language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought.” When one turns from muddied exposition to
literary invention, however, it is clear that prose rhythm, including the word choices that channel it, can be ironic in both its mock euphonies and its massaged idioms. Take, for instance, the dead metaphor of traverse in the standard-issue phrase “to arrive at a conclusion” – rather than “to conclude.” And here take Zadie Smith again, when the parting lovers in NW, in finishing one last hasty coupling in the arch solemnity of the Queen’s English, “came swiftly to reliably pleasurable, reliably separate conclusions.” It is only the premature reader who has been teased into assuming the adverb swiftly to have completed a verb phrase from the vulgate.

In this way, swamping the probable form of a word by the distended stylization of phrase can have a power operating against the drift of those “swindles and perversions” that Orwell sees in everyday published claptrap, where the wry artifice of his own internal rhyme marks the “gumming” together of words as a matter of sheer “humbug.” In 1984, the gum becomes a corrosive glue, squeezing the life out of conflated word forms to choke off any premeditated dissent. Anticipating the redrafted dictionaries of the Minitrue (Ministry of Truth), “Politics” finds constraint of thought already contagious in the malfeasance of hackneyed prose. Implicitly, hope lies only in extricating the word from the phrases to which it is sentenced: making it count again as a unit of thought, rather than just accumulate in some received phrasing. Regrettably, 1984 crushes that hope altogether.

From the lucid disgust of Orwell’s essay and novel alike, two indirect lines of fictional succession point up the stylistic crux for the fate of the word: one descended from the grotesque lexical compressions of 1984 transposed to contemporary marketing, one from the broader ethical critique of “Politics.” The twin legacy is legible in two novels over half a century after Orwell, themselves a decade apart: the first from an African American novelist satirizing the loss of racial empathy amid the buzzwords of the marketplace; the other, in the mode of linguistic sci-fi, from a lionized American ironist and “euphonious” wordsmith turning to futurist speculation in imagining, for the subjects of cryogenic resuscitation, a post-human language. This is a reborn phonetic and somatic tongue, far more alien than Newspeak, whose prevision only serves to remotivate the power of present literary wording, and its incessant self-reflection, in monologues recoiling from its pending implementation. Between these two oblique derivations from Orwell lies the difference between the word abjected by commercial propaganda and the word ruminated for renewal.

**Stylizing the Word: What Sin a Name?**

A decade before his Pulitzer-Prized historical novel *The Underground Railroad*, African American novelist Colson Whitehead seeded its liberation
struggle as the retrospective matrix for a satire of corporate jingoism, *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2007), which at first seems far afield from such historical trauma. A member of the “pre-eminent identity firm in the country,” the anonymous black protagonist (a yuppie Manhattanite Everyman in denial) is a vaunted “nomenclature consultant” who would be quite at home in the lexigraphic department of Orwell’s Minitrue.18 “He came up with the names,” and “like any good parent he knocked them around to teach them life lessons.”19 Such brand words, having no true patrilineage, no natural etymology, are the genetically modified spawn of an originality that disappears into them as pure corporate medium. Yet such progeny must be made “ready” – wait for it, the merchandizing pun on the warehouse of ideas – “for what the world has in store for them.”20 Abused into submission, the names are “bent to see if they’d break, dragged by metal chains, exposed to high temperatures.”21 In this monetized phonetics, “Sometimes consonants broke off and left angry vowels on the laboratory tables.”22 Yet, in the novel’s free indirect discourse, vowels can be otherwise recruited in the recall of failed lexical bondings, as, for instance, with the assonant match (the dull soft u) in conjuring the neologism’s frequent fate: “Clunker names fell with a thud on the ground.”23 Or, alternately, when the merely routine name turns out to click, we have the harmonized verbal assurance that “success shushes” all “accusations.”24

As the plot opens, our consultant “neologist” has been retained by the midwestern town of Winthrop to rebrand itself with more pizzazz. Earlier rechristened for the town’s richest businessman, “Winthrop” made more sense than “Freedom,” its original plain designation by the southern blacks who founded it when “they dropped their bags here”25: a name that the consultant deems a mere utility of “packaging” (his implied market term) in which “they forgot to pack the subtlety.”26 It is “so defiantly unimaginative” as to be a “moral” as well as a mercantile “weakness”27 – indirectly parodying Orwell’s claim for the political as well as stylistic deficits of sodden prose. This African American agent of the salesworthy is conspicuously indifferent to the racial legacy of the founders. They had escaped the Georgia of plantation shackles, and, when they stopped running, in relief “they called it Freedom,”28 the “it” being the very condition of arrival.

