How Syntax Moves Us: Language as Dance

The term syntax makes us think of structures, static and abstract. But syntax gives shape to sentences, and sentences are language in motion. What if syntax affects us the way a dance does? Seeing a dancer suddenly defy gravity, we feel ourselves uplifted. Or someone simply drops his face into his hands, and something stirs deep inside us. It's mysterious—we identify with the movement and are ourselves moved.[i]

So it is with sentences—we find ourselves carried, physically and emotionally. Their progress becomes our progress, their tempo ours. Sentences move through us quite literally, grow out of the body; voiced, they rise through flesh and sinew, shaped by contraction and release. They are made of physical energy, life. The life is pressed into shape by specific patterns and syntactic forms, channeled and released in ways that are profoundly evocative. The outward flow—the ex-pression—becomes a dance. I don't want to continue too much in this abstract vein. Let us instead experience the dance of syntax, the range of emotion it gives rise to, in the writings of Charlotte Gilman, Marilyn Robinson, Flannery O'Connor, Shelton Johnson, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce.[ii]

Perhaps the easiest way to see how sentences channel life's energy is to notice when the flow is blocked. For this reason, I'll start with Charlotte Gilman's story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, whose theme, broadly speaking, is the suppression of life and whose syntactical forms dramatize this suppression.[iii] The story offers us a powerful experience of the patriarchal culture of Victorian times, largely because its sentences have been

shaped—or misshapen rather, stunted—by the frustration of desire, and as we read along, making the sentences our own, we feel this frustration directly.

The narrator is a character who has decided to commit her thoughts and feelings to paper (the story we read is this record). She writes secretly, in the face of active opposition, for stimulating her mind and imagination in any way violates the "rest cure" prescribed by her husband and society at large. "What can one do?" she asks, evasively using the impersonal pronoun *one*. "If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?"

What *is* one person to do, faced with Victorian society as a whole? Shortly thereafter, she does use the personal pronoun *I*. And the repetition is tinged with an angry urgency: "Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?" she asks, reverting to the use of "one," feeling oppressed again by her isolation.

Notice that she voices her beliefs in a way that is definitive—her sentence ends in a full stop. But then a new sentence beginning with *But* undercuts her assertion. This basic pattern dominates her thinking and the syntax of the story we're reading. She finds herself constantly butting against a wall and forced to "rest." Usually, it's John who asserts himself, his voice that butts in. "I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes, I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition. But

John says...” Her sentence reaches its conclusion, punctuated by a period. But then its wholeness is ruptured: the sentence that follows begins with a *But* and as a fragment, attaches itself to the sentence before it, creating a drag, a pulling down and under. In some cases, her sentence is cut off before it even reaches its conclusion: “I sometimes fancy that my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition…”

A number of forces—the relentless erosion of her authority, her husband’s insistence that she exercise self-control, and her dutiful efforts to keep within prescribed bounds—eventually sap her strength and sanity so that when she does desire to express herself, she no longer has the power or stamina. Now her self-expression is cut off by her own fatigue, or rather, peters out. Each of the following short sentences gives way to silence, conveying her lassitude and sense of defeat. If there’s an outburst, it’s just that—a momentary burst overwhelmed by exhaustion.

> I don’t know why I should write this.
> I don’t want to.
> I don’t feel able.
> And I know John would think it absurd. But I *must* say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!
> But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief.
> Half the time now I am awfully lazy, and lie down ever so much.

Each utterance is a fundamental expression of life’s energy and spirit, but the effort to say what she feels and thinks in the face of John’s ridicule is becoming greater than the relief (and at this point in the narrative, it is half the time). Each paragraph ends after only a sentence, giving way to a pronounced silence. She needs to rest. (And so they were right,

after all.) Through the erratic pulse of her expression, we get an energetic hit of how her condition has deteriorated, how difficult it is becoming for her "think straight."

One of the most compelling effects to be achieved through syntax is this expressive interplay between sound and silence. Syntax is at work not just within a sentence but between sentences. How we arrange a sentence affects how it lands. The period after a short sentence can resonate with an individual's taking a stand, putting her foot down. In the silence, energy continues to build (whatever mixture of will, hope and desperation) like a body swelling with power. But then the sentence that follows, depending on its syntax, can erode that finality and drain the previous sentence of its power—it turns out the stop was temporary, not final... In this way, a sentence revises the silence that preceded it.

