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THE FORMS OF STYLE: VICTORIAN STORYTELLING AND THE RISE OF THE
STYLIST

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Forms of Style: Victorian Storytelling and the Rise of the Stylist

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The Forms of Style links two key literary trends that unfolded in Britain between the 1850s and '90s: the rejection of the chatty, rhetorical author in novelistic theory and practice; and a new critical enthusiasm for theorizations of prose style. What was emerging in these decades, I argue, was a new concept of style: one in which the intimate details of composition disclose the individual trace of an unseen author. This new model was understood to be incompatible with a previous notion of style, conceived under the sign of rhetoric, wherein the author is directly available as a speaking presence in the text, hailing the reader from the page. In this way, the effacement of the loquacious, rhetorical author as a Victorian novelistic convention was an essential prerequisite for the emergence of the modern idea of style that we still hold today.

Recognizing these two trends allows us to properly historicize the understanding of style that we've inherited from modernism. I argue that the emergence of a modernist commitment to style did not come about as suddenly as we often assume, in some definitive break with chatty Victorian storytelling—rather, it unfolded gradually over the course of a 50-year span, a long period in which rhetoric and style were not fully extricated from each other or even fully defined. By extending this negotiation between the immediacy of a vocal presence and the abstraction of textual construction into the

very heart of the Victorian period, we are recognizing not only its centrality to the Victorian novel, but also the fact that the shift from rhetoric to style was much more a story of *continuity* than of any kind of decisive break. Indeed, I argue that style, in truth, did not vanquish or replace rhetoric—rather, rhetoric *became* style: the markers of oral immediacy, of a direct speaking presence, were repurposed into the telling details of style.

Understanding style in fiction as a concept with a history—that is to say, recognizing in ‘style’ a literary term that does not designate a historically constant idea, but rather an idea that has been reinterpreted through successive dispensations—is also to recognize, I argue, the inextricability of style’s history from the history of narrative forms: it implies that what we mean by ‘style’ has evolved in dialogue with the changing fashions of novelistic technique and the arrival of new modes of narration and representation. The question of how to identify the transitional forms, the types of stories in which one can see rhetoric becoming style, is the question that animates the readings of the Victorian novel that comprise this dissertation. In this project, I argue that many of the best-known and most influential narrative forms of the period—from Dickensian caricature, to melodramatic tableau, to the “whodunit,” to the frame tale—share a status of being interestingly poised between rhetorical address and stylistic diffusion, between an intimate author who meets the reader’s gaze directly and one who is detectable only in the purposeful construction of the text: and in fact reveal the former becoming the latter, the gestures of authorial presence beginning to function *as* the signs of style.

Finally, one of the motivating commitments of this dissertation is to read the novel as an art that was not evolving in a vacuum, but rather developing in mutual dialogue with

other literary arts: a perspective that is especially necessary when tracking the passage of the Victorian novel from rhetoric to style, as the aesthetic changes that the novel was undergoing during this period often looked to other arts, like the drama, for their theory or justification. Ideas about theater and theatricality were central to the debates over novelistic rhetoric that began in the middle of the century—and novelists, too, looked to the theater and its forms in their efforts to imagine a post-rhetorical narrative discourse. Theater, however, was hardly alone in playing this kind of supporting role: for in the 1880s, the rapid rise of the modern short story in Britain—carrying with it an aesthetic of brevity, of elliptical suggestiveness and signifying moments, which was seen to be antithetical to the loose and baggy discursivity of the rhetorical novel—introduced another influential model for a novel in a state of aesthetic transition, as well as a convenient venue for authors of fiction to experiment with new kinds of narratives. The theater and the short story were each mobilized as metaphors for a new model of style at successive points in the latter half of the nineteenth century, providing a heuristic for the rhetorical novel to reimagine itself as the product of a stylist.

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Introduction

From Rhetoric to Style

This dissertation links two concurrent literary trends that unfolded in Britain between the 1850s and 1890s: on one hand, a turn in novelistic theory and practice against the convention of the chatty, rhetorical author; and on the other, a new critical enthusiasm for theorizations of prose style. The turn against the loquacious, confiding, preaching, apostrophizing authorial posture in the narration of the British novel—a posture that had been pervasive during the rise of the three-volume novel in the first half of the century and, indeed, continued to dominate the Victorian novel for decades after—can be traced to the mid- to late 1850s, around the time that G. H. Lewes first praised Jane Austen for showing her characters by what he called “dramatic presentation,” rather than merely “telling us” what they are like, and Harriet Martineau, writing in her notebooks, expressed regret for the “laborious portions” of authorial commentary that she had “obtruded” into her 1838 novel *Deerbrook*; by the early 1860s, authors like Trollope and Thackeray were being negatively reviewed for indulging in too many personal confidences and asides to the reader by critics increasingly insistent that the author’s role was to get out of the way and let the characters and story present themselves.¹

Meanwhile, these same years witnessed the beginning of a steady trickle of British articles, books, anthologies, and reviews on the subject of prose style, a trend that can be

¹ George Henry Lewes, “The Novels of Jane Austen,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 86 (July 1859): 105. Harriet Martineau, *Autobiography*, ed. Maria Weston Chapman, 2 vols. (London: James R. Osgood & Co., 1877), p. 415. Although the entry in question was not published until 1877, it was written in 1855; see Richard Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850–1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 93. For reviewers’ complaints about the “obtrusive” narration of Trollope and Thackeray from the mid-1850s to the early 1860s, see Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England*, *ibid.*, pp. 95-6.

dated to David Masson's 1859 volume *British Novelists and Their Styles*; by the 1880s, this trickle had become a torrent of critical commentary aimed at defining and explicating the meaning of style, by such authors as George Saintsbury, T. H. Wright, John Earle, Walter Raleigh, Robert Louis Stevenson, Vernon Lee, and Walter Pater. These two trends—the turn against the rhetorical author and the new enthusiasm for prose style—were deeply linked: for what was emerging in these decades, I argue, was a new concept of style, predicated on a new understanding of how the author is revealed in the text. In this new model, the author discloses herself, unconsciously, by the evident traces that she leaves behind in her writing; what we find in the text is an abstraction of the author's persona, dispersed and discoverable in all the intimate details of composition. Such a model depends, crucially, on the assumption that the author is *not* already available in the text as a speaking self, apostrophizing the reader directly in her own person; this mode of direct address belonged to an earlier idea of style conceived under the sign of rhetoric, in which writing was understood to be, in essence, merely an alternate species of orality—with the authorial presence assumed to be a given. It was the effacement of this authorial presence, who hailed the reader familiarly from the page, that allowed the author of style to be constituted as a kind of mystery, a veiled figure, who had to be traced and reconstructed through signs and symptoms embedded in the technical features of the prose.

In this dissertation, then, “rhetoric” and “style” name two antagonistic strategies of novelistic narration, as well as two alternate accounts of the individual author's position in the narrative text. In the pages that follow, “rhetoric” denotes a narration in which the author purports to tell the story herself, in her own person: throughout the

nineteenth century in Britain this was understood to be the default form of narration—as Anna Laetitia Barbauld put it in her “Life of Samuel Richardson” (1804), the “most common way” of telling a story was what she called the “narrative” or “epic” mode, one in which “the author relates himself the whole adventure.” As Barbauld writes of this mode,

The author, like the muse, is supposed to know everything; he can reveal the secret springs of actions, and let us into events in his own time and manner. He can be concise, or diffuse, according as the different parts of his story require it. He can indulge, as Fielding has done, in digressions, and thus deliver sentiments and display knowledge which would not properly belong to any of the characters.²

This understanding is closely echoed by Walter Raleigh, writing at the end of the century, who explains in *The English Novel* (1894) that the “first and most usual way is that an author should tell the story directly. [...] At a slight sacrifice of dramatic force, the events of the story are supplied with a chorus, and at any time that suits him the author can cast off his invisible cloak and show himself fingering the ‘helpless pieces of the game he plays’.”³ Throughout this project, then, I will refer to the rhetorical posture as *authorial* narration: but I do not mean to suggest that the narrator of the novel is literally the real-world author (that the narrating voice is ‘actually’ William Makepeace Thackeray, or ‘actually’ George Eliot—whoever that is!); rather, I mean to suggest a mode of novelistic storytelling in which the narrator *presents herself* as the real-world, extradiegetic author of the story: one who shares the reader’s status as a person having existence outside of

² Anna Laetitia Barbauld, “Life of Samuel Richardson, with Remarks on his Writings,” in *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson, author of Pamela, Clarissa, and Sir Charles Grandison. Selected from the original manuscripts, bequeathed by him to his family, to which are prefixed, a biographical account of that author, and observations on his writings, by Anna Letitia Barbauld*, 6 Vols. (London: printed for Richard Phillips, no. 71, St. Paul’s Church-Yard, Lewis and Roden, Printers, Paternoster-Row, 1804), p. xxiii.

³ Walter Raleigh, *The English Novel: Being a Short Sketch of its History from the Earliest Times to the Appearance of Waverley* (London: John Murry, 1894), p. 148.

the story-world, while also serving as the garrulous and charming expert guide *to* that world. As both Barbauld and Raleigh suggest, the hallmark of this mode is metafictional commentary, which is often happy to acknowledge that the story being related is entirely fictional, even if that means undermining the felt reality of the plot: in this sense, rhetoric as a storytelling stance was closely bound up with the larger literary strategy of Victorian realism—a strategy fundamentally rooted, as George Levine and others have pointed out, in the unmasking of the literariness and conventionality of outdated genres, and even of the fictionality of the realist novel itself: an impulse, finally, to recognize the artifice of one’s own discursive medium, and to meet the reader frankly on that ground, without imposture.⁴ The literary effect that rhetoric strives for is one in which the author faces the reader openly and candidly, person to person, freely acknowledging the rhetorical situation of address: it is a narration directed, fundamentally, at a nineteenth-century audience wary of the emotional and psychological dangers of immersion in fiction, which aims to set the reader at her ease and assure her—with a voluble candor and good humor—that everything is above-board, and all the tricks are being played in the open. Meanwhile, “style” denotes a more modern narration that has turned away from its reader, one in which the author no longer appears as a direct, speaking presence in the narrative discourse—making no direct acknowledgement of the reader in any way—instead, the author is sublimated, as it were, into the construction of the literary text itself. Rather than an immediate, accessible person, the author of style is an inferred personality that is only visible in the technical details of textual construction, traces that point back to a prior scene of composition, in which the author was present as the constructive agency

⁴ See Chapter One, “Realism,” in Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

behind the text. In this new stylistic model, the author's unique personality is dispersed and distributed into these technical details: as T. H. Wright posits in his 1877 essay "Style," "the author's personality [...] brings with it a corresponding complexity of language, not merely the complexity of structure of sentences, but of choice of words, use of figures of speech, and all the refinements of elaborate writing."⁵ For Wright, and the other theorists of the new stylism, the intricacies of grammar, syntax, word choice, metaphor, and all of the other facets of literary construction are where we look to find the author: these aspects of composition become the unconscious tics and telling mannerisms that allow us to reconstruct the personality behind the text—a personality that is never directly exhibited or seen.

This idea of a large-scale literary shift from rhetoric to style is one that will likely strike many readers today as familiar, even old-fashioned; and in fact, a large part of my interest in this shift has to do with the fact that some version of it has become an unspoken assumption in literary criticism, one of our basic premises. Indeed, in surveying critical accounts of style I became struck by the frequency with which scholars seemed to assume—either tacitly, or openly—that style's 'Other', the historical antagonist that it had to vanquish, was Victorian rhetoric: that style's crafted, eminently *composed* sentences embodied the rejection of rhetoric's aspiration to a loose, chatty, free-flowing speech. We can see this in theorists as different as Fredric Jameson, who argues in an early essay that style, associated with a "modernistic aesthetic of the art sentence," is what succeeds "the rhetorical strain" in the English novel, for the "great English novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are [...] forms of direct and quasi-immediate

⁵ T. H. Wright, "Style," *Macmillan's Magazine* 37 (November 1877): 80.

social communication and embody an aesthetic essentially oral in character”—and more recently has asserted a interestingly similar claim in his *Antinomies of Realism* (2013), describing a shift from a “self-posing, self-dramatizing” nineteenth-century narrator, who confronts the reader face to face, to a modernist mode in which rhetorical appeals have been replaced by “impersonal” appeals, made entirely through the construction of the narrative text—and D. A. Miller, who draws a sharp distinction in *Jane Austen; or, The Secret of Style* (2003), between style’s austere “fantasy of divine authority,” its aspiration to embody in writing a position that transcends, in its crystalline perfection, the address of a Person (associated with Jane Austen, Oscar Wilde, Roland Barthes) and “the noisy personalities of Fielding and Thackeray,” narrative speakers that “relentlessly humanize that authority.”⁶ For a graduate Victorianist seeking to write a dissertation on style, this assumed opposition between style and the Victorian novel became, itself, the interesting thing to say something about. The version of the rhetoric-to-style story that we have internalized has understood this shift as a product of the late-century turn towards modernism: we identify the obsolescence of intrusive, rhetorical narration with celebrated stylists like Henry James, whose writings formed the basis for the protocols of literary objectivity laid down by twentieth-century critics like Percy Lubbock. But the turn against rhetoric hardly began with James; it had begun, in truth, a half-century earlier, in the 1850s—a fact we have long known, thanks to the exhaustive documentation of scholars like Richard Stang and Wayne Booth, but have failed to fully digest. As Stang pointed out in his 1959 volume *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850–1870*, in a

⁶ Fredric Jameson, “Criticism in History,” in *Weapons of Criticism: Marxism in America and the Literary Tradition*, ed. Norman Rudich (Palo Alto: Ramparts Press, 1976), pp. 34-5; *The Antinomies of Realism* (New York: Verso, 2013), pp. 169-70, 175. D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen; or, The Secret of Style* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 31.

chapter entitled “The Disappearing Author,” “aside from a few passing remarks on this subject [...] there was no extensive discussion of the position of the novelist in his books until the 1850’s when the subject became one of the most important points in the criticism of fiction.”⁷ The starting premise of this dissertation, then, is that it is worth looking back at the real history and origins of the idea of style that we have received and continue to hold as literary critics today. Contrary to the modernist accounts that our discipline has so deeply internalized, the notion of style as we’ve come to understand it emerged, not out of a rejection of the Victorian novel, but through the critical conversations that surrounded and informed Victorian fiction.

Recognizing the two trends that I identified at the start of this introduction—and their interrelation—allows us to properly historicize the understanding of style that has been handed down to us: one in which the mundane details of composition disclose the individual trace of an unseen author. This has consequences for more than just periodization: for it suggests that the emergence of a modernist commitment to style did not come about as suddenly as we often assume, in some definitive break with chatty Victorian storytelling—rather, it unfolded gradually over the course of a 50-year span, a long period in which rhetoric and style were not fully extricated from each other or even fully defined. We are already accustomed to recognize this kind of complex negotiation between rhetoric and style in the work of a turn-of-the-century, proto-modernist author like Joseph Conrad, whose fiction is often understood to live at the conjuncture of a nostalgic, orally inflected storytelling with modernist textuality: but my dissertation argues that this kind of dynamic is not limited to the final years of the nineteenth

⁷ Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England*, *ibid.*, pp. 92-3.

century—that this negotiation between the immediacy of a vocal presence and the abstraction of textual construction is playing out, in truth, over a much longer scale of time that we have hitherto acknowledged, and at a much more piecemeal pace. By extending this negotiation into the very heart of the Victorian period, we are recognizing not only its centrality to the Victorian novel, but also the fact that the shift from rhetoric to style was much more a story of *continuity* than of any kind of decisive break. Indeed, a key part of my thesis here is that style, in truth, did not vanquish or replace rhetoric—rather, rhetoric *became* style: the markers of oral immediacy, of a direct speaking presence, were repurposed into the telling details of style. Spontaneous, free-wheeling narration became intricacy of composition: as we can see, for example, when we reflect on all of the digressions and backtracking, the second thoughts and qualifications, that define the highly stylized narrative discourses of Conrad or James—which serve to mark, at once, the present and unfolding immediacy of an oral address (Marlow’s yarn, or James’s dictation) *and* the virtuosic construction of the crafted sentence. By identifying this essential doubleness, not only in the modernist-aligned fiction of the *fin de siècle*, but also in realist novels of the 1850s by such stoutly Victorian authors as Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, this dissertation seeks to uncover surprising lines of continuity, running both between rhetoric and style and between the high Victorian and early modernist moments. Following these lines allows us to track the contingent and incremental paths by which rhetoric’s garrulous address was reimagined as the dispersed evidence of the stylist.

The other important consequence of style’s re-periodization that my dissertation aims to highlight has to do with the relationship between style and *narrative form*.

Understanding style in fiction as a concept with a history—that is to say, recognizing in ‘style’ a literary term that does not designate a historically constant idea, but rather an idea that has been reinterpreted through successive dispensations—is also to recognize, I argue, the inextricability of style’s history from the history of narrative forms: it implies that what we mean by ‘style’ has evolved in dialogue with the changing fashions of novelistic technique and the arrival of new modes of narration and representation. But while it probably wouldn’t shock many of us to be told that the idea of style as we know it is inseparable from modern narrative techniques like free indirect discourse or a detached, ironic narration, we still tend to discuss style and narrative as if they were two separate and incommensurable aspects of a text—or, in many cases, even opposed aspects. Narrative, by this logic, is a propulsive principle, driving the reader with a forward, linear momentum, while style is about lingering, settling down, luxuriating in the language. As Amanpal Garcha writes, for example, in his 2009 book *From Sketch to Novel: The Development of Victorian Fiction*, style is “a textual element that is predicated on stasis [...] when a novelist draws the reader’s attention away from the plot’s progress and to the novel’s language itself.”⁸ As a result of this commonly held view, we tend to think about reading style or narrative as alternatives. I want to suggest, on the contrary, that to read style is necessarily to read narrative: that to consider what style means to a particular text is to consider it within a specific historical account, developing in conjunction with contemporary ideas about narrative presentation.⁹

⁸ Amanpal Garcha, *From Sketch to Novel: The Development of Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 22.

⁹ To be fair, I don’t believe that this last point is one that Garcha would disagree with—in fact, I would even say that it is entirely in the spirit of his book. Rather, the heart of the difference I’m trying to highlight is that Garcha’s inquiry tends to stabilize what the Victorians understood by ‘style’, in order to treat it as a stable term in the analysis; whereas I want to make style itself the focus of a historical inquiry, which would understand it as a historically dynamic and variable quantity.

Indeed, as this dissertation will show, it is in fact through narrative that the continuity of rhetoric and style can best be seen. If, as I argue, the chatty, rhetorical author did not simply disappear, as is often supposed, but rather was sublimated and refashioned over the course of several decades, in certain specific and trackable ways, into the textual markers of style's dispersed craftsman, then the question becomes how to identify the transitional forms, the types of stories in which one can see rhetoric becoming style. This is the question that animates the readings of the Victorian novel that comprise this dissertation. In this project, I argue that many of the best-known and most influential narrative forms of the period—from Dickensian caricature, to melodramatic tableau, to the "whodunit," to the frame tale—share a status of being interestingly poised between rhetorical address and stylistic diffusion, between an intimate author who meets the reader's gaze directly and one who is detectable only in the purposeful construction of the text: and in fact reveal the former becoming the latter, the gestures of authorial presence beginning to function *as* the signs of style. In the history of these Victorian forms—many of which would not commonly be thought to occupy the same formal history—we can follow the gradual recessing and abstracting of the vocal author into the interstices of composition. This process plays out in different ways: in the frame tale, for example, the effect of being directly addressed by a present author is folded into the diegetic interior of the story, becoming another element of the plot; while in the melodramatic tableau, the direct appeal to the audience is delaminated and peeled apart from the diegetic 'reality' of the scene, such that the authorial appeal comes to be made entirely through the telling composition of the stage-picture. These cases are broadly representative: for much of the process by which rhetoric is sublimated into style, as I

recount it here, involves either the chatty, rhetorical address becoming integrated and accounted for within the world of the story—in such a way that it ceases to refer us to an extradiegetic author—or the decoupling of the narrative construction from the plot itself, such that the reader begins to follow the author’s deliberate construction of the narrative elements as another ‘plot’ in its own right, one which points us to an unseen craftsman behind the text. This makes sense: for rhetoric and style are not just two alternate accounts of where the author is positioned in relation to her text, but also two alternate kinds of narrative reality—style, of course, being associated with a contained, self-enclosed story-world, the illusion of which must not be ‘intruded upon’ or broken by any open acknowledgement of an author or a reader; it is natural, then, that the rhetorical author’s sublimation into style should frequently hinge on the migration of the authorial address into the interior of the diegesis. By the same token, if style in its modern sense is unthinkable without the idea of the narrative text as a recognizably crafted, constructed product, then it is no surprise that style’s emergence should be brokered, in part, by the growing visibility and autonomy of the story’s discursive representation, which increasingly declares independence from the represented story itself. These are the kind of long-term processes, then, that my dissertation identifies as the shared project unifying such disparate forms as the theatrical narration of Dickens, the melodramatic narrative pacing of Elizabeth Gaskell, the mystery plot structure of Henry James’s ghost stories, and Conrad’s framed narrator, Marlow. It is for this reason that I refer to the objects of my analysis as *narrative* forms, specifically (rather than just ‘forms’): because their functioning crucially invokes and revolves around the foundational distinction of narrative theory, between story (*fabula*) and discourse (*syuzhet*)—they are devices

grounded in the double aspect of narrative, and the distribution of narrative sense-making between these two levels. As we will see, the passage from rhetoric to style always involves redistributions of weight and significance across these levels, and as such is a movement that can only be illuminated using the tools of narrative analysis.

In this dissertation, then, “narrative form” refers to a structure or device employed for the purpose of constructing or communicating story. This might mean a specific shape that a narrative can take, or a specific disposition of the narrative elements: for example, what I call the ‘mystery plot’, which is defined as any narrative in which the reader and focalized characters are met with a series of events that appear incoherent and are only afterward explained by the diegetic account of a character in the know; or a frame tale, a form in which one or more diegetic scenes of storytelling are nested within the broader narrative discourse. It might also mean a structure that recurs within a narrative: for example, a melodramatic form of compressed action in which a character whose name is mentioned in the scene immediately enters from offstage; or a specific method of characterization in which characters are defined by their repetitive tics and habitual gestures. Finally, it can refer to a strategy of narrative presentation, such as the Jamesian reflector or register, a strategy whereby we don’t receive the story directly, but instead encounter it through the reflecting character’s impressions, interpretations, and surmises. These narrative forms can be associated with particular genres but are also able to move between genres: the mystery plot, for instance, is associated with detective fiction, but is also used in ghost stories and science fiction; while melodramatic forms like the tableau can be adopted by realist narratives.

By the same token, these forms are not constrained to a single type of literature but can move between narrative arts: from the novel, to the short story, to the drama, to the lyric. Indeed, it will have been noted that some of the forms listed above refer specifically to the theater: this is by design, as one of the motivating commitments of this dissertation is to read the novel as an art that was not, after all, evolving in a vacuum, but rather developing in mutual dialogue with other literary arts. This broader, intermedial perspective, while always salutary, is especially necessary when tracking the passage of the Victorian novel from rhetoric to style, as the aesthetic changes that the novel was undergoing during this period often looked to other arts, like the drama, for their theory or justification: for example, we have already noted that critics of the rhetorical author in the 1850s argued for “dramatic presentation,” drawing upon aesthetic rules originally laid down for the theater to contend that novelists had an imperative to exhibit their characters through dramatic action, rather than explaining them in asides to the reader. As I will show, ideas about theater and theatricality were central to the debates over novelistic rhetoric that began in the middle of the century—and novelists, too, looked to the theater and its forms in their efforts to imagine a post-rhetorical narrative discourse. Theater, however, was hardly alone in playing this kind of supporting role: for in the 1880s, the rapid rise of the modern short story in Britain—carrying with it an aesthetic of brevity, of elliptical suggestiveness and signifying moments, which was seen to be antithetical to the loose and baggy discursivity of the rhetorical novel—introduced another influential model for a novel in a state of aesthetic transition, as well as a convenient venue for authors of fiction to experiment with new kinds of narratives. There are a number of reasons we could point to explain why the drama and the short story, in particular, were

the key interlocutors of the nineteenth-century novel during its long movement from rhetoric to style—for one, both were understood by the Victorians to be arts of economy, as well as of *showing*, of visual presentation rather than narration—but one of the most significant reasons to flag here is that both of these mediums privilege, in their aesthetics, that foundational distinction between story and discourse that was to be so central for style’s transitional forms. In the case of the theater, the story–discourse division is reproduced in the essential doubleness of theatricality itself, the appreciation of which always involves an awareness of two levels: on the one hand, there is the diegetic ‘reality’ of the scene, the represented actions and emotions of the characters; and on the other hand, there is the spectator’s understanding that all of these represented actions and emotions are the elements of a performance, trained and deliberate appeals to an audience. Meanwhile, the suggestive brevity of the modern short story (I use the term to distinguish it from earlier nineteenth-century tales associated with authors like Washington Irving, which might also be called short stories but entail a different sort of aesthetic altogether), for its part, is also in some sense defined by a fundamental narrative doubleness, and has been theorized by critics like Ricardo Piglia as a narrative that “always tells two stories”: an ostensible story that it “narrates [...] in the foreground,” and a hidden story that is “encode[d] [...] in the interstices” of the surface-level events through “implication and allusion,” such that the narrative elements “are employed in two ways in each of the two stories.”¹⁰ Like theatricality, then, the modern short story asks to be read at two levels: the ‘reality’ of the diegetic events, and the knowing or winking appeal that is being made through the author’s discursive construction of those events.

¹⁰ Ricardo Piglia, “Theses on the Short Story,” *New Left Review* 70 (July–August 2011): 63, 65.

The theater and the short story were the two key interlocutors for the novel during this period because they offered novelists tools for thinking through and enacting a mode of style that was itself based in a process of encoding the author into the interstices of the text's construction—introducing a second level to the reading of the novel itself, one in which the individual author is tracked through her own composition. The theater and the short story, in short, were each mobilized as metaphors for a new model of style at successive points in the latter half of the nineteenth century, providing a heuristic for the rhetorical novel to reimagine itself as the product of a stylist.

Given all this emphasis on doubleness, it is perhaps fitting that this dissertation is organized into two halves, each of which is comprised of two chapters. The first half focuses on the 1850s, as the period in which critical attitudes towards rhetoric first began to shift; this half is concerned with the role of the theater and theatricality in the early debates around rhetoric, and examines the ways that mid-century novelists borrowed narrative forms from the theater in their first searching attempts to disperse the rhetorical author. Chapter 1 begins with Charles Dickens, finding in the straight-faced comic performance of Dickens's narration a storytelling posture oddly perpendicular to the unmasking, metafictional candor of the rhetorical author; by analyzing two of Dickens's most recognizable narrative forms—his theatrical narration and the defining tics of his comic caricatures—I locate in Dickens an aesthetic strain that interestingly anticipates and prefigures the stylist's dispersal into the unconscious habits and gestures of composition. I then turn, in my second chapter, to Elizabeth Gaskell to trace the effacement of the chatty, garrulous storyteller that occurs between *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854-5), arguing that what enables this effacement is, in fact, a

shift in the position of melodrama in these two novels, from the story events (*Mary Barton*) to the narrative form (*North and South*). Identifying two specific narrative forms in *North and South* that originate in stage melodrama—one being a particular structure of narrative compression tied to character entrances, and the other, the tableau—I suggest that the stagey, obvious tactics of melodramatic narrative become the key means by which Gaskell attempts to construct a story that ‘tells itself’, without the vocal presence of a centralized speaking author: melodrama, then, becomes the transitional vehicle for the diffusion of authorship into the mute appeals of narrative construction.