Whitehead’s novel repeatedly skirts issues dear in this way to language philosophy. The recent translation of Giorgio Agamben’s essay “On the Sayable and the Idea” comes to mind.29 The ontological juncture by which the idea of a thing and its name coincide in producing human language (the first question of philosophy for Agamben) is glimpsed in “they called it Freedom” but travestied in the marketer’s branding agenda. With the goal always that “the name” should become synonymous with “the thing,” this
Words

“Holy Grail” is not some metaphysical “it is that it is” – not logocentric but only logo-minded, the sought usurping of all competitors, as in the case of Kleenex or BAND-AID bandages. Though playing catch-up on the latter front, the protagonist’s own career-making coup is to have remarked Dr. Chickie’s Adhesive Strips with the catchier, indeed stickier, name Apex, together with a tagline that became a nationwide pop-cultural meme, where the highest recommendation for any saleable pleasure is that it “hides the hurt”: the eponymous slogan of the novel itself. At one point, the marketer dwells in self-bedazzlement over his inspiration: “Apex” – with “that great grand plosive second syllable. Quite the motherfucker, that” – worthy, he fancifully thinks, of a “fascistic crescendo” in the mouths of the public (rather like the “B B” chant at the hate rallies in 1984: the abbreviated Big Brother as the foreclosure of all individual being).

The wordwork of branding is typically sublexical, phonemic, in just this way. “He dealt in lies and promises, distilled them into syllables.”

A similar logic of advertising seems, in reverse, to have been flexed by the austerity regime in 1984, not to induce desire but to wither the very idea. Amid the many iterations of terms cycled through the socialtext, think “Miniplenty,” a governmental office whose oxymoron exposes the starvation protocols of the Ministry of Plenty. Or the bureaucratic subsection called “pornosec,” which – given the truncation of real sex in the celibacy strictures of the Party – operates to disseminate addictive smut only to the underclass as “prolefeed”: what a later portmanteau would compress as “sexploitation.” Or the portmanteau “telescreen” inscribing the tele-spic access of a surveillance state in the remote detection of “thoughtcrime.” To say nothing of the dictaphone apparatus at the hero’s work desk, called “speakwrite,” whose strictly semantic transcription, under the corrective arm-twisting of “speak right,” drains writing not only of all truth but of all subvocal music. The rule of “doublethink” (a lazy jamming of “doubled/think”) means only falsification in context, not the felicity of second thoughts where, in the tensile play of literary language, doubles speak.

In any descent from Orwell to Whitehead, there’s more than just the linguistic link between mangling and jingoism as two sides of the deceptive coinage, the entrapping versus the catchy. In the marketer’s mounting disaffection with his verbal finesse, Orwell’s 1984 looms as an all but explicit intertext for a fever dream induced by the infected, Apex-bandaged toe of this anti-hero, who keeps stubbing it against dumb names as well as curbs. Recalling the nightmare of Room 101 in Orwell, his dream is beset by pests “making little rat noises.” “They were everywhere, and he know that even though they wore the skin of rats, they were in fact phonemes, bits of words with sharp teeth” – bitten off by forced conjunction – “and tails” (confected
suffices?). “Latin roots, syllables to be added or subtracted to achieve an effect, kickers in their excellent variety, odd fricatives, and they chased him down.”

Even awake, on automatic pilot, with no product in view, still he “crunched the names, fed them into the input slot of his particular talent,” where, for instance, a sound cluster like “Dark the Field” is compacted to the elided “FieldDark” for how you feel there.

Earlier, too, in a more explicit literary allusion, he is hounded by “Frankenstein names, lumbering creatures stitched together from glottal stops and sibilants, angry unspellable misfits suitable only for the monstrous.”