Or the sentence had very little energy to begin with and what is said causes the period at the end to resonate with fatigue and resignation rather than power or defiance. How intriguing that periods—those identical, black points, all equally expressionless—should set in motion such a range of reverberations. And a specific syntactic pattern will have various effects, depending on the context. The examples I've chosen will continue to demonstrate that there is no one-to-one correspondence.

To return to *The Yellow Wallpaper*, because the writer's imagination is walled off, her only stimulus remains the wallpaper itself—she finds herself caught in its patterns, pursuing them obsessively. There's a woman behind those bars; she's certain of it. "But

nobody [can] climb through that pattern—it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads. They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white!" Caught up by the story's syntax, we ourselves experience the stricture that has led to this implosion; we've aligned ourselves with her basic life force and feel how life itself is at stake, its undistorted evolution into this world.

Gilman's story, when it was published a hundred years ago, played a crucial role in abolishing the rest cure. By carefully locating her Victorian readers on the threshold between movement and stasis, expression and implosion, she gave them an experience of the cure that made it difficult for them to impose it on the ones they loved. Even the author's doctor—who had prescribed it in her case, nearly causing her own "mental ruin"—admitted he'd altered his treatment after reading her dramatized account.[iv] Conveying the danger of "rest" must have been a challenge, but Gilman, by attuning herself to the confluence of form and feeling, found a way.

I've dwelt on this story because it focuses our attention on the basic life force that drives all utterance. The more we can think of our sentences as having an energetic pulse and sensitize ourselves to the play between energy and rest, flow and contraction, the more alive and expressive they will become and the more our readers will align themselves with our unfolding story on a visceral level.

Let me jump now, by way of contrast, to Marilyn Robinson's *Gilead,* whose opening lines allow life to flow unobstructed. It is the conjunction *and* rather than *but* that regulates this flow.

> I told you last night that I might be gone sometime, and you said, Where, and I said, To be with the Good Lord, and you said, Why, and I said, Because I'm old, and you said, I don't think you're old. And you put your hand in my hand and you said, You aren't very old, as if that settled it. I told you you might have a very different life from mine, and from the life you've had with me, and that would be a wonderful thing, there are many ways to live a good life. And you said, Mama already told me that. And then you said, Don't laugh! Because you thought I was laughing at you. You reached up and put your fingers on my lips and gave me that look I never in my life saw on any other face besides your mother's. It's a kind of furious pride, very passionate and stern. I'm always a little surprised to find my eyebrows unsinged after I've suffered one of those looks. I will miss them. [v]

These powerful lines attune us to an aspect of all writing, how sentences flow through time and adhere to a specific tempo or rhythm. In this particular passage from *Gilead*, the prose aligns itself with the river of life as a whole. We feel how life is allowed to advance and in fact, cannot be kept from advancing, slipping inexorably towards its end. This streaming motion is established in the long first sentence by a smooth sequence of monosyllables and kept going by multiple *ands*.[vi]

When the first full stop finally comes, it barely disrupts the ongoing motion because the next sentence begins with "And," suggesting that the periods are not endings at all. The son tries to put a stop to the flow, saying, "I don't think you're old." And he says it again: "You aren't very old, as if that settled it." He wants saying it to make it so, and this desire, expressed in such a direct, naïve way, resonates with our own longing to stop

time. A period punctuates his assertion, as if to make it definitive, but it marks only a pause, poignant in its brevity, for nothing is settled ever, and the father carries on: “I told you you might have a very different life from mine, and from the life you’ve had with me, and that would be a wonderful thing, there are many ways to live a good life.” The flow of conjunctions resumes. A comma displaces a period. And once again new sentences begin with the conjunction, becoming just fragments or pieces of what is felt to be a continuum: “And you said, Mama already told me that. And then you said, Don’t laugh! Because you thought I was laughing at you.”

At this point, when the son has pressed his fingers to his father’s mouth to stop the words and their implications, the pattern shifts. The father describes the child’s “furious pride,” and the sentences begin to sound more distinct, ending abruptly. The last sentence in the paragraph is utterly blunt. “I will miss them.” As the father continues to dwell on the boy and his mother and the personal qualities that endear them to him, he cannot help but feel torn from them. Now, instead of aligning himself with time’s flow, he clings to moments within it, and his speech becomes jagged with the rhythm of attachment and loss. Again, it’s the interplay of sound and silence that gives us such a powerful sense of what is happening emotionally, especially since the words themselves are so reasonable, so calm.

In the second paragraph, in which the father imagines himself among the dead, we focus not on the conjunctions within life but the periods that conclude it. Their silence dominates, resonating with the ultimate silence.

