Samuel Johnson’s novel *Rasselas* (1759) begins with the following sentence:

Ye who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy, and pursue with eagerness the phantoms of hope; who expect that age will perform the promises of youth, and that the deficiencies of the present day will be supplied by the morrow; attend to the history of Rasselas prince of Abyssinia.¹

The careful construction of this periodic sentence lends authority to the moralist as he addresses a reader who stands to learn from the salutary example of the tale that follows. The future may be uncertain in everyday experience, but within the compass of this sentence it comes round with surety; the reader awaits the completion of sense that the writer has foreordained; indeed, the sentence replicates the deferred expectation and chastening fulfilment that it describes. The periodic sentence suspends its sense until the last clause. George Campbell observed in his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) that ‘[a] period is a complex sentence, wherein the meaning remains suspended till the whole is finished’, and it is often achieved, especially in the classical languages, by ‘reserving the verb to the end’.² In practice, in the history of English prose, the effects of control and design are equally the functions of other characteristic properties, as here: the balance of the clauses and phrases ‘listen with credulity’ against ‘pursue with eagerness’ and ‘whispers of fancy’ against ‘phantoms of hope’, and then the chiastic arrangement of the next clauses, where the subject-verb-object construction (‘age will perform the promises’) is mirrored on the other side of the conjunction (‘deficiencies … will be supplied by the morrow’). The orchestration of the sentence displays a writer firmly in control.

Derived from Ciceronian rhetoric, the periodic sentence reached its culmination in English in the eighteenth century, and Samuel Johnson was among its most practised exponents. It is apt to suggest orderliness and premeditation. Structured by logical connectives, it often implicitly emphasises reason and judgement. It can be weighty, meditative and deliberative;
sometimes it is deemed ponderous and artificial. Samuel Taylor Coleridge had sentence structure in view when he said of Johnson, ‘he creates an impression of cleverness by never saying anything in a common way.’ William Hazlitt argued that in Johnson’s writing, ‘the close of the period follows as mechanically as the oscillation of a pendulum, the sense is balanced with the sound.’ He continued, ‘Dr Johnson is a complete balance-master in the topics of morality. He never encourages hope, but he counteracts it by fear; he never elicits a truth, but he suggests some objection in answer to it’ – a sentence that mimics the syntax it denigrates. These responses indicate a reaction against the formality and seeming artifice of the periodic sentence at a time when a less formal, more conversational sentence structure was becoming increasingly common in written prose.

Set against the periodic sentence is the loose sentence common to narrative and more characteristic of the early novel. A sentence is a ‘loose’ one – the term is technical and not pejorative or merely descriptive – when its main clause is followed by subsequent clauses and phrases in an accretive fashion. Campbell notes that in loose sentences, ‘there will always be found in them one place at least, before the end, at which, if you make a stop, the construction of the preceding part will render it a complete sentence.’ These sentences, also known as cumulative sentences, do not often suggest the same level of predetermination as the periodic sentence, but they can create an appearance of freedom, improvisation and spontaneity. They are common in fictional narrative because they are suited to representing events or thoughts in the order in which they occur.

Daniel Defoe’s narrative fiction makes use of this sentence type. Here, Robinson Crusoe for the first time kills a goat for food:

The first shot I made among these Creatures, I kill’d a She-Goat which had a little Kid by her which she gave Suck to, which griev’d me heartily; but when the Old one fell, the Kid stood stock still by her till I came and took her up, and not only so, but when I carry’d the Old one with me upon my Shoulders, the Kid follow’d me quite to my Enclosure, upon which I laid down the Dam, and took the Kid in my Arms, and carry’d it over my Pale, in hopes to have bred it up tame, but it would not eat, so I was forc’d to kill it and eat it my self; these two supply’d me with Flesh a great while, for I eat sparingly; and sav’d my Provisions (my Bread especially) as much as possibly I could.