In their common portmanteau collapse, these words are ripe for what the latest slang – popular since he wrote – calls the “Frankenword.” He is keenly alert to the awkward seams between syllables, whether forced by the “glottal” swallow or the hissing slur. I tried imagining an instance of the glottal device (mentioned at first without example) – and, jotting in the margin “Angrip” for an anti-aggression drug, I later forgot that the term wasn’t his and searched for it in vain. But the text itself rewards patience with subsequent hints of the glottal hinge (unflagged as such) when “TelKing” (tel[e]king) was saved from bankruptcy by rebranding as “UnyCon,” with the lurch toward unique caught in the very throat of that compound. Or, in allusion to Lego in the combinatory playground of the “plastic” syllable as well as product, there’s the “snap sound” of its fantasized alternative, “Ekho”: a “hook,” in every sense, “for a good stretch of childhood.”

The novel’s guru of nomenclature is proudest of what we might call his “Frankenfolds” when they brandish, by openly enfolding, their own branded etymology, as with “Loquacia” as a drug for shyness.

For bad breath, “Halitotion,” he realizes, won’t work. He hits on “weathertique” (as both noun and verb), as in the familiar “antiqued” effect – “Apply Weathertique for that lived-in look that will turn your house into a home” – but decides it has too many syllables. For receding chins, an idea finally “came to him: Chinplant. Not his best work.”

Call it an ungainly verbal implant.

Here is diction gone formally awry in the slippery poetics of deception, words both hung, and wrung, out to dry. With the vertical axis imploded into the horizontal, these lexical distortions represent a collapse of form with no opening to style. Epitomizing the fantasies pandered to in this way, our wordsmith even harbors such terms on hold, names without material signifiers, thus allegorizing the artificial middle ground between desire and act, anticipation and fulfillment: “Tantalasia” is held in tantalizing abeyance for a miracle product not yet emerged – or “Redempta,” one of his early coups for a product not in fact described for us. Much of the signifying work is formulaic, but the urge toward originality on the heels of the preformulated
infects the discourse of his own narrative, as when, in a rut, he “suffers through a month of suffixes” — rather than a “month of Sundays” — during which he and his team “hung the staple kickers on a word: they –ex’ed it, they –it’ed it.” Or “they stuck,” in a further internal echo, “good ole –ol on it.” (One thinks of a name like Levitol for a Viagra competitor.) In the terminological fray, there is always the chance of “incipient revival” for some word fragment of faded glory, a syllabic rebound: “Pro- and anti-would stumble back to the top, bruised and lacerated but still standing, this month’s trendy morphemes and phonemes lying at their feet in piles.”

Among the marketer’s favorite conflations, there is the vocalic elision of “Aquaway” for a water-repellent leather spray — itself syllabically liquefied. Indirectly aligned with such border trans/fusions, an odd refrain in the novel puts the established term shuttle bus (with its unmentioned assonance and alliteration) into iterative celebration. “Say it five times fast, he maintained—shuttle bus shuttle bus sounded like leaves whispering to each other in your textbook primordial glen.” And beyond the inferred sibilant circularity of the bu/ss/huttle loop, these named vehicles of transfer are “perfect containers of that moment between anticipation and event,” so that they “cannot be blamed” if it is to be discovered that “the destination disappoints, if desire is counterfeited.” Recall Tantalasia, with its four interwoven a’s as a scrim of invitation in the wholesale absence of product, of referent itself. Such phonemic blur may recall the other Whitehead, Alfred North, when celebrating algebra’s precision as reversing the priority of sound to script in the vagueness of “ordinary language,” which his dismissal went so far as to travesty — in his own assonance — when calling speech, in contrast to writing, “merely a series of squeaks.”

The marketing of strategically manipulated noise eventually disheartens the hot-shot brander, who recognizes how the “textbook primordial glen” he fantasizes has become a despoiled Eden. Until then, with the whole panoply of “organics” in mind, he had considered “nature” as the ultimate “strong brand,” a ruse to package all effective n(omencl)ature. But with another part of his mind, he realizes that branding is in fact a counter-nature, an overtended glen, a hothouse internalized. Early on, vistas of facility generate a locus amoenus, a “magnificent and secret landscape” where “beautiful hidden things scrolled to the horizon.” It is a wordscape whose strange flora, lushly summoned, and evoking the proverbial “flowers of rhetoric” under market pressure, include “saplings that curtseyed eccentrically” — waiting, no doubt, to be pruned and grafted, as well as “low shrubs that extruded bizarre fronds,” perhaps in the form of mutant suffixes. Yet, in his mounting disillusion, the nomenclaturist yearns ultimately for a prelapsarian world, pre-Adamic: a space of perception before naming. “Isn’t it
great when you’re a kid and the whole world is full of anonymous things?” – ablaze with presence before the “light goes out” of them – until suddenly, “All those flying gliding things are just birds.” The seeming lexical inherence of the mobile ing – floated in the two participles and then enfolded by the volatile “things” themselves on the wing – is finally grounded by category, say pigeonholed. We may wonder whether the character’s own withheld name is part of some Edenic remission from the blitz of nouns?