> It seems ridiculous to suppose the dead miss anything. If you're a grown man when you read this—it is my intention for this letter that you will read it then—I'll have been gone a long time. I'll know most of what there is to know about being dead, but I'll probably keep it to myself. That seems to be the way of things.

Each sentence ends abruptly, with a noticeable thud. We feel the power of gravity, the pull of the earth on everything that is alive. "That seems to be the way of things," the father says finally, the paragraph winding down abruptly.

The father's philosophy, calm, and courage appear to dominate, and yet grief, like a strand of lightning, streaks the whole—we're surprised to find ourselves singed. Perhaps it's when the truth is plainly seen, when we're most open to it, that the pain will be most searing.

Poignancy is by no means the principle effect. The whole opening of *Gilead*, even as it fills us with a sense of the "way of things," is a paean to love in the face of this mortality. We've seen how the series of *ands* marks the steady slippage of time, but these same conjunctions serve to bind together in love father and son. After all, it is in the dimension of time that love is expressed. Time's flow is its lifeblood. Recall how in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the two main characters were violently opposed, with the conjunction *but* capturing the clash: *But John says… I think… But John says…* Contrast this stop and start with the way the conjunction *and* in Robinson's narrative braids together, in exquisite intimacy, father and child. First one strand is picked up, then the other. *And I said… and you said…* The two are by no means merged. The writer, avoiding subordinate clauses, keeps each subject stark and isolated, and this is what makes the intimacy so profound,

the coming together of two individuals, each with his separate life and separate death. The strands are distinct *and* they are interwoven. The boy and the father contradict each other, the boy even looks furious, but the reason is love and the conjunction is never *but*. It is again and again *and*.

What a deeply resonant emotional state is achieved, in a passage of such deceptive simplicity, by this careful manipulation of flow. What we feel is the poignancy of all love, because what is loved must also be relinquished; and yet, with time, it also grows stronger. Capturing in the actual flow of her language this fundamental convergence, Robinson allows us to internalize it on the deepest levels.

The next passage, from Flannery O'Connor's *The Lame Shall Enter First,* shows a father trying to outpace death, the syntax catching us up in this race. After his wife died, his response was to contract, and for most of the story, we see how alienated he is from his young son, who has himself turned away from the world, setting his sights on the moon instead (he thinks his mother has ascended there). Eventually, the father reaches a moment of reckoning. Abruptly realizing his son's need, he feels love and life rush through him. For the moment, they're still in separate rooms, but he can see his son in his mind's eye:

> He saw Norton at the telescope, all back and ears, saw his arm shoot up and wave frantically. A rush of agonizing love for the child rushed over him like a transfusion of life. The little boy's face appeared to him transformed; the image of his salvation; all light. He groaned with joy. He would make everything up to him. He would never let him suffer again. He would be mother and father. He jumped up and ran to his room, to kiss him, to tell him that he loved him, that he would never fail him again.[vii]

The transfusion of life the father experiences also spurts through O'Connor's prose. Short sentences capture the rush of energy propelling the father towards his son. Joy moves through his body with an audible sound—"he groaned with joy"—and desire drives him to close the gap: "He would make everything up to him. He would never let him suffer again. He would be mother and father." Repetition creates a leaping rhythm: though we land with each period, it's only for an instant, for the next *he* launches us again. Capturing the father's breathless determination, the short sentences turn to a string of clauses. The periods turn to commas, and *to* is repeated several times in quick succession, the pace accelerating as the father races to catch up with the son: "He jumped up and ran to his room, to kiss him, to tell him that he loved him, that he would never fail him again." When one phrase ends, the tail end of it becomes the beginning of another, the whole sentence like a telescope extending itself ever further: he is running "to the room" and the preposition *to* causes this protraction—"to kiss him, to tell him that he loved him" which leads to this protraction—"that he would never fail him again." And notice the shift in the word *to* from one kind of preposition to another: "he ran to the room, to kiss him, to tell him"—pure rhythmic repetition has him hurtling toward his salvation.

Capturing the rush of life in his veins, the prose sweeps him to the boy's room and then to the attic: "The light was on in Norton's room but the bed was empty. He turned and dashed up the attic stairs and at the top reeled back like a man on the edge of a pit." Everything has been propelling us forward—the verbs one after the other, the repetition

of *and*: *turned and dashed and*—O'Connor does not prepare us. Sheer momentum spins us around, sends us reeling backwards.