In the dissertation’s second half, I leap ahead to the 1880s and ‘90s, the heyday of the stylist, in which the modern idea of style as we know it is being explicitly theorized and feted in the journals of the day—and in which the modern short story, too, is reshaping the literary landscape in Britain, appearing as the very fulfillment of the critical calls, originating in the 1850s, for a narrative aesthetic that embodies the presentational efficiency and discipline of the drama. My final two chapters—on Henry James and Joseph Conrad, respectively—posit the short story as a space for late-century novelists to imagine what a dispersed, stylistic model of authorship might look like in practice. For these authors, I argue, the most broadly accessible and familiar narrative forms of the late Victorian short story—forms like the mystery plot and the frame tale—became the transitional forms that allowed these authors, at once, to tell one story in the interstices of another *and* to rehearse the process of stylistic authorship within the plot itself. For Henry James, who devoted himself to the short story for much of the 1890s while on hiatus from novel-writing, it was the many ghost stories that he would pen in this decade that proposed to him the narrative form that would come to define the stylistic masterpieces of

his major phase: one in which the focalized characters, encountering the inexplicable, must continually attempt to define and articulate their own story, thus staging the composition of the narrative discourse within the diegesis itself. Meanwhile, for Conrad, it was the frame narrative—a form with a longstanding relationship to tale-telling and short fiction—that allowed him to stage Marlow’s rambling direct address as a stylistic performance of his own veiled authorship. Ultimately, both the mystery plot and the frame tale are forms that schematically separate out the two aspects of narrative—the diegetic and the extradiegetic, that which is of the story and that which is of its construction, its telling—and it is through these forms that we witness a newly independent, newly mysterious, narrative discourse emerge as a rival ‘plot’ in its own right, autonomous from the plot of the story that it tells. It was this change in the understanding of the narrative text that would be the basis for what we know as style.

Against the widespread assumption that style was constituted by the rejection of Victorian rhetoric, my dissertation posits that the story of rhetoric’s slow process of becoming style is, in fact, the story of the Victorian novel. In closing, however, I would just like to say that I regard the chapters that follow, not as the final word on this subject, but as a starting point for rethinking some of the oldest assumptions of literary study as they pertain to prose style, the novel, and Victorian storytelling. I am very aware, at the end of this project, of how much more there is to say, how many avenues still remain to be explored and mapped: and my ultimate hope is that the readings and arguments I’ve assembled here may be useful provocations to thought for other scholars to build from. One of the important next steps that I would envision for this argument, in particular, would be to connect the story that I am telling here about Victorian literary history to a

story about the social or cultural history of the period that might further contextualize and account for the shift in literary values that I'm describing. What changes were taking place in Victorian society, what new kinds of consciousness were emerging, that could help to explain the critical turn against the garrulous, chatty figure of the rhetorical author in the 1850s? How did the formation of the interiorized, private individual over the course of these same decades help to pose the new model of style that ultimately emerged out of this figure? For that matter, what kind of lived subject positions stand behind the abstract persons of the rhetorical author and the stylist? Who do we talk about when we talk about the author of rhetoric—does this figure have a gender, a social class, a sexuality? Does the author of style? And what, then, might it mean to say that the former became the latter? These are questions, it seems to me, that have no simple answers, and their difficulties lie, for the most part, beyond the scope of this project as it currently stands. But if the readings of the Victorian novel in this dissertation are compelling—if the story that I'm telling about novelistic aesthetics feels true—than other stories, it seems clear, will need to be told, as well, to ground these literary claims in other kinds of histories. For now, my hope is that this project may prompt us, as literary critics, to reexamine the stories that we tell about style.

Chapter 1

From Theatricality to Style: The Act of Address in Dickens

1. The Peculiar Relation

Any investigation of nineteenth-century novelistic rhetoric has to come to grips with the problem of Dickens: the “problem,” because he appears before us at once as the very exemplar and mascot of cozy, chatty, rhetorical authorship—and yet at the same time seems, for mysterious reasons, to sit uneasily alongside those candid talkers that comprise the acknowledged canon of Victorian rhetoric, such as Anthony Trollope, William Makepeace Thackeray, and George Eliot. After all, if rhetoric is about cultivating a relationship with one’s reader that is forged through the intimate candor of direct address—an author–reader relationship that affects to stand outside the world of the fiction, purporting to represent the communication of one ‘real’ person to another—then surely there is no Victorian novelist who emblemizes this mode more than Charles Dickens. No other Victorian novelist was so concerned to speak directly to his readers, to join them in the real world, to be almost a personal presence in their lives and in their homes. Again and again throughout his career, Dickens obsessively stages and performs the scene of visiting his reader in person at the domestic hearthside: from the preface to his second installment of *Sketches by Boz* (1836), in which he playfully includes a scripted dialogue between himself and “the Public,” upon whose doorstep he has come calling, to his instructions to the audience at an early public reading, some 18 years later, in which he desires the crowd of thousands to (as recounted by one observer) “imagine

this is a small social party assembled to hear a tale told round the Christmas fire.”¹¹ He staged this scene, furthermore, in a variety of paratextual formats—not only in prefaces and advertisements to the reader, but in live public readings, and in his editorial capacity, as curator and master of ceremonies for multiple journals that aspired to be fixtures at the fireside of every home—continually seeking new venues, outside the situation of storytelling itself, to personally address his readership, and by addressing them, to befriend them.

Moreover, from the earliest years of his career, Dickens was driven to reshape the published form of his literary output in ways that furthered his establishing of this friendship: for it was Dickens, we must remember, who all but single-handedly launched the trend of serializing novels, with the smash success of his *Pickwick Papers* (1836-7).¹² For Victorian readers, the innovation of serial publication seemed at once to place them on a more intimate footing with their novelist: as a writer for *The Illustrated London News* would later recall, in an obituary tribute following Dickens’s death, “[Dickens's] method of composing and publishing his tales in monthly parts, or sometimes in weekly parts, aided the experience of this immediate personal companionship between the writer and the reader. It was just as if we received a letter or a visit, at regular intervals, from a kindly observant gossip, who was in the habit of watching the domestic life of the Nicklebys or the Chuzzlewits, and who would let us know from time to time how they

¹¹ I owe Alicia Williams for pointing me to these useful examples. See *Sketches by Boz*, ed. Dennis Walder (New York: Penguin, 1995), p. 9; and Susan L. Ferguson, “Dickens’s Public Readings and the Victorian Author,” *SEL* 41 (Autumn 2001): 742.

¹² As Nicola Bradbury observes, “Novels in parts, whether separate volumes or shorter units, were not unknown in the eighteenth century, but it was Dickens with *Pickwick Papers* in 1836 who brought part-publication to such success that it became the dominant pattern for the novel through most of the Victorian period.” See her essay on “Dickens and the Form of the Novel” in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 152.

were going on.”¹³ As Malcolm Andrews concludes, “Serialization had been the foundation of the special relationship Dickens developed with his readers.”¹⁴ Of course, serial publication also had another important effect: it made novels affordable for new classes of readers.¹⁵ In this way, while Dickens was aiming to reach and befriend the widest possible public (at the readings, he insisted that penny seats be made available for the poor, so that his audience might include a mixture of all classes), he was, at the same time, appealing to this unprecedented mass on terms of the most personal attachment. He sought always a readership on the greatest scale, while simultaneously scaling down the readerly relationship to the armchair’s-length of domestic intimacy, “a small social party assembled to hear a tale.”¹⁶ This seemingly miraculous collapsing of such disparately scaled extremities, the heights of publicity and privacy, was constantly cited by Dickens’s admirers as the essence of his achievement: G. K. Chesterton, in his widely read biography, writes that Dickens

had been a great popular king, like a king of some more primal age whom his people could come and see, giving judgment under an oak tree. He had in essence held great audiences of millions, and made proclamations to more than one of the nations of the earth. His obvious omnipresence in every part of public life was like the omnipresence of the sovereign. His secret omnipresence in every house and hut of private life was

¹³ Quoted in Malcolm Andrews, *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 16.

¹⁴ Andrews, *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves*, *ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁵ Again, see Bradbury: “Serial publication, either in weekly or more generally twenty monthly numbers at a shilling a time (the last a double-issue with Part 19, and costing two shillings), brought novels within the budget of many who could not afford one and a half guineas for a three-volume work. The evidence of audience response in sales figures, like the visible output of the author, engendered an economy of production and consumption: a measure of the dialog between the novelist and his public.” *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, *ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁶ Ivan Kreilkamp argues that this strategy of imaginatively converting an anonymous, mass readership into a space of domestic intimacy is a highly strategic one, closely related to Dickens’s anxieties over the lack of copyright protections for his work: “For Dickens, the privatized interior space of the domestic defines a realm in which a father/author can own and control his own language and protect it from the vicissitudes of popular performance, while still retaining some of the power and pleasure of that performance.” Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 98.

more like the omnipresence of a deity.¹⁷

This theme of vast crowds alchemized into spaces of private commune had long since been a staple of the contemporary criticism of Dickens's work, as in the *Examiner's* review of the first number of *Bleak House*: "Already judgment has been passed upon this *First Number* at many thousands of English firesides. There, already, it has kindled expectations which will make a particular day, in each of the next twenty months, looked forward to as for the coming of a friend."¹⁸

In sum, what Dickens called "that peculiar relation (personally affectionate, and like no other man's) which subsists between me and the public" appears before us as the very embodiment of everything that rhetorical authorship could aspire to be: an author–reader relation modeled on the easy intimacy of two friends having a chat by the fire. Given, then, the extent to which Dickens tirelessly cultivated this extradiegetic bond with his reader in all the various forms of address that were external or adjacent or occasional to narration—paratexts, editor's notes, opening remarks, and even the doting regularity of the serial form itself—it comes as something of a shock when we turn at last to Dickens as storyteller, and find that the familiar Victorian posture of authorial rhetoric is almost totally unrepresented in his vast body of work. We need only think of the kind of extended, metafictional authorial digressions that feature so prominently in the novels of Eliot, Thackeray, and Trollope—as well as in the work of a great many other Victorian novelists that may be readily called to mind, including Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Harriet Martineau, Charles Reade, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Gissing, and George Meredith, to

¹⁷ Chesterton, *Charles Dickens: The Last of the Great Men* (New York: The Press of the Readers Club, 1942 [1906]), p. 170.

¹⁸ "Bleak House," *Examiner* 6 Mar 1852: 150.

name only a few—to realize that such moments are almost entirely absent in Dickens. To be sure, there are other British novelists of the nineteenth century whom we don't associate with authorial rhetoric: but nearly all of these are wedded to various forms of homodiegetic, character-based narration (e.g., Charlotte Brontë or Wilkie Collins—and even these, it might be noted, simulate this kind of “dear reader” authorial address from the diegetic position of their narrating character), or else come late enough in the century that the bantering conventions of rhetoric had already begun to wane, giving way to something more recognizably proto-modernist (Thomas Hardy). Dickens fits into neither of these categories: his position in the century, his predilection to narrate his novels in the voice of the author, and—as we have just seen—his great need to connect directly and affectionately with his readers, all make him ideally predisposed to just this kind of apostrophizing, extradiegetic commentary. And, to be sure, there are stray instances of it to be found in his work, moments when the authorial voice comments explicitly on the fiction: most famously, the “streaky bacon” passage at the beginning of Chapter 17 of *Oliver Twist* (1837-9), in which the author riffs on the relationship between melodrama and realism in Oliver's narrative; and then there's the line in the opening chapter of *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9), in which he recognizes the reader's expectation that Ralph Nickleby will be the protagonist of the novel (“From what we have said of this young gentleman, and the natural admiration the reader will immediately conceive of his character, it may perhaps be inferred that he is to be the hero of the work which we shall presently begin. To set this point at rest, for once and for ever, we hasten to undeceive them, and stride to its commencement.”).¹⁹ But when we consider how little else there is

¹⁹ Charles Dickens, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, ed. Hablot Knight Browne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 4.

to speak of—and how voluminous is the novelistic output in which such passages could easily arise—it begins to seem that there is some difference in Dickens himself, as an author, that makes this type of metafictional commentary so unusually scarce in his work.

Let me, then, give up the game immediately (in the proud tradition of the divulging rhetorical author), and state at once what I believe that difference to be, and what this chapter will be positing in the pages to come: namely, that the distinction we are trying to put a finger on can best be understood as a function of *theatricality*. If Dickens refrains from taking his reader aside to acknowledge that they are together engaged in an act of fictional storytelling, it is not because he shares Henry James's concern to maintain the free-standing illusion of an autonomous diegetic world. What makes such admissions out of place in his work is rather a kind of decorum of performance. For it is, of course, manifest to anyone who has read him that Dickens's narration *is* a performance—one in which, significantly, all manner of vivid absurdities are presented by a wryly self-amused voice that continually affects a tone of purely technical delineation: as if Dickens himself has no part in the ludicrousness of the situation, but is merely its scrupulous reporter. We see this technical tone everywhere: “He looked again, and was under the painful necessity of admitting the veracity of his optics”; “The pupils then entered among themselves upon a competitive examination on the subject of Boots, with the view of ascertaining who could tread hardest on whose toes”; “Some time elapses, in the present instance, before the old gentleman is sufficiently cool to resume his discourse; and even then he mixes it up with several edifying expletives addressed to the unconscious partner of his bosom,” and so on.²⁰

²⁰ These quotes (taken entirely at random) are from, respectively, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. Mark Worwald (New York: Penguin, 1999), p. 36; *Great Expectations*, ed. Graham Law and Adrian J. Pinnington

There are other accounts of Dickens's performativity (with which we will deal in the next section), but for now, the point I want to make is that this discourse is performative because it operates by invoking the double consciousness that is definitive of theatricality. Any appreciation of theatricality always entails our awareness of two things at the same time: on the one hand, we are observing the distress, or joy, or comic silliness of the diegetic character represented in the scene; on the other hand, we are aware all the time that every last sign and token of this distress, or joy, or silliness, is actually a trained and strategic appeal made to the audience—what Charles Lamb, in his 1825 essay on “Stage Illusion,” called “a perpetual subinsinuation to us, the spectators,” that “even in the extremity of the shaking fit,” the man on stage “was not half such a coward as we took him for,” but remained in absolute control of his performance from first to last.²¹ All deadpan humor or straight-faced comedy works by assuming this kind of theatrical awareness in its audience: the performance works because we grasp the actor's “subinsinuation” that he is—despite the absurdity of all that he says—every bit as rational as we are, and knows very well that what he is saying is amusing. In this way, though Dickens addresses us in his own person, he still comes before us playing a kind of role—almost ‘in character’, as it were: the highly proper and mild narrator.²² The effect

(Peterborough, Ontario & Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2002), p. 108; and *Bleak House*, ed. Nicola Bradbury (New York: Penguin, 1996), p. 338.

²¹ Quoted in David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 16. The eminent theater scholar Josette Feral has also emphasized this double consciousness in the beholder as constitutive of theatricality as such: “veridical and illusory aspects are grasped simultaneously by the spectator [...] the spectator's double-edged gaze penetrates the actor's mask, questioning the presence of the other, his know-how, his technique, his performance, his art of dissimulation and representation. The spectator is never completely duped. The paradox of the actor is also the paradox of the spectator: to believe in the other without completely believing in him.” See Josette Feral and Ronald P. Bermingham, “Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language,” *Sub/Stance* 31.98/99 (Nos. 2&3) (2002): p. 100.

²² Further, when Dickens has recourse to a homodiegetic, first-person narrator—Esther Summerson, David Copperfield, Pip—this character is always the embodiment of exactly this type of mild-mannered, well-spoken, excessively polite observer. For a discussion of the “central, but passive, protagonist” in Dickens

of this narratorial playacting, on the one hand, is to relegate the absurdity of what is being described entirely to the story, rather than the discourse: while the events are clearly of an exaggerated nature, the voice describing them sounds oddly understated—as if a very buttoned-up and learned man were to narrate what was happening in a cartoon, relating with great precision and perfect propriety everything that the roadrunner and coyote were doing. But this, of course, is only at the first level of theatrical reception: for, at the same time, we are wholly aware that the exaggeration that seems to arise solely from the story is itself being produced by Dickens’s discourse—our first clue being the obvious zest with which the supposedly buttoned-up man ‘plays up’ his buttoned-upness: there is exaggeration evident even in his understatement. (In this way, a phrase like “under the painful necessity of admitting the veracity of his optics” is funny because it heightens flatness itself: it is a neutral, colorless, purely technical diction pushed to the point of becoming colorful and strange.) We are not fooled about our author’s intentions: what we are really taking in, we understand, is not a buttoned-up man describing a cartoon, but a cartoonist pretending to be a buttoned-up man, describing a cartoon that he has himself composed—and yet, we also understand that this set-up is funny precisely because it invokes, in brackets, the idea that a buttoned-up narrator *really might* describe a cartoonish situation in just this way, and wouldn’t it be funny if he did: both theatrical levels have to be kept in play for the humor to continue to function.

(whose constitutive confrontation is with “the powerful, but distorted, minor character”), see Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 35. Woloch, however, is not talking about Dickens’s protagonists as narrators: for a somewhat similar discussion, which focuses on the narrator in Dickens as a figure “completely defaced” and “abstracted” (and starkly contrasted with the “extroverted” Dickensian character), see D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 209, 211.

All of this we allow, as a part of the normal experience of reading Dickens, without even needing to consciously think about it. It is an ordinary, everyday kind of theatricality: like a man slipping into a mock-official voice while reading aloud, to a circle of friends, a letter of resignation that he has just sent to his boss. Because deadpan humor is a form to which we are already accustomed, its conventions automatically recognized, it operates by a kind of unspoken decorum: the “subinsinuation” that brings it into existence—by whatever legible signs and tokens of performative enjoyment, and the intention to amuse—enters us into shared protocols, in which we, too, have a part of play: agreeing implicitly, as the ‘audience’, to indulge the seeming absurdity of a bracketed, hypothetical character, only because we have inwardly ratified the situation of performance that is taking place. To return, then, to the question of Dickens’s abstinence from metafictional rhetoric with which we began: it is not so much that Dickens can’t admit that he is the creator of these fictional situations, in order to preserve his straight-faced performance—but rather, that he has *already* admitted it, as the very condition of that performance. To admit again, baldly and outright, what he has already admitted artfully and winkingly, to great effect, would be a redundant and perplexing gesture, which would not only spoil his own joke, but would place the comedian himself, bizarrely, on the outside of a joke that the rest of us grasped implicitly—as if he had not really understood his own routine. Rather than levelling with the reader, and meeting her on frank terms, such a gesture would tend to alienate the reader completely from an author who had suddenly become incomprehensible.

The point, then, is that Dickens’s theatrical discourse *is* a kind of levelling, a way of cultivating a shared understanding with the reader, which is intimately signaled by any

number of mutually enjoyed winks and nods throughout his prose. As a strategy, however, it is significantly different from the conventional novelistic rhetoric of Dickens's peers—even the most playful and waggish of whom (Thackeray, say, or Trollope) never rise to anything even approaching the kind of sustained, unceasing straight-faced delivery that Dickens's discourse performs: the comic raillery of Thackeray being, in essence, just an inventive and freewheeling heightening of extradiegetic commentary, requiring no theatrical operation for the audience to grasp. What's more, Dickens's brand of performative discourse is not only an alternative to rhetoric, but is also, in a key way, *incompatible* with it: it constitutes its own form of author–reader rapport, which largely excludes the more dominant convention of candid, metanarrative address—a convention that, as we've seen, is cited in scattered places in Dickens's early novels, and then rapidly dropped thereafter. As such, if Dickens's discourse is similar to Victorian rhetoric in many of its intentions—to build an intimacy with the reader, to make her feel included in the act of fiction-making—it is nonetheless quite different in its effects: and has consequences for how a reader conceives the relation between the author and the language of the text. Specifically, I'll argue that the performativity of Dickens's prose must be connected to the broader movement to reimagine the author–reader relation in the second half of the nineteenth century, under the auspices of what we now know as 'style': which relocated the author's address to the reader from the content of the text (explicit direct address), to the telling linguistic details of that text's construction. We can begin to see this link if we recognize that the move towards stylistic indirection, typically seen as characteristic of modernism—in which authorial appeals to the reader are not made directly, but rather occur through the

conscious arrangement and structuring of the textual materials—is also a move towards theatricality: the author withdraws behind a screen, ceding the stage to various thinking and discoursing characters who show no recognition of the reader—but the authorial intention evident in the way that these discursive elements have been structured clearly conveys the subinsinuation that all of this has been artistically composed for our benefit. It is in this subinsinuation that we locate the presence of the author in the modernist text. In this way, style demands a mode of reading that is fundamentally rooted in theatricality: one that will ratify the author’s writerly performance, evaluating it on the basis of the author’s ability to make powerful appeals to her audience while, at the same time, maintaining the illusion of a diegetic reality in which the author and audience alike are effaced. Dickens’s theatrical discourse bends authorial address towards this stylistic model, for the paradoxical purpose of furthering his rhetorical aims: the theatrical subinsinuation—predicated on authorial effacement—here becomes the very basis of a friendly, winking, fireside intimacy between the author and the reader he addresses. In the process, the presence of the authorial Dickens in his own text becomes subtly decentered from the deadpan narratorial character that is ostensibly speaking to us, and is instead distributed into the language of the narrative discourse—the site of all those nods and nudges, that winking exaggeration and ‘playing up’ that is also, very evidently, ‘playing *to*’ an audience—in which we detect the author’s presence as a theatrical entertainer, and bond, as it were, around our inclusion in this shared in-joke.

If, then, at first glance, the answer that this chapter is proposing to our Dickens quandary is utterly familiar, even predictable—what could be more familiar than the notion that Dickens differs from other realists of his time by being more theatrical?—I

hope, on a closer viewing, it may reveal a set of implications that are quite surprising, and perhaps rather radical: implying not only that Dickens may have more in common with James and Conrad than he does with Thackeray and Trollope, but that a theatrical narration may have more in common with modernist impersonality than it does with Victorian rhetoric. In the next section, I'll be examining the contrast between Dickens's theatricality and the rhetoric of his contemporaries in more depth—pointing out that the critiques of rhetoric that began in the 1850s themselves drew significantly on an analogy to theater that aligned the rhetorical author with the 'tasteless', audience-addressing actor; as I'll show, however, Dickens occupied a unique position in this discourse, for his refusal to extend his disapproval of extradiegetic rhetoric to a condemnation of theatrical personages *within* the fiction. In this way, Dickens decoupled his period's association of rhetoric with an "intrusive" theatricality, in a move that helps to elucidate his own use of a theatrical narration as an alternative strategy of audience rapport. Following that, the subsequent section will trace Dickens's peculiar brand of performative discourse back to its origin point, in *The Pickwick Papers*: excavating the prehistory of Dickensian style's most recognizable feature—namely, the use of speech tags and personality tics to mark individual characters, a practice that Dickens began in *Pickwick*—in the comic tradition of eighteenth-century authorial role-playing and the deadpan impersonations of Dickens's early acting idol, Charles Mathews. Interestingly, I'll argue, those narrative features that Dickens internalizes from the eighteenth-century novel (e.g., a straight-faced narratorial playacting that decenters Dickens's own person into linguistic details, such as verbal tics) are, in fact, the same features that affiliate him with a modernist stylism. But while the use of repetitive tics to distinguish characters had key precedents in the comic novel and

on the stage, I'll show that the tic functions differently in Dickens: indexing, not mere comic affectation, but rather the truest, most intimate part of the self, known only to a character's longstanding friends—of which the reader herself is solicited to be one.

Finally, my fourth and last section will shift from the 1830s—a period dominated by the chatty author—into the advent of the latter half of the nineteenth century, and the era of the decline of rhetoric, reading *Bleak House* (1852-3), with its famously doubled narration, as Dickens's precocious registering of, and reaction to, the tremors of that seismic shift against novelistic rhetoric that was still, at that point, only an approaching rumble. Turning, here, from Dickens's characters to Dickens as narrator, I'll argue that *Bleak House* represents both the apotheosis of Dickensian theatricality, and Dickens's conscious reflection on this theatrical narrator's encounter with its rival, the rhetorical author, staged as the narrative standoff between his own narration and that of Esther Summerson.

2. The Dramatic Analogy

In considering the relationship between Dickensian theatricality and Victorian rhetoric, it's worth remembering that the critical reevaluation of rhetorical authorship in the novel that began in the mid to late 1850s was itself deeply bound up with changing notions of what constituted proper and improper theatricality on the stage. This shift in novelistic aesthetics took place against a backdrop of analogous changes in other art forms—for example, the rise of the dramatic monologue in poetry, which signaled the migration of the lyric address and its addressee into the diegetic interior of the poem; or the new vogue among English art critics for complaints of “theatricality” in painting (on

which we'll say more in a moment)—and perhaps the most important of these were the changes taking place in the London theaters. It was, after all, over the course of the nineteenth century that audiences witnessed the gradual rise of the 'fourth wall' in British playhouses: and with it, a new protocol of non-acknowledgement between performer and spectator, rooted in a notion of the performance as a self-contained fiction, which meant the end of the prologue, the epilogue, and other forms of direct address from the actors to the audience.²³ Like the Victorian novel, the drama would undergo a shift: from an earlier aesthetic, marked by frame-breaking moments of audience address, to a new aesthetic in which all such moments of address are expunged, and all acknowledgement of the audience officially effaced, in the name of establishing a contained and naturalistic diegetic illusion. To understand this shift, it's worth remembering here that theatricality, as we've noted, always involves two levels: the level of the diegetic reality created by the performance, and the level of "subinsinuation," in which the performers and audience share a tacit understanding that this diegetic 'reality' is not meant to be taken as literally real, but is rather an imagined 'real' that is bracketed by the event of performance. Theatricality, in this basic sense, is equally present—and continuous across—both of these stage aesthetics, the earlier and the later: what changes is the relative weight and emphasis that is assigned to the two levels. In the earlier aesthetic, more emphasis is given to the shared understanding between performer and spectator, the ratifying of the

²³ See, for example, David Kurnick: "the last spectators had been exiled from the stage at the end of the eighteenth century, and by the middle of the nineteenth, the stage apron—the 'point of acknowledged contact between actors and audiences'—was also being phased out. With it went the epilogues and prologues through which the actors had broken character and addressed the audience ... Instead, actors were increasingly confined to the space of the new box set, in which painted flats—outfitted with workable doors and windows—ensured that a realistic interior setting gradually replaced the stylizations of the proscenium stage ... Middle-class spectators now gazed through a 'fourth wall' into a stage world increasingly resembling the home they were temporarily escaping." *Empty Houses*, *ibid.*, p. 49.

frame of performance, as signaled by the prologue and epilogue that bookend the diegetic representation on either side and serve to ritually conduct the spectator across the border into (and out of) the fiction, while also marking that border as explicit. Interestingly, in the new aesthetic, this border is also carefully defined: but it is communicated to the audience, not by a direct address, but by the way that the theatrical space itself has been structured and composed—the absolute separation of the space of the spectators from the performers’ stage space, the literalized ‘frame’ of the box set, and the dropping and raising of the house lights to signal the temporal boundaries of the diegetic reality (made possible by the gradual introduction of gaslight to the London theaters over the course of the 1820s), with the effacement of the audience enforced by the fact of their observing the lighted performance from a space of total darkness, in which they cannot be seen by the actors or even by each other.²⁴ Here the level of the represented diegetic reality is paramount: and every effort is made to scrub any hint or reference to the collective theatrical understanding that underwrites the performance, which now fades literally into the scenery.