Long committed to the premise that “wording and phrasing,” when anchored in the branded bonding of syllables, articulate “the essential grammar of modern business,” our anti-hero finally breaks away into a more familiar grammar of human agency, where phrasing releases itself from terminology. Until this turning point, his proposal was to rename Winthrop “Prospera,” boasting a formulaic, aspirational “romance language armature” that would give it, according to his abiding philological instinct, “a glamorous Old World aura draped over the bony shoulder of prosaic prosperity.” In this target of Whitehead’s satiric prose, the prosaic per se is what must be avoided, torqued, or even mangled and refashioned – prose and the individual words at its base. But in the protagonist’s quest for the trendy original, he ends up with second thoughts – those, in fact, of another. It turns out that one of the town’s two black founders had thought, in a proposal dismissed as “cockeyed,” a better name than “Freedom” would be “Struggle.” The rebrander actually likes this one. When taken up by an existential syntax, the name “Struggle” spells an “anti-Apex,” all climb, no peak, where there is no effort to hide the hurt, to “camouflage” the “wound,” let alone heal it. Since his contract obliges the township to retain the name for a trial year, he thinks they might grow “comfortable with it,” living within its resonance “as if it were their very skin.” Letting slip away his perverse linguistic vigilance, he falls asleep hearing the conversations: “They will say: I was born in Struggle. I live in Struggle and come from Struggle. I work in Struggle, and so on: historicizing the site, and the longer plight, of endurance per se. Where Orwell sees the potential vigor of English diction enervated by rote phrasing, this marketer’s confected word, so often isolated, fetishized, and debased as name, is returned to vitality by phrase: say by prose itself, rather than nomenclature, in the lateral plane of stylistic rescue and lived speech.

Just before this closural replacement of Prospera by Struggle, the novel’s wordplay so closely anticipates the climax of Toni Morrison’s A Mercy, two years later, that Whitehead’s verbal move shimmers as intertext. Morrison’s seventeenth-century historical fiction about the Portuguese trafficking in human labor for the New World, before the American institutionalization
of slavery, never deploys that abstract noun for such bondage – except in its final defiance by cross-word phonetic irony. In the heroine’s climactic speech, trying to break free with her own abrupt end-stops: “Slave. Free. I’ll last.”\(^5\)\(^8\) In Whitehead’s millennial novel, set long since official emancipation, the portmanteau collapse – quite apart from any of his marketable ingenuities – runs (together) like this: “Before coloured, slave. Before slave, free,”\(^5\)\(^9\) the inescapable sounding of the slavery to come. Even for narrative discourse itself, it would seem hard to recover a memory free from the shadow (phonetic, ethical) of that curse. Remember the neo-Orwellian rat dream in the gnawing revenge of its neologisms, an assault by “kickers in their excellent variety, odd fricatives” – fricatives like v/f in this worded return of the historically repressed. It is no doubt a final irony, in the metalinguistic satire of Whitehead’s novel, that even this kind of subliminal, even subversive, prose poetry may find its demeaned obverse in the smoke screen facility of the marketer’s Frankenfolds. Nonetheless, in the dialectic of word versus phrase spurred here by Orwell’s critique, for a tensed moment the phrase, the chronological sequence slave, free, is heard struggling to liberate itself from the manacling syllables of a single convergent noun.