> He turned and dashed up the attic stairs and at the top reeled back like a man on the edge of a pit. The tripod had fallen and the telescope lay on the floor. A few feet over it, the child hung in the jungle of shadows, just below the beam from which he had launched his flight into space.

How different from *Gilead* whose sentences weave together father and child. Here, the father is not in sync with his son but finds himself one fateful step behind. We find the boy's body hanging "in the jungle of shadows." As we follow the sentence, it keeps extending itself, one prepositional phrase after the other (*in* the jungle of shadows, *just below* the beam *from which* he had launched...); we feel how he himself kept reaching and yearning, to the point of no return. Phrase hangs upon phrase, like a tree branching and branching again. The boy found himself on the outermost limb, one that could no longer bear his weight, and from there he launched forward. Into space. Into the silence that ends the story.

The distance he managed to traverse feels pathetic. For the father, who sees the boy dangling right before him, it is unbridgeable. The syntax captures what is a heart-rending convergence: both have failed to close the gap between themselves and their desire. We feel inside of ourselves the reaching, the longing… the sickening snap.[viii]

How differently we are affected by a passage from Shelton Johnson's *Gloryland*, whose sentences do not move us forward but keep us still—immersing us ever deeper in warmth and safety. Elijah, coming no higher than his mama's hip, has just been called a nigger,

for the first time, by a white man in town. His mama, saying nothing, holding herself stiff as a starched skirt, focuses on getting him home. The prose moves along briskly, efficiently. Then, as soon as they enter the safety of their home, she devotes herself to repairing the damage. The prose becomes suddenly loose and layered, rich with redundancy.[ix]

> What I can't forget is Mama talking to me when we got home. When we got inside where there was shelter, her holding my face in her rough warm hands like she was praying, I felt how warm it was and safe to be there in her hands. Nothing could hurt me in that shelter that was hands and love, and she said, "Elijah, you forget that man, he nothin to you or to me or your daddy. But you ain't nothin, cause I didn't work a day and a half bringin nothin into this world. I didn't bleed tears or sweat blood bringin nothin into my life. You could never be nothin, you never be anyone's nigger. You my boy Elijah, you my son, and my son ain't a nigger, and your daddy ain't a nigger, and I ain't a nigger, and it don't matter how much it get said, don't make it true.
> "That man's cussin something inside him, somethin he hates inside him, but not you cause he don't even know who you are, Elijah. Cause what I'm holdin in my hands is somethin good and kind, and I know you'll never be a nigger unless you forget who you are!"[x]

The sentences are shaped to capture the layers of a mother's love, its cumulative warmth and protection. Phrases that would usually seem redundant—"in her hands… in her hands… in that shelter that was hands and love…"—only drop us deeper and deeper into the layers. We feel how ensconced the boy is in his mother's protective care, how he luxuriates in it.[xi]

Then, when the boy's mother begins to speak, the repetition continues. The word nigger had cut him "like a knife, deep inside" but now she is holding the wound closed. Holding his face between her rough warm hands, she speaks words that fall into a pronounced

rhythm of twos, for they are, just like her two hands, shoring him up: “You could never be nothin, you never be anyone’s nigger. You my boy Elijah, you my son…” Steadily, methodically, she knits him together, her assertions short, regular, and uniform, the healing steady and cumulative. With unwavering focus, she keeps coming back to his essence, going back to repair the violence that has been done, going back even to the moment of birth to affirm the miracle of life’s arrival into this world, the creation of something out of nothing. Peering into his face, she reaches for that which lives deepest inside him, that *somethin good and kind*. All her words are channeled there. It is the form they take, their syntax, and the flow of the boy’s words as well, that give us such a palpable experience of her love and motherly love in general—how connected it is to the essence within each one of us, how it protects this core.

It seems sentences must move within the dimension of time, as we ourselves do, and we’ve seen how a writer can give shape to the converging flows of time and emotion. This last passage from *Gloryland*, however, shows us how syntax can be used to still time’s flow. And the same is true of the last two examples I’d like to share. In the following passage from *Mrs. Dalloway*, Peter’s experience hardly unfolds in time; what we experience is a nearly instantaneous expansion, in all directions:

> And just because nobody yet knew he was in London, except Clarissa, and the earth, after the voyage, still seemed an island to him, the strangeness of standing alone, alive, unknown, at half-past eleven in Trafalgar Square overcame him. What is it? Where am I? and why, after all, does one do it? he thought, the divorce seeming all moonshine. And down his mind went flat as a marsh, and three great emotions bowled over him; understanding; a vast philanthropy; and finally, as if the result of the others, an irrepressible, exquisite delight; as if inside his brain by another hand strings were pulled, shutters moved, and he, having nothing to do with it,

> yet stood at the opening of endless avenues, down which if he chose he might wander. He had not felt so young in years.[xii]

One of Woolf's extraordinary gifts as a writer is to alert us to our kinesthetic experience of language. Her prose dances. Her sentences swoop, dip and turn, their syntax loose and flexible as well as powerfully precise and, for that very reason, extremely expressive.