This new theatrical aesthetic was to be routinely cited as the model for a new code of decorum in the realm of novelistic fiction. As one representative critic, writing in the *National Review*, complained of Trollope’s *Barchester Towers* (1857),

it might have been better if he would have refrained from frequently and somewhat offensively coming forward as author to remind us that we are reading a fiction. Such intrusions are as objectionable in a novel as on the stage: the actor who indulges in extempore and extra-professional hints and winks to the audience, and the author who

²⁴ Matthew Buckley is incredibly persuasive on the pivotal significance of gaslight to the formal and generic structure of nineteenth-century English melodrama (and, by extension, the Victorian theater at large) after 1820: “The use of gaslight, begun at Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and the Lyceum in 1817 and largely completed in the next decade, marks an epochal shift not unlike that which we associate with the arrival of film.” See Buckley’s “Early English Melodrama,” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama*, ed. Carolyn Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 23-4.

interprets his characters to introduce himself to our notice, are alike guilty of a violation of good taste.²⁵

It is difficult to overstate the pervasiveness of this theatrical trope in the critical attacks on the rhetorical author that gained steam in this period. For instance, in 1860, a reviewer of the now-obscure novel *Artist and Craftsman* complains, “We are forced by these comments of the author on his own performance to remember we are only reading fiction. [...] We do not want the author to come in, like Bottom, with his prologue, and tell us that the lion is only Snug the Joiner.”²⁶ In this way, the fact that this new novelistic etiquette intended to borrow, to a large extent, its logic and authority from changes that had been taking place within the theater was made explicit by its proponents. Such arguments, which attempted to make the rhetorical author seem obtrusive and tiresome by comparing him to a theatrical figure—the mugging or apostrophizing actor—that was already widely understood to be tasteless, must be connected, in turn, to that other key figure that was to become a byword for the rhetorical novelist in the writings of these critics—namely, the “showman”: redolent of a nondramatic, fairground theatricality, with its carnival barkers, impresarios, and touts. As one critic, writing in the *Saturday Review* of another forgotten novel, *Who Breaks—Pays*, put it in 1861: “The author has continually to speak for his characters, and perform the part of showman to each in succession, instead of allowing them to speak for themselves and cast their own shadows on the wall”; this usage was apparently so widespread that the novelist Charles Kingsley, writing to George Brimley, a critic for the *Spectator*, to defend his use of rhetorical

²⁵ Vol. VII, p. 425. Quoted in Richard Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 95.

²⁶ *Saturday Review*, Vol. X (July 7, 1860): 23-4. Quoted in Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England*, *ibid.*, p. 96.

address (one of the only authors who had the temerity to do so), felt obliged to protest that “the author must act as showman.”²⁷ This terminology, incidentally, would later become central to Percy Lubbock’s influential *Craft of Fiction*, the seminal articulation of the post-Jamesian, modernist credo of authorial discretion and self-effacement (“in most of the books around us there is an easy-going reliance on a narrator of some kind, a showman who is behind the scenes of the story and can tell us all about it”).²⁸

Meanwhile, ranged against the showman and the actor’s prologue was an opposed model of theatricality, rooted in what G. H. Lewes, in his 1859 essay in praise of Jane Austen, called “*dramatic presentation*”: here, the stage drama was held up as the very emblem of a story that simply exhibits itself, free of extraneous commentary or interpretation (“instead of telling us what her characters are, and what they feel, she presents the people, and they reveal themselves”).²⁹ Beginning in the ‘50s, critical wisdom began to hold that, as a critic for the *Spectator* put it in 1862, the novelist ought to make “his *dramatis personae* develop their own characters”; or as Nassau Senior was writing of Thackeray (a common target in these years) in the *Edinburgh Review* as early as January 1854, “Mr. Thackeray indulges in the bad practice of commenting on the conduct of his *dramatis personae*. He is perpetually pointing out to us the generosity of Dobbin, the brutality of the Osbornes, the vanity of Joseph Sedley, and so on, instead of leaving us to find out their qualities from their actions.”³⁰ Further, because the drama was understood to be an art of economy, in which the storytelling time is of necessity limited,

²⁷ Quoted in Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England*, *ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁸ *The Craft of Fiction* (New York: The Viking Press, rpt. 1957 [1921]), p. 197.

²⁹ Italics in original. *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. LXXXVI (July 1859), p. 101.

³⁰ *Spectator*, Vol. XXV (December 1862), p. 1447; *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. XCIX, p. 202. Quoted in Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England*, *ibid.*, p. 96.

the ideal of dramatic presentation implied a reaction, not only against this kind of rhetorical ‘telling’, but against the loose digressiveness and baggy superfluity that it tended to promote in the novel’s form—with which all direct address now became closely associated. Lewes, pursuing the theme in *Blackwood’s* in 1860, writes that

Remarks *away* from the immediate business of the scene [...] are faults: they may be beautiful, they may be witty, they may be wise, but they are out of place; and the art of the dramatist consists in having everything in its proper place.³¹

So prominent had this line of argument become by the 1860s that Bulwer-Lytton, writing in the same publication three years later, felt compelled to object to the modern tendency of critics to review novels by applying “rules drawn from the drama,” for “they are not only inapplicable, but adverse, to the principles which regulate the freedom of the novel.”³² The dramatic analogy, however, had become a critical truism: and in the decades that followed, one could simply assume the premise that, as one reviewer wrote of *Middlemarch* in 1873, “Strictly speaking, the writer should be as little seen in person in a novel as he would be in a modern drama.”³³

What was Dickens’s position in all of this? Interestingly, Dickens as editor was an early adopter of the anti-rhetorical line and had frequent recourse to the dramatic analogy in his correspondence with authors. As early as 1855, in a letter rejecting the submission of a Miss King, Dickens wrote that “[t]he people do not sufficiently work out their own purposes in dialogue and dramatic action. You are too much their exponent; what you do for them, they ought to do for themselves.”³⁴ By the 1860s, his partisan stance on the

³¹ Vol. LXXXVII (March 1860), p. 333-4. Quoted in Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England*, *ibid.*, p. 121.

³² *Blackwood’s*, Vol. XCIII (May 1863), p. 558. Quoted in Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England*, *ibid.*, p. 123.

³³ Monckton Milnes, “Middlemarch,” *Edinburgh Review*, CXXXVII (1873), quoted in Kenneth Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel, 1865-1900* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965), p. 125.

³⁴ Quoted in Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England*, *ibid.*, p. 100.

question of authorial rhetoric is clear. Writing in 1866, for example, to refuse the novel of a Mrs. Brookfield, submitted for serialization in *All The Year Round*, he explains,

But it strikes me that you constantly hurry your narrative (and yet without getting on) *by telling it, in a sort of impetuous breathless way, in your own person, when the people should tell it and act it for themselves*. My notion always is, that when I have made the people to play out the play, it is, as it were, their business to do it, and not mine. [...] I don't want you, in a novel, to present *yourself* to tell such things, but I want the things to be there.³⁵ [italics in original]

Similarly, in his more approving moments, he might tell an author with satisfaction, “You had not existence, as to me when I read it. The actions and sufferings of the characters affected me by their own force and truth.”³⁶

It is perhaps unsurprising that such an avid theatergoer as Dickens would join enthusiastically in the chorus of critical voices that were demanding that the novel follow the example of the stage. Interestingly, however, Dickens's opinions on this subject were rather more complex than a simple willingness to compare the novel to an acted drama. In his writings from this period, he exhibits a sharp critical suspicion of that neat distinction between a refined “drama” and a tasteless “theatricality” that was then becoming so ubiquitous—not only in the literary world, but in art criticism, as well. In 1856, Dickens attended a Paris art exhibition, in which the accusation of theatricality was much in the air. His remarks are telling:

In the Fine Arts department of the French Exhibition, recently closed, we repeatedly heard, even from the more educated and reflective of our countrymen, that certain pictures which appeared to possess great merit—of which not the lowest was, that they possessed the merit of a vigorous and bold idea—were all very well, but were ‘theatrical’. Conceiving the difference between a dramatic picture and a theatrical picture, to be, that in the former case a story is strikingly told, without apparent consciousness of a spectator, and that in the latter case the groups are obtrusively conscious of a spectator, and are obviously dressed up, and doing (or not doing)

³⁵ *Letters of Charles Dickens*, Vol. II: 1857-1870 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1880), Letter to Mrs. Brookfield, Feb. 20th, 1866, p. 250.

³⁶ Quoted in Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England*, *ibid.*, p. 100.

certain things with an eye to the spectator, and for the sake of the story: we sought in vain for this defect. Taking further pains then, to find out what was meant by the term theatrical, we found that the actions and gestures of the figures were not English.³⁷

Here Dickens describes the obsession of the English attendees with distinguishing between a properly “dramatic” artwork, and an artwork that is tainted with theatricality: a distinction, as we’ve already seen, that was coming into force at just this time in the English literary periodicals of the day, and was essential to the critical condemnation of novelistic rhetoric. But Dickens refuses to endorse that logic. Instead, he makes a distinction that would not have been shared by most of his fellow critics: while a rhetorical address is to be condemned, for its refusal to let the characters “*tell it and act it for themselves*,” Dickens will brook no condemnation of theatricality, or of figures who “are obtrusively conscious of a spectator.” The two, for him, are not to be equated. In this way, he seems to stake a position that holds that the author should not intrude her ‘telling’ between us and the characters—but that there is nothing wrong with these characters behaving theatrically; that is, “with an eye to the spectator, and for the sake of the story.” That last clause is telling: for Dickens, theatrical characters don’t detract from the story, they are acting in service of it, “for the sake of the story.” Moreover, he sees no difference between this kind of theatrical characterization and a story that is simply “dramatic,” and “strikingly told.”

Of course, Dickens is talking about painting here; but it is a very small step to assume that what he insists upon, with some passion, in the realm of the visual arts, is indexical to his deeply held views on the literary—particularly when the charge of theatricality that he is speaking on was such a current affair in both domains. What we

³⁷ Quoted in Andrews, *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves*, *ibid.*, p. 39.

may infer, then, is that Dickens's position was rather interesting, and rather anomalous for the 1850s, when the denigrating association between rhetoric and theatricality was rapidly on the rise: while he objected to the author's rhetorical presence, on grounds that such "telling" was insufficiently "dramatic," he made no distinction between the dramatic and the popularly theatrical, as it was manifested within the diegetic narrative itself—and observed no injunction against his dramatic personages exhibiting a theatrical self-awareness towards their audience. These conclusions tally very well with what we know of Dickens: whose love of the theater, after all, made no distinctions, but extended promiscuously to its most popular, and least prestigious, forms. And it tallies very well, of course, with the solution to our "Dickens problem" that we set forth at the start of this chapter—the notion that Dickens's abstinence from rhetoric and his embrace of the theatrical are somehow mutually informing.

But the distinction that Dickens made between rhetoric and theatricality has been lost in much subsequent Dickens criticism. Perhaps the most instructive case in this regard is that of Robert Garis: the now, perhaps, little-read scholar whose 1965 book *The Dickens Theatre: A Reassessment of the Novels* may nonetheless be credited as the fountainhead of all criticism on Dickens's theatricality. Garis's influence has been profound: he was the first to point out the knowing theatricality of Dickens's people, writing that "all of the typically Dickensian characters can best be thought of as 'performing' their own personalities," and that, further, a character like Lady Dedlock "[w]hen she is alone [...] is not less a performer than when she is in public"—a point that David Kurnick has recently affirmed, situating this understanding at the center of his 2013 essay on *Great Expectations* ("the most memorable of his invented people amuse

precisely through a scenery-chewing extravagance that suggests their awareness of an audience even when they are alone”).³⁸ This is the recognition, I need hardly add, that Dickens’s characters are not only performers in some strict diegetic sense (i.e., performing for other characters within the story-world), but are consciously performing *for the real reader*, for that audience that is watching when they are alone. In this way, the theatricality of these characters is, of course, inseparable from the theatrical stance that Dickens himself, as storyteller, assumes towards his reader: or, as Garis puts it, “We can say of the descriptions, too, that they ‘perform’ [...] There is a perfect consonance between our response to the narrator of these novels and our response to the objects and characters he is rendering.”³⁹

It is this latter theatricality, on the part of Dickens as author and narrator, that is central to Garis’s interest. Taking the opening description of Marseilles from *Little Dorrit* as an example, Garis argues that “there are two ‘presences’, two illusions being created in this description:

the illusion of Marseilles, a ‘fact to be strongly smelt and tasted’, and also the illusion of ‘seeing’ the skill of the describer itself, almost palpably present to us as he goes about his professional work of evoking the illusion of Marseilles.⁴⁰

The doubleness of Dickens that Garis points to here perfectly matches the doubleness of reception that we have been taking in this chapter as definitive of theatricality: at one level, there is the represented, diegetic reality (Marseilles), while at another level we are aware of the calculated intention to entertain that underwrites this description, “the

³⁸ Garis, *The Dickens Theatre: A Reassessment of the Novels* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), p. 63; and Kurnick, “Stages: Theatre and the Politics of Style in *Great Expectations*,” *Critical Quarterly* 55.1 (April 2013), p. 98.

³⁹ Garis, *The Dickens Theatre*, *ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴⁰ Garis, *The Dickens Theatre*, *ibid.*, p. 9.

professional work of evoking the illusion.” Indeed, for Garis, the sheer “loudness of Dickens’s voice and of its expressive devices”—what he elsewhere characterizes as “a profusion of verbal figurations, or, to use the word from Renaissance rhetorical analysis, ‘schemes’”—“produces a condition in which the explicit intention of the insistent voice all but totally fills our consciousness.”⁴¹ For Garis, Dickens is the performer who never lets you forget how hard he is working to keep you entertained: and in this suspicion of a theatricality that is overtly directed towards its spectator, Garis seems to echo the note of those Victorian critics who faulted novelists for deviating from the austere “art of the dramatist.” This association is strikingly confirmed in Garis’s next remarks—for after noting, with some disapproval, that “[o]ur response to Dickens’s presence in his prose takes the form of an impulse to applaud,” he goes on to write that

the impulse to applaud does not ordinarily come upon us when we are reading other great novelists. When it does, something has gone wrong. In the work of Conrad, for instance, whenever we sense the presence of conscious brilliance of expression we resent the intrusion of the artist calling for our applause: we think of such an occurrence as a vice of style, and so it is, because it interrupts the kind of illusion the prose is creating. Not so with Dickens, which is to say that Dickens’s art thrives on a state of affairs that would be a vice in other novels.⁴²

The first thing we notice here is the familiarity of the critique, the language of which is patently sourced from the attacks on Victorian rhetoric that were launched a century before: Garis speaks of an “intrusion of the artist calling for our applause,” that “interrupts the kind of illusion the prose is creating”—a showman tactlessly soliciting our response. Further, in laying out what he calls “the Dickens problem” in his opening pages (to which my own description of a rather different “Dickens problem” in the opening to this chapter is in part an homage), Garis draws directly on the language of authorial

⁴¹ Garis, *The Dickens Theatre*, *ibid.*, p. 14, 8.

⁴² Garis, *The Dickens Theatre*, *ibid.*, p. 9-10.

shame and self-effacement: “The machinery, the ‘works’, that produces the expressive effects is puzzlingly, almost *embarrassingly visible*. [...] Nor is there the slightest suggestion of an attempt to *hide the presence of the artificer*” [italics added].⁴³ As Garis later puts it, “the tasteful artist will never seem to be seeking our applause. It is moreover only *good sense* that the novelist should not work hard to make us believe in his illusion and then let us catch a glimpse of him behind the scenes, manipulating the whole business.”⁴⁴ The objection, then, is familiar: but by 1965 (when Garis is writing), the offense that this critique is meant to target has undergone a full revolution. It is not the intrusion of the rhetorical novelist that is at issue (the specter of which had been fully laid to rest for, by conservative estimate, some 40 years), but rather the intrusion of the self-parading stylist (or, as Garis calls Dickens, “a self-exhibiting master of language”): not the vocal presence of the author in the text, but “the presence of conscious brilliance of expression.”⁴⁵ The exemplar, for Garis, of an offender against style is not Thackeray, but Conrad.

Garis’s rhetoric of the tastelessly theatrical, invasive author is not sourced directly, then, from the critics of Dickens’s day, much as it may sound like them: it has a more immediate source. For by the mid-1890s, another critical backlash, this time against the new enthusiasm for prose style, had begun to air its grievances in the literary periodicals: grievances that were, as it turned out, ironically similar to those that had been formerly leveled against the rhetorical author.⁴⁶ Like the loquacious storyteller, the author

⁴³ Garis, *The Dickens Theatre*, *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Garis, *The Dickens Theatre*, *ibid.*, p. 38-9.

⁴⁵ Garis, *The Dickens Theatre*, *ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁶ For an account of this backlash, see Travis R. Merritt, “Taste, Opinion, and Theory in the Rise of Victorian Prose Stylism,” in *The Art of Victorian Prose*, eds. George Levine and William Madden (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 31-4.

of style would be faulted for a distracting obtrusiveness, for intervening between the reader and the story in order to draw attention to herself, for not ‘getting out of the way’. The stylist was accused of writing a prose that was, as one critic complained of Walter Pater’s, overly “conscious of itself,” or else was reliant on “antics”: charges that seem to recall, like the earlier critique of Trollope quoted above, a performer who is insufficiently effaced within her role, and insists on mugging the audience in a way that detracts from the story at hand.⁴⁷ But while the objections to novelistic rhetoric ultimately brought about its demise, the new objections to performative stylism were only intended to curb its worst excesses; the model of style as authorship dispersed into linguistic detail has, of course, remained with us—as has the critique of the obtrusive stylist, which for many literary critics of the twentieth century and beyond came to be seen as the original literary sin. Indeed, the sentence immediately preceding Garis’s line about the “tasteful artist,” quoted above, states, “The first ‘rule’ our civilization teaches any writer is not to ‘show off his style’, not to show that he is trying to delight us with verbal tricks and dazzle us with his virtuosity.”⁴⁸ The fact that this supposedly foundational prohibition is actually quite recent, and was derived from an earlier prohibition aimed at the chatty author, is forgotten: with Victorian direct address a distant memory, and the regime of style long since established, the important offense now is a prose that exhibits too much of the author’s conscious, theatrical appeal to the reader.

The irony, of course, is that this kind of self-conscious theatricality, in which the author’s presence and address is distributed into a purely technical “brilliance of

⁴⁷ Quoted in Merritt, “Taste, Opinion, and Theory in the Rise of Victorian Prose Stylism,” *ibid.*, p. 33; Merritt, “Taste, Opinion, and Theory in the Rise of Victorian Prose Stylism,” *ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴⁸ Garis, *The Dickens Theatre*, *ibid.*, p. 38.

expression” (wherein the author is visible only as the inferred agency behind the text), was, in a writer like Conrad, precisely a response to the charges of authorial “intrusion” and “interrupt[ion of] the illusion” that Garis is still engaged in making. He can’t see the meaning that theatricality had for Dickens’s generation, because he himself is writing from within the long tail of the same critical paradigm. Instead, his account of what made Dickens as a storyteller unique in his own period ends up reassigning, unconsciously, all of the aesthetic coordinates to accord with his own vantage-point in the wake of a canonical modernism. Nowhere is this more jarring than when Garis places Dickens side by side with the rhetorical novelists of his day, going so far as to contrast George Eliot favorably with Dickens’s putative violation of literary good taste. After quoting a passage from Eliot that is rife with explicit authorial self-reference (not only “I,” but also “me” and “we”), Garis makes the case that Dickens’s performative style is, in truth, *more* of an artistic indiscretion than Eliot’s explicit insertion of herself into the narrative discourse, arguing that “[t]he unabashed presence of the narrator here, and the presence of the narrator’s personal feelings, actually further the illusion rather than interrupt it; for those feelings [...] will be echoed and confirmed by the feelings of the heroine.”⁴⁹ Needless to say, it is only through the distorting distance of a twentieth-century retrospective view that an account in which Eliot’s digressive, metafictional rhetoric is intended to “further the illusion,” and is thus given the seal of approval by post-Lubbockian advocates of authorial self-effacement, could make any historical sense. Ultimately, Garis’s “Dickens problem” says more about the literary precepts of the post-war era than it does about narration in the nineteenth century.

⁴⁹ Garis, *The Dickens Theatre*, *ibid.*, p. 12.

But this kind of unconscious distortion is hardly limited to Garis, or to scholars of the 1960s; it remains a persistent feature of critical accounts of Victorian storytelling even today. For example, a similar oversight is made in Fredric Jameson's 2013 volume *The Antinomies of Realism*, an impressive, comprehensive theoretical account of the rise and fall of the nineteenth-century realist novel. In his discussion of narrational strategies, Jameson stunningly leaves out authorial rhetoric altogether, thus omitting the dominant posture of address in the Victorian novel; instead, he divides the century between what he calls "the third-person classics" on the one hand, and on the other, a smaller crop of "self-posing, self-dramatizing" first-person narratives à la *Huckleberry Finn*.⁵⁰ But the "third-person classics" were not, of course, third-person: nor were they first-person, in the way that Jameson means this term—they were not the neutral, impersonal writing of an effaced authorial position (Roland Barthes's "nonperson") any more than they were the first-person account of a homodiegetic character.⁵¹ The rhetorical author of such novels represented, in truth, a different kind of vantage altogether: one who spoke from an external position equivalent to that of the reader's, situated outside of the story-world, and yet was also the expert and guide *to* that world, his charming loquacity and easy familiarity a way of smoothing the reader's first step over the diegetic border, into a potentially intimidating world of fictional intensities. Clearly this is a position that cannot be simply assimilated to a first-person, character-based narration, which was often (though not always) a way for the narrative to 'account for' its own text in diegetic terms, implicitly casting the addressed reader as *already* a denizen of the story-world in which this 'autobiographical' document had been penned and eventually published—or

⁵⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 170.

⁵¹ Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, *ibid.*, p. 182.

alternately, as in the case of putatively found manuscripts like Defoe's *Crusoe*, an attempt to go the other way around, casting the novelistic text as already an artifact of the real world. In tactical terms, then, homodiegetic narration is about summoning the resources of fiction to elide and explain away the problematic status of fiction itself (as pretending, dissimulation)—while rhetorical narration is about cheerfully tackling that problematic status head on, with disarming candor and good humor. Given his misconstrual of this rhetorical posture as “third-person,” it comes as no surprise that Jameson also neglects to distinguish between rhetoric and theatricality: both of which he discusses solely as attributes of a “self-dramatizing,” homodiegetic address. In his account, the essentially “theatrical” nature of the first-person is closely wedded to “rhetoric”—that is, to a “specific address to the audience and the demands it makes on their reactions”; indeed, the two terms consistently appear as a pair (“this equally rhetorical ‘theatricality,’” etc.).⁵² If Jameson fails to recognize that the garrulous, winking, confiding discourse of a Thackeray or Trollope is every bit as “self-dramatizing” as Huck Finn—for even if we are not receiving the address of an identified *person*, we are surely taking in an ostentatiously displayed *personality*—it is because he is starting from the premise that the discourse of narrative fiction is essentially “impersonal” (thus necessitating the hiving off of first-person texts into a different taxonomic box).⁵³ Like Garis's, Jameson's account turns out to be more reflective of assumptions about fiction that were enshrined by the triumph of modernism than it is of nineteenth-century narration.

⁵² Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, *ibid.*, p. 170, 139, 141.

⁵³ Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, *ibid.*, p. 169.

As we've seen, rhetorical address and theatricality were linked in the Victorian period, as well: but their decoupling by such a major author as Dickens demonstrates that we need to be able to make the distinctions that I've been advancing here, between rhetoric and theatricality as alternate strategies of address (as well as, for that matter, between rhetoric and the first or third person), if we truly want to understand what made Dickensian narration anomalous within its larger literary context—and, indeed, the realist novel as such. In this vein, Garis's take on the "Dickens problem," for all its unconscious presentism, does flag something true and difficult to articulate about its subject, in its recognition that Dickens could—unlike a rhetorical author like George Eliot—be critiqued on the same grounds as first-wave stylists like Conrad. The history may be dubious, but the implication—that if Dickens's presence within his own narratives was to be faulted, it would have to be faulted in the same way as one would fault the overly self-conscious stylism of the *fin de siècle*, and not as one would fault his chatty, rhetorical contemporaries—serves to corroborate the premise of the preceding pages: a premise that the readings in the remainder of this chapter will explore.

3. "A Beautiful Caricature of Himself": Character Tics in *The Pickwick Papers*

Dickens's first novel, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (otherwise known as *The Pickwick Papers*), begins with a parody of Rhetoric with a capital 'R'. As Garrett Stewart puts it,

The style of Dickens's novelistic career begins in pure derivation, a sustained send-up not only of the Johnsonian high style of journalistic and parliamentary claptrap in the eighteenth-century Age of Rhetoric but of Sir Walter Scott's editorial aliases and their prefatory paraphernalia—and then finds its true quasi-oratorical tone amid the cleared

debris of tradition.⁵⁴

Stewart has in mind the first sentence of *Pickwick*, which runs like this:

The first ray of light which illumines the gloom, and converts into a dazzling brilliancy that obscurity in which the earlier history of the public career of the immortal Pickwick would appear to be involved, is derived from the perusal of the following entry in the Transactions of the Pickwick Club, which the editor of these papers feels the highest pleasure in laying before his readers, as a proof of the careful attention, indefatigable assiduity, and nice discrimination, with which his search among the multifarious documents confided to him has been conducted.⁵⁵

Capital-‘R’ Rhetoric is, of course, a very different thing from ‘rhetoric’ as we’ve been discussing it here (in the sense of a Victorian novelistic address), and it would be very misleading to conflate them: but it would be equally mistaken to assume that the two terms have no relationship at all. In fact, the rise of novelistic rhetoric as an authorial strategy in the 1830s flowed directly from a reaction against the big-‘R’ Rhetoric of the previous century. The break began with the Romantics, who, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, rejected what they saw as the excessively stilted and artificial manner of eighteenth-century neoclassical poets like Alexander Pope; instead, poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge, in their 1799 volume *Lyrical Ballads*, opted for a more plainspoken, vernacular diction, which was meant to evoke the lived speech of rural people. The ‘rhetoric’ of the early Victorian novelists was an extension of this turn: a pivot towards a conversational, direct, and orally inflected mode of writing—an address modeled, not on an orator addressing a multitude, but on a person addressing a single, intimate interlocutor (“dear reader”). The new chattiness and familiarity of this narratorial address represented not only a deliberate informality but also a disarming candor, a

⁵⁴ “Dickens and Language,” *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. John O. Jordan (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 136.

⁵⁵ *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, ed. Mark Wormald (London and New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 15. Cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

reaction against the elaborate artifice and deception of eighteenth-century novelists who framed themselves as merely the ‘editors’ of someone else’s autobiographical narrative, rather than admitting what they actually were, the author of a work of fiction. The realism of this new generation of Victorian novelists was of a piece with their commitment to eschew all such pretenses, to dispense with “editorial aliases and their prefatory paraphernalia,” and to come before the reader in their own person, freely admitting that their story was a fiction—a commitment, in short, to acknowledge the real-world storytelling situation, of a real author addressing a real reader. The irony, then, is that what we have subsequently come to understand as Victorian ‘rhetoric’—the preaching, divulging, opinionated Victorian narrator—began as the explicit rejection of everything that Rhetoric represented.