**Prime Terms: Wording the World**

After *Apex*, Don DeLillo’s very different version of “Politics and the English Language” comes a decade later in *Zero K*, in a bizarre sci-fi plot about a Wall Street billionaire entering into a contract for cryogenesis (the title, *Zero K*, refers to Kelvin’s discovery of absolute zero). His skeptical unnamed son is the narrator, permitted top-secret access to the underground laboratories of Convergence (the trademarked intersection of life and death) at an unmapped Eurasian site where the frozen bodies are wired and stockpiled. Among the most chilling prospects of such a thawed-out immortality is, for this narrator, the melting away of human language itself, which has been his lifelong fascination. He grew up chasing words in the dictionary, wading through one new synonym after another – from, say, the overheard paternal accusation of “fishwife” through “shrewmouse” to “insectivorous”\(^6\)\(^0\) – and he now pauses repeatedly to comment on linguistic curiosities or self-consciously reach for his own best nugget of expression. “There was,” for instance, “a word I wanted, notcrypt or grotto,” when his mental thesaurus is under strain in the dungeon of the banked dead: “bodies on both sides of me, and the sight was overwhelming, and the place itself, the word itself—the word was *catacomb*.”\(^6\)\(^1\) Only such a knotted polysyllable could summon the honeycombed necropolis through which he stumbles.
For all his repulsion, the narrator revels with perverse fascination in the argot of this rejuvenation enterprise, with words like “vitrification” and “cryopreservation” being, in his view, linguistic prods to further notches of molecular discovery – and thus goads to his own lexical investigations in a resistant vein: “Cherish the language, I thought. Let the language reflect the search for ever more obscure methods, down into sub-atomic levels” – as in the nuclear combustion of the anagrammed cherhslerch dyad. He is continually probing his own discourse for the inner linings of association. Distracting lexical fragments are dwelt on in a way that might “draw other words out to locate the core” – with the vocalic core there chiastically targeted. A mannequin is seen as “reddish brown, maybe russet or rust.” Sounds redouble, embed, and bracket each other. A favored Catholic ritual entails a phonically-smudged “splotch of ash.” With words understood as “dense realities,” the one that comes to mind in responding to his father’s diminished spirit, after delaying his euthanasia, seems suited to their conversation on the banquette of a posh New York restaurant, “desuetude” feeling just right for the fancy ambience. Elsewhere, the wording of a “purer aura” seems to rarefy itself by syllabic iteration as we listen, ur purified via er to a softened aur. And in recalling the notion of “prime numbers,” he “needed to find the precise and perpetual and more or less mandatory wording that would constitute the definition of a prime.” A search, in short, for a prime wording.

Orwell had his hero Winston Smith reach for the right word, too, while dodging the monstrosities of Newspeak. In free indirect discourse, Winston’s unpoliced thought takes shape in just the right four-syllabled metaphor – producing exactly the kind of compelling “image” Orwell’s earlier essay finds blurred in the murk of contemporary prose. “Winston was gelatinous with fatigue.” No sooner said than glossed: “Gelatinous was the right word. It had come into his mind spontaneously” – that very adverb indicating a minor triumph under the crush of Newspeak. “His body seemed to have not only the weakness of jelly, but its translucency,” with that etymologized soft g of gelatinous having operated to sap even the glottal closure effected by the very noun fatigue.

More often yet, DeLillo’s protagonist in Zero K is caught listening in on his own wordings – as hooked on syllabic latches and aural “cores” as any marketer’s playbook from Apex, yet in a mode curious and investigative rather than instrumental. This is the DeLillo who, in a famous Paris Review interview, explains that being a writer means writing sentences acutely attuned to the syllables of words. “I’m completely willing to let language press meaning upon me,” so that “I might want rapture matched with danger—I like to match word endings”: poetry by another name.
Exemplified in that very instance is less the particular seesaw of ecstasy and threat than the oscillation of the slant rhyme itself – which can take hold at the beginning of words as well: in Zero K, a backseat taxicab video submitting him to the “deadly sedative tenor of picture and sound.” Or there is the underground postmortem epiphany of a spectral monk present “on this bench” in “the context of an immense emptiness” with the plosives themselves deflated by more emphatic flattenings. Blind spots of criminal negligence about one’s own motives are called “little felonies of self-perception.” Although he imagines a frozen body trying to picture her own verbal memories not by seeing “the letters in the words but the words themselves,” in the throes of his own self-expression he often sees letters in their separate insistence, his own version of “subatomic” recognition – as with the pivot-like (and erotically feminine) \( v \) of the mesmerizing word lover for his girlfriend: “The idea alone consoled me, the word itself, lover, the beautiful musical note, the hovering letter v.” Or there is the compact echoic “savor” tasted on the tongue of the internally chimed polysyllable “forevermore” – just the kind of word that will, in fact, have no place in the newspeech of eternal rebirth.