The sentence describes events in sequence, linking them through conjunctions and relative pronouns (‘when’, ‘which’, ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘so’, ‘for’). This is a sentence on the run; it unfolds in real time, as it were, and we participate in Crusoe’s unanticipated discoveries. One of the effects of this accretive style in Defoe’s hands is to make it difficult to detect the tone and emphasis of successive

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clauses, because they are not co-ordinated into a grammar of relations, and, as the cumulative sentence extends itself, the emphasis is equally weighted across all its clauses. The pace of the sentence means that even though there are occasional personal reflections (e.g. ‘which griev’d me heartily’), there is a matter-of-fact tone as Crusoe moves quickly through practical consequences and incidents. There is a near approximation to rhetorical, Johnsonian balance in the two clauses ‘but it would not eat, so I was forc’d to kill it and eat it myself’, but it is a strange deduction that requires a goat to be taken for food because it would not itself immediately eat. The tone of this is hard to gauge: is there regret or indifference in killing the kid? The combination of first-person voice and a sentence style harnessed to narrative event means there is no vantage point outside of Crusoe’s own narrative from which we gain a perspective on incidents and actions. We are marooned along with him.

The effects of syntax are too variable to be adequately catalogued by the usual manuals of style or dictionaries of rhetorical terms. In any case, there is a wide variety of possible sentence shapes, not confined to these two types. Some textbooks of composition note, for example, the semi-periodic sentence, and Campbell acknowledges ‘an intermediate sort of sentences . . . though they are not entirely loose, nor perfect periods’. What is needed to appreciate the full variety of syntax is a careful evaluation of the effects of sentences. Whether for the purposes of critical response or the rehearsal of such effects in the practitioner’s creative prose, it is less important to classify sentences or to name their rhetorical features because identifying a periodic, loose or right-branching sentence, and so on, still leaves everything to be said about precisely how it works on the given occasion; it is more productive to be able to redescribe or reproduce their effects. The coming sample sentences from later prose – fiction particularly – demonstrate the versatility of syntax and the variety of its implications. Since sentences are frequently an inexact blending of these two pure types, they often mingle the qualities of the periodic and the loose sentence in combinations of deliberation and improvisation, of narrative and reflection, of reason and feeling.

Jane Austen’s style bears the marks of the influence of Samuel Johnson, a writer who her brother said was her favourite ‘in prose’. That influence is manifest in her juvenilia, which show how early and deeply she had absorbed into her own practice the formal, rhetorical style of eighteenth-century prose. Her novella *Kitty, or the Bower*, written at seventeen (in 1792), includes the following sentence about the readiness of the heroine’s aunt to receive her distant relations:

As her Aunt prided herself on the exact propriety and Neatness with which every thing in her Family was conducted, and had no higher Satisfaction than
that of knowing her house to be always in complete order, as her fortune was
good, and her Establishment Ample, few were the preparations necessary for
the reception of her Visitors.  

The propriety of the aunt’s family’s conduct and the order of her house are
registered by the controlled syntactical structure; the balance of ‘as her
fortune was good, and her Establishment Ample’ is a Johnsonian
parallelism. The sentence plays out in its own proportions the thorough
readiness, orderliness and organisation beforehand, described in the
mounting clauses, that mean that the activity that remains is minimal, or,
as the succinct independent clause puts it, ‘few were the preparations
necessary.’

Austen’s style, influenced by neoclassical rules of proportion and balance,
accommodates feeling and passion within an orderly narrative. The sen-
tences themselves may shape a balance of reason and emotion, circumspec-
tion and enthusiasm or, for instance, sense and sensibility. Consider this
example from Austen’s second published novel (1811), after Willoughby has
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Elinor, for some time after he left her, for some time even after the sound of his
carriage had died away, remained too much oppressed by a crowd of ideas,
widely differing in themselves, but of which sadness was the general result, to
think even of her sister.  

The sentence begins with a periodic suspension – the subordinate clauses
(‘for some time...; for some time’) delay the main verb (‘remained too
much oppressed’) – and there is another suspension where the two clauses
describe the ‘crowd of ideas’. There is a felt organisation in the sentence,
owing to the association of suspension with writerly premeditation, but
this coexists alongside an equal and counter suggestion of emotion in the
repetition and in the overwhelming ‘crowd of ideas’ that obstruct clear
thought. The further delay of syntactical completion caused by the two
subordinate clauses in this sentence (‘widely differing in themselves, but of
which sadness was the general result’) recreates in the syntax the troubled
forestalling of intentional, considerate thought. Despite the usual associ-
atations of the periodic style, these suspensions represent not only writerly
organisation but Elinor’s struggle to think clearly; they imply emotion
more than rational thought.