The further irony, as Stewart’s description of *Pickwick*’s opening suggests, is that Dickens—though not himself a rhetorical author—was nonetheless one of the key figures in instigating this turn, and bringing about the rise of rhetorical narration. *Pickwick* was not only Dickens’s first full-length project, it was also the first serialized Victorian novel to be a breakout hit—the novel that, perhaps more than any other, set the mold for what the Victorian novel would be—and it is not an accident that Dickens conceived the work, at least initially, as a satirical attack on eighteenth-century modes of narration and storytelling. As the novel progressed, this intention gradually receded, and by the end of *Pickwick* we have arrived at something resembling a standard Dickens novel (whatever that is!): as Stewart points out, the parody of oratorical address eventually settles into a more “vernacular lilt,” and, in its final chapter, with its depiction of Sam Weller reading an account of their adventures aloud to Mr. Pickwick beside the fire, closes “in the

envisioned recurrent scene of its own reception: the oral recitation of popular prose, jauntily glossed at the domestic hearth.”⁵⁶ In this way, *Pickwick* sketches a direct line between the felt obsolescence of eighteenth-century editorial roleplaying and the new authorial posture of chatty, hearthside intimacy that would come to dominate the novels of the Victorian era—a posture that Dickens’s “peculiar relation” with his readership would both embody and tirelessly strive for. *Pickwick* gives us the bridge from the death of the eighteenth-century novel to the birth of the Victorian rhetorical author, the origin story of nineteenth-century novelistic rhetoric. If there is any place to begin answering the question of why Dickens abstained from a rhetorical address, it is here.

Of course, the answer to that question that I have already suggested has to do with the way that Dickens substituted theatricality for rhetoric; and here again, the eighteenth-century context on which *Pickwick* gives view proves to be critical. It has, perhaps, never been fully appreciated just how much the theatricality of Dickens’s narration is bound up with the eighteenth-century novel: its faux-editorial roleplaying is the key precedent for Dickens’s own straight-faced delivery, his narration ‘in character’ as the mild, understated author—an author who, in the mold of the eighteenth-century ‘editor’, pretends that he is not the creator of the absurdities being depicted, but only their scrupulous, detached reporter. As such, though Dickens’s parody of the editorial mode in *Pickwick* helped to make plain its outdatedness, and thus to shovel it onto the scrapheap of literary history, it also revealed Dickens’s abiding fondness for the elaborate, deadpan pettifoggery of eighteenth-century narration, and illustrated the familial closeness that he would always bear towards the comic novels of the preceding century. The works of

⁵⁶ Stewart, “Dickens and Language,” *ibid.*, p. 137.

Tobias Smollett, for example (for which Dickens's affection is well known, having imparted his early reading habits to David Copperfield), provided the model for one of the most recognizably 'Dickensian' calling-cards, the use of which also began in *Pickwick*: namely, the marking of characters with linguistic tics and catch phrases. Jingle's famously broken-off, staccato speech, it has been pointed out, has its precedent in the character of Captain Crowe, from Smollett's *Sir Launcelot Greaves* (1762), whose dialogue is also interpolated with dashes; and the marking of a comic character through their speech patterns is not an uncommon feature in Smollett's work.⁵⁷ Significantly, these narrative features that Dickens draws from the eighteenth-century novel are the same features that, I've argued, establish his affinity to the *fin de siècle* stylists (e.g., a straight-faced narratorial playacting that decenters Dickens's own person into the linguistic details of composition, such as verbal tics, etc.). It is telling, in this regard, that Garis's characterization of Dickens's performative narration as rooted in a "profusion of [...] 'schemes'," with its explicit allusion to the tradition of Rhetoric (big 'R'), is also what allows him to align Dickens with late-century stylists like Conrad. If Dickens never signed on for the rhetorical mode of address embraced by his fellow Victorians, it is in large part because he never fully broke with the eighteenth-century novel that this rhetorical strategy was reacting against; and, paradoxically, it is this unique closeness to the eighteenth century that affiliates him with a proto-modernist stylism.

Depending on our angle of vantage, then, we can see in *Pickwick* not only the origin story of Victorian rhetoric (the satirizing of an obsolete eighteenth-century editorial mode that gives way to the ideal of a cozy, hearthside authorial address), but

⁵⁷ See Earle R. Davis, "Dickens and the Evolution of Caricature," *PMLA* 55.1 (Mar. 1940), p. 231-2.

also the origins of that alternative to rhetoric, Dickensian theatricality (the fondness for eighteenth-century roleplaying that leads to a straight-faced, decentered authorial presence). In the early chapters, the novel's appeals to readerly entertainment are made mostly at the level of plot: hijinks, close scrapes, and all manner of comedic incident (a mistaken identity that leads to a duel, a runaway carriage, near escapes from hostile mobs, botched attempts at heroic action, various pranks played on Mr. Pickwick, etc. etc.), as well as genre-standard storylines (romance plots, seduction plots, villains unmasked, and so on: not to mention the Gothic tales of the novel's interpolated stories)—but after the first third of the novel, the pratfalls and physical comedy begin to disappear, and the focus on incident is gradually replaced by a purely linguistic humor. From here on, more and more of the novel revolves around encounters with interesting talkers and their peculiar discourse: the guests at Mrs. Hunter's literary salon, the clerks in Dodson and Fogg's, the old man at the Magpie and Stump, all of the various functionaries surrounding the Magistrate (all leading up to the novel's climactic and purely talk-based set-piece, Pickwick's trial), and, of course, Sam Weller and his father—and more and more of these encountered personages begin to be linguistically marked with repetitive tics and speech patterns. In short, the comedy begins to migrate from the level of story to the level of discourse: not comedic incident, but the comedic rendering of spoken language. (There are, obviously, linguistically marked characters in the first third, too—most notably, Jingle—just as there are comedic incidents in the last two-thirds: but the relative proportion of each shifts significantly.) As the novel's appeals move to the level of language, of textual composition, rather than narrated event, we see Dickens increasingly turning his attention to the theatrical possibilities of his prose.

It is fitting, then, that the other key precedent for Dickens's use of speech tags is the popular theater of his age. As Earle R. Davis has observed, a number of plays first performed in the 1790s or early 1800s made use of the jerky, staccato speech tic that would later be made famous by Jingle: a dramatic lineage that may be traced back to the character of the retired jockey, Goldfinch, from Thomas Holcroft's 1792 play *The Road to Ruin*.⁵⁸ Certainly the use of linguistic habits and catchwords to distinguish characters was a common device on the stage in Dickens's day: and undoubtedly the most important figure in this regard is Dickens's theatrical idol, the comic actor Charles Mathews (for whom, as it happens, the character of Goldfinch was a celebrated and recurring role). Mathews was best known as a master of impersonation: that is, of fully assuming a character's minute habits and mannerisms. Beginning in 1819, he performed a one-man show called *At Homes*, in which he drew on his diverse theatrical roles to play a variety of distinct comic characters, often in quick succession; the climax of the show was a one-act play in which Mathews played all of the parts. Naturally, one of Mathews's chief means of differentiating his characters was by exaggerated speech patterns and tics.⁵⁹ So taken was Dickens with Mathews's performances in his youth that by the age of 20 he had, by his own account, "knew three of four successive years of Mathews's *At Homes* from sitting in the pit to hear them," and went religiously "to see Mathews whenever he played." It may be inferred that Dickens—himself, of course, a talented impersonator—devised his youthful plan of becoming an actor in response to his identification with Mathews's unique talent: by his own report, Dickens's pitch to a London stage manager centered around his "strong perception of character and oddity, and a natural power of

⁵⁸ Davis, "Dickens and the Evolution of Caricature," *ibid.*, p. 232-5.

⁵⁹ Davis, "Dickens and the Evolution of Caricature," *ibid.*, p. 235-6.

reproducing in my own person what I saw in others.”⁶⁰ As the story goes, on the day of his big audition (before Charles Kemble at Covent Garden Theatre) he fell horribly ill and was forced to miss the tryout, which led to his switching career paths to become a writer. The audition he had prepared was a rendition of one of Mathews’s vignettes from *At Homes*; later in life, he would continue to attempt Mathews’s routines in his own private theatricals, including the playing of multiple parts in rapid sequence.⁶¹

As my fourth chapter (on Conrad) will argue in greater detail, the new paradigm of style that was popularized in the 1880s and ‘90s was intimately related to an emerging conviction in those years that the truth of a person was not to be found in her explicit and conscious account of herself, but was rather revealed in her unconscious habits and mannerisms, the details that ‘tell’ (it’s no coincidence, after all, that psychoanalysis was first formulated in these same decades). By homing in on Dickens’s trademark use of verbal tics to mark character, then, I want to link the theatricality of Dickensian characterization to the stylistic idea that authorial identity is distributed among linguistic details. But, of course, the 1830s were not the 1890s: and the idea that one’s deep individuality was discoverable in unconscious gestures did not yet exist in Dickens’s era. Indeed, at that time, commentators were inclined to starkly differentiate the true personality from ‘mere mannerisms’, which were held to be almost opposites. An entire discourse invested in preserving this opposition circulated around the immensely popular impersonations of Mathews, and would later come to circulate around Dickens’s caricatures. Mathews himself, for example, had an incredibly delicate and cautious

⁶⁰ Letter to E. M. Forster, dated December 1, 1844. *The Selected Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Jenny Hartley (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 151.

⁶¹ Davis, “Dickens and the Evolution of Caricature,” *ibid.*, p. 239.

explanation that he would produce, when necessary, to rationalize the extreme attention that he paid to surface-level mannerisms in his act:

It is my purpose to evince, by *general* delineation, how easily peculiarities may be acquired by negligence, and how difficult they are to eradicate when strengthened by habit; to show how often vanity and affectation steal upon the deportment of youth, and how sure they are to make their possessor ridiculous in after life; in short, to exemplify the old adage, that ‘No man is contemptible for being what he is, but for pretending to be what he is not’.⁶²

Mathews’s rather tortured explanation—that all of his minutely observed character studies are actually moral fables meant to show that the real person is *not* reducible to their distinguishing mannerisms, which are in fact merely affected and thus *external* to the true self: that, in other words, what Mathews is embodying in each character is not “what he is,” but “what he is not”—indexes the necessity that he felt he was under to square what he was doing with the prevailing truth: that focusing on superficial “peculiarities” did not reveal the underlying individual, but rather detracted from any genuine understanding of her deeper nature.⁶³ Interestingly, a reviewer in *Blackwood’s*, moved by the same motivation, and intent to get Mathews off the hook, produced a precisely contradictory explanation, that Mathews in fact did *not* portray the external

⁶² Quoted in Malcolm Andrews, *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves*, *ibid.*, p. 113. As Andrews dryly remarks, “Mathews is making some fine discriminations here in attempting to dissociate the essential personality from the mannerisms (‘peculiarities’) that grow upon it, either by negligence or by cultivation.”

⁶³ Interestingly, Mathews’s excuse for his act, implausible as it is, does resemble some critic accounts of the Dickensian caricature. It is reminiscent, for example, of D. A. Miller’s understanding of the character tic in Dickens: in which the tic indexes, not the character’s interiority, but the very effort to withhold and conceal that interiority from a threatening social world. Of course, in Mathews’s account, the tic is not the product of self-discipline, but quite the reverse; it is assumed carelessly, as a kind of youthful indiscretion, like smoking: “peculiarities [...] acquired by negligence” and subsequently “strengthened by habit.” But there is a sense here in which the undeveloped subjectivity’s resort to affectations asks to be read as a kind of defense mechanism, a tactic for concealing an unformed and insecure person—an armor for the self, which the adult finds impossible to remove: as Mathews implies, by exhorting such a person to be “what he is,” rather than “what he is not,” to stop concealing his real self. But as the coming pages will show, my own reading of the tic is rather different: mainly, because I believe that Dickens’s use of the character tic as a token of affectionate readerly recognition (a departure from Mathews and from the precedents of his time), implies that the tic *is*, in fact, at least in Dickens, indexical to the deeper self underneath. See Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, *ibid.*, pp. 200-4.

mannerisms, but only the authentic person: “his faculty is so decidedly that of [...] creating character, instead of merely aping the tones, or gestures, or countenances, of individuals.”⁶⁴ Everyone, it seems, agreed that Mathews’s act did *not* imply that one’s mannerisms were revealing of their character—but no one could quite agree on why it was innocent of this implication.

The same concerns would dog Dickens throughout his career. As George Eliot put it, most famously, in an 1856 review, Dickens “is gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population; and if he could give us their psychological character—their conceptions of life, and their emotions—with the same truth as their idiom and manners, his books would be the greatest contribution Art has ever made to the awakening of social sympathies.” But the likelihood of this, she added, was not very high, for “he scarcely ever passes from the humorous or external to the emotional and tragic without becoming [...] transcendent in his unreality” (and here it may be noted how Eliot aligns this depth psychology with a familiar genre hierarchy, from high tragedy, representing the internal, to low comedy, as the external).⁶⁵ Two years later, in 1858, the critic Walter Bagehot sounded the same note when he wrote that Dickens “expands traits into people,” and added that in his novels, “we have exaggerations pretending to comport themselves as ordinary beings, caricatures acting as if they were real characters.”⁶⁶ By this logic, Dickens’s characters were all mannerism, all externality, and as such could have no genuine self. The idea that Dickens’s own identity

⁶⁴ Quoted in Andrews, *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves*, *ibid.*, p. 113.

⁶⁵ George Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life,” *Westminster Review* 19 (July 1856), p. 55.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Andrews, *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves*, *ibid.*, p. 243.

could be located in his characters' mannerisms would have made little sense to readers of the day.

There are, however, some signs that Dickens's use of verbal tics is beginning to look beyond the assumptions of his era, to imagine a deeper relationship to the underlying personality than merely that of an acquired affectation. And this evidence is rooted in the unique *intimacy* that Dickensian characters ask from us. Like many things in *Pickwick*, this aspect of Dickensian characterization is not present at the beginning of the novel, but steals over it slowly, almost organically, as it were, as the novel becomes less and less the rather flat satire that Dickens initially intended it to be and more and more the kind of mixed novel—of characterological humor, social commentary, and popular sentiment—that was to define his career. In the earlier chapters, Mr. Pickwick is a purely satirical character, a delusional nincompoop set up solely to be the broad butt of jokes at the expense of gentlemen scientists and the very Victorian inclination to found minor societies and clubs. Somewhere along the line, this intention reverses itself completely and Pickwick becomes one of the most ardently beloved characters in English literature, inspiring a level of popular attachment that was utterly unprecedented in Dickens's time.⁶⁷ So notable was this reversal that Dickens himself was forced to acknowledge it in his preface to the 1847 cheap edition:

It has been observed of Mr Pickwick, that there is a decided change in his character, as these pages proceed, and that he becomes more good and more sensible. I do not think this change will appear forced or unnatural to my readers, if they will reflect that in real life the peculiarities and oddities of a man who has anything whimsical about him, generally impress us first, and that it is not until we are better acquainted with him that we usually begin to look below these superficial traits, and to know the better part of him. (760)

⁶⁷ Mark Wormald's introduction to the Penguin Classics edition, cited throughout, does a good job of conveying what a sensation *Pickwick* was (and, oddly, remains): see pp. xiii-xv.

Here Dickens toes the familiar line, arguing that Pickwick's "peculiarities" and "superficial traits," which are emphasized at the start of the book, are utterly separate from the real individual that we get to know in the later chapters. In this way, Dickens attempts to enlist the conventional psychological wisdom to rationalize an inconsistency of construction. It is unlikely, however, that anyone believed this excuse, as even the Victorians' conception of the distance between external traits and true character was not wide enough to allow for a man to be a pompous idiot externally, while he is 'deep down' a beacon of wisdom and generosity. It is too evident that Dickens's idea of Pickwick's character underwent a diametrical transformation over the course of the novel. The question is, why?

In accounting for the unprecedented popular affection that Pickwick called forth, we could of course point to Dickens's innovative use of the serial format, which, as we've already seen, made his characters feel like familiar friends, living lives in real-time parallel to one's own. But this intelligent answer should not distract us from the more obvious and flatfooted explanation, which in this case may be the best one: that Dickens simply wrote him that way. Indeed, what's most striking about the treatment of Pickwick as a public treasure is that it so exactly mirrors the way his character is treated within the story-world in the second half of Dickens's narrative: a character, after all, who by the end of the novel prompts such reverence from his friends that they regularly break down in tears at his very goodness; who elicits such fervent devotion from his manservant, Sam Weller, that he refuses (in a voice "husky" with emotion) to leave his master's service to marry the woman he has been wooing for the entire novel (743); who causes young brides to "sob[] audibly" when he declares, in a retirement speech, that "[t]he happiness

of young people [...] has ever been the chief pleasure of my life” (749); a character described, in the book’s closing paragraph, in the following terms of worship:

He is known by all the poor people about, who never fail to take their hats off as he passes with great respect; the children idolize him, and so indeed does the whole neighbourhood. Every year he repairs to a large family merry-making at Mr Wardle’s; on this, as on all other occasions, he is invariably attended by the faithful Sam, between whom and his master there exists a steady and reciprocal attachment, which nothing but death will sever. (753-4)

The easiest explanation, then, for the sensational outpourings prompted by Pickwick is that such mass adulation was literally written into his character. This point is not as facile as it may seem. There is something remarkable and deserving of study in the evident degree of authorial intentionality that is mixed up in the public embrace of Dickens’s most beloved characters: these characters are repeatedly shown surrounded by performances of extreme collective affection, routine and almost ritualized effusions of unnatural fondness—scenes that actively train and solicit the reader to be affected by the character in the same way.

This fact is, of course, familiar to all readers of Dickens; we are so used to these scenes that we don’t even notice how strange they are, how perplexing and out of place they would appear in the work of any other Victorian novelist. Let’s also recognize that we are in the realm here of the famous Dickensian sentimentality: but the point at issue, I’d suggest, is somewhat different. What I have in mind here are not so much the scenes of melodramatic heart-wringing, like the infamous death of Little Nell, but rather those quieter moments in which Dickens pauses the story for no other purpose than to let the narrative discourse gaze fondly upon his central characters, and to let them gaze fondly on each other. As we saw above, by the end of the novel, the Pickwick idolatry has reached a fever pitch: but I suspect that the peaks of adulation that arrive at the

narrative's close are built up, gradually, in quiet, out-of-the-way moments tucked into the middle of the novel, like the following, in which Pickwick and his companions,

Snodgrass, Winkle, and Tupman, are bundling into the Muggleton coach:

The interest displayed in Mr Pickwick's countenance is most intense, as Mr Weller and the guard try to squeeze the cod-fish into the boot, first head first, and then tail first, and then top upwards, and then bottom upwards, and then side-ways, and then long-ways, all of which artifices the implacable cod-fish sturdily resists, until the guard accidentally hits him in the very middle of the basket, whereupon he suddenly disappears into the boot, and with him, the head and shoulders of the guard himself, who, not calculating upon so sudden a cessation of the passive resistance of the cod-fish, experiences a very unexpected shock, to the unsmotherable delight of all the porters and by-standers. Upon this, Mr Pickwick smiles with great good humour, and drawing a shilling from his waistcoat pocket, begs the guard, as he picks himself out of the boot, to drink his health in a glass of hot brandy and water, at which, the guard smiles too, and Messrs Snodgrass, Winkle, and Tupman, all smile in company. The guard and Mr Weller disappear for five minutes, most probably to get the hot brandy and water, for they smell very strongly of it, when they return, the coachman mounts to the box, Mr Weller jumps up behind, the Pickwickians pull their coats round their legs, and their shawls over their noses; the helpers pull the horse-cloths off, the coachman shouts out a cheery 'All right,' and away they go. (361-2)

It is almost impossible to imagine this kind of scene appearing in a novel by Eliot, Trollope, Thackeray, or Gaskell. Its sole purpose, it seems, is to allow the reader to observe the main characters in a moment of spontaneous good cheer and conviviality—upon which we smile lovingly, like a fond mother watching from the window as her children play. The pace is patient, unfolding in real-time, with a rapt attention to each new turn of events—each new attempt to maneuver the fish into the boot, each facial expression reacting in response—thus enforcing our own position as an enjoyably absorbed witness. Significantly, the scene also trades upon what we know of the characters' signature traits and foibles: Pickwick's engrossed interest in any eccentric goings-on happening in his vicinity, as well as his attentive kindness to strangers and frequent use of a social drink to smooth over any ruffled feathers; Weller's easy

camaraderie with all working people he encounters, and his opportunistic penchant to sneak a tipples while on the job. As readers, we are invited to shake our heads with knowing fondness as we smile indulgently on such minor interludes of merriment: indeed, the indulgent smiles are modeled for us within the scene itself, on the faces of Snodgrass, Winkle, and Tupman as they look on.

This kind of solicitation—to imagine ourselves as the intimate friends of the main characters, with an affectionate regard for their endearing quirks—is not a feature in the novels of Dickens’s contemporaries. The other novelists of Dickens’s day simply did not conscript their readers into this particular kind of doting fondness for their characters: a difference, I would contend, that has everything to do with that other signal difference we have already identified—namely, Dickens’s abstinence from authorial rhetoric. In the work of novelists like Eliot, Trollope, or Thackeray, there is a cultivated intimacy between the reader and the rhetorical author; this is an intimacy not with the diegetic world being narrated, but rather with an extradiegetic address. In such novels, the characters are flawed, deluded, or mendacious, in differing degrees, and the rhetorical author is the center of common sense and right thinking, standing back from the characters in judgment but also understanding. As much as we may ‘see’ the characters and feel that we inhabit their world, we are always reminded that this is a narrative being told to us by an affable, sensible voice, an author who knows more about this story than any of the characters in it, and whose perspective we must hew to if we want to understand truly what the characters’ lives and choices really mean. Even in the case of the most beloved of Eliot’s characters—Dorothea Brooke, say—whatever affectionate closeness we may feel is always tempered by the reflective distance that is carefully

maintained: and our intimacy with Dorothea is only ever allowed to be secondary, held in check behind that primary intimacy with the vocal author, whose discourse is both true and moral, neither inviting nor requiring any evaluative distance; this is no less true of an author as different as Trollope. With Dickens, however, the case is otherwise. In Dickens, intimacy with diegetic characters takes the place of intimacy with an extradiegetic author. The narrative discourse does not hold us at a contemplative remove from the central characters, nor does our relation to these characters plot, in any primary way, along a spectrum of judgment to understanding; as in a light comedy, or popular theatrical, there is little interest in scrutinizing the moral flavor of Pickwick's (many questionable) actions too closely. The vaunted 'goodness' of Pickwick is not attributable to his moral conduct, but is rather a product of how *dear* he is to us, how well we feel we know him; and the narrative discourse is all organized around the goal of enforcing this illusion, in which we come to regard the character as if through a longstanding, intimate friendship.

But all of this, of course, is only *after* Pickwick has ceased to be what he was at the novel's beginning: namely, an eighteenth-century satirical figure, serving only to index the absurdity of amateur scientists. In this light, the shift in Pickwick's character, I would suggest, can be traced to Dickens's discovery, over the course of writing his first novel, that the combination of a deadpan, performative narrator and contemptible, buffoonish characters was not allowing for the kind of affective attachment to his readers that he sought. Indeed, the immediate impetus for the new, loveable Pickwick, and the entire narrative strategy of character-based intimacy that he represented, was probably Dickens's decision to introduce the novel's first genuinely likeable character, Sam Weller, which (as is well known) served to revive the commercial fortunes of a novel that

was, up until that point, badly tanking. The revision of other central characters, such as Pickwick himself, to call forth more readerly fondness, would have followed naturally on the heels of this success. Nor is this shift towards the cultivation of a character-based intimacy with readers unrelated to that other key shift that *Pickwick* performs, which has already been noted in this section: namely, the shift from comedic incident towards a discursive humor of linguistic tics and mannerisms.⁶⁸ Naturally, it only makes sense that, as Pickwick becomes an object of endearment and ceases to be a satirical buffoon, the narrative will pivot away from its early emphasis on placing him in uncomfortable or humiliating situations to elicit our (somewhat mean-spirited) laughter; as such, the incidence of runaway carriages and hostile mobs declines considerably. But the more significant point, I think, is that the growing emphasis on recognizable habits of speech and gesture, tics and catchphrases, becomes a key element of how Dickens creates in the reader a sense of deep personal familiarity and intimacy with his characters.

To note this fact is, in many ways, to fly in the face of how such characterological tics in Dickens are typically read. In Alex Woloch's influential account, such character tics are "distortions," produced by the "minorness" of Dickens's secondary characters: it is because we aren't fully shown these characters by the narrative discourse that they come to appear to us as flat caricatures, utterly defined by a single repetitive tic or catchphrase.⁶⁹ Indeed, this distortion, for Woloch, is a kind of violence, a mangling of the character, associated with images of bodily fragmentation and beheading: in this way, he

⁶⁸ For reference, Weller is introduced in the fourth number of the serial release; the scenes that I mentioned previously as heralding the turn towards a linguistic humor (the guests at Mrs. Hunter's literary salon, the clerks in Dodson and Fogg's, the old man at the Magpie and Stump) occur in the sixth and seventh numbers.

⁶⁹ Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 129.

connects Jingle's highly marked manner of speaking with his gruesome story of a woman getting decapitated by a low overpass. It is not the unfortunate woman, Woloch implies, but Jingle himself who has been beheaded, by Dickens's discourse: becoming all body, all fragment, all externality.⁷⁰

In a sense, Woloch's view reproduces the Victorian psychology of Dickens's own time: in which the distinguishing mannerisms are merely extraneous traits that are not indexical to the deeper personality, which is unseen (and, presumably, utterly unmarked by any kind of eccentricity). Instead, they index only minorness itself: the character's overlooked status within the novel's attention economy (and beyond that, the inequities of the urban class system). But is distortion and mangling the only way to think about Dickens's tics? What if we took as the model of Dickens's mannered characters, not the recurring villain Jingle, but the comic hero and reader darling Sam Weller—a character every bit as marked by repetitive gestures and speech tags as any in Dickens? Weller is not a minor character, so it seems his quirks must be pointing to something other than minorness. The fact is, while some Dickensian caricatures—like, say, *Bleak House's* grotesquely puffed and artificial dancing master, Mr. Turveydrop—fit a model of mannerism as mangling, as a gesture of authorial dismissal and contempt, there are others, like Weller, whose mannerisms speak affection. Rather than neglect and inadequate knowledge, Dickensian tics in these latter instances signify a profound degree of acquaintance and knowledgeability. Indeed, their primary function is to reproduce, in as abbreviated a space as possible, that fondly amused and knowing recognition that we feel when we observe the unconscious mannerisms of our closest loved ones. Instant

⁷⁰ See Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, *ibid.*, p. 152-4.

recognition has, of course, always been the objective of representing a character as a ‘type’, and the use of exaggerated, telltale mannerisms to ensure this recognition is as old as literature itself. But Dickens’s use of this device adds something new: it frames our recognition of the repeated mannerism as the symptom of a personal attachment to an individual. An unvarying, repetitive tic will always imply a kind of infinite chain; in Dickens, the tic’s gesture towards an infinitely receding prehistory is repurposed to simulate the untold years of a durable and abiding relationship. We somehow feel, very quickly, as if we have known these characters forever. In this way, the very repetitiveness of these mannerisms mimes the pleasurable, and always somewhat comic, sense of observing an utterly known personality that can only emerge in the context of a longstanding affectionate bond. G. K. Chesterton is very alive to this other capacity of Dickensian caricature:

To every man alive, one must hope, it has in some manner happened that he has talked with his more fascinating friends round a table on some night when all the numerous personalities unfolded themselves like great tropical flowers. All fell into their parts as in some delightful impromptu play. Every man was more himself than he had ever been in this vale of tears. Every man was a beautiful caricature of himself. The man who has known such nights will understand the exaggerations of “Pickwick.” The man who has not known such nights will not enjoy “Pickwick” nor (I imagine) heaven.⁷¹

Chesterton’s apt analogue for the reader’s relationship to Dickens’s “exaggerate[ed]” characters is a group of close friends spending an intimate evening together, savoring and appreciating each other’s personalities at their most characteristic, like exotic hothouse “flowers” or fine wine: “Every man [...] a beautiful caricature of himself.” There is something very Oscar Wilde, very *fin de siècle*, in this idea of a personality as a virtuosic performance, a work of art, which seems to reflect Chesterton’s era more than Dickens’s;

⁷¹ Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, *ibid.*, p. 65.

it is an idea, of course, that was very much bound up with that period's discovery of stylism. But there is also something very revealing and true about Chesterton's linking of this idea with Dickens's intimate caricatures, which in many ways are the anticipation of this stylistic view of the self.