Instead, the “occult language” of the futurists, shaped by commissioned “philologists” in the revamping of “roots” and “inflections,” traps speech within an “opaque bubble” of phonemes and gestures that communicate nothing to the living, a condition parallel to a speech-disabled student of the protagonist’s girlfriend in Manhattan, who, in his apraxia, is stumped by “the specific motor movements” that permit speech. In his case, regarding so-called natural language: “Nothing is natural.” With that sentence read either of two ways, nonspeech is the easy default – even while the litany of rare and “unnatural” disablement hangs in the air without a sentence grammar of its own, just a word list of inefficacies: “Phonemes, syllables, muscle tone, action of tongue, lips, jaw, palate.” Similarly, in the subterranean labyrinth of Convergence, the “congested syllables of ‘regularly’” are heard by the narrator at one point to trouble a dying tongue. Back in New York, when the hero’s own embarrassed stammers in a job interview find him “murmuring microdecibles of assent,” we may think by contrast of those subatomic rumbles of dissent regarding Convergence. When asking rhetorically near the story’s end, “Isn’t that why I was here” – in the novel at all, that is, rather just in his granted access to the underground lab – “to subvert the dance of transcendence with my tricks and games?”, we can hear an instance of just such prestidigitation in the smoked-out “trance” of artificial animation. And the “tricks” can be more constrictive yet. In describing his colorless cell there, he spews a quartet of monosyllables whose own linguistic cast is transferred to an epithet for what it pictures: “Wall,
floor, door, bed” – and thus, by lexical metonymy, a monosyllabic image of his claustrophobic room. Even this side of the future’s post-human new-speech, the narrative’s own “natural” language may thus, under duress, appear cramped in confrontation with the perverse ontology of a cybernetic beyond.

But precisely because language is always at risk of expressive default, the narrative voice must stay alert to a semiotics of aurality beyond its own lexical register. As much as Whitehead’s novel dreams of embodied natural flight in a time before the word bird names such agency, so DeLillo finds cleansing words of his own for the pre- (rather than post-) linguistic affect of living energy. In the novel’s contrapuntal structure, a final return from Convergence to the open-ended seethe of metropolitan humanity achieves a moment of contingent secular grace in the last paragraphs, when a radiant New York sunset happens to align its glowing orb, on a given bus route, with the cavernous city streets – and when a child’s squeal of delight, seeing the burning shape framed so symmetrically by cement, serves to voice, without exactly uttering, a burst of affirmation. Celebrated by the narrator as eloquently “pre-linguistic,” the child’s delight is also solemnized by DeLillo’s typifying syllables: avoiding this time the flat monosyllabism of a phrase like “great round red mass” for the epiphany of a “great round ruddy mass” amid the assonant “urban huddle” of stone.80 Beyond the modest personification of the phrase (huddle rather than pile for the architectonic frame of this natural wonder) is the displaced intertext of America’s “huddled masses.” Not all prime wording is definitional, but rather imagistic as well, evocative, allusive, revisionist in its own play of vocables.

Beyond formulaic phrasing, it is “staleness of imagery” – whether in the mixed or the dead metaphor – that remains the abiding charge against modern prose in Orwell’s “Politics” essay, all such dreariness captured, by contrast, in figuring the colorless writer as “a cuttlefish squirting out ink.”81 The inveterate phonetic grain of DeLillo’s syllabic prose doesn’t rest easy with its image of the sun, but finds in echo (rudhud) its subsidiary image of an animated and momentarily centered metropolis. Such imaging (figurative rather than strictly pictorial) is the glory of the crisp fictional archive out of which Orwell’s writing emerges – and to which, after our contemporary sampling, we can return for one concentrated if extreme Victorian example. George Meredith puts into the mouth of his novelist-heroine in Diana of the Crossways (1885) a flamboyant instance of the imaging word at its own syntactic crossings, shunting from one register to another in a running pun on the locomotive grammar of gender. Under
such figurative extrapolation, even an unworded term can inflect an entire passage. Marriage is the heroine’s literal topic, the resources of language her metaphor (with my italics) in this extended conceit: “We women are the \textit{verbs passive} of the alliance, we have to learn, and if we take to activity, with the best intentions, \textit{we conjugate} a frightful disturbance.”\textsuperscript{82} The bravura energy of this whole lament may well seem extruded (by exclusion) from the unsaid word \textit{conjugal}. Then, too, any phrasal impetus in “we have to learn” – any quest for knowledge we might expect – is nipped in the bud by the antecedent drag on this phrase as a matter not of open inquiry but of belated recognition.