Let's start with the first sentence. So much is held suspended, the verb delayed until the very end. First, there's the extremely long subordinate clause beginning *And just because*, followed by the subject of the sentence, which itself goes on and on—*the strangeness of standing alone, alive, unknown, at half-past eleven in Trafalgar Square*—all of this held suspended and then dropped, suddenly and completely, with a dramatically short predicate: *overcame him*. Through its motion alone, the sentence captures the largeness of the feeling as well as the suddenness with which it overcomes him. It's like an ocean swelling, heaving itself up, gathering, gathering… till it suddenly folds, crashing towards shore.

And yet it has not crashed, for the stop, that pause after the period, is immediately repeated and turned into a questioning pause: *What is it? Where am I? and why, after all, does one do it?* This series of questions keeps everything suspended, like a wave hovering at its apex, continuing to arc and arc some more. And even the last question, which sounds like a culmination (*and why, after all, does one do it?*) does not release us, for the sentence continues: *he thought, the divorce seeming all moonshine*. Only now, with this afterthought, does everything that has been building finally collapse: *And down*

his mind went… The drop is dramatic since we've had to wait so long, keeping the various phrases suspended in our mind, the sentence growing top-heavy and unwieldy.

And the drop happens instantly: *And down...* How important the beginnings and ends of our sentences are, the words there sounding into the silence and receiving that much more weight. Poets break their writing into lines so as to multiply these junctures, luxuriating in their resonance. Writers of prose must pay attention to syntax if they're not to squander their opportunities.

Woolf does all she can to accentuate the flow of energy and feeling. The normal syntactic pattern would be: "and his mind went down," but the adverb is brought forward, surprising us and, for this reason also, receiving extra emphasis, creating a plunge: "And *down* his mind went flat as a marsh…" And the feeling with which Peter is overcome spills out, as over a vast plain, the words themselves lushly polysyllabic, rippling outward: "and three great emotions bowled over him; understanding; a vast philanthropy; and finally, as if the result of the others, an irrepressible, exquisite delight." Notice how Woolf interrupts the flow with the phrase *finally, as if the result of the others*, inserting two suspenseful pauses, shamelessly delaying the climax. And still she draws the moment out, teasing us with those overly long adjectives *irrepressible… exquisite…* Finally, the feeling that can't be repressed, that has been built up so carefully, is released. The final accented syllable when it comes down feels cathartic: de *light*: "finally, as if the result of the others, an irrepressible, exquisite de*light*." [xiii]

What distinguishes good choreography, what makes dance so mesmerizing, is not knowing what's next. We locate ourselves on that frontier, of the body pushing into space, that blossoming forth. And so it is with the swoops and turns of Woolf's prose. Her sentences take us in one direction, then another. What we thought was a stop was really a pause. A landing was just a suspension, the energy sweeping us onward and up. Good syntax often takes us by surprise, creating an expectation and then overturning it. It mimics the flow of emotion, which has everything to do with surfacing and surprise. *E-motion* literally means *moving out*. Energy crosses a threshold, and in that moment becomes what we recognize as an emotion. If we can locate our readers on that moving frontier, then they are more likely to feel the emergence within themselves, that *flow* of feeling, that *exiting* energy. Capturing the surprise of this emergence is what responsive syntax makes possible.

And how surprising when the moment of catharsis, that apparent climax, is itself engulfed. We thought the sentence had ended in the culmination of delight (and you thought my analysis had ended!) but the sentence flows on. What felt like an exclamation point is turned into a semi-colon:

> …and finally, as if the result of the others, an irrepressible, exquisite delight; as if inside his brain by another hand strings were pulled, shutters moved, and he, having nothing to do with it, yet stood at the opening of endless avenues, down which if he chose he might wander.