From this vantage, we can now plainly see the falseness of Dickens's excuse for *Pickwick*'s shift in character—that “in real life the peculiarities and oddities of a man who has anything whimsical about him, generally impress us first, and that it is not until we are better acquainted with him that we usually begin to look below these superficial traits, and to know the better part of him”—which is, in fact, the very opposite of how characterological “peculiarities and oddities” work in Dickens: it is *through* what is whimsical, what is eccentric and on-the-surface that we come to love the personality of a Dickensian character. Nor is this only true of *Pickwick*, or of Dickens's earlier novels: we have only to think of a much-loved character like Mr. Jarndyce, and the extent to which our affection for him is cultivated through our amused recognition of his quirks and tics, his habit of rubbing his hair and referring to the “east wind,” his refusal to ever be thanked—tics which give us a rapid sense of thoroughly knowing the man and his essential kindness, precisely through his telling, unconscious mannerisms. What all of this suggests is that, whether Dickens knew it or not, his tics imagine a model of personality that goes beyond the psychology of his day. They, in fact, foreshadow the stylistic idea that a person's deepest individuality is distributed into the unconscious, habituated details of their speech and behavior—the details that, for Dickens, will be lovingly read by their oldest friends.

Because *Pickwick* was the work in which Dickens began soliciting the reader to feel this kind of companionate intimacy towards his main characters, it is also the work in which he models this solicitation most explicitly within the text. A key component of this appeal, as we've seen, is the way that the narrative discourse positions the reader as a fond onlooker, watching with amused affection as the main characters unconsciously display their characteristic mannerisms. In *Pickwick*, this fond gaze is often written literally into Dickens's narration:

It was a pleasant thing to see Mr Pickwick in the centre of the group, now pulled this way, and then that, and first kissed on the chin and then on the nose, and then on the spectacles, and to hear the peals of laughter which were raised on every side; but it was a still more pleasant thing to see Mr Pickwick, blinded shortly afterwards with a silk-handkerchief, falling up against the wall and scrambling into corners, and going through all the mysteries of blindman's buff, with the utmost relish for the game, until at last he caught one of the poor relations; and then had to evade the blind-man himself, which he did with a nimbleness and agility that elicited the admiration and applause of all beholders. (377-8)

Here the discourse repeatedly enforces the reader's status as a quietly smiling observer, twice telling us what a "pleasant thing" it is "to see Mr Pickwick" at play among his friends; by the end of the passage, it is clear that we, too, stand among the admiring "beholders" who watch and applaud Pickwick from the sidelines—and who serve, of course, to model our own position of affectionate spectatorship, analogous to Snodgrass, Winkle, and Tupman in the Muggleton coach scene. The firm hand with which Dickens thus conscripts his reader into the position of an intimate onlooker is seen throughout the latter half of the novel: 20 pages later we read, "It was the most intensely interesting thing, to observe the manner in which Mr Pickwick performed his share in the ceremony," as well as that "it was the most invigorating sight that can possibly be imagined, to behold him gather up his hat, gloves, and handkerchief, with a glowing

countenance, and resume his station in the rank, with an ardour and enthusiasm which nothing could abate” (397-9). While Dickens’s discourse ensures that we train an appreciative eye on the elderly Pickwick’s zest for life and boylike spirit, Pickwick himself often serves, within the story, to model the process whereby the recognition of a character tic becomes a token of affection. For example, when Pickwick is announcing to Sam that he is releasing him from his service so that he may marry his sweetheart (with Sam’s father, Mr Weller, chiming in), we read:

‘So far from thinking that there is anything wrong in conduct so natural,’ resumed Mr Pickwick, ‘it is my wish to assist and promote your wishes in this respect. With this view I have had a little conversation with your father, and finding that he is of my opinion—’

‘The lady not bein’ a vidder,’ interposed Mr Weller in explanation.

‘The lady not being a widow,’ said Mr Pickwick, smiling. ‘I wish to free you from the restraint which your present position imposes upon you [...]’ (743)

Throughout the story, Mr. Weller’s adamant denunciations of the sexual wiles of widows, for whom he has an inveterate weakness, are a running joke. Here, in Pickwick’s amused reaction, he shows that he has recognized Mr. Weller’s catchphrase, and looks upon this tic with a fond knowingness—he is in on the joke. With this quiet, inward smile, Dickens shows us how we are to view the repetitive tics and speech tags of his caricatures: we seem to feel his presence in this moment, in the brief eye contact that Pickwick’s smile makes with the reader—the glance of shared recognition, the look that says “I see what you see, I share your amusement.” It is in such small winks and nudges that Dickens, as author, appears in his own texts.

4. Dickens as Narrator: From *Pickwick* to *Bleak House*

The narrator of *Pickwick* is both Dickens and not Dickens. Or rather: it is Dickens, but in character as the eighteenth-century ‘editor’ narrator. We know that this is Dickens acting the role because he tells us: in the advertisement for *Pickwick* that appeared in *The Athenaeum* in March of 1836, just prior to its first number, we find “EDITED BY ‘BOZ.’” in all caps below the title, and Dickens (who, it is safe to assume, himself composed the ad) goes on to elaborate on his editorial role:

The Pickwick Travels, the Pickwick Diary, the Pickwick Correspondence—in short, the whole of the Pickwick Papers, were carefully preserved, and duly registered by the secretary, from time to time, in the voluminous Transactions of the Pickwick Club. These transactions have been purchased from the patriotic secretary, at an immense expense, and placed in the hands of ‘Boz’, the author of ‘Sketches Illustrative of Every Day Life, and Every Day People’—a gentleman whom the publishers consider highly qualified for the task of arranging these important documents, and placing them before the public in an attractive form.⁷²

It is thus made manifest that the ‘editor’ who narrates *Pickwick* is Dickens himself, the same man who authored the successful *Sketches* that first introduced Dickens to the public. Moreover, it is clear from the fact that “Boz” appears always in quotation marks that this name is not meant to be interpreted as an independent character who is separable from Dickens (like, say, Pip or David Copperfield), but is merely an alias denoting the actual author. Like a rhetorical author, then, Dickens appears in the text in his own person, but playing a fictional role (that of ‘editor’), which means that he never acknowledges himself directly as the real author of the novel. Like a true actor, Dickens maintains this role with zealous commitment, making repeated references to the authority of the documents and papers that supposedly form the basis of his narration. As Dickens declares at the start of chapter 4, “We are merely endeavoring to discharge in an upright manner, the responsible duties of our editorial functions; and whatever ambition we

⁷² Advertisement from *The Athenaeum*, 26 March 1836. In *The Pickwick Papers*, *ibid.*, Appendix A, p. 755.

might have felt under other circumstances, to lay claim to the authorship of these adventures, a regard for truth forbids us to do more, than claim the merit of their judicious arrangement, and impartial narration” (58).

But, of course, as this deliciously deadpan statement makes clear, there is a twist to this performance: which is that Dickens will seize every opportunity to clearly telegraph to the reader that he is the author of the novel, without ever admitting it openly. The point of these hints, naturally, is not to clarify the real authorship of the text, for the reader is perfectly aware that Dickens is making this all up: the point is rather to acknowledge, with a wink, what everyone already knows, and to make a joke out of it. In this way, the referencing of his supposed “editorial functions” with as much ironic gravitas and mock-seriousness as possible becomes a game for Dickens, in which the more he insists that he is only the editor, the more we understand him to be winkingly confirming that he is the real author. The performance of his narration, in short, is eminently theatrical, in the sense that it actively seeks to highlight the gap between the actor and the role, the real author and the pretend part that he is electing to play: it plays up the dual reception that is definitive of theatricality, and—like a mugging, unserious actor—makes it a source of entertainment in its own right. If we are to ask where Dickens the real-world author actually resides in this performance, the answer is in the winks, in the mugging, in the tacit acknowledgement of the real identity that underlies his performance—including in the very exaggeration of that performance itself, the fulsome manner with which he plays up his “regard for truth” and commitment to the “responsible duties” of “impartial narration.” These winks to the reader become even bolder when Dickens hints at the fictiveness of the story-world that he is representing:

We will frankly acknowledge, that up to the period of our being first immersed in the voluminous papers of the Pickwick club, we had never heard of Eatanswill; we will with equal candour admit, that we have in vain searched for proof of the actual existence of such a place at the present day. (165)

Thus Mr Pickwick was led by the very warmth of his own good feelings to give his consent to a proceeding from which his better judgment would have recoiled—a more striking illustration of his amiable character could hardly have been conceived, even if the events recorded in these pages had been wholly imaginary. (202)

As can be seen from these quotes, Dickens takes great enjoyment from hinting, with a straight face, that his narrative is entirely made up. This evident relish in pulling back the curtain on the fiction, and showing the reader the backstage while the performance is still on, is a quality he shares with rhetorical authors like Trollope or Thackeray. But in Dickens's case, of course, there is never any direct admission: he reveals the fictiveness of his story only by saying that it is *not* fictive, in such a gratuitous and implausible manner that there is no doubting his actual meaning. In short, while Dickens, too, wishes to bond with his reader around a shared acknowledgement of the real situation of address, he substitutes theatricality for rhetoric. As I've been arguing in this chapter, this difference matters. And though the editorial roleplaying and broad hints of the fictiveness of his story are not continued past *Pickwick*, it is these theatrical games that establish the template for the performative, straight-faced narration of all of Dickens's novels.

But before we leave *Pickwick* behind, it is worth returning momentarily to that pivotal *Pickwick* character, Sam Weller: for Sam is, I would suggest, the diegetic figure for the curiously indirect and deadpan nature of Dickens's narration, which we see inaugurated in that novel. Of all Dickens's comic performers, Sam is the one who bears the most resemblance to a mugging actor—a character who even, at times, seems to break the diegetic frame to direct his remarks towards the audience. Indeed, one of the

peculiarities of Sam's speech is the frequency with which he makes 'asides' that seem not to be intended for the ears of any other character, but implicitly for the reader's alone:

'What had better be done, then?' asked Mr Pickwick.

'Nothing but taking him in the very fact of eloping, will convince the old lady, Sir,' replied Job.

'All them old cats *will* run their heads agin mile-stones,' observed Mr Weller in a parenthesis.

'But this taking him in the very act of elopement, would be a very difficult thing to accomplish, I fear,' said Mr Pickwick. (218)

'I don't like this plan,' said Mr Pickwick, after deep meditation. 'Why cannot I communicate with the young lady's friends?'

'Because they live one hundred miles from here, Sir,' responded Job Trotter.

'That's a clincher,' said Mr Weller, aside. (219)

Sam's 'asides' draw no reply or recognition from anyone else in the scene; he almost seems to be muttering these remarks to himself, except that this is not what Dickens says—rather, by calling them 'asides' Dickens specifically evokes the theatrical analogue of a character speaking, as it were, behind his hand to the audience, making comments that the other characters are, by dramatic convention, unable to hear. In this way, Sam is aligned with the apostrophizing or prologuing actor who delivers commentary to the audience—a type, as we've seen, that would come to be associated in later decades with the rhetorical author, as both declined in popularity.⁷³ In fact, the question of whether Sam is rhetorical—whether he offends against decorum by making overt appeals to the reader—was a central preoccupation of one reviewer, in his write-up of one of Dickens's 1860s public readings. Interestingly, this reviewer was convinced by Dickens's reading

⁷³ *Pickwick*, incidentally—pathbreaking in so many ways—can also be credited as the first Victorian novel to embrace the image of the "showman" as a figure for its authorial narrator (a decade before *Vanity Fair* made this fairground theatricality its trope for Thackeray's authorial presence in the text): in an announcement at the conclusion of *Pickwick*'s tenth number, dated December 1836, Dickens ends by referring to himself as "Mr Pickwick's Stage-Manager" and quotes the farewell address that "the late eminent Mr John Richardson [...] always said on behalf of himself and company, at the close of every performance." John Richardson was the most famous fairground booth showman of Dickens's time. See Paul Schlicke, "The Showman of *The Pickwick Papers*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 20 (1991): 1-15.

of the trial scene from *Pickwick* that Sam was not as offensive an actor as he had previously seemed on the page:

So Sam Weller, as Dickens thought of him, is not the slangy dried-up cockney, who jerks out his drolleries with a consciousness of their force, and gives a self-satisfied smirk when he sees how they sting, but rather a pleasant, smart young fellow, shrewd as he is quick of motion, ready with his flooring joke as he is amusing with his comical smile, but doing it all with a perfectly natural and almost artless air.⁷⁴

The question that animates this reviewer—of whether Sam displays a “consciousness” of his own comedic effects, or whether they are “natural” and “artless”—we can by now recognize as a problematic that was, in these years, becoming central to the debates around novelistic narration and the “intrusion” of the author into her text. But what is striking is that this question, this basic indeterminacy, seems to have been written into Sam’s character from the beginning. In truth, even the other characters in *Pickwick* are routinely unable to tell if Sam is consciously playing for laughs or is naïvely innocent of any comedic intent:

‘Do you recollect anything particular happening on the morning when you were first engaged by the defendant, eh, Mr Weller?’ said Sergeant Buzfuz.

‘Yes I do, Sir,’ replied Sam.

‘Have the goodness to tell the Jury what it was.’

‘I had a reg’lar new fit out o’ clothes that mornin’, gen’l’men of the jury,’ said Sam, ‘and that was a very very partickler and uncommon circumstance vith me in those days.’

Hereupon there was a general laugh; and the little Judge, looking with an angry countenance over his desk, said, ‘You had better be careful, Sir.’

‘So Mr Pickwick said at the time, my Lord,’ said Sam, ‘and I was very careful o’ that ‘ere suit o’ clothes; wery careful indeed, my Lord.’

The Judge looked sternly at Sam for full two minutes, but Sam’s features were so perfectly calm and serene that he said nothing, and motioned Sergeant Buzfuz to proceed. (464)

⁷⁴ Review from the *Chester Chronicle*, quoted in Andrews, *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves*, *ibid.*, p. 244-5.

It seems fairly clear that Sam's answers are crafted to mock the entire process of the court and its officials; but he cannot be caught out, as it were, because no matter how closely he is scrutinized, he reveals nothing of his real intent. His poker face is impregnable. As such, Sam is the diegetic analogue for Dickens's own straight-faced narration, the impossibility of pinning the novelistic discourse to any direct admission that would break Dickens's editorial 'character' or confirm the fictiveness of the story being narrated. The inclusion of Sam in the story serves to make plain that this deadpan theatrical act, this narratorial insistence on indirection, is itself, for Dickens, a game to be relished, and a kind of readerly appeal in its own right. Like Dickens, Sam is willing to pursue this game to extreme lengths: even when he's not joking, there is often an uncanny vacancy about Sam's gaze and expression, an indeterminacy of presence and absence, as when Pickwick awakens in his jail cell to find Sam staring eerily at their disconcerted cellmate, Mr. Smangle, as if in a kind of trance: "Sam, with a comprehensive gaze which took in Mr Smangle's cap, feet, head, face, legs, and whiskers, all at the same time, continued to look steadily on, with every demonstration of lively satisfaction, but with no more regard to Mr. Smangle's personal sentiments on the subject than he would have displayed had he been inspecting a wooden statue, or a straw-embowelled Guy Faux" (557). Both Dickens and Sam seem to make direct eye contact with their viewer, but without any acknowledgement that the viewer has been recognized—the gaze they offer is deadpan, there is no person behind it. We locate the person, not in this blank face, but in the small signals of comedic intention distributed throughout their speech and gestures: the trace of theatricality.

In the novels that would follow *Pickwick*, Dickens abandons the faux-editorial posture: but the mold for his straight-faced, performative narration had been set. In two of these early novels (*Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*), he briefly experiments with the rhetorical directness that was then coming into vogue; but what his novels overwhelmingly show, in the two decades after *Pickwick*, is an author settling into his peculiar alternative to novelistic rhetoric—a direct address to the reader, but in a deadpan character, and without any explicit acknowledgement of his own authorship. The typical Dickensian narratorial stance is, in fact, a kind of ‘lite’ version of *Pickwick*’s committed editorial satire. But instead of tracing that movement any further, what I’d like to do in the remainder of this chapter is leap ahead to the early 1850s: for it was here, at just the moment that the forceful rejection of rhetorical authorship was about to crest the horizon, that Dickens—in an apparently prescient registering of the shifting winds—published a novel remarkable for its explicit thematization of novelistic narration itself: a novel that, perhaps more than any other Victorian triple-decker, is *about* the variable affordances of the different modes of narration that were available during the period. I am talking, of course, about *Bleak House*.

Bleak House was serialized between March 1852 and September 1853. We know that as early as 1855, the novelist Harriet Martineau was writing in her journal that she now regretted the rhetorical posture taken in her 1838 novel *Deerbrook*, declaring that, if she could go back, she would give the storytelling a much more “objective” character, and that “the laborious portions of meditation, obtruded at intervals, are wholly objectionable in my eyes.”⁷⁵ Such striking reversals don’t emerge out of nowhere. And

⁷⁵ Martineau, *Autobiography*, ed. Maria Weston Chapman, vol. 1 (London, James R. Osgood & Co., 1877). Quoted in Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England*, *ibid.*, p. 93.

though I've been unable, in my research, to locate a documented instance of pushback against Victorian rhetoric that predates Martineau's private journal entry, we have to assume that she was not alone in having such thoughts, that there was a context to this change in her aesthetic views on the novel. This implicit context, I think, needs to be appreciated, for *Bleak House* to appear in its proper frame. It was in 1855, too, that Dickens as editor (a real editor, this time) wrote in reply to a novel submitted by a Miss King (as I have already quoted) that "The people do not sufficiently work out their own purposes in dialogue and dramatic action. You are too much their exponent; what you do for them, they ought to do for themselves." Evidently, Dickens was one of the early adopters of the anti-rhetorical line; and we know that in the 1860s his opposition to novelistic rhetoric would become increasingly explicit, as the larger campaign against rhetoric gained steam. We have to assume, then, that the choice to write a novel that offers a thought experiment in narration only 3 years before is no coincidence, but signifies some of Dickens's earliest thinking about the problems and possibilities of Victorian narration, at a time when the dominant form of novelistic narration was about to come under unprecedented pressure.

As we know, the principal mode of narration in the Victorian novel was authorial: the author herself tells the story. Indeed, when we consult the novel theory of the time, we find that across the entire span of the nineteenth century—from Anna Laetitia Barbauld's "Life of Samuel Richardson" (1804) to Walter Raleigh's *The English Novel* (1894)—the dominant form of narration was one in which, to quote Barbauld, "the author relates himself the whole adventure"; or, as Raleigh puts it, "The first and most usual way is that an author should tell the story directly. [...] At a slight sacrifice of dramatic

force, the events of the story are supplied with a chorus, and at any time that suits him the author can cast off his invisible cloak and show himself fingering the ‘helpless pieces of the game he plays’.”⁷⁶ This mode of authorial narration is always contrasted with what Barbauld calls the “memoir” mode—and which we would call a first-person, homodiegetic narration—in which one of the characters “relates his own story”; and beyond this was the less popular epistolary mode, which had its heyday in early novels like *Pamela* (note, too, Raleigh’s use of the theater analogy in referring to the rhetorical author as a “chorus,” the use of which entails a “sacrifice of dramatic force”: audience address is again contrasted with a properly dramatic representation). In *Bleak House*, then, it is as if Dickens sets out with the intent of taking the two most viable modes of narration then extant, the authorial and the memoir, and smashing them together to see what happens; the collision course feels deeply purposeful, like some experiment in particle physics. But this set-up, as we’ll see, is not exactly what it seems. The subjects of Dickens’s experiment, in truth, are not authorial and character-based narration, but a different pair of literary rivals: Victorian rhetoric and Dickensian theatricality.

As we all know, *Bleak House* has two narrators, one heterodiegetic and one homodiegetic: the first is the ‘Dickens’ author-figure, in his familiar theatrical mode, and

⁷⁶ Barbauld asserts that there are “three modes of carrying on a story”: the narrative or epic, which is the “most common way,” in which “the author relates himself the whole adventure”; the memoir, “where the subject of the adventures relates his own story”; and “that of *epistolary correspondence*, carried on between the characters of the novel.” Of the narrative mode, Barbauld writes that “[t]he author, like the muse, is supposed to know everything; he can reveal the secret springs of actions, and let us into events in his own time and manner. He can be concise, or diffuse, according as the different parts of his story require it. He can indulge, as Fielding has done, in digressions, and thus deliver sentiments and display knowledge which would not properly belong to any of the characters.” Anna Laetitia Barbauld, “Life of Samuel Richardson, with Remarks on his Writings,” in *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson, author of Pamela, Clarissa, and Sir Charles Grandison. Selected from the original manuscripts, bequeathed by him to his family, to which are prefixed, a biographical account of that author, and observations on his writings*, by Anna Letitia Barbauld, 6 Vols. (London: printed for Richard Phillips, no. 71, St. Paul’s Church-Yard, Lewis and Roden, Printers, Paternoster-Row, 1804), p. xxiii. Walter Raleigh, *The English Novel: Being a Short Sketch of its History from the Earliest Times to the Appearance of Waverley* (London: John Murry, 1894), p. 148.

the second is one of the novel's characters, Esther Summerson. But as we argued in our earlier discussion of Jameson, a character-based narrator, who serves to 'account for' the novelistic discourse itself within the story-world, provides a fundamentally different kind of justification for the fictional text than an authorial narrator, who positions that discourse as an act of communication that lies outside of the story-world, in the real world of authors and readers. These two kinds of narrators represent, in fact, two alternate explanatory structures for the fiction itself: alternate and, indeed, contradictory. This inherent contradiction would likely be too glaring to be tenable in the case of a rhetorical narrator (can anyone imagine Trollope's garrulous authorial persona, or even Eliot's for that matter, sharing the narration with one of their characters? It's almost unthinkable); but in Dickens's case, because he never directly acknowledges that he is the author and that the story is fictional, this sort of joint custody scheme is plausible enough to work—or, at the very least, it means that his narration does not explicitly undercut his co-narrator's claims to reality. Nonetheless, the basic contradiction between these two rationales for the existence of the text itself—one within the story-world, and one without—remains: the main consequence of which being, that it is quite impossible to come up with an overarching account of the narrative and how it was produced that is capable of incorporating both narrators. If Esther and the story-world are supposed to really exist, then it is impossible to imagine the position from which her co-narrator is writing—an entity that “may pass from the one scene to the other, as the crow flies,” flitting in an instant between places that are miles apart, in order to observe people, invisibly, within their private dwellings.⁷⁷ The two narrators simply belong to two

⁷⁷ *Bleak House*, ed. Nicola Bradbury (London & New York, Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 20. Cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

different orders of reality: there's no world in which they can both exist. This fact alone is highly interesting for our purposes—for, as we know, rhetoric and style posit two different kinds of novelistic reality: one that lies outside the story-world (*around* the fiction), and one within it. The transition from rhetoric to style, then, is not only a process in which the extradiegetic 'frame' of the story is effaced, and the author's presence is redistributed into the details of the text; it also signifies the migration of the reality inward, into the interior of the fiction. *Bleak House*, which forces us to keep one foot in each of these realities throughout its narrative, is a kind of halfway house for this process, and marks one of the beginning points of this transition.

Given the impossibility of these two narrators co-existing, it is probably prudent of Dickens that they never interact within the narrative: but there *are* rare moments of mutual acknowledgement, which are fascinating in their implications. The first line of Esther's narration is, "I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know I am not clever" (27). By explicitly referencing the scheme of shared narration ("my portion of these pages"), Esther confirms that she is aware of the other narrator (the only line in which she does so). Just how much does she know about her co-narrator? She never tells us, but some points can be inferred. She knows that there is another half to the book, but not, it seems, what is in it: for when she first describes Chesney Wold, she shows no awareness that we've seen this house before (many times, by now) in Dickens's chapters; similarly, when introducing the Bagnets late in the novel, she seems not to know that the reader is already familiar with who they are; and when mentioning the crossing sweeper Jo after his death, appears not to know his name, and refers to him only as "the boy"—even though Dickens, in his chapters, has consistently

called him by name (287, 798, 789, 792). So Esther is unable to read what Dickens has written, at least while she is composing her portion.

Fascinatingly, the knowledge that Dickens has of Esther is the reverse of this, in a precisely symmetrical way. Dickens's narration never acknowledges any other narrator, or other "pages" besides his own. At the same time, it seems he *is* aware of what Esther is writing, chapter by chapter: for at the end of chapter 6, Esther tells us that she went to bed, and at the start of chapter 7 Dickens begins, "While Esther sleeps, and while Esther wakes, it is still wet weather down at the place in Lincolnshire" (103). So Dickens, unlike Esther, is actually able to see his counterpart's pages as she composes them: when he takes over the narration, he is aware of what she has just written (obviously, Dickens is aware of what the previous chapter said because he himself wrote it—but what we are interested in, at the moment, is the logic of the narrative, and the unspoken rules that it posits for its own operation). But this suggestion that Dickens can read Esther's chapters 'in real time', as it were, opens up a host of issues: for the two narrators don't only represent two different explanatory frames, they also correspond to two very different temporalities. Dickens's chapters are written solely in present tense, while Esther's discourse alternates between the past tense (when she is recounting the story) and the present (when she is referring to her act of composition, or her current feelings at the time of writing). Both narrators exist in the 'present', but their two presents are not the same: Esther exists in a present scene of composition—the time that she is writing these pages and recounting the story, which is also the present of the novel's final chapter, in which, as she reports, "Full seven happy years I have been the mistress of Bleak House" (985). In this way, Esther is narrating from a fixed point: her present is the same throughout the

narrative. Dickens's present, on the other hand, is a mobile one: since all of his narration is in present tense, his present is whatever point in the story he is describing. He does not look back on the story events, as Esther does, but experiences them as they are unfolding, like the reader. But if this is true, then it is impossible to explain how Dickens, at the start of chapter 7, could know what Esther had written at the end of chapter 6—for the time that Dickens is narrating chapter 7 from, “while Esther sleeps and while Esther wakes,” is at least seven years and some months *before* Esther wrote that previous chapter. In fact, it is impossible to explain how Dickens is even writing at all, since there is no scene of composition in which his “portion of the pages” are being produced.⁷⁸ He is simply speaking to us, from within the moment that the events are happening, articulating an ever-repeated ‘now’: “Now, the moon is high; and the great house, needing habitation more than ever, is like a body without life. Now, it is even awful, stealing through it, to think of the live people who have slept in the solitary bed-rooms: to say nothing of the dead. Now is the time for shadow [...]” (641).