On it goes. In the straitening custom regretted in the next clause – “We are to \textit{run on lines}, like the steam-trains” – it is as if an enjambment by run-on in the literary line itself has been commandeered for prosaic routine, followed by an insistence on the abiding threat: “or we come to no \textit{station}” – not just no resting place but no social standing. In picking up again the double logic at just this switch point of impasse, where the risk of independence is that we “come to no station, dash to \textit{fragments},” one may hear the parallel predicate “dash to” taken as a single past participle of defeat – again in the register of \textit{verbs passive}: the cross-syllabic finality of “dash(ed) to.”\textsuperscript{83} In the vocabulary educed from DeLillo, and related in fact to Whitehead’s (and Morrison’s) “slave/free,” we may say that prime terms serially chosen from the formal paradigm can become primed terms for their cross-word manipulation by the ligatures of horizontal syntax.

At the figurative intersection of Meredith’s \textit{Crossways}, the grammar of predication returns explicitly to clinch the point: “I have the misfortune to know I was born an active” – the noun “verb” going unsaid (in chiastic symmetry with the inverted \textit{verbs passive} at the start), keeping all latently denominated possibilities open, still volatile. “I take my chance”\textsuperscript{84} – a submission to contingency already well illustrated at the level of lexical drive across the rails of syntax. If form is vertical, style horizontal, what has been anomalously fashioned in the space of these three sentences – by the resolute double valence of formal selection from the stack of verbal alternatives – is staged to guarantee that each word has philological as well as psychological traction. And a momentum all its own. En route, formal tension restyles the contemporaneous railroad image of Victorian progress into a double-tracked irony of syntactic and social mobility alike. In the spirit of Orwell, here is the \textit{gender} “politics of the English language” – as, before in our examples from Whitehead and DeLillo, the racial and the ontological – at work overtime yet again, word by forked word, in the transforms of figurative diction over the energized time of reading.
NOTES

2 R. Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics: Closing Statement” in Style in Language, ed. T. E. Sebeok (New York: Wiley, 1970), 350–77, 358, where the vertical paradigm is contrasted with the horizontal axis of association and combination, so that the poetic function, for prose as well as poetry, is defined as the mapping of likeness (alternate choices) onto a sequence (by way of stylistic bonus) that doesn’t require such patterned recurrence.
4 Smith, NW, 145.
5 Smith, NW, 77.
8 Orwell, “Politics,” 159.
11 Orwell, “Politics,” 164.
12 Orwell, “Politics,” 164, emphasis added.
13 Orwell, “Politics,” 158.
14 Orwell, “Politics,” 170.
15 Smith, NW, 156.
16 Orwell, “Politics,” 163.
17 Orwell, “Politics,” 163.
18 C. Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt (Boston: Little, Brown, 2007), 105, 22.
19 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 3.
20 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 4.
21 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 3.
22 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 3.
23 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 3.
24 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 51.
25 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 76.
26 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 76.
27 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 83.
28 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 192.
30 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 87.
31 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 78.
32 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 99, 100.
33 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 153.
34 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 52.
35 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 53.
36 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 196.
37 Whitehead, Apex Hides the Hurt, 21.
41 Whitehead, *Apex Hides the Hurt*, 44.
42 Whitehead, *Apex Hides the Hurt*, 43.
52 Whitehead, *Apex Hides the Hurt*, 34.
57 Whitehead, *Apex Hides the Hurt*, 211.
73 DeLillo, *Zero K*, 162, 158.
76 DeLillo, *Zero K*, 244.
81 Orwell, “Politics,” 158, 165.
82 G. Meredith, *Diana of the Crossways* (London: Constable, 1902), 64.
83 Meredith, *Diana of the Crossways*, 64.
84 Meredith, *Diana of the Crossways*, 64.