After a lengthy preparation, we had reached a dramatic and completely satisfying climax. How astonishing, then, when *as if* is repeated (*as if the result of the others... as if inside his brain…)* like a second wave washing up on the heels of the first, another clause

rushing to be included, a clause that includes a whole new tripartite series, the last part further subdivided, the sentence continuing to unfurl itself. As readers, we must remain alert and responsive, revising our expectations from moment to moment, if we're to keep our feet under us. Reading becomes a dance, and the pleasure is in the surrender, allowing ourselves to be carried...

Notice, as the sentence unfolds, how malleable it is: "as if inside his brain by another hand strings were *pulled*, shutters *moved*, and he, having nothing to do with it, yet *stood*." Modifying phrases are brought forward so that verbs may land at the end, punctuating the rhythm, giving it energy and drive. This is Woolf's priority. She could have stopped with *the opening of endless avenues,* but this image, while expansive, ends in a noun and remains static so she adds yet another modifying phrase—*down which if he chose he might wander*. The period when it finally comes is more of an elipsis, signifying a movement that radiates indefinitely.

Compared to this long, unfolding sentence (will it ever end?), the next sentence is dramatically short, ending the paragraph with a flourish: *He had not felt so young in years.* All the sentences till that point had been voluminous, spilling over. Their energy would eventually have dissipated. But the final curt pronouncement seals the energy in, making the entire paragraph an ecstatic explosion. It's the exclamation mark for the whole.[xiv]

Woolf famously wrote: "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness."[xv] We've seen how flexible her syntax is, allowing her to stay true to the unfolding experience. She does not go as far as some—she still adheres to the rules of grammar—but there is a way in which she is willing to atomize her sentences, almost liquefying them, so as to conform to the emotion as it flows through a person, rising, falling, surging, exploding. Her sentences vary dramatically in length. Often, they're complex and unpredictable, containing multiple interjections, phrase within phrase. But always they're crystal clear because of the emotion guiding them so powerfully forward.

A question we can ask ourselves is, what are our own habits regarding syntax? Have our sentences fallen into a rut? What happens if we tune into the emotion and allow its momentum to move us forward? Perhaps a sudden impulse will flip our sentences right out of their rut, and they'll go spilling out over the field. We'll interject a phrase, then another, and suddenly we have no idea where our sentence is going—we're risking incoherence—perhaps it will never end. But then it does, and we're surprised, and so is the reader. It's the surprise of emotion itself, how it wells up and overflows, stops and shifts.[xvi]

In fact, without some mirroring of emotion by syntax, descriptions of feeling can end up sounding clinical. We observe the emotion from the outside but don't feel its motion

within us. Arbitrary syntax can even set up a contradictory motion that effectively detaches us.[xvii]

For Woolf, form was hardly incidental. It was the very substance of her message, her starting point. The words came after. Using the word rhythm to describe the dynamics we've been exploring, she writes in a letter to her friend Vita Sackville-West that it is "all rhythm."

> Once you get that, you can't use the wrong words. But on the other hand here am I sitting after half the morning, crammed with ideas, and visions, and so on, and can't dislodge them, for lack of the right rhythm. Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit in; and in writing (such is my present belief) one has to recapture this, and set this working (which has nothing apparently to do with words) and then, as it breaks and tumbles in the mind, it makes words to fit it.[xviii]

I have a hunch (it is my present belief) that much of our best writing is produced in this way. Feeling dictates the form, and form in turn dictates the words "to fit it."

Woolf's fellow modernist James Joyce, in creating his most powerful work, probably began himself with "the sight, the emotion that creates a wave in the mind." Consider the final lines of *The Dead,* where the content itself is clearly secondary. What we're told, in sentence after sentence, is that it's snowing, everywhere in Ireland—information which on its own feels insignificant. It's the *form* of the telling—the syntax—that creates the astonishing epiphany.

> A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling

> obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.[xix]

For most of a long and busy evening, Gabriel has been caught up in a series of personally meaningful dramas, and we've been carried along with him. Only now, at the very end, does something shift. "A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window." The word *taps*, when it becomes the subject of the sentence (instead of Gabriel), is the first, subtle sign of the reversal about to take place. At first, Gabriel doesn't understand; nor do we. All we get is a tapping at the door of his consciousness. It makes him turn. What he sees is snow. [xx]

After that, all our attention is brought to its softly falling motion. The snow itself is barely mentioned, only its falling. What gets the emphasis is the predicate, the ongoing descent: "Softly falling," "thickly drifted," "falling faintly," "faintly falling" (all trochees accentuating the downward drop). Passive, linking verbs diminish the dominance of the subject: the newspapers were right, snow was general. Instead, lowly prepositional phrases get all our attention, bringing a larger world into view. We see how everything is covered: "upon the pane, "into the waves," "on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns." The blanketing is what is important, the universality. Outlines are softened, our gaze dispersed. The repetition lulls us, and

towards the end, hardly an object of focus remains, just the falling faintly and faintly falling, a complete dilation: “His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.”