The competing impulses detectable at the level of syntax, even within a
single sentence, are evident in the long, accretive sentences of Charles
Dickens that present tumultuous, sprawling scenes of urban chaos. Here is
a syntactical extravaganza from Sketches by Boz (1839) that describes the
accumulated stock-in-trade of a pawnbroker’s shop in a down-at-heel part of the capital:

A few old china cups, some modern vases adorned with paltry paintings of three Spanish cavaliers playing three Spanish guitars, or a party of boors carousing: each boor with one leg painfully elevated in the air, by way of expressing his perfect freedom and gaiety; several sets of chessmen, two or three flutes, a few fiddles, a round-eyed portrait staring in astonishment from a very dark ground; some gaudily-bound prayer-books and testaments, two rows of silver watches quite as clumsy and almost as large as Ferguson’s first; numerous old-fashioned table and tea spoons displayed, fan-like, in half-dozens; strings of coral with great broad gilt snaps; cards of rings and brooches, fastened and labelled separately, like the insects in the British museum; cheap silver penholders and snuff-boxes, with a masonic star, complete the jewellery department; while five or six beds in smerey clouded ticks, strings of blankets and sheets, silk and cotton handkerchiefs, and wearing apparel of every description, form the more useful, though even less ornamental, part of the articles exposed for sale.11

The sentence is divided in impulse between whether it should replicate the chaos or catalogue it. The prose is so chock-full that much of it reads like a list rather than a sentence. Yet we find orderliness within the clutter. After the initial china cups and vases, the list proceeds in an approximate alphabetical order: chessmen, flutes and fiddles, a portrait, prayer-books and testaments, watches. There is an insistent effort at quantification: ‘a few’, ‘three’, ‘one’, ‘several’, ‘two or three’, ‘a few’, ‘two’, ‘numerous’, ‘half-dozens’, ‘five or six’; so that all this stock is something like the ‘cards of rings and brooches, fastened and labelled separately, like the insects in the British museum’, a comparison that emerges admiringly into the cluttered list. Regular alliteration provides a set of linkages throughout: ‘paltry paintings’, ‘several sets’, ‘few fiddles’; there is a thread of sounds: ‘round’, ‘ground’, ‘bound’; and other acoustic chimes: ‘form the more . . . ornamental’ and ‘part of the articles’, as if Dickens is sewing together this miscellaneous patchwork in an effort to find or assert pattern amongst plenitude. The brief diversions of personification or comparison are all the more conspicuously imaginative coming in a list that proceeds apace, so that there is a felt tension between syntactical drive and diversion. The main verb arrives at ‘complete the jewellery department’, and now grammar attempts to reassert itself. It is not entirely clear how far back we can look for the subject of this verb: presumably to the ‘cheap silver penholders and snuff-boxes’, but plausibly to the ‘cards of rings and brooches’; only the unlikelihood of items like the ‘old china cups’ being incorporated into a ‘jewellery department’
prevents us taking the whole catalogue of items as the final stock of the jewellery department, prompting us instead to read this as a mere list that gradually becomes a sentence, as if being pulled into order. The creative rivalry between the pleasures of diversion and the attractions of order, writ large in this tour de force, is replicated as a feature of many sentences that balance digression and accretion.

Periodic sentences are used to more poignant purpose towards the end of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). One could find in Dickens every variety of sentence, turned to innumerable effects – energetic, comic, sentimental, earnest, satirical, solemn – but a sentence style emerges into prominence at the end of his novel of the French Revolution that reflects the inevitability of history (where effects follow necessarily from causes) and the inevitability of historical fiction (the main historical circumstances of the tale are prescribed). In the last chapter, when Sydney Carton goes to his self-sacrificial death at the guillotine, in the company of a young seamstress he befriends, we read:

> Eye to eye, voice to voice, hand to hand, heart to heart, these two children of the Universal Mother, else so wide apart and differing, have come together on the dark highway, to repair home together, and to rest in her bosom. \(^{12}\)

The sentence begins by following the pattern of the famous words of the burial service (‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’), but, though a more direct allusion will shortly follow, here it is displaced, since that moment is not yet come and as if to deflect its more frank acceptance of death. Then, the small rhyme of ‘heart’ and ‘apart’ (echoing again in ‘dark’) adds to the rhythmical cadence of the sentence so that it seems to signify beyond itself and to operate on the borderline between literal and figurative – they have actually arrived in a tumbril along the road, but the ‘dark highway’ is also figurative of their lives’ journeys (anticipating the shift to metaphor in ‘repair home’), like the metaphorical travellers in *Little Dorrit* (1857) who are ‘on the great high-road’. \(^{13}\) But it is the delayed verb in this left-branching sentence that I want most to observe here. The felt suspension of the sense across the proliferating clauses prior to the main verb reconfigures the sentence as a model of inexorable fate: finality is necessarily, inevitably coming.