Scholars have been quick to note the exceptional mobility of Dickens's narrator in *Bleak House*, his ability to fly between disparate locales “as the crow flies”: but what is perhaps more remarkable is his extraordinary confinement, in diegetic terms. Though it seems that he is able to eavesdrop on Esther as she writes, in reality the Esther that he

⁷⁸ Actually, there *is* one way to explain it, advanced by Hillary Schor, which would also be the only scenario in which the two halves of the narration could exist in the same reality: if Esther was actually composing Dickens's narration, as well as her own. As Schor argues, “It seems to me entirely possible to read ‘his’ text as ‘her’ imaginings of those scenes from which she is absent [...] In fact, one could postulate that in writing the other narrative, Esther has achieved what she claimed she wanted in her own: a text in which her little body will, in fact, ‘fall into the background’.” This reading accords surprisingly well with my own understanding of Esther, will I’ll lay out in the pages that follow, as a figure for the self-effacing rhetorical narrator. By this logic, the rhetorical author’s (Esther’s) vocal presence is extinguished in the Dickens narration through the means of Dickensian theatricality—positing a kind of literary moral, in which Dickens’s theatrical narration becomes the solution to the problem of effacing rhetoric. Schor, *The Daughter of the House* (New York & Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004 [2000]), p. 117.

sees is not the Esther who is writing, but the Esther who is asleep, seven years before the time of her composition. Esther, as narrator, recognizes that she is engaged in writing a book, and that she is collaborating on that book with someone else: as a corollary of this, she recognizes that there is a reader, whom she addresses directly (and refers to, in one place, as “the unknown friend to whom I write”) (985). There are times when Esther’s voice takes on a kind of immediate presence, when we see her in the present act of composing these pages, in the moment: “I hope it is not self-indulgent to shed these tears as I think of it. [...] There! I have wiped them away now, and can go on again properly” (31). As such, she is able to move freely between the world of the story (the past events being represented) and the present, rhetorical situation of address—the world in which there is a reader in an armchair reading her discourse. But for Dickens, there is no present scene of composition, no rhetorical situation, no book, and no reader: he is unable to move between the diegetic world and the real world. He is trapped within the represented events of the story: trapped in Esther’s past tense, which is his present. This is confirmed by the Dickens narrator’s apostrophizing moments, which are exactly where we would expect him to show some awareness of the reader that he is rhetorically addressing—but instead of addressing the reader in these moments, Dickens’s apostrophes in *Bleak House* are, significantly, directed *inward*, towards the characters within the fiction: “Jo, is it thou? Well, well! Though a rejected witness, who ‘can’t exactly say’ what will be done to him in greater hands than men’s, thou art not quite in outer darkness” (181). To this peculiarity we might further add his odd habit of referring to Lady Dedlock throughout as “my Lady”; suggesting that Dickens’s place of residence is within his own character world, rather than in our world. The implicit theatrical frame of Dickens’s bracketed,

straight-faced narration—the positing of a narratorial ‘character’, who shows no recognition of the reader, no acknowledgement of the fiction—has become, in *Bleak House*, a kind of cage. It suddenly feels, for the first time in his work, as if he is unable to leave the brackets, unable to break the frame—unable to join us in the real world. He has become a kind of spectral figure in his own text, haunting his own story-world—endlessly walking the paths of these past events that we know to be long concluded (seven years ago!), just as he recursively returns, over and over again, to his favorite site in the novel: The Ghost’s Walk at Chesney Wold. “While Esther sleeps, and while Esther wakes, it is still wet weather down at the place in Lincolnshire. The rain is ever falling, drip, drip, drip, by day and night, upon the broad flagged terrace-pavement, The Ghost’s Walk” (103). But the ghost that haunts this world is the Dickensian author himself.

In this way, *Bleak House* shows us, more clearly than any other novel, that Dickens’s theatrical narration is a stage in the migration of the literary reality into the interior of the fiction: a stage in the development of rhetoric into style. It signals that the author’s address is in the process of becoming an attribute of the narrative text—just as Dickens’s presence as creative agency is legible, not in the deadpan personality that speaks to us, but in the tokens of self-awareness and knowing comic appeal that are distributed throughout his discourse. It is fitting, then, that the specific character tics displayed by *Bleak House*’s roster of caricatures often seem to consciously reflect on the premise of style itself—to point up the very notion that a person’s address could be sublimated into their unconscious habits and mannerisms. Take, for example, the modest law stationer Mr. Snagsby, who has the habit of communicating his intentions through a highly versatile and eloquent cough—“his deferential cough,” “his cough of general

propitiation,” “his confirmatory cough,” and even “a cough expressive of not exactly seeing his way out of this conversation” (161, 169, 508). Snagsby highlights the idea that an address, an act of communication, could be displaced into one’s involuntary tics: the very conceit on which the emergent idea of style was based. As such, there is something particularly self-aware about his defining mannerism, which feels of a piece with the novel’s thematic focus on narration and its dramatization of the author’s migration into the text. The same could be said, as well, of Mr. Jarndyce’s boyhood friend, the serial exaggerator Boythorn, who, as Jarndyce puts it, “is always in extremes; perpetually in the superlative degree”—a man for whom a passerby who gives bad directions is “the most intolerable scoundrel on the face of the earth,” and whose pet canary is “the most astonishing bird in Europe” (141, 143). Boythorn’s affably inflated pronouncements immediately endear him to Esther, Ada, and Richard:

We all conceived a prepossession in his favour; for there was a sterling quality in this laugh, and in his vigorous healthy voice, and in the roundness and fullness with which he uttered every word he spoke, and in the very fury of his superlatives, which seemed to go off like blank cannons and hurt nothing. [...] it seemed so plain that he had nothing to hide, but showed himself exactly as he was – incapable (as Richard said) of anything on a limited scale, and firing away with those blank great guns, because he carried no small arms whatever – that really I could not help looking at him with equal pleasure [...] (143)

Jarndyce has prepared the way for this favorable reception by providing an affectionate sketch of Boythorn’s eccentric character just before his arrival, laying emphasis on the singularity of the man’s personality and how long Jarndyce has known him (140-1). We have already discussed how the exaggerated nature of Dickens’s lovable caricatures is meant to simulate, in a short space of time, the fond knowingness of an old friendship: the more we recognize the character in their defining eccentricities, the more we seem to draw on a long knowledge of their personality. What is striking about Boythorn, then, is

that his defining tic is, in fact, the dramatization of this very process: it is an exaggeration that is linked to long years of friendship, and that prompts a kind of instant recognition and fondness in those he meets. His exaggerated quality *is* to exaggerate, is exaggeration itself, and this quality becomes indistinguishable from a kind of total transparency, an instant legibility and knowability: “it seemed so plain that he had nothing to hide, but showed himself exactly as he was.” Nor should it be overlooked that Dickens’s strategy of endearing his characters to the reader by their eccentricities bears some relationship to his own theatrical narratorial persona—a fact that *Bleak House* seems remarkably cognizant of, in the pronounced similarity between Boythorn’s dialogue and Dickens’s own comically exaggerated descriptions. In the chapter after Boythorn is introduced, for example, Dickens tells us of Snagsby’s servant, Guster, “The Law-stationer’s establishment is, in Guster’s eyes, a Temple of plenty and splendour. She believes the little drawing-room up-stairs, always kept, as one may say, with its hair in papers and its pinafore on, to be the most elegant apartment in Christendom”: a declaration that cannot help but recall the way that Boythorn has habitually spoken in the previous chapter of “the most astonishing bird in Europe,” “the most intolerable scoundrel on the face of the earth,” etc. etc. (157).

To Snagsby and Boythorn we could add a list of further caricatures who all serve somehow to point towards the idea of rhetoric becoming gesture, becoming style: the lawyer “Conversation” Kenge, for instance, who ostentatiously composes his words while he speaks (“We have been checked—brought up suddenly, I would say—upon the—shall I term it threshold?”); or Inspector Bucket, whose genial demeanor is merely a front for his true investigative persona, which is legible only in the actions of his

forefinger (“He is free with his money, affable in his manners, innocent in his conversation—but, though the placid stream of his life, there glides an under-current of forefinger”); or even the stiffly formal oratory of Guppy’s final proposal to Esther, which is tellingly accompanied (and analogized) by his mother’s incessant winking and mugging (“‘I have no capital myself, but my mother has a little property which takes the form of an annuity;’ here Mr Guppy’s mother rolled her head as if she never could sufficiently enjoy the observation, and put her handkerchief to her mouth, and again winked at me”) (974, 803, 968). Rather than go any further into this list, however, let me simply note that on top of all of this, *Bleak House* is a novel that is inordinately interested in representing characters who may be read by others, not in their direct discourse, but in their small tics: such scenes of reading abound in the text, from Bucket’s lightning-quick interpretation of Sir Leicester’s minute glances and mute facial signals (860), to Esther’s reading of Ada’s distress in the “fluttering” of her hands over the piano keys (927-8), to Ada’s confession apropos of Richard, “I watch him in his sleep. I know every change of his face” (928), to Esther’s declaration of gratitude, upon being surprised by Mr. Jarndyce with the second Bleak House, “I have seen this in your face a long while” (962)—to, finally, the second Bleak House itself, which, as an archive of all of Esther’s unconscious habits, collected and curated by Mr. Jarndyce, is also the physical representation of Jarndyce’s long affection for Esther, and thus expresses the same knowing fondness and amusement for her eccentricities as the many comic nicknames that he’s given her, from “Dame Durden,” to “little woman,” to “Cobweb”:

I saw, in the papering of the walls, in the colours of the furniture, in the arrangement of all the pretty objects, *my* little tastes and fancies, *my* little methods and inventions which they used to laugh at while they praised them, my odd ways everywhere. (963)

The second Bleak House is a monument to Esther's style, to her deepest individuality as it is distributed and legible in all of her small, "odd ways," her "little tastes" and "little methods." Since *Pickwick*, Dickens's characters have been represented and made knowable in their smallest mannerisms: but *Bleak House* is the novel where this process becomes conscious and reflects upon itself. Just as the novel represents Dickens's reflection on his own theatrical narration, so it is the novel where his characters' ties become a commentary on his own narrative processes, the forms of indirect performativity that have taken the place of a communicative directness.

It is with Esther, then, that we must conclude our discussion of *Bleak House*: a discussion that brings us back now to the novel's scheme of shared narration. For if Dickens has descended here into the interior depths of the fiction, such that he no longer has access to the extradiegetic world of the reader and, in fact, has become a kind of ghostly inmate or abstraction within the narrative text (no longer a real author of flesh and blood), then Esther is—as I've already suggested—the figure who takes Dickens's place, who is able to move freely between the world of the story and the world in which the story's words are being composed and read. In this sense, while Dickens's narration represents the endpoint of his own strategy of theatricality, which assumes a bracketed persona that only recognizes the reader indirectly, and thus is ultimately dispersed throughout the text as so many winks and nudges—a strategy that turns away from the rhetorical acknowledgement of the reader, away from the extradiegetic, and towards the interior details of the novelistic text—then Esther seems to invoke a very different type of authorial narrator, one who stands in stark contrast to all that Dickens represents. Unlike Dickens, Esther comes before the reader in her own person, without pretense or

pretending; she acknowledges directly that she is the author of the pages in hand, and meets the reader frankly on those grounds, promising above all to be candid in everything: even (and especially) when it goes against her own pride to do so: as she reminds us, near the novel's end, "I have suppressed none of my many weaknesses [...] but have written them as faithfully as my memory has recalled them" (935). It is Esther, then, who is properly the figure for authorial rhetoric, for the author who seeks above all to level with her reader. Indeed, what most confirms her deep involvement in the knot of associations and prejudices entangling the rhetorical author is, in fact, that defining, repetitive trait that could be called Esther's tic—namely, her extreme insistence on her own *self-effacement* as a narratorial presence in the text. This obsession with removing herself from the narration, her perpetual promise that she will "soon fall into the background now," is the keynote of Esther's character from her very first line, in which she apologizes for presuming to narrate at all, and is constantly reiterated throughout the novel (40):

I don't know how it is, I seem to be always writing about myself. I mean all the time to write about other people, and I try to think about myself as little as possible, and I am sure, when I find myself coming into the story again, I am really vexed and say, 'Dear, dear, you tiresome little creature, I wish you wouldn't!' but it is all of no use. (137)

The comically gratuitous nature of Esther's consternation at her ongoing failure to efface herself from her own storytelling feels unmistakably pointed, given the historical moment in which the novel was arriving. It would not be far wrong to think of Esther as a kind of parody of the attacks on rhetoric that were then brewing among critics and novelists: an authorial narrator so flustered by the imperative of self-effacement that she is perpetually announcing her exit from the text, only to fall back into self-recrimination and despair

when she finds that she is, in fact, still there. The satire is a gentle one, to be sure—as we would expect given that Dickens himself was an early proponent of authorial effacement—and Esther’s excessive humility is clearly calculated to endear her to her readers. But Esther serves nonetheless to preview the deadly earnest and vociferous demands for the invisibility of the storytelling subject that would, before the decade was up, have begun to transform the English novel. Her ceaseless attempts, as narrator, to fall into the background must be placed alongside her counterpart’s recession into the diegetic interior, as further evidence that the problematic of rhetoric and style had become a conscious preoccupation for the author of *Bleak House*.

With that said, we should not overlook the comic quality of Esther’s exaggerated wish to be unobtrusive—its status as a running joke—which turns out to be highly significant for our purposes. Indeed, the fact that Esther’s self-effacement *is* a gag is established immediately, and forms, in truth, our first introduction to her character: by the second paragraph of her narration, Esther’s way of tying herself in knots to avoid making any statement that could be regarded as self-praise is already a punchline:

I had always a rather noticing way – not a quick way, O no! – a silent way of noticing what passed before me, and thinking I should like to understand it better. I have not by any means a quick understanding. When I love a person very tenderly indeed, it seems to brighten. But even that may be my vanity. (28)

Esther cuts a rather pitiful figure in these first two paragraphs, which introduce her by way of her childhood image—a friendless young orphan, pathetically instructing her doll in her own unworthiness: “I used to say to my doll, when we were alone together, ‘Now, Dolly, I am not clever, you know very well, and you must be patient with me, like a dear!’” (27). She seems not to notice the comic aspect of her younger self warning an inanimate object to keep its expectations low, and likewise fails to see anything ironic in

such an abjectly humble individual expressing concern about her “vanity.” The humorous obliviousness occasioned by her chronic underestimation of herself, and overestimation of everyone around her, continues in the paragraph that follows, when Esther introduces the cruel aunt who raised her:

I was brought up, from my earliest remembrance – like some of the princesses in the fairy stories, only I was not charming – by my godmother. At least I only knew her as such. She was a good, good woman! She went to church three times every Sunday, and to morning prayers on Wednesdays and Fridays, and to lectures whenever there were lectures; and never missed. She was handsome; and if she had ever smiled, would have been (I used to think) like an angel – but she never smiled. She was always grave, and strict. She was so very good herself, I thought, that the badness of other people made her frown all her life. (28)

The joke here, of course, is rooted in dramatic irony: Esther, intending to paint a portrait of her aunt’s supposed virtue, unwittingly makes plain her actual meanness. Not only it is dramatic, it’s also theatrical, in that it posits two levels of reception: the text, in which Esther depicts her aunt’s unsmiling strictness to show us how good she was; and the subtext, in which we understand both that the aunt is actually a horrible person, and that Esther doesn’t realize that she is. In other words, the joke is one that can’t be attributed to Esther, because she is comically oblivious to that second level of reception: the gag works because she is unaware of the true import of her words. Rather, the joke can only be referred to a level of agency that transcends Esther’s character—that is, to Dickens himself, as the real author of the text, and the intentionality that stands behind her narration.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Such moments recur throughout the novel, whenever Esther, in her innocence, makes a remark in which Dickens’s meaning exceeds her own: for example, when, in trying to be fair to Mr. Skimpole, she ends up making all too plain how calculating he really is (“I should be sorry to imply that Mr Skimpole divined this, and was politic”); or when, in wondering aloud whether Richard’s education—consisting largely in composing Latin verses—was of any benefit to him in later life, her words make a clear polemical point that seems to go beyond her own intention in writing them (“I wondered whether the Latin Verses often ended in this, or whether Richard’s was a solitary case”) (239, 198).

The key point here, then, is that the very moments in which we find the recurring joke of Esther's self-effacement are also the moments in which we read Dickens as author winking at us through the text. Esther's handwringing over her own supposed "vanity"—the way she scolds herself for failing to recede out of view, while doing everything possible to prop up and foreground the other characters over herself—is, in truth, a straight-faced Dickensian performance, which nudges us to recognize its own theatricality, to see the performer behind the character. The Dickensian heroine that Esther exemplifies is, of course, a character type: and one of her established rules, laid down in the laws of Dickens, is that she cannot know how good, and pretty, and well-loved she is, for if she was conscious of these things it would ruin her appeal. We are asked to smile fondly upon these heroines, because we can see all the virtues and charms in them that they are, in their simplicity, unable to see in themselves. In this way, Dickens's women (the good ones, at least) always involve an equation in which the reader understands more than they do. But by elevating his heroine in *Bleak House* to the role of narrator—a move that he makes nowhere else in his published work—Dickens builds this knowledge differential into the narrative discourse itself, creating a situation of theatricality that points to himself as the creator of the fiction: and also, necessarily, and by extension, to the theatrical operation of his own narratorial persona.

Esther brings together many of the separate strands that I've discussed in this chapter, and shows their mutual interconnection: in her, we see the self-effacement of the author as, and at once, the stylistic winks and nods that scatter the author's persona through the compositional details of the text; and we see this authorial indirection and decentering as part and parcel with the amusing tics of fondly regarded Dickensian

caricatures, which themselves gesture back to the foundational theatricality of the novelistic discourse. In Esther's narration, these different pieces seem to recognize each other, and fall into conscious alignment. But as the above remarks indicate, Esther also points us to an area that we haven't considered thus far in this project, but which seems a useful opening for future work: namely, the implicit *gendering* of the self-effacing, unobtrusive author of style. For if the garrulous, pontificating rhetorical author is, as D. A. Miller has pointed out, an inescapably male personality, always putting one in mind of "a learned magistrate, say, or a gossip clubman," then Dickens's choice of Esther to parody the discrete, withdrawing author makes plain that this figure's tasteful invisibility is just as irreducibly female: a figure contiguous with the helpmate always in the background, the wife-servant who knows her place and, most of all, knows how to hold her tongue.⁸⁰ For, indeed, as we have seen, the question constantly asked of this author—whether she is *conscious* of the appeals she is making, whether she is *knowingly* and *calculatedly* seeking to call forth our emotional response—a question overloaded with truly excessive stakes, as deciding the difference between one artless and charming, and one "intrusive" and "tasteless," is also the very question by which women characters in fiction, from the realist novel to melodrama, were judged in the nineteenth century: and certainly not least in the novels of Dickens. The charge of theatricality, then, was a threat uniquely central and constitutive of Victorian femininity; for, like a proper dramatist, the highest ideal of such a woman's composing labor was to be always *behind the scenes*. In this way, too, *Bleak House* is an unusually lucid document for excavating the living

⁸⁰ "Far from enacting a fantasy of divine authority, the noisy personalities of Fielding and Thackeray relentlessly humanize that authority, never let us forget its earthly origins as a glamorization of some garden-variety male know-it-all." D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 31.

associations that swirled around the retreat of that paperbound persona, the rhetorical author.

Chapter 2

Gaskell's Melodramatic Style: Narrative Compression and Tableau in *North and South*

1. The Gaskell Theater

The previous chapter took pains to establish that Charles Dickens was exceptional among the Victorian novelists of his day—that his abstinence from novelistic rhetoric made him fundamentally different from peers like George Eliot, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, and Elizabeth Gaskell. This difference, I argued, separated him from the rhetorical authors of his period, and aligned him, surprisingly, with the stylists of the 1880s and '90s: in this way, Dickens marks one of the earliest inflection points in the half-century-long transition from a dispensation of rhetoric to one of style. In this chapter, we turn our attention to the rhetorical author herself. If, as I am proposing, we need to think of our modern notions of style as continuous with Victorian rhetoric, rather than representing a clean break, then there must be evidence of this transition to be found in the mainstream of rhetorical authorship, and not merely in idiosyncratic figures like Dickens.

To this end, I've chosen to focus this chapter around the work of Elizabeth Gaskell. Gaskell is not, perhaps, an immediately obvious choice to represent the rhetorical author; though parts of her work—notably her early and widely read novel *Mary Barton* (1848), as well as, to a slightly lesser extent, her follow-up works, *Cranford* (1851-3) and *Ruth* (1853)—are fully in line with the dominant storytelling trends of her day, and make routine use of rhetoric, she is not as instantly identified with a garrulous,

chatty narration as Trollope or even Eliot. But from another point of view this is, in fact, one of the features of Gaskell's career that makes her so revealing to consider: for most of Gaskell's novelistic output is clustered around the late 1840s and early 1850s, right at the hinge-point at which opinions on novelistic rhetoric began to shift, and, as a result, her work is unusually reflective of this turn. By the time we get to *North and South* (1854-5), which will be the focus of the current chapter, Gaskell has dropped the rhetorical posture entirely—and it is here, I'll argue, that we can begin to see how her former rhetorical stance is being sublimated into a new kind of textual relationship with her reader. Furthermore, while authors like Eliot and Trollope continued to write well into the 1870s and even '80s, Gaskell's career ended with her death in 1865 (leaving her final novel, *Wives and Daughters*, unfinished); for this reason, she is a less likely candidate than either of these two to display gestures of stylism in her composition, as her career did not extend to the period of style's mass popularization (which did not begin in earnest until at least the 1870s). What Gaskell offers us, then, is a chance to see how the proto-modern paradigm of style could be detected, *in utero*, even in the work of a mid-century rhetorical author who had, by the end of her career, largely abandoned rhetoric but did not live long enough to see what would succeed it. Her work bore the forerunning traces of the style model that was to come, even if she did not know it. It is in this way that we can best see the real continuity of the rhetorical and stylistic modes.

Moreover, we will find—as we found of Dickens—that the ways in which *North and South* is already moving perceptibly toward a late-century model of style have much to do with theatricality. As I argued in Chapter 1, the theater emerged, in the 1850s, as perhaps the key interlocuter for a mid-century Victorian novel that was increasingly self-

aware about its own modes of storytelling—and a novel criticism that came to see theatricality as the primary prism through which to understand the novelist’s relation to her audience. In our discussion of Dickens, we noted that theater provided the central metaphor for both the rhetorical author—associated with the “showman” of a nondramatic fairground theatricality—and its opposite, the author who discretely withdraws from view, associated with the properly “dramatic presentation” of the new naturalistic drama. In this chapter, we will go further in attempting to account for why and how the theater, in particular, played this role. In part, this involves recognizing in theater a technology for brokering a shift from storytelling presence to stylistic dispersal: one in which the storytelling agency has already been distributed, as it were, into a cast of performers—and thus into the structured enactment of the narrative representation itself. For an English novelist in the 1850s and ‘60s, looking for a way to efface her own vocal narratorial presence from the text, while still preserving the legible order and readerly transparency that this chatty presence had enabled, the dispersed storytelling of an embodied, theatrical performance would have been an obvious model to emulate. In performance, the kind of overt cues to readerly understanding that the rhetorical author would tend to communicate through direct address had instead to be conveyed indirectly, through the in-scene dialogue of the characters, the incidental effects of the dramatic staging, and the meaningful arrangement of the narrative events themselves: the timely entrance of a particular character whom the others onstage have just been discussing, or the musical nudge we receive when the villain knocks on the door. Today, of course, we would condemn such unsubtle signals to the audience, made through the construction of the performed story itself, as ‘stagey’, overly theatrical: but this sort of dramatic toolkit,

in truth, exemplifies a rhetoric of performance that is irreducibly present in all plays, to a greater or lesser degree—and which would likely have appeared, to a mid-century novelist, as a quieter means to communicate the intentionality of the unfolding narrative to one's audience, in comparison with the prevailing novelistic mode of a garrulous, divulging narration. As such, while the will to disappear the rhetorical author into a story that 'tells itself' was, for the modernists, utterly contiguous with their rejection of the clunky devices of a nineteenth-century theatricality, I argue that these theatrical devices were, in fact, central to Victorian novelists' efforts to move away from a centered rhetorical speaker towards a dispersed authorial agency that has been sublimated into the construction of the narrative.

In the case of Gaskell, we'll be concerned with one particular theatrical mode, which falls neither into a nondramatic "showman" model, nor into the naturalism of the new drama: namely, *melodrama*. Melodrama is particularly relevant for our purposes, for at least a couple of reasons. First, and most obviously, melodrama was unquestionably the dominant genre of the Victorian stage, one which eclipsed all others in the nineteenth century for its delirious popularity and outsize hold over the public imagination, the enduring afterlife of which is still very much with us today. To speak of melodrama is to go directly to the heart of the Victorian theater's traffic with the novel: and any argument about aesthetic exchanges between the former and the latter must be able to be made on this ground, if on any. But secondly, and even more to the point, melodrama has long represented the most dialed-up and ostentatious version of the kind of audience-leading, 'rhetorical' theatricality that we have been discussing: the stagiest, the clunkiest, the most theatrical theatricality. In this way, it would have been not only the most blazingly visible

and available model for novelists of the time, but also the most conducive for exactly those aspects of theatrical storytelling that they were keen to emulate. Further, the rhetorically insistent legibility of melodrama's narrative devices is deeply connected to the extreme emotional demands that it makes of its audience: its stagey obviousness is part and parcel of its well-earned reputation as the most intensely soliciting of all theatrical genres. To an author like Gaskell, who engaged extensively with melodramatic conventions throughout her writing career, it would have appeared as a genre uniquely well-suited to a post-rhetorical moment: at once transparent in its storytelling devices and maximal in its appeals to the viewer—and all without any centralized authorial presence.

This chapter, then, will demonstrate that melodrama's well-documented influence on novelistic storytelling in the period—its famous ability to overflow the bounds of mere theatrical 'genre', becoming a multimedia narrative 'mode' that extended first to the novel before going on to conquer early cinema, Hollywood, and later, television—is, in fact, part of the story of how rhetoric was repurposed into style. Melodrama's role in this story has much to do with its well-known affinity for spectacle, and for the kind of static image—inviting audience contemplation—that was exemplified by its key formal feature, the tableau. For this reason, melodrama was more closely associated with the visual arts than any other dramatic genre, and was very much implicated—as theater scholars have recognized—in the debates among art critics around the use of rhetorical solicitation and direct appeals to the viewer in painting (which we noted in the last chapter comprised a set of discussions that paralleled the debates around the role of rhetorical appeals in the novel). But it will also be a goal of this chapter to broaden our very understanding of the formal signatures by which we recognize the melodramatic mode in narrative: in short, to

look beyond the much-discussed link between melodrama and the static picture, to foreground a less recognized aspect of melodramatic form that turns out to be highly relevant for our purposes—namely, its *speed*, its narrative compression. For, despite the notorious inconsistency of melodrama’s many definitions and characterizations, virtually every account agrees that rapid pacing is a defining feature of the genre; indeed, the theater scholar Jeffrey Cox refers to melodrama as “built for speed,” terming it “the breathless style,” and Michael Booth, one of the earliest literary critics to write seriously on melodrama, placed “concentration of plot” and “emphasis on [...] rapid action” at the top of his list of its distinctive qualities.⁸¹ Nonetheless, while everyone agrees that speed is essential to melodramatic form, there have been surprisingly few accounts of melodrama’s influence on the novel that have thought at all about the issue of pacing.

In this chapter, I aim to place narrative compression at the center of a discussion of melodrama’s formal effects, alongside the tableau. This is no arbitrary pairing: for, as I’ll argue, the seeming opposites of breathless action and static picture are in fact two sides to the same formal coin, two different ways of reading the same narrative phenomena. Throughout this chapter I will argue that it is these narrative phenomena—which may be read either as the accelerations of a compressed plot or as the drive to visual enactment, to realize in pictorial form—that reveal melodrama as the most heightened version of an assertively ‘rhetorical’ theatricality. If these are the very narrative features that Gaskell incorporates into *North and South*, then, it is because these particular forms also exemplify what novelists saw the theater offering them in a moment

⁸¹ Jeffrey N. Cox, “The Death of Tragedy; or, The Birth of Melodrama,” in *The Performing Century: Nineteenth-Century Theatre’s History*, eds. Tracy C. Davis and Peter Holland (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 171-6; Michael Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: H. Jenkins, 1965), pp. 13-4.

of transition from vocal presence to dispersed agency: namely, a set of strategies whereby they might simulate rhetoric without rhetoric.