If sentences serve to channel our life’s force, what we have here, through a combination of syntactical decisions, is the greatest possible expansion of that channel. The linear time that moves individuals to their specific goals has largely dissolved. Even though every descent has an end, the falling is constantly happening, for as flakes drop to the ground, others materialize. While snow hits the ground, forming drifts, the repetition returns us to the air where new flakes form, and thus we are held suspended. There is never the arrival or endpoint, only the constant motion. The living and the dead converge. Normally, a period would lead us to an ending that is absolute. Here the snow-filled sky is filled with these periods, like elipses that radiate in all directions.

That something as mundane as a weather report should be the vehicle for this revelation only deepens the feeling of humility as regards human endeavor and the distinctions between us. Every last pretension is dissolved, drawing in its wake an exquisite tenderness. Nothing is allowed to happen, all stories and dramas are withheld, and the boundaries that normally contain the individual ego are slowly and steadily moved outward to the point of dissolving utterly. Leaving the soul.

Who would have thought that a passage so simple, devoid of pyrotechnic sentences, could have such an outcome? And yet, if we keep attuned to the convergence of feeling and form, we'll come upon the felicitous decisions that together create an effect whose subtlety and power is incalculable. If we start with the wave, then, as it breaks and tumbles in the mind, it will make the words to fit it.

Any given syntactical pattern can have multiple effects. There's no one-to-one correspondence. A unique convergence and synergy are to be discovered in each case via our total engagement, emotionally and energetically, with the life to be expressed. The starting point is everything. The results are manifold. This is what makes our personal relationship with syntax so open-ended and rich with possibility.

The word syntax means to arrange together. And if asked to analyze the shape of a sentence, we might begin by dissecting it, splaying it into a static simultaneity of parts. As writers, however, we're interested in the effect, or affect, of syntax. And so we start by volunteering our own selves, body, mind, and spirit. We begin with surrender. No sentence, or series of sentences, lives on the page. Its life is our life, its pulse our pulse. Knowing its shape to be a changing, kinetic thing, we see and feel it move through us—rising like a wave, or marching along like soldiers, or still, like a butoh dancer, falling into snow.

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[i] The mirror neurons in our brains are constantly firing so we can know what it's like to engage in a movement we're only witnessing. At root is an instinctive desire to understand the feelings and intentions of others, helping us to predict their behavior.

[ii] Some wonderful books on syntax: Virginia Tufte's *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*, Donald Davie's *Articulate Energy*, and Ellen Bryant Voigt's *The Art of Syntax: Rhythm of Thought, Rhythm of Song*

[iii] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings* (New York: Random House, 2006) 1-18.

[iv] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*," *The Forerunner*, October 13, 1913.

[v] Marilyn Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004) 3.

[vi] Polysyllabic words would create an uneven rhythm since the syllables within them come faster. Or differently put, the pause between syllables within a word is shorter than the pause between words.

[vii] Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997) 481-2.

[viii] I find this passage exceptional for O'Connor, whose sensibility seems more classical than romantic and whose prose is shaped less by the emotions of her characters and more by the steady gaze of a clear-seeing eye. She allows the facts—as to what human beings are capable of—speak for themselves, and the passion that dominates her work streams from a fiery sun setting on the Judgment Day. Reader and character alike are urged to have their epiphany before it's too late. What dominates her syntax is the steady, relentless march towards this final reckoning. In the passage I've singled out, the father is propelled by a desire to preempt this reckoning, to make up for his mistakes. Because the prose creates within ourselves the rhythms of his urgency, his drama becomes ours, and we're left griefstricken. But most of the time, O'Connor's prose offers us a dispassionate view of the characters, leaving us instead with a cool and bracing sense of the truth.

[ix] If Johnson had followed the "rules," he would have shunned these redundancies. But he has a gift for letting the feeling rule, and the result is some of the most original, evocative language I've read in a while.

[x] Shelton Johnson, *Gloryland* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2009), 17.