The moment of Carton’s death is recorded as follows:

> The murmuring of many voices, the upturning of many faces, the pressing on of many footsteps in the outskirts of the crowd, so that it swells forward in a mass, like one great heave of water, all flashes away. \(^{14}\)
Again, there is an accumulation of clauses that only gradually yield to a main verb (‘flashes’), as if to replicate the many circumstances that have led, together, to this place in this moment. The novel repeatedly communicates the inexorability of fate, with periodic suspensions of verb and sense; front-loading sentences with events and circumstances, which all await the inevitable outcome, grammatically and narratively. On this occasion, there is a grammatical wrinkle because the main verb should more properly be singular – ‘all flash away’ – if its antecedents are the preceding clauses. But as it is, we perhaps have to imagine an elided ‘it’ – ‘it all flashes away’. In the very elision, or the moment of grammatical dislocation, the sentence clocks with pinpoint precision the ineffable moment of death.

Girolamo Savonarola, in George Eliot’s historical novel Romola (1862–3), is similarly ill-fated, doomed by the forces that conspire against him (which include the circumstance of his being in historical fiction). When he heads to his possible martyrdom in a ‘trial by fire’, the novel communicates his experience in a periodic sentence:

> When Savonarola felt himself dragged and pushed along in the midst of that hooting multitude; when lanterns were lifted to show him deriding faces; when he felt himself spat upon, smitten and kicked with grossest words of insult, it seemed to him that the worst bitterness of life was past.¹⁵

The sentence mobilises the capacity for surprise that the periodic sentence standardly offers, because even in the midst of his public suffering, Savonarola feels himself beyond the ‘worst bitterness of life’, rather than, as we might have expected, recognising that it had not yet come. The point at which the accumulation of clauses gives way to the release of the verb is where the sentence turns inward, from multiplying circumstances to enduring selfhood. Buffeted, sometimes more than figuratively, by multiplying contingencies, the monk’s spirit is not overcome; it endures. This is a sentence with a narrative purpose, and it contributes to a dramatic representation of the events the chapter describes. Beyond this fact, though, the remarkable timing of the sentence gives it its power. Savonarola’s progression beyond the worst bitterness is timed when he felt himself dragged, and so on; not ‘after he had’ or ‘having been’. Readers may intuit a spiritual transcendence of the immediate pain and scorn in such timing, but it may also be that Savonarola is too hasty because though he braves the public hostility, the novel has in reserve for him the greater trial of not feeling himself worthy to be a martyr.

George Eliot’s sentences are justly famous for their delineation of inward drama. She develops a moral syntax sufficiently complex to respond to the
ethical complications that she lays out and that the best of her characters strive to negotiate. This is how she describes Savonarola’s state of mind, accused of false testimony, in support of a cause he believed virtuous:

But under this particular white tunic there was a heart beating with a consciousness inconceivable to the average monk, and perhaps hard to be conceived by any man who has not arrived at self-knowledge through a tumultuous inner life: a consciousness in which irrevocable errors and lapses from veracity were so entwined with noble purposes and sincere beliefs, in which self-justifying expediency was so inwoven with the tissue of a great work which the whole being seemed as unable to abandon as the body was unable to abandon glowing and trembling before the objects of hope and fear, that it was perhaps impossible, whatever course might be adopted, for the conscience to find perfect repose.  

This is a digressive, qualificatory syntax that can appear lopsided and disproportionate; George Eliot is about to dismiss those who make their ethical judgements ‘according to concise alternatives’, as she, in another novel, condemns the ‘men of maxims’ who are ‘guided in their moral judgement solely by general rules […] without the trouble of exerting patience, discrimination, impartiality’. Her syntax takes up this burden of patient ethical discrimination. It requires a complicated co-ordination both of the narrative’s moral penetration and the character’s complexity of consciousness: ‘a consciousness in which … in which … which … as … as … that’. And yet there is still an impulse to balance (note the twinning equilibrium of ‘errors and lapses’ against ‘noble purposes and sincere beliefs’), as if the sentence performs the weighing of competing claims though honestly recognising preponderating factors and mitigating conditions. Overall, there is so much qualifying and modifying, co-ordinating and subordinating, that the impetus of the sentence is lost to the ballooning enumeration of moral influences. So ramifying is the sentence that its concluding word ‘repose’ brings a sense of rest and relief even as that possibility for the conscience of this particular monk is disavowed.