In the section that follows, I'll begin with Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton*, to trace the movement from her early embrace of rhetorical authorship (in the late 1840s) towards the effaced narration of *North and South* by the mid-1850s. In the process, I'll also consider longstanding critical narratives around *Mary Barton*'s melodramatic content and discuss how my analysis of *North and South*'s melodramatic form revises our conventional understandings of Gaskell's engagement with melodrama in her industrial novels. The key difference between these two novels, I'll argue, is not the disappearance of melodrama, which is alive and well in *North and South*, but rather the disappearance of authorial rhetoric—a disappearance that is, in fact, crucially enabled by melodramatic narrative devices. The third section will then take a close look at *North and South*, identifying a specific form of narrative compression visible in its handling of sudden plot developments, such as unexpected entrances and deaths, which I'll argue is imported from stage melodrama: a form whereby a narrative possibility raised hypothetically in the discourse of the characters is immediately actualized within the plot itself. Ultimately, I'll argue that a form of compression that in stage melodrama speaks to the unique pressure that the offstage space—the space from which all last-second rescues and returns of the repressed emerge—exerts on the events onstage, is repurposed in Gaskell's appropriation of the device to highlight something rather different: namely, the pressure that the rhetorical space, the space of extradiegetic communication with the reader, might exert invisibly as a structuring force upon diegetic events themselves. In my fourth and final section, I'll then turn to the tableau, long recognized as the key melodramatic form,

reading in its hyper-expressionist aesthetic the formal analogue of the genre-typical melodramatic plot: its obsession with the legibility of virtue and vice, its resolution hinged upon the total externalizing of all that is interior in its characters. In the hands of post-rhetorical novelists, I'll suggest, the tableau became a way to reflect upon the legibility of authorial presence within the text's discourse: a stage technology useful precisely for its unique sublimation of direct, affective audience solicitation into a *composition*, a composed picture that must be interpreted, and in which the presence of the characters themselves has become strangely recessed, indirect, and absent from the stage. In short, the tableau embodies a dynamic of rhetoric as style, audience address as telling composition, making it an ideal transitional form for novelists thinking through the aesthetic shifts then underway in the Victorian novel. In the end, uncovering the melodramatic form of *North and South* allows us to trace where rhetoric goes when it disappears from the narration, how it is sublimated into the technical construction of the text. In this way, the importation of melodramatic form by novelists of the 1850s and '60s must be read, surprisingly, as a *modernizing* move—one of the key mediators between rhetorical address and stylistic composition in the nineteenth-century novel.

2. After Rhetoric: From *Mary Barton* to *North and South*

If we were to ask where Elizabeth Gaskell is in *Mary Barton*, the answer would be: everywhere. From the first chapter on, Gaskell is continually present in her own narration; indeed, she seems to go out of her way to insert self-references into statements where they aren't required, to offer a kind of running commentary on her own storytelling: to take the second page of the novel alone, we are perpetually being met with

phrases like “you would not wonder, if you could see, or I could properly describe, the charm of one particular stile”; “belonging to one of those old-world, gabled, black and white houses I named above”; “the stile of which I spoke”; “I do not know whether it was on a holiday,” and so on and on.⁸² In none of these sentences is it strictly necessary to include the authorial “I”—one could simply describe the stile, without observing oneself in the act of describing it—but the avidity with which Gaskell writes herself into the narration in this, her first novel, is entirely representative of the storytelling mores of the 1830s and ‘40s, in which it was assumed that the author had to appear before the reader as a talkative, jocular presence, chatting the reader up and setting her at her ease. The continual “I” and “you” speak to a novelistic aesthetic in which the act of communicating with the reader, the address itself, is prioritized and foregrounded above everything else; what’s more, the nostalgic orality of this address is made explicit in the conceit that Gaskell is “speaking,” rather than writing: “But I am speaking of the events which have occurred only lately, while I have yet many things to tell you that happened six or seven years ago” (465). Throughout the whole of the novel, this chatty storyteller is always on hand, forever ready to remind us of what we’ve been told (“as I said”), confess the limits of her knowledge (“I cannot tell”), confide her emotional reactions (“I am afraid”), and prompt the reader’s reflection (“it is for you to judge”)—and all this within the space of a single page (57).

But in truth, Gaskell’s presence in the text begins even before the first chapter, in the preface that she wrote for the original two-volume edition. Here she sketches her reasons for choosing to, as she puts it in the opening sentence, “employ myself in writing

⁸² Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, ed. Jennifer Foster (Peterborough, Ontario and Orchard Park, NY: Broadview, 2000), p. 34. Cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

a work of fiction,” proceeding to describe her “deep sympathy with the care-worn men” of Manchester (the town where she had settled with her husband, the Unitarian minister William Gaskell) as the impetus for setting herself to write a politically engaged, industrial novel: a novel intended to, in Gaskell’s words, “give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people” (29, 30). If there was any doubt that the voice of this authorial preface is intended to be continuous with the narrating voice that immediately follows in Chapter 1, it is laid to rest by the unmistakable way that the preface’s concerns return, and are the subject of explicit reflection, throughout the narrative—as in this apologetic parenthesis that she pleads to the reader just after a sustained attempt to ventriloquize the inarticulate class resentment of her central working-class character, John Barton:

I know that this is not really the case; and I know what is the truth in such matters: but what I wish to impress is what the workman feels and thinks. True, that with child-like improvidence, good times will often dissipate his grumbling, and make him forget all prudence and foresight.

But there are earnest men among these people, men who have endured wrongs without complaining [...] (55)

No curtain is drawn between the speaker of the preface, who earnestly explains her aims in writing the present “work of fiction” (“to give some utterance to [...] this dumb people”), and the narratorial speaker that commentates on her ongoing attempts to pursue these aims in the very act of narrating (“what I wish to impress is what the workman feels and thinks”). This discursive continuity between text and paratext is eminently typical of rhetorical narration, which in fact represents, we might say, a kind of *paratextual* stance to the fiction within the novel itself: a posture of talking *about* the novel even as one is engaged in telling it. Nonetheless, the Gaskell of the preface and the Gaskell of the novel’s narration (both anonymous, it should be noted) do not, of course, bear *precisely*

the same relationship to the actually existing person, Elizabeth Gaskell: as is always the case, the novelistic narrator, as a kind of emissary between the real world that the reader inhabits and the fictional world of the novel's characters, is herself, in part, a construct of the fiction. For example, during the trial scene, Gaskell tells us that "I was not there myself; but one who was, told me that her look, and indeed her whole face, was [...] like the well-known engraving from Guido's picture of 'Beatrice Cenci'" (404). Because the rhetorical author always occupies the impossible, liminal position of being, simultaneously, an author writing from a place in the real world and a familiar of the fictional world that she inducts us into, such moments of fictionalized contact with diegetic characters, or fictional 'memories' of diegetic scenes or places, are bound to occur—marking the fact that the rhetorical author, though she may come before us as the candid, confiding novelist, has always one foot in fiction. With that said, what defines rhetorical narration as a literary tactic is its positing of a supposedly real-world author as the open and honest narrator of the story—even if her much-flaunted honesty is itself a formal effect. Of this rhetorical strategy, *Mary Barton* is entirely representative.

As is evident in the above quote, Gaskell was quick to qualify the working-class views that she was endeavoring to articulate ("I know that this is not really the case"); nonetheless, *Mary Barton* was met with outrage upon its publication and condemned by manufacturers (some of whom attended Gaskell's husband's congregation) as a hostile and one-sided account of industrial relations. Gaskell, who had (as we've noted) published the novel anonymously, and thus was able to escape being personally attacked for what she had written, was dismayed by the charges of bias, but did not back down from controversy in her subsequent novels—in *Ruth*, notably, she would choose a "fallen

woman” for her sympathetic protagonist. Meanwhile, *Mary Barton* had also attracted positive reviews and a wide readership, and its success drew the notice of novelists and editors in London: among them, Charles Dickens. The year after its publication, Gaskell visited London, where she met Dickens, along with Thomas Carlyle and John Forster. In 1850, when Dickens launched his new journal, *Household Words*, he invited Gaskell to contribute in terms of the strongest praise, writing that “there is no living English writer whose aid I would desire to enlist, in preference to the author of *Mary Barton* (a book that profoundly affected and impressed me).”⁸³

Gaskell’s first contributions to *Household Words* were short works, including the story “Lizzie Leigh” and the rural sketches that would be gathered into *Cranford*. *Ruth*, like *Mary Barton*, was first published in volume form, and it was not until *North and South*, in 1854, that Gaskell would serially publish a full-length novel under Dickens’s editorship. It was, in fact, Gaskell’s first serialized novel. The process of serial writing proved to be a great strain to her, and its publication was marked by bitter conflict, bringing her working relationship with Dickens to the point of breakdown. Dickens thought the novel “wearisome,” and entirely too protracted; he clashed routinely with Gaskell over her unwillingness to revise and shorten her submissions.⁸⁴ For Gaskell’s part, she had great difficulty tailoring her writing to the pace of weekly deadlines; as the novel overran its space in the magazine, William Gaskell appealed to Dickens to expand the columns allotted to each installment from twelve to sixteen—ultimately, the

⁸³ Quoted in Sally Ledger, “‘Mere dull melodrama’? Popular Aesthetics in *Mary Barton* and *Hard Times*,” on The Royal Holloway Victorian MA Blog, <<https://rhulvictorian.wordpress.com/mere-dull-melodrama-mary-barton-and-hard-times-by-sally-ledger/>>, Accessed 1/12/2017.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1993), p. 361.

installments would themselves be extended from twenty to twenty-two.⁸⁵ When it was all over, Gaskell's greatest regret was the hurried pace imposed on the end of the novel, which she had specifically intended to be gradual; on this issue of pacing, she felt, the effect of the novel as a whole depended. As such, she made sure, before the novel was printed in volume form, that the events of the conclusion were lengthened and slowed down. Indeed, it was this anxiety about narrative speed and concentrated plotting that Gaskell would choose to foreground in her preface to *North and South*, which is only one paragraph long:

On its first appearance in "Household Words," this tale was obliged to conform to the conditions imposed by the requirements of a weekly publication, and likewise to confine itself within certain advertised limits, in order that faith might be kept with the public. Although these conditions were made as light as they well could be, the author found it impossible to develop the story in the manner originally intended, and, more especially, was compelled to hurry on events with improbable rapidity toward the close. In some degree to remedy this obvious defect, various short passages have been inserted, and several new chapters added.⁸⁶

Unlike the earnest, confiding preface of *Mary Barton*, this preface refuses the authorial "I": Gaskell refers to herself in the third person as "the author"—a choice that foreshadows her absence from the narration of the novel itself, which includes no self-references or metafictional commentary, remaining entirely rooted in a close, over-the-shoulder third-person account of its middle-class heroine, Margaret Hale. But the displacement of Gaskell herself as a rhetorical speaker is not the only continuity between text and paratext here: for, fascinatingly, the preface's worry about a narrative that is forced to move too quickly ("compelled to hurry on events with improbable rapidity") turns out to be reproduced within the novel itself. At both a thematic and a formal level,

⁸⁵ Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, *ibid.*, pp. 361-2.

⁸⁶ Gaskell, *North and South*, ed. Angus Easson (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 3. Cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

North and South is a novel obsessed with the threat of rapidly unfolding events—the bewilderment and inability to cope that can result from an accelerated pace of change. If *Mary Barton* takes its preface’s asserted aim of representing working-class voices in fiction and makes it the subject of explicit rhetorical commentary within its narration, *North and South* takes the harried pace of its own composition and publication—worried over in its preface—and integrates it, self-reflexively, into the novel’s narrative form. What was previously rhetoric has become something closer to style, to a composed text that gestures back, in its telling details, to its own prior scene of composition.

It is only fitting, then, that *North and South* also represents Gaskell’s first return, since the controversy of *Mary Barton*, to the genre of the industrial novel: and that the threat of speed within its plot is distinctly connected to the thematics of urban and industrial modernity that it sets out to explore—a topic not, of course, unrelated to the mass distribution of serial publication, or the highly time-regimented working schedule that this system imposes on writers (much like the factory system itself). Nor, as we will see, is it unrelated to the breathless pacing of melodrama, that quintessentially modern mass-theatrical mode. There has long been a critical consensus that *Mary Barton* is melodramatic: its plot is overtly marked by the kind of sensational murders, seductions, dramatic trials, and last-minute rescues by surprise witnesses that comprise the most obvious imports from stage melodrama.⁸⁷ But, until very recently, there has been no scholarly acknowledgement that *North and South*, too, borrows liberally from

⁸⁷ See, for example, Sally Ledger, “‘Mere dull melodrama?’,” *ibid.*; and Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832-1867* (Chicago and London: U. of Chicago Press, 1985), esp. pp. 70-75; more recently, see Thomas Recchio, “Melodrama and the Production of Affective Knowledge in *Mary Barton*,” *Studies in the Novel* 43.3 (Fall 2011): 289-305; and Robert Burroughs, “The Nautical Melodrama of *Mary Barton*,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 44.1 (March 2016): 77-95.

melodramatic tropes: albeit ones that are more difficult for a modern reader to identify.⁸⁸ The reason this recognition has taken so long is in part, then, because stage melodrama itself has only recently attracted the kind of sustained, patient critical attention necessary to detect *North and South*'s more subtle engagement with the genre; but it is also because of the critical narrative that has been told about Gaskell's two industrial novels since the late 1960s, which has tended to contrast *North and South* favorably with *Mary Barton*, as a less melodramatic, more nuanced and complex, kind of novel.⁸⁹ As this narrative would have it (not without some merit), Gaskell was mindful of the critics of *Mary Barton* when writing *North and South*, and keen to ensure that this new industrial tale would not be taken as merely sensational and one-sided: as such, she strove for a more evenhanded depiction, which ultimately produced a more measured and self-aware novel. This assessment was confirmed, in negative, by Marxist critics like Raymond Williams, who viewed *North and South* as a retreat from the stark class extremities of its predecessor, into a disappointingly domesticated, courtship-focused kind of plot. The narrative, in both cases, was of *North and South*'s abandonment of the fervent political sentiment and heightened, melodramatic polarities so evident in *Mary Barton*.

What I want to argue, however, is that *North and South* is not actually a 'less' melodramatic book: rather, the site of melodrama has migrated, from the explicit narrative events to the narrative *form*—and that where we locate melodrama in the novel

⁸⁸ I am thinking here of John Kucich, "Political Melodrama Meets Domestic Fiction: The Politics of Genre in *North and South*," *Novel* 52.1 (May 2019): 1-22. I'll be engaging with Kucich's reading at more length in the fourth section of this chapter.

⁸⁹ For example, see the opening paragraph of Sally Shuttleworth's Introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of *North and South* (the edition cited here), in which she observes that while "[e]arly critics of the novel, looking for a straightforward focus on industrial issues, tended to prefer Gaskell's first work, *Mary Barton* [...] [m]ore recent criticism, however, has highlighted the greater complexity of *North and South* [...] [which] explores questions of industrial unrest, but in a wider social and cultural framework than that employed in *Mary Barton*" (ix).

is no longer in its depictions of murder and seduction but in, precisely, the temporal patterns of its narrative pacing, its evocation of space, and the compositional details of the text. What *North and South* represents is an experiment in melodramatic narrative conducted by Gaskell in the wake of the furor over *Mary Barton*, which coincided—and productively cross-pollinated with—her move away from novelistic rhetoric. Indeed, it was her translation of melodrama from represented diegetic events to the form of representation itself that showed Gaskell how the depicted presence of the rhetorical author could become a feature of the text’s composition and structuring: a feature of style. By paying attention to the forms of narrative compression in *North and South*, then, we can learn a great deal about the ways that the rhetorical voice of the Victorian novelist, by degrees, became style’s dispersed linguistic trace.

3. Speak of the Sun: The Rhetoric of Narrative Compression in *North and South*

When Henry Lennox arrives to propose to Margaret Hale at the beginning of the third chapter of *North and South*, “Margaret had been thinking of him only a moment before” (22). As the narrator tells us, “It was ‘parler du soleil et l’on en voit les rayons’”: speak of the sun and you’ll see the rays. The very suddenness with which Lennox materializes on the scene is soon matched, in turn, by the unwelcome alacrity of his offer: the revelation of his true intentions overwhelming Margaret “in an instant,” at which time Lennox, already perceiving his failure, must directly apologize for having “startled” her—“Forgive me! I have been too abrupt” (30). The whole of the interview is over in less time than it takes Mr. Hale to finish the pear he had been eating, leaving Margaret feeling like “the eastern king, who dipped his head into a basin of water, at the

magician's command, and ere he instantly took it out went through the experience of a lifetime" (31-2). If Margaret, however, is left reeling by the speed of this disturbing encounter, Lennox has a final surprise in store for her—a final proof of his suddenness of manner, which serves to seal her contempt: for "before a quarter of an hour" has passed, he has already fallen back into his accustomed demeanor of "quiet sarcasm," and is conversing drily with her father as if nothing had happened (31).

Lennox's proposal is the first crisis of the novel, and marks the beginning of the punctual cascade of crises that will come to define its plot: in just a few hours, Margaret will learn that her father has abandoned his living as a vicar, and means to relocate their family to the distant industrial town of Milton-Northern (read: Manchester) within a fortnight. As Margaret will later reflect, "since that day when Mr. Lennox came, and startled her into a decision, every day brought some question, momentous to her, and to those whom she loved, to be settled"—an assessment that will often prove literally true in the chapters to come, as Margaret grapples with the imminent death of her mother, nurses a dying Bessy Higgins, faces down a violent mob, angrily rejects her second suitor, and summons her fugitive brother to risk his life by returning home, all in the space of as many days (56). Indeed, *North and South* is remarkable, not only for what Rosemarie Bodenheimer (to whom I am indebted for the foregoing list) has called its "astonishing rapidity of event," but also for the self-conscious way that it worries over its own narrative pacing.⁹⁰ Following Lennox's proposal, the novel's early chapters repeatedly meditate on their own accelerated storyline and compressed action—meditations in which, interestingly, Lennox himself is almost always invoked: "Margaret went along the

⁹⁰ "North and South: A Permanent State of Change," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 34.3 (Dec. 1979): 294.

walk under the pear-tree wall. She had never been along it since she paced it at Henry Lennox's side. [...] Only a fortnight ago! And all so changed!" (53). By these habitual references, Lennox becomes a kind of emblem of speed, a figure persistently associated with the swift passage of time. This symbolic linkage is rendered still more apparent when Lennox assumes a central role in one of Margaret's dreams:

Mr. Lennox [...] haunted her dreams that night. He was climbing up some tree of fabulous height to reach the branch whereon was slung her bonnet: he was falling, and she was struggling to save him, but held back by some invisible powerful hand. He was dead. And yet, with a shifting of the scene, she was once more in the Harley Street drawing-room, talking to him as of old, and still with a consciousness all the time that she had seen him killed by that terrible fall. (43)

In this dream, Lennox's presence is wedded to a fantastic temporality in which events are suddenly precipitated without warning, almost like a series of cinematic cuts ("he was climbing [...] he was falling [...] he was dead"). The jarringly condensed nature of this crisis culminates, in turn, in an unsettling conclusion in which two different times seem to have been pressed on top of each other, and made to simultaneously occupy the same scene: Lennox is chatting "as of old," and yet Lennox is also dead. In this overlay, temporal compression reaches an apotheosis. The problem of the dream, for Margaret, is her struggle to inhabit, and make sense of, its radically foreshortened and disjunctive timeframe; she ultimately experiences this struggle, in the final scene of the dream, as the unfolding of a moment that is both present and already over, already lost. Nearly all of the invocations of Lennox in these chapters share this elegiac note. Saturated with a sense of nostalgic loss, they register the acceleration of the plot as a present that is always past: when Margaret walks beside the pear-tree wall, it is not only her last day in Helstone, but also late autumn and sunset, conjuring an overdetermined mood of universal belatedness, "with everything falling and fading, and turning to decay" (54). Lennox signifies longing

for a time that was pre-Lennox, a time before the rapid accumulation of narrative incident, and presides over the opening section of the novel as the symbolic harbinger of a new regime of bustle and haste, closely paired with the family's removal from village life. As the Hales are being whisked through the London streets, where "every one they saw [...] appeared hurrying to some appointment," Henry Lennox is suddenly spotted from the window of the moving carriage, passing too quickly to say hello (57).⁹¹

The Hales, of course, are heading north: and it is this spatial transition from Helstone to Milton that would seem to be the operative context in which to understand the novel's self-aware shift into a new gear of brisk and compact pacing. The family's dislocation from the lazy life of their rural hamlet—redolent with all the timelessness of a "village in a poem"—to the unfamiliar, and strikingly modern, environs of a manufacturing town brings with it the switch to a new temporality: one defined by relentless business, the factory clock, and the rush of crowds (12). As such, insofar as the thematics of narrative speed in *North and South* have been discussed by critics, they have typically been understood in reference to the novel's efforts to represent the hectic pace of industrial life.⁹² But the early association of Lennox with accelerated time, while it serves to anticipate our introduction to the factory town, also signals that the narrative's

⁹¹ For a discussion of this moment, see Sue Zemka, "Brief Encounters: Street Scenes in Gaskell's Manchester," *ELH* 76.3 (Fall 2009): 806.

⁹² For example, Hilary M. Schor has written of the novel's multiple beginnings as a "series of rapid ruptures" with readerly expectations, which serve to deflect the narrative away from any anticipations of a predictable romance plot, preparing readers for the weighty changes that Margaret must undergo in the course of her story—changes which parallel the rapid displacements of industrialization itself. Thus, the misdirection of the novel's opening scenes is actually a deliberate effort to "recreate the intense changes of industrialization." Similarly, Zemka has argued that *North and South*'s Manchester offers us an "urban chronotope" of the city street as a "world of mandated velocity," where the frequency of death and crisis in the narrative matches the breakneck pace of the pedestrian rush. See Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: 1992), pp. 124-5; and Zemka, "Brief Encounters," *ibid.*, p. 799, 807-8.

investment in the problem of speed actually predates, and, in some sense, encompasses, this scene change. My focus on Lennox's proposal is intended to remind us that the disorientations of narrative compression are a privileged issue almost from the outset of the novel, and their status as an explicit object of concern precedes, in fact, any discussion of urban experience or the politics of industrial production.⁹³

If it is Lennox's abortive suit that marks the first break, and functions in the novel's imaginary to anchor the point at which the onrush of events began to blur, designating a baseline against which rapid changes are retroactively measured ("since that day when Mr. Lennox came"), then the transition to Milton must be seen as an intensification, and ramping-up, of the shocks of speed already in play. Indeed, the scene of the proposal, occurring in a chapter entitled "The More Haste, The Worse Speed," is revealing of *North and South*'s thematization of its own pacing in yet another important sense: one that requires us to register the specifically emphasized nature of Lennox's arrival, occurring as it does just after he had been present in Margaret's thoughts—a fact underlined for our attention by the use of the French proverb, "parler du soleil et l'on en voit les rayons." What is interesting about this sudden, speak-of-the-devil appearance is that it is not actually distinctive within the novel's plot: *North and South*, in truth, is full of such moments. We may recall, for example, John Thornton's many abrupt and

⁹³ There is evidence that Gaskell is unusually interested in the issue of narrative pacing in her other major novels, as well: novels which often revolve around problems of speed, staking their resolutions on the question of how fast or slow events ought to unfold. We may recall, for example, Roger Hamley's constant associations with slowness in *Wives and Daughters* (his father continually calls him "slow," and even Roger himself admits "I'd many a nickname at school for my slowness"): a key characteristic that plays out, crucially, in his "slow, but steady" overtaking of his rash brother, Osborne, in the estimation of his family and of professional society; as well as the central contrast between his hasty courtship with the 'fast' Cynthia, and his protracted, long-simmering romance with Molly—the culmination of which is specifically decelerated by Gaskell through the device of Roger's extended trips abroad. See *Wives and Daughters* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 257, 264.

theatrical entrances, which frequently occur directly after his name has been mentioned in conversation, or after Margaret has just been thinking about him—entrances habitually tagged by phrases like, “At this instant Mr. Thornton entered the room,” and, “There was a slight noise behind her [...] and there stood Mr. Thornton” (369, 324). When Thornton arrives to propose to Margaret, his appearance comes just as she has resolved “not to think of” him (192). In like fashion, when Margaret accuses Nicholas Higgins of leading his neighbor, Boucher, to an unhappy fate, she tells him, “You have made him what he is!” “Made him what he is!” the narrator asks. “What was he?” At that moment, a noise is heard outside in the street, and Boucher’s body is carried by the window, a drowned corpse (294). At the train station, Margaret worries aloud that her outlaw brother, Frederick, whom she is helping to flee the country, may happen to cross paths with his enemy, Leonards: just then, Leonards appears suddenly on the platform; Mr. Hale mentions the possibility of his own death, and is found dead the very next morning (263, 349). Speak of the sun, and you’ll see the rays.

Lennox’s emphatically marked entrance may thus be seen to exemplify, as well as establish, a particular temporal pattern of sudden appearances and equally sudden deaths that extends throughout the entirety of the novel. These odd moments are related to coincidence—but they represent a special kind of coincidence. In these instances, a narrative possibility that has been raised hypothetically by a character, or the bare suggestion of a potential event articulated in conversation, is immediately and strikingly actualized within the narrative itself. The “immediately” is important—for it is, precisely, the instantaneous quality of these fulfillments that most alarms us: if the suggested possibility were to be realized some chapters later, it would merely be a case of (rather

crude) foreshadowing—here, the unnerving promptness with which the invocation of potentiality instantly ‘comes true’ borders on the occult, a kind of magical thinking. It speaks to a narrative logic that feels jarringly unrealistic: a cause-and-effect utterly unconcerned with plausibility, but operating rather by a sort of rhetorical causality, a nakedly mechanistic solicitation of the reader that occurs in plain sight. Put another way, the speed of events here implies theatricality—suggesting an organization of narrative events motivated solely by the awareness of an audience—and, indeed, the central point that I want to register about these encounters is their very *staginess*: after all, Thornton’s sudden appearances, occurring just after the other characters in the scene have been discussing him, are like nothing so much as a bad play; one gets the feeling, reading *North and South*, that Thornton is always hovering just offstage, ears pricked, waiting for the cue to make his entrance.

In fact, this kind of entrance is extremely common in Victorian melodrama, where an onstage conversation about an absent character is sure to be a set-up for that very character’s imminent entry into the scene.⁹⁴ To provide just two representative examples that typify the prevalence of this convention, let me first recall the moment in Douglas Jerrold’s *Black Ey’d Susan* (1829) where Hatchet is telling Susan the false narrative of William’s death at sea; just as Hatchet is building towards the story’s climax—William’s supposed death—he turns (with the words, “His shipmate turned round and saw—”), and sees William himself standing before him (Act 1, Scene 5).⁹⁵ Here we can see clearly

⁹⁴ Carolyn Williams has commented, in a different context, on melodrama’s affinity for “sequence[s] of prefiguration and fulfillment,” in which “expectations seem to be fulfilled almost magically or immediately.” See “Moving Pictures: George Eliot and Melodrama,” in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, ed. Lauren Berlant (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), pp. 119-20.