[xi] Note the subtle but powerful effect that launches this paragraph, how our expectations as to rhythm are revised midstream: "What I can't forget is Mama talking to me when we got home. When we got inside where there was shelter, her holding my face in her rough warm hands like she was praying…" Here we reach a stopping point, having heard a complete sentence (which the chiasmus, or pattern of inversion, suggests, causing us to ignore the period). Just when the sentence we perceive has wound down, a main clause arrives ("I felt how warm it was") and with it an unexpected surge in energy, for really there is no pause in the nurturing; it keeps coming, powerful and enveloping.

[xii] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1997) 55.

[xiii] Even the choice of the three final words heightens the drama. We can hear the rhythm of a count-down: 3… 2… 1! *Irrepressible… exquisite… delight*! The words (diminishing from six syllables to three to two) come quicker, the dramatic pauses come closer, creating a crescendo. This kind of attention to the rhythm on a syllabic level is associated with poetry, but once we break open our sentences and start manipulating the parts, hearing the rhythm, what's to stop us from breaking the words themselves open? Every pause, whether between sentences, phrases, or syllables, has emotional resonance, and it is the rhythm achieved by the sequencing of these moments that creates emotional

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trajectories of specific, undeniable power. There's no reason to stop short. Woolf certainly doesn't. To go still further, notice the long *i* in that final, climactic syllable in *delight*—how it's preceded by a series of short i's so that its arrival signals a sudden dilation. And because the previous words ended in unaccented syllables (*irrepressible*, *exquisite*), the final accented syllable lands all the more forcefully, the equivalent of an exclamation point. (The closest word ending with an accented syllable is the word *result*—also a two-syllable word ending with the letter *t*—and so this word chimes with delight, accentuating the finality. The re*sult* is… de*light*!

[xiv] Even within this last sentence, there's a crescendo: notice how much heavier the emphasis is on the final two syllables—*young* and *years*. "He had not felt so *young* in *years*." Only at the end does the iambic rhythm become pronounced, and the emphasis is further heightened by alliteration. In the end, it is not just the final sentence but this final pair of beats that becomes resounding, punctuating the paragraph as a whole—*two* exclamation marks, not just one.

[xv] Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, Vol. 3 (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 161.

[xvi] By so powerfully capturing the dynamics of emotion, Woolf's prose raises fascinating questions regarding the nature of emotion itself and how we as writers choose to convey it. Think again of dancers and the power of their expression. What we see is wordless—pure form, no story—only energy as it flows through the body, shaping and reshaping the torso, the limbs. Emotions themselves seem dramatically opposed—anger and calm, grief, fear, ecstasy… but what if they are fundamentally composed of the same substance, which is energy, and what distinguishes them (besides the triggering circumstance, besides the story) is how they move, the path they take? Perhaps it is the trajectory above all that determines what we feel. In the dictionary, anger is the opposite of joy, but in the realm of the body, perhaps anger and joy come from the same source. Anger is rooted in the desire to live—life insisting on its rights, in ways that can become violent. If this same energy is allowed an earlier, more gradual release, it is no longer anger. Or if it is steadily repressed, it creates lethargy. Given a radically different channel of expression, the same energy might express itself as ecstasy. What we are talking about is form rather than content or substance. If emotion doesn't just have a form but *is* form, then the most evocative writing finds its power in the realm of abstraction. Like a painting by Kandinsky. Or a dance.

[xvii] If a passage in our writing is falling flat, it can be helpful to observe its syntax. Are certain sentences too choppy? Too long? Too simple? Too complex? When we speak the sentences aloud, do we feel the rush of feeling (or its softness or calm)? Why not? When we summon the feeling inside, how does that change the way we want to speak the words? The form we give them?

[xviii] Woolf, Virginia. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume 3: 1923-1928* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1977) 247. I'm indebted to David Jauss for bringing this passage to my attention. He also shared with me Gertrude Stein's dictum: "A sentence is not emotional a paragraph is." Certainly, we've seen in the passage from *Mrs. Dalloway* that the emotion finds its ultimate shape in the paragraph as a whole. Syntax creates a rhythm not just within a sentence but within a paragraph, and from paragraph to paragraph. We've seen this cumulative effect in all of the passages so far. Gertrude Stein, *How to Write* (New York: Dover Publications, 1975) 23.

[xix] James Joyce, *Dubliners* (New York: Penguin, 1992) 225.
[xx] Notice the difference when you make the subject of your sentence, neither the character hearing the sound nor the object producing the sound, but the sound itself. It's a small but powerful revision of syntax that introduces the sound, unmediated, directly to the consciousness of your readers, immersing them in your fictional world, its here and now. And if the sound moreover starts the sentence, breaking upon silence, it becomes all the more startling and audible.