The drama of syntax can demonstrate purposes waylaid by proliferating contingencies. Thomas Hardy is alert to the disruption of intentions by chance occurrences in his plots, and he intuits a version of the conflict between will and fate in his sentences. Writing is always a balance between purpose and chance, between plan and serendipity, because even careful writing, even writing directed towards narrative ends, is subject to the unforeseeable associations or surprising acoustic correspondences of
language in the event. Consider this sentence from *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1872–3), where Elfride determines to pursue duty in the face of desire:

So during the day she looked her duty steadfastly in the face; read Wordsworth’s astringent yet depressing ode to that Deity; committed herself to her guidance; and still felt the weight of chance desires.  

A sequence of determinations is articulated by the coordinating clauses, denoting a discipline that constrains freedom and fluency. The regular d-alliteration cooperates to suggest determined effort, while a nascent iambic pulse in the last clause reveals a pulsing rhythm emerging into the day and the sentence. But these effects might be the result of chance rather than effort, and the further chime of ‘self’ and ‘felt’ and the half-rhyme of ‘guidance’ and ‘chance’ are the sort of unforeseen occurrences in language, here marshalled into order, that suggest the play of spontaneity against purpose. Consider, too, this sentence from *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876):

She could scarcely reply to his supplication; and the parting was what might have been predicted from a conversation so carefully controlled.

The patterns of alliteration here seem managed to communicate the predictability and control described. The sentence is formally controlled too, because the last clause is composed as if in two three-stress lines, with the stress falling predominantly on the alliterating words. On the other hand, alliteration will be surprising and unpredictable in sentences composed with a priority on sense, over and above sound. The sudden correspondence of ‘chance’ and ‘guidance’ in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, then, is especially suggestive in relation to these acoustic effects because all sentences are themselves the mixed products of the interplay of chance and guidance.

At the start of *The Return of the Native* (1878), an imagined inhabitant of Egdon Heath is figured as looking out on the surrounding landscape, as if restless for times and places beyond, as the heroine will prove to be:

To recline on a stump of thorn in the central valley of Egdon, between afternoon and night as now, where the eye could reach nothing of the world outside the summits and shoulders of heathland which filled the whole circumference of its glance, and to know that everything around and underneath had been from prehistoric times as unaltered as the stars overhead, gave ballast to the mind adrift on change, and harassed by the irrepressible New.

The long periodic sentence, which lies in wait for its main verb in ‘gave ballast’, gives a shape and a trajectory to the ungoverned experience that finds its only stability in the changeless durability of the heath. The syntax itself gives ballast to a mind adrift on change; the chime of ‘ballast’ and
‘harrassed’ brings the two final clauses into balance, while the restless energies and possibilities of the ‘irrepressible New’ are brought under control by the finality of the sentence, curtailed at precisely this phrase. This sentence is about change and stability, and its periodic suspension provides the shape and control that an inhabitant like Eustacia takes from the landscape.

Sentences like this, in their very organisation, provide ways of understanding the world, of engaging with its vast incomprehensibility. Syntax is not a neutral medium, for its power to organise, coordinate and subdue itself either replicates or reorganises the perceived nature of things. What Eric Griffiths says of lists is also true of syntax: ‘the order of items of information is itself an item of information’.

That is especially pertinent if we take information in its primitive sense to mean the giving of form. It is easy to see how sentences can become models of social organisation, with their own sets of relations, hierarchical organisation, freedom under the constraint of law, systems of governance – so that grammar and syntax offer their own ways of upholding law and order. What is more, sentences may become small models of human experience as their progress is thwarted, waylaid, qualified and as meaning is held at bay.

We might look to modernist experimentation to remind us of this deep relationship between syntax and experience; there, we can review a still wider range of effects, and there the rejection of conventions of syntax is a rejection of certain ways of seeing and being in the world. Gertrude Stein, for example, develops a prose style in which the present tense predominates and punctuation is minimised. Her prose creates a fluid, ongoing experience, a ‘continuous present’, where meaning can be more difficult to ascertain within the relentless onward movement of her sentences. Here is a passage from her lecture, ‘Composition as Explanation’ (1926), that gives an account of her practice:

The composition is the thing seen by every one living the living they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of the time in which they are living. It is that that makes living a thing they are doing. Nothing else is different, of that almost any one can be certain. The time when and the time of and the time in that composition is the natural phenomena of that composition and of that perhaps every one can be certain.

The combined density and fluency of this style give the passage its difficulty. The challenge to comprehension posed by this style, the folding of explanation back into composition, is played up by the wry appeals to everyone’s certainty. Take the last sentence as an instance of the willed
obscurity. Condensation of it is possible – the time of and in that composition – but avoided; there is a grammatical oddity when these times take a singular verb – ‘is the natural phenomena’ – though this may represent the collapsing of difference into continuity that is expressed throughout the lecture; and Stein’s reiterative style returns words that repeat exactly (in close proximity) and yet have different significations, like ‘of that’ here, where the first ‘that’ refers to the ‘composition’ but the next ‘that’ refers back to this statement, so that the distinction between this discourse and a reality beyond it is minimised, just as the title of the lecture effaces the difference between ‘composition’ and its ‘explanation’. The capacity for a sentence to start to seem self-propelled, self-generating, as though it were solely discourse, governed by its own internal logic, rhythms, sounds and so on, without reference to an imagined reality beyond it, is a capacity that modernist writers exploit. It is as if ordinary syntax, with its grammar of relations, its co-ordination and subordination of clauses, in order to generate meaning, is a falsification of our experience in the middle of life where we do not yet have available elevated, detached and meaningful perspectives.

Virginia Woolf replays some of these techniques in her fiction. The ‘Time Passes’ section of To the Lighthouse (1927) is a lyrical interlude where the ability of prose to take its time and to manipulate time through syntactical effects is exploited. The narrative asks, ‘what after all is one night?’ and supplies these images by way of answer:

A short space, especially when the darkness dims so soon, and so soon a cock crows, or a faint green quickens, like a turning leaf, in the hollow of the wave.\(^2^3\)

The experience of the sentence is more important than its logic because it remains mysterious why one night is a short space especially when the things that follow happen. Sound and rhythm are mobilised to lyrical effect, particularly through the close alliteration – ‘darkness dims’, ‘so soon’, ‘cock crows’. As we read the sentence, we may experience a momentary uncertainty if we first assume ‘green’ to be an adjective before revising our understanding to read it as a noun here. These mild disorientations of meaning, achieved at the level of grammar and syntax, are not unusual. Here is a sentence a few pages on:

So loveliness reigned and stillness, and together made the shape of loveliness itself, a form from which life had parted; solitary like a pool at evening, far distant, seen from a train window, vanishing so quickly that the pool, pale in the evening, is scarcely robbed of its solitude, though once seen.\(^2^4\)
The opening of the sentence is impressionistic rather than literal, and literal meaning remains difficult of access throughout the sentence. The simile that describes the loveliness as ‘solitary like a pool at evening’ courts bafflement – why is a pool the image of solitariness, and are we to imagine it more solitary at evening than at other times of the day? As the sentence unfolds – and the timing of the unfolding is necessary to the effect: ‘solitary like a far-distant pool at evening’ reads differently – the image and its metaphorical significance begin to cohere; the loveliness is solitary like an isolated pool in the far distance seen from a train window. But to put it like that is to lose the experience of perplexity as well as lyrical pleasure that the syntax elicits. Since the pool is the subject of the clause ‘seen from a train window’, we might expect it to be the subject of the next clause ‘vanishing so quickly’, for we usually think of things seen from train windows as disappearing rapidly as the train leaves them behind, but in a striking reorientation of the perspective, we read ‘vanishing so quickly that the pool …’ and recognise that it is the train and its window that have vanished; the pool remains. The pool is ‘scarcely robbed of its solitude’ – an intriguing reimagining of solitude as an essence that can be stolen, and stolen simply by being viewed – ‘though once seen’, which could mean either ‘though seen once’ or ‘though it had been seen’, neither of which obviously threatens the solitude of a pool. Such a sentence creates the experience, as time passes, of finding ourselves in the middle of things, in a continuous present, without vantage point or elevation; perhaps disorientated or at a loss.

At the start of the novel’s third section, ‘The Lighthouse’, Lily is in a state of uncertainty:

What does it mean then, what can it all mean? Lily Briscoe asked herself, wondering whether, since she had been left alone, it behoved her to go to the kitchen to fetch another cup of coffee or wait here. What does it mean? – a catchword that was, caught up from some book, fitting her thought loosely, for she could not, this first morning with the Ramsays, contract her feelings, could only make a phrase resound to cover the blankness of her mind until these vapours had shrunk.

These cumulative sentences, punctuated by commas that register both accretion and interruption, move interchangeably between Lily’s inner life and her outward situation, in a way that is characteristic of Woolf’s prose. The abundant detail of inward and outward life and the exchange between the simple past tense and present participles communicate an ongoing experience, from the midst of which it is not easy to determine overarching meaning. That difficulty is compounded in this case by the claim that language itself may be inadequate to represent inner feeling. Lily’s question
is no more than a ‘catchword’, and it is too narrow for her feelings. Woolf’s prose repeatedly declares that the dynamic process of syntax, combined with the presence of acoustic effects, provides a way in which language can compensate for its semantic limitations; but the insufficiency of sentences to capture adequately the complexities of experience is a preoccupation Woolf shares with other writers.

Samuel Beckett takes the idea further. His novels extend the possibility that sentences falsify reality to the point that they may not represent reality at all; they might be part of their own enclosed system, a law unto themselves. It is as if Beckett exposes the bias of sentences towards purpose, order and meaning by creating an unconventional, ungrammatical style that seeks to shed these allegiances. He calls it a ‘syntax of weakness’.

Years before he wrote *Molloy* (1951, 1955 in English), the novel from which my examples come, he declared:

> It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. Grammar and Style. To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman.

Instead of conventional sentences, then, which had come to seem old-fashioned and mannered, Beckett develops a style that is often self-regarding, taking up its own terms; it often loses contact with sense, so that it contradicts itself, cancels itself out or descends into incoherence. The absence of paragraphing creates the effect of a relentless need to go on talking, performing an interiority that has no purchase on a world outside itself, which may in fact be ‘Nothingness’. This becomes manifest in a prose that is increasingly punctuated with commas – a style that interrupts its own progress whilst allowing the sentences to go on and on. The syntax mediated by these commas gives more or less the appearance of syntactical logic, but as if there are no conditions outside its own articulation that it needs to satisfy.

Beckett’s novels mount a series of perceptive and funny investigations into the philosophical bases of language and syntax. Consider this sentence where Molloy is talking about his legs, one of which is becoming a stump:

> For it was shortening, don’t forget, whereas the other, though stiffening, was not yet shortening, or so far behind its fellow that to all intents and purposes, intents and purposes, I’m lost, no matter.

This is a characteristic moment because even while describing legs that are not going to take him very far, his own syntax breaks down in its onward movement. The sentence collapses on ‘intents and purposes’, as if Molloy is...
thrown by these unfathomable notions. His repetition of the idiom highlights a laxity in our usual way of talking: what precisely is the difference between ‘intents’ and ‘purposes’, or is this a tautology by which we reassure ourselves that we have one and the other? The halting prose, punctuated by commas, continues until another typically digressive, self-referential passage a few pages later. Molloy complains that his progress is slowing, but that this is ‘not due solely to my legs’:

The fact is, and I deplore it, but it is too late now to do anything about it, that I have laid too much stress on my legs, throughout these wanderings, to the detriment of the rest.29

The joke here is that ‘laid too much stress on my legs’ could mean either actually, physically, or in terms of the narrative. The confusion is compounded by ‘wanderings’, which could mean his journeying or his rambling narration. The stress he has laid on his legs probably refers principally to narrative emphasis; this is typical of a characteristic across the Beckett trilogy that external reality becomes more and more a function of discourse.

The fear that sentences may falsify experience is of long standing. George Eliot puts one version of it eloquently in her gothic tale, The Lifted Veil (1859):

That course of our life which I have indicated in a few sentences filled the space of years. So much misery—so slow and hideous a growth of hatred and sin, may be compressed into a sentence! And men judge of each other’s lives through this summary medium. They epitomise the experience of their fellow-mortals, and pronounce judgement on him in neat syntax, and feel themselves wise and virtuous—conquerors over the temptations they define in well-selected predicates. Seven years of wretchedness glide glibly over the lips of the man who has never counted them out in moments of chill disappointment, of head and heart throbings, of dread and vain wrestling, of remorse and despair. We learn words by rote, but not their meaning; that must be paid for with our life-blood, and printed in the subtle fibres of our nerves.30

One of the risks incurred in writing is that the texture of one’s sentences smooths the roughness of difficulty and suffering. We prize those sentences whose formulation is not automatic or mechanical, but which inscribe human feeling and which register the difficulties and contingencies that beset human endeavour. We could take one of George Eliot’s sentences from this passage for closer inspection: ‘Seven years of wretchedness glide glibly over the lips of the man who has never counted them out in moments of chill disappointment, of head and heart throbings, of dread and vain wrestling, of remorse and despair.’ There is a poise and transition in the cadence of the
sentence; the symmetry of the two clauses ‘of head and heart throbblings, of dread and vain wrestling’, aided by rhyme and rhythmical balance, gives way to a minor variation of rhythm in ‘of remorse and despair’. We have here the organisation that writing bestows, a sense of pattern amidst painful profusion, but not an unperturbed mechanical rhythm. Meanwhile, the alliteration of ‘glide glibly’ provides a precarious test case for the way that acoustic effects work: on the one hand, it could suggest a sudden lyrical skid whereby the sentence performs the glissade it describes; on the other hand, it may constitute the clogging of fluency that George Eliot so often introduces into her sentences in order to frustrate their easy movement as a way to stage the difficulties of decision and the frustrations of circumstance, or, here, the intrusion of felt meaning into rote language. Acoustic play alone will not constitute responsible writing, only its careful combination with all the other aspects that go into the making of a sentence.

Good writing must overcome the kind of automation of which Hazlitt accused Johnson, though Johnson’s sentences in fact rarely succumb to such unthinking equilibrium. In Rasselas, we read:

‘The Europeans,’ answered Imlac, ‘are less unhappy than we, but they are not happy. Human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed.’

Here, the swing of the pendulum is awry; the structure of ‘less unhappy ... but ... not happy’ creates recurrence rather than true antithesis, though it has the shape of antithesis, and there is a jarring of the final word ‘happy’ as it repeats itself from within ‘unhappy’ and so fails to deliver the uplift of variety where we are accustomed to expect it. So too the balanced phrasing of ‘much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed’ is something close to a parallelism, masquerading as an antithesis. Here we have the contrast of endurance and enjoyment, but so worded as nearly to equalise the sense on either side of the conjunction; the sentence faces up to the hardship of life in which equilibrium is difficult to achieve. The sirenic allure and danger of crafted sentences are soon recognised by Rasselas, after his encounter with the philosopher (and rhetorician) whose daughter has died:

The prince, whose humanity would not suffer him to insult misery with reproof, went away convinced of the emptiness of rhetorical sound, and the inefficacy of polished periods and studied sentences.

The final alliteration may demonstrate what it rejects, but it also suggests the continuing appeal, despite everything, of ‘rhetorical sound’. Insofar as the alliteration clinches the claim with something like epigrammatic force, the sentence may yet raise a quiet challenge to its own moral.
Writers like Stein, Woolf and Beckett inaugurated new possibilities in the craft of the sentence, through a break with traditional forms (though the breach was not always so complete as they claimed). They show what can be done with new styles, and their practice reveals how meaningful syntax is and, in their own terms, how the conventions of sentence structure needed to be overturned in order to resist the philosophical bias towards purpose, order and meaning, deep rooted in the very structure of syntax. But their prose reminds us, by negative example, and still on their own terms, that the art of the sentence, even in new combinations and new styles, can be affirming in the modern world. Sentences themselves can, in Hardy’s phrase, give ballast to the mind adrift on change and harassed by the irrepressible New. Even at a time of disenchantment and crisis, sentences can provide a glimpse of the beauty of structure and the harmony of design.

NOTES

16 Eliot, Romola, 64, 492.
24 Woolf, To the Lighthouse, 176.
25 Woolf, To the Lighthouse, 197.
29 Beckett, Molloy, 78.
31 Johnson, Rasselas, 355.
32 Johnson, Rasselas, 367.