⁹⁵ Douglas Jerrold, *Black Ey’d Susan; or, “All in the Downs”: A Nautical and Domestic Drama in Two Acts* (London: Samuel French, 1899), p. 21.

how the “speak of the devil” entrance is a device for maximizing the emotional effect of a character’s entry into the scene: both for the other characters onstage, and for the audience. In diegetic terms, it is hardly plausible that William would walk in at just the moment when Hatchet is announcing his death: but in extradiegetic terms—that is, in terms of the relationship between the represented fiction and its extradiegetic spectator—there is clearly no more thrilling and dramatic moment for William to appear. The reason we tend to look down on this kind of device, then, and call it “stagey,” is because it plainly reveals that the drama in question has chosen to privilege audience solicitation over the coherence and believability of its own fiction. In such a play, the appeal, the gesture, that is made for the sake of the spectator—the space of extradiegetic communication—is prioritized over the work’s autonomy, over the fiction’s ability to make sense on its own terms. In this way, such melodramatic entrances are fundamentally *rhetorical*, in the sense that I’ve been using that term in this project: i.e., they privilege readerly address over self-contained diegetic illusion. The key difference, of course, is that there is no storyteller in drama, no authorial voice that relates the events—which are, obviously, represented by performers. As such, the rhetorical in drama is already something formalized, dispersed, made into a feature of the piece’s construction. It is for this reason that theater, and melodrama specifically, becomes a useful model for the novel at the moment that it is sublimating rhetoric into the structure of its composition.

This kind of entrance in melodrama is not, however, purely reserved for such climactic moments: in truth, it is a very common and quotidian device, as we can see, for example, on the very next page of *Black Ey’d Susan*’s script, in which William asks

Susan about her uncle, Doggrass, who right at that moment enters the room (“The very griffin I was talking of,” as William remarks).⁹⁶ This progression is typical of the way that these melodramatic entrances tend to cascade: Hatchet’s dialogue sets up William’s entrance into the scene, and then William’s dialogue sets up Doggrass’s entrance. This brings us to our second example, which I’ve selected from a very different, but equally representative, melodrama: in the first scene of Henry Milner’s *Mazeppa* (1831), Rudzloff and Drolinsko have a conversation with Cassimir about his lover, the Lady Olinska, in which Cassimir learns, to his horror, of Olinska’s impending marriage; this conversation serves to set up the immediate entrance of Olinska herself. Olinska then falls at once into a conversation with her maid, Agatha, about her true feelings for Cassimir—which serves, in turn, to set up Cassimir’s sudden (and impassioned) re-entrance into the scene.⁹⁷ What we can see here is that the “speak of the devil” entrance, as a localized form of speed that occurs within a scene, has a way of building on itself to create narrative accelerations on the larger scale, as well: the instant actualizing of every projected confrontation, the impulse to bring every issue to a head at once, will contribute to a narrative that moves in a sequence of shocks and disorienting leaps. In this way, such entrances are absolutely foundational to melodramatic form.

Thus far, I’ve been suggesting that a thematics of narrative pacing in *North and South* is inextricable from theatricality. This is true even in the example of Margaret’s dream, in which the abrupt temporal shifts—now climbing, now falling, now dead—are expressed in theatrical language, as a “shifting of the scene,” thus linking the disjointedly

⁹⁶ Jerrold, *Black Ey’d Susan*, *ibid.*, p. 22.

⁹⁷ Henry M. Milner, *Mazeppa*, in *Victorian Melodramas: Seven English, French, and American Melodramas*, ed. James L. Smith (London; Totowa, NJ; Dent: Rowman and Littlefield, 1976), pp. 6-8.

condensed temporality of the dream to the set changes in a play. But more specifically, the novel's aesthetic refers us to the compressed plotting characteristic of melodrama: a theatrical form noted—like *North and South* itself—for the rapid accumulation of crises that comprises its narrative structure.⁹⁸ The use of dialogue to anticipate, and briefly contextualize, the imminent entrance of a character, or to telegraph a narrative possibility just prior to its instant fulfillment, is a considerable part of how nineteenth-century stage melodramas achieved their extreme efficiency. Each encounter between two characters, while affectively compelling in itself, also looks ahead with one eye, as it were, and works to implicitly introduce and frame the encounter that will follow: when the villain taunts the heroine with references to the powerless and beleaguered state of the hero, the scene functions on the one hand to engage our present feeling, and on the other hand as exposition for the troubles of the hero, who will be shown in the succeeding scene. In this way, the disjunctive nature of melodramatic narrative, with its apparent indifference to causality, and preference for plots that progress by lurches and jerks—wrenching spectacles and sensational developments that propel the story forward in explosive bursts—is often licensed by rhetorical means, in the tacit way that the characters' speeches reflect upon and condition our reception of what is to come. The double duty of a melodramatic moment, as I have here conceived it—as both present crisis and rhetorical anticipation of a future catastrophe—extends the temporal logic of its “situations,” or frozen, composed tableaux, which, as Carolyn Williams has observed, “look both before and after, summarizing the import of the action so far and suggesting plot development to

⁹⁸ Michael Booth speaks, for example, of melodramatic plotting as a relentless piling of “catastrophe upon catastrophe,” leading the viewer up an “ascending scale of emotions.” *English Melodrama*, *ibid.*, p. 26, 15.

come.”⁹⁹ These tableaux (which were also known as “realizations,” if the tableau was meant to recreate a well-known work of visual art—as in the opening scene of Jerrold’s *The Rent Day*, in which the characters are arranged in poses to evoke David Wilkie’s painting of the same name) are the punctuating hallmark of melodramatic form, occurring frequently at the climax of dramatic action, and indicate the pictorial emphasis of melodramatic signification, as a form that caters to the visual over other modes of literacy. By summing up the erstwhile progress of the story, while also offering a glimpse of the action ahead—encapsulating past and future in a single image—the pictorialism of the static tableau is contiguous with the narrative compression that is definitive of the melodramatic plot itself.¹⁰⁰ Melodrama’s speed and its stasis are thus expressive of the same tendency, and serve to point up an intimate connection between acceleration and theatrical spectacle; indeed, the visual logic of melodrama suggests a further sense in which to understand the instantaneous narrative actualizations of *North and South*. As the abrupt “realization” of a possibility framed within a character’s thoughts or speech, such occurrences speak not only to a compressed temporality, but also to a drive towards enactment, literalization, and expressive presence: the discussion of Boucher’s sad decline, in dialogue, seeks to be realized in a spectacular, visually affirmed fashion, by the sudden appearance of his actual corpse—and this hastening towards visual realization in turn becomes an abrupt and disorienting acceleration of the plot. The inseparability, in

⁹⁹ Carolyn Williams, “Melodrama,” *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. Kate Flint (Cambridge UP, 2012), p. 208.

¹⁰⁰ This is implicit, for example, in Williams’s characterization of the “tableau as a pictorial form of dramatic condensation, a freeze-frame picturing a moment that suggests both past and future.” “Melodrama,” *ibid.*, p. 197.

melodrama, of abbreviated pacing and a nakedly theatrical, expressionistic style provides a key for plumbing the peculiar temporal issues embedded in Gaskell's novel.

But the "melodramatic" in *North and South*—the novel's adoption of popular theatrical convention—extends beyond mere scenes of sensation, to make itself felt even in moments of domestic calm. The conversation between Margaret and the family servant, Dixon, at the end of Chapter 16 ("The Shadow of Death"), may be taken as a case in point: here, Gaskell's near-exclusive focus on transcribing the dialogue creates the first impression of a dramatic script, which is strikingly confirmed by the fact that the only descriptors appended to the characters' speeches are interjected as *parentheticals*, clearly intended to resemble stage directions: "'Now don't ye set off again, or I shall give way at last' (whimpering)"; "'—There she goes' (looking out of the window as she heard the front door shut)" (130-1).¹⁰¹ But perhaps even more telling is the way that the exchange itself constructs its setting as theatrical space: Dixon advises Margaret to "go out" and take some time for herself, and though it is ostensibly the latter, and not the family servant, that focalizes our interest in this scene, when Margaret goes "quickly out," we do not follow her exit, but instead remain to watch Dixon, who is now alone in the room (130-1). Dixon then delivers a soliloquizing speech, apparently to herself, on the theme of her affection for the Hales and Margaret in particular, which closes out the chapter. This style of ending is manifestly theatrical in its origins; it demands comparison to the conventional practice, in popular drama, of concluding a scene by allowing a 'low' or comic character (often a servant) to remain momentarily on stage after the principals have departed, to ruminate in soliloquy on the plot currently unfolding. This

¹⁰¹ Kucich makes this point in his recent article: "Sometimes the narrator provides parenthetical notes that look uncannily like stage directions." "Political Melodrama Meets Domestic Fiction," *ibid.*, p. 10.

understanding is corroborated by the curious temporal function of Dixon's speech, which ends with these lines:

—There she goes' (looking out of the window as she heard the front door shut). 'Poor young lady! her clothes look shabby to what they did when she came to Helstone a year ago. Then she hadn't so much as a darned stocking or a cleaned pair of gloves in all her wardrobe. And now—!' (131)

This pregnant trailing-off is severed by the chapter break, after which we read the first line of the following chapter: "Margaret went out heavily and unwillingly enough" (131). Dixon's speech, with its rumination on Margaret's stressed and threadbare state, is the rhetorical anticipation of our next glimpse of Margaret, whom we will see going out glumly into the street in the subsequent scene. There is a narrative relay of immediate fulfillment here, in which the verbal discussion of Margaret's sad condition seeks visual enactment in an actualized depiction of her dispiritedness. Though the servant's soliloquy is not a literal moment of arrested action, the pause it instills before we rejoin Margaret, like a melodramatic tableau, looks both before and after—summing up our heroine's past, while also turning our gaze to the chapter to come. It is to such innocuous moments of theatricality—which are surprisingly frequent in *North and South*¹⁰²—as well as to the more overtly spectacular setpieces, that we must pay attention if we wish to measure the depth of the novel's investment in melodrama.

More specifically, when considered alongside the examples of narrative actualizations discussed above (including the abrupt appearances of Lennox, Thornton,

¹⁰² A number of chapters in the novel end with similar soliloquies, in the fashion of a single character left alone on stage, including the chapter that immediately follows the conversation between Margaret and Dixon (Ch. 17, "What is a Strike?"), and the chapter after (Ch. 18, "Likes and Dislikes"). See also Ch. 19, "Angel Visits" (156) and Ch. 24, "Mistakes Cleared Up" (196), as well as speeches by Thornton and Mrs. Thornton, respectively, on 314 and 317, for similar examples. Parenthetical "stage directions," of the kind identified above, are also a recurrent pattern in the text: see p. 143, 195, 227-8, and 352, for some representative instances.

Leonards, etc.), the scene of Margaret and Dixon's talk enforces an inescapable sense that *entrances and exits* bear a special weight of significance in this novel, and are a privileged site of its traffic with melodramatic form. It may be noted, in this regard, that entrances—and all movements to and from the offstage space—are inordinately loaded in stage melodrama, given the degree to which its narratives hinge on last-second rescues, unexpected interruptions, returns of the repressed, and other punctual arrivals.

Melodrama trains its audience to view the offstage space as a pregnant zone of possibility: the source of interventions, the place from which all narrative twists appear. Despite its emphasis on the visual, it is the genre in which nothing seen on stage has any finality—for the spectators already know that extraordinary reversals of fortune are *de rigueur*, and thus that no matter how beaten-down the hero may visibly be now, he is capable of being redeemed absolutely at a moment's notice. What one sees is no sure predictor for what will happen next: everything on stage is eminently mutable, and will eventually be overhauled completely by whoever is waiting in the wings. This dynamic, of the provisionality of appearances, is intimately related to melodrama's drive to enact and actualize, to realize in pictorial form—the bottom line is the essential significance of passage between the offstage and onstage spaces. The movement between these two areas of the theater—the potential and the actualized—is the spatialization of melodramatic pacing. Viewed in this way, the issue of speed in *North and South* is specifically melodramatic in its coordinates, because it is about the pressure, the *compression*, that the zone of potentiality exerts on the narrative present. And, as we saw earlier in this section, in our discussion of “stagey” melodramatic entrances like that of William in *Black Ey'd Susan*, this narrative compression must be understood not only as a product of the

pressure that the offstage space exerts on onstage events, but also as a result of the extradiegetic space of audience communication—the space of rhetoric—exerting a formal, shaping pressure on the diegetic world: the structuring force of an authorial intentionality that remains invisible.

It is by now clear that the progression from *Mary Barton* to *North and South* is not, in fact, defined by the abandonment of a simplistic and overheated melodramatic plotline in favor of a more nuanced and complex take on industrial relations; rather, the operative difference is between a novelistic discourse that rhetorically asks its readers to sympathize with “what the workman feels and thinks,” and one that makes its appeals to readerly emotion by adopting the formal devices of melodramatic narrative. In short, this is not a story about the renunciation of melodrama, but rather, a story about the renunciation of *rhetoric*: this is the key difference between Gaskell’s earlier and later industrial novels. In fact, it was, I have suggested, Gaskell’s shift away from rhetoric, and away from vocal solicitation of her reader, that led her to experiment with the kind of theatrical appeals that can be made through narrative form: and it was, precisely, in melodrama that she found a model for this process. Far from abandoning melodrama, then, what we find in *North and South* is a novel that has fully plumbed and measured the narrative resources that stage melodrama could offer to a Victorian novel in a state of transition, and has put them to the fullest possible use.

Moreover, when we examine the melodramatic devices that I’ve inventoried above, we find that many of the theatrical forms that the novel has put into play serve to substitute for the rhetorical communication of a vocal author. For example, the novel’s tendency to give its characters theatrical soliloquies, in which they speak their interior

thoughts out loud to themselves, as speeches given in dialogue—as Dixon does in the scene just discussed—clearly works to shift the burden of rhetorical speaking from the narrating author to the individual characters themselves. As we’ve seen, the author of *Mary Barton* takes it upon herself to communicate “what the workman feels and thinks” through rhetorical speeches addressed directly to the reader; but in *North and South*, it is the solitary characters who vocally express their feelings and thoughts, in speeches that are not directed towards the reader, but only towards themselves and the empty room in which they stand—and which the reader, as it were, ‘overhears’, in a way precisely parallel to the theatrical audience that the soliloquizing stage character shows no awareness of, even as she explains her inner thoughts in an expository fashion clearly intended for just that audience. In this way, theatrical convention provides an avenue for authorial rhetoric to be folded into the diegetic interior of the narrative. After all, in a sense, that was already the function of the soliloquy: given that theater is a form in which the author is, by convention, absent, and everything is conducted through the representations of a cast of performers, soliloquies constituted the only available way for the playwright to tell the audience something *directly*: if she wanted to speak to the viewer, she had to put the speech into the mouth of a character. Viewed in this way, nothing could be more natural for a nineteenth-century novelist who had absented herself from her own text than to adopt exactly the same approach: the soliloquy would have been the obvious way to delegate rhetorical duties, a form already familiar from countless popular melodramas. Indeed, Gaskell makes frequent use of just the kind of sentimental and emotionally heightened soliloquies that melodrama was known for throughout *North and South*: whether it’s Thornton pouring out his heart over Margaret’s unconscious form

after the riot at the mill (“looking on her pure white face, the sense of what she was to him came upon him so keenly that he spoke it out in his pain: ‘Oh, my Margaret—my Margaret! no one can tell what you are to me! Dead—cold as you lie there, you are the only woman I ever loved! Oh, Margaret—Margaret!’”) or Margaret, in the next chapter, delivering a speech nearly a page long, on her anguish at being seen to have feelings for Thornton (“‘[...] Let them insult my maiden pride as they will—I walk pure before God!’”) (180-1, 190-1).

But this is far from the only way that melodramatic form proved useful in carrying out rhetoric by other means. Earlier in this section, I argued that a large part of how melodramas achieve their extreme efficiency is by the uniquely doubled function of the melodramatic scene, which serves both to depict the narrative present and to anticipate or prepare the scene or entrance to follow—in short, that scenework in melodrama has a *rhetorical* function, that part of its job is, precisely, *exposition*. The expository quality of in-scene dialogues between characters allows the plot to move in a fast and unpredictable way, without losing legibility for the audience; at the same time, this kind of instant fulfillment, whereby the hypothetical topic of a dialogue is immediately realized in the subsequent scene, is itself one of key mechanisms that forces acceleration. In a rhetorical novel, it is, of course, the author’s address that performs this expository work, helping us to follow the movement from one scene to another, to understand the connections between events, and to be appropriately primed for new developments of the story. To see this process at work, we need look, once again, no further than *Mary Barton*: there, rhetorical commentary often serves to introduce a scene or character, and to ensure that we understand this character as discursively linked to the

larger thematic and political interests of the novel—for instance, when Gaskell pleads (in the “what the workman feels and thinks” passage, quoted earlier) for the “earnest men among these people, men who have endured wrongs without complaining,” this appeal is immediately followed by the line, “Among these was John Barton,” which leads into an extended summary of Barton’s background, biography, and psychological motives (55-6). Similarly, when Gaskell’s narrator comments later on, “Such are the tastes and pursuits of some of the thoughtful, little understood, working men of Manchester,” the next sentence reads, “And Margaret’s grandfather was one of these”—pivoting the reader from a general disquisition on the resourceful and misunderstood working man into a scene in which Mary accompanies Margaret on a visit to her eccentric grandfather, Job Legh (73-4). In these cases, rhetoric constructs a context for the entering character to be inserted into, so that the reader will immediately understand what the character signifies. In melodrama, this context is constructed through the in-scene dialogue that precedes a character’s arrival onto the stage: Rudzloff and Drolinsko’s conversation with Cassimir about the Lady Olinska in *Mazeppa*, which establishes that Olinska is both Cassimir’s lover and, much to his distress, engaged to another man, builds the context for us to understand Olinska’s state of mind when she enters moments later. It is in this way that we ought to think about the stagey entrances and deaths in *North and South*: about the conversation between Mr. Hale and Mr. Bell in Chapter 16, for example, in which they discuss what would become of Margaret if Mr. Hale were to die—a conversation that occurs, as it happens, on the night of Hale’s actual death (349-50). The dialogue creates a context in which the event itself, when it happens, arrives as already-signified, already understood: a function that, in Gaskell’s first novel, was carried out by authorial rhetoric.

Indeed, as I've already implied, to call something "stagey" is simply to register the privileging of a performed narrative's rhetorical aspect—the way that the diegetic representation visibly addresses itself to the audience, making the story's theatrical scaffolding painfully obvious. The staginess that we detect in *North and South*'s adoption of melodramatic forms points us to the function that these forms serve in the novel: to take the place of novelistic rhetoric.

The fact that melodramatic forms *do* serve this function for a rhetorical novelist who has moved away from rhetoric should not surprise us: after all, it is well known that melodrama speaks a visual language, a language of signifying pictures, poses, and gestures—what better model for a Victorian novel in the process of transitioning from, as the moderns would say, 'telling' to '*showing*'? Indeed, perhaps the most unexpected and yet most fundamental way that stage melodrama modeled a move from rhetoric to style is precisely in its characteristic push towards visual enactment. It was melodramatists that were working to make theatrical language ever more hyper-expressive, ever more transparent—the actor's body ever more coincident with signification in its every stance and gesture.¹⁰³ It was melodramatists who were thinking about how to formalize and heighten incidental aspects of performance, like stage music and facial expression, to maximize their emotional solicitation of the spectator, to tell a story without words. The notion of a story that 'tells itself' would be claimed as the ideal of the post-Lubbockian, modern novelist in the early decades of the twentieth century; as such, we tend to

¹⁰³ Peter Brooks, the seminal theorist of melodrama, has written, in regard to the body of the actor in melodramatic performance, "of the body wholly seized by affective meaning, of message converted on to the body so forcefully and totally that the body has ceased to function in its normal postures and gestures, to become nothing but text, nothing but the place of representation." "Melodrama, Body, Revolution," in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, eds. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press/BFI, 1994), p. 22.

associate this notion with the aesthetically rigorous productions of the modernists. But the point that I most want to impress here is that, for a mid-nineteenth-century novelist, popular stage melodrama was, very literally, what a story that ‘tells itself’ would have looked like: a narrative in which the narrative elements themselves—from the pacing and sequencing of the scenes to the content of the dialogue—serve the same function as an assertive storyteller. Victorian novelists’ turn to melodramatic form is the prehistory of the turn to modernist style.

4. Dramas of Recognition: The Audience and the Tableau

It is, then, to this idea of a total transparency of expression, so foundational to melodrama, that I want to turn in the remainder of this chapter: because I think that, in a crucial way, this is really what is at issue in the debates over authorial rhetoric in the novel—indeed, this is what rhetoric promises and represents: that everything will be divulged, everything known. And if the question that rhetorical novelists were asking themselves from the 1850s on was how to achieve this total transparency without the intervention of the author’s speaking voice, then the answer that many arrived at would have been: melodrama.

Perfect expression, total legibility, is at once melodrama’s formal obsession and the defining drama of the stories that it tells. The genre-typical melodramatic plot hinges on the legibility of virtue: the suffering hero or (more typically) heroine, who has been falsely accused by the outwardly respectable villain, is abandoned by her community and mercilessly battered by a series of escalating crises (which, of course, the villain has orchestrated): her honor is maligned by a false witness; her husband is press-ganged into

the navy, or framed for murder and packed off to a penal colony; her poor, gray-haired father dies of heartbreak; a forged will is produced depriving her of her inheritance; and so on and on—and in the midst of all these trials, the heroine is all along maintaining her virtue against the villain’s wheedling advances. Of course, no matter how downtrodden the heroine becomes, she is always capable of being redeemed by a last-second rescue—the false witness is forced to recant, the husband returns a hero, the true will is suddenly discovered—and with this intervention, the heroine’s virtue, and the villain’s slanderous machinations, are both finally recognized by the larger community for what they are. This resolution, invariably occurring in the final moments of the play, always coincides with the end of the narrative: for what the story is *about* is this drama of recognition, and when the inner truth of the characters has become totally transparent to all observers, totally *externalized*, the story is over.

It is into precisely this kind of drama of recognition that *North and South* settles in its last 200 pages. The proximate cause of the misrecognition in this case is the return of Margaret’s brother, Frederick, a fugitive sailor wanted for his participation in a righteous mutiny (a character who has clearly, as John Kucich points out, “wandered out” of a classic nautical melodrama¹⁰⁴). Attempting to conceal Frederick’s presence in the house imbricates Margaret in a series of deceptions that arouse Thornton’s suspicion: Thornton, as local magistrate, is aware that Margaret has told an investigating officer that she was not at the train station on a given night—but he personally knows this statement to be a lie, as he himself happened (by melodramatic coincidence) to witness Margaret giving Frederick an affectionate, and suspiciously furtive, farewell, just before she

¹⁰⁴ Kucich, “Political Melodrama Meets Domestic Fiction,” *ibid.*, p. 11.

packed him onto the train. Not knowing that Margaret has a brother, Thornton naturally assumes that the young man he saw her embracing is her secret lover, and the real reason she has rejected his marriage proposal; the specific nature of this misrecognition is itself a melodramatic trope, as the Victorian humorist Jerome K. Jerome makes plain in his great parody of melodramatic stage conventions, *Stage-land: Curious Habits and Customs of its Inhabitants* (1889): “Sometimes the Stage heroine has a brother, and, if so, he is sure to be mistaken for her lover.” Jerome goes on to note that when the heroine’s husband walks in on her and her brother sharing a kiss, she never clears up the misunderstanding on the spot, as would be “simple and sensible”: “No, she does all in her power to make everybody believe it is true, so that she can suffer in silence. She does so love to suffer.”¹⁰⁵ *North and South* remains faithful to this generic mandate, and in the chapters to come Thornton’s misapprehension of Margaret’s supposed dishonor repeatedly fails to be corrected, as the two continually contrive new ways to miss each other, and thus perpetuate the misunderstanding: when Margaret dispatches her father’s friend, Mr. Bell, to tell Thornton the whole truth, Mr. Bell manages to die before he can pass on the message.

This is the part of the novel, it should be recalled, that Gaskell expressly desired to be slow, and which she revised from the serialized version in order to ensure that its narrative movement was properly prolonged. As any reader of the book will tell you, she was successful: the last 150 pages or so of *North and South* are characterized, more than anything, by an agonizingly inert pacing, in which the courtship plot simply treads water, with no moves made on either side to get the (rather sulky) Thornton and Margaret

¹⁰⁵ Jerome K. Jerome, *Stage-land: Curious Habits and Customs of its Inhabitants* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1889), p. 18.

together; it is not until the last two pages of the novel that they will confess their mutual love. The reason why this slowness was so important to her, I would argue, is as deeply connected to melodrama as the reason why haste and speed were so foregrounded elsewhere in the novel. This recognition requires us to take a step back and complicate our previous understanding of melodramatic pacing, which is not, as it turns out, *wholly* a matter of rapidly accumulating crises and instant realizations: for, as our above summary of the genre-typical melodramatic plot has made clear, there is one fulfillment that is *not* immediately actualized in melodrama, and that is the final resolution to its drama of recognition—the clearing-up of that mystified state of affairs in which virtue has been mistaken for vice and vice for virtue. Indeed, this clearing-up is endlessly deferred, and postponed (often literally) until the last possible moment. For this reason, critics who have written extensively about the temporality of melodrama, like Linda Williams, have emphasized that melodrama causes one to “feel time in two contradictory ways [...] Actions feel fast, and yet the ultimate duration of the event is retarded.”¹⁰⁶ The crises come fast and hot, realized almost the moment they are foreseen: but the act of recognition that will undo all crises and set the social world at rights is subjected to perpetual delay. *North and South*’s pacing follows this pattern.

Nor is it a coincidence that in this last stretch of the novel Margaret returns to the placid places from which she began: for after the death of her father, she is forced to move back in with her upper-middle-class aunt, Mrs. Shaw, with whom she was staying when we first met Margaret in the opening chapter. At Mrs. Shaw’s Harley Street house in London, Margaret’s new life is the opposite of “that whirl” of speed and instantaneity

¹⁰⁶ Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), pp. 33-6.

that she left behind in Milton: an “unpunctual” existence of “eventless ease,” in which every meal is of “dragged-out length” and Margaret grows “wearied with the inactivity of the day” (373-4). Just as Margaret had been beset by the breakneck pacing of the novel earlier on, she is now plagued by the narrative’s interminable slowness. Overwhelmed by her feelings of loss, Margaret leaps at the chance to accompany Mr. Bell on a trip to Helstone, the bucolic, southern village where her family was once happy. In her discussion of melodramatic time, Linda Williams notes that melodrama is fundamentally “an expression of feeling toward a time that passes too fast,” in which we are simultaneously propelled into the future and reminded of past loss—a characterization that ought to put us in mind of that pervasive sense of nostalgic loss with which Margaret has been saturated since the day of Lennox’s proposal, and its close connection to the acceleration of the novel’s plot—and further points out that the last-second melodramatic resolution seeks to roll back what speed has taken away, with the temporality of “too late” defied and negated by a temporality of “in the nick of time.”¹⁰⁷ Related to this, Williams argues, is the fact that melodrama “begins, and wants to end, in a space of innocence”: another way of rolling back time, which is often spatialized in melodrama as a recovery of the family home in the idyllic rural village, which had been stolen away by financial predation, leading to a period of exile.¹⁰⁸ By cycling back to the languid, pre-industrial spaces from which the novel began, Harley Street and Helstone, *North and South* cites this melodramatic convention, only to argue that no such recovery is possible—for despite its putatively “timeless” quality at the beginning of the novel,

¹⁰⁷ Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, *ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁸ For a discussion of “rural nostalgia” in melodrama, see Christine Gledhill, “Domestic Melodrama” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama*, ed. Carolyn Williams (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2018), pp. 65-6.

Helstone has changed: “Nothing had been the same; and this slight, all-pervading instability, had given her greater pain than if all had been too entirely changed for her to recognise it” (400). Feeling now that nothing of her former world remains familiar, and exhausted by a steady diet of catastrophe, Margaret succumbs briefly to the lure of stasis, of standing outside time altogether:

‘I begin to understand now what heaven must be—and, oh! the grandeur and repose of the words—“The same yesterday, today, and forever.” Everlasting! [...] I am so tired—so tired of being whirled on through all these phases in my life, in which nothing abides by me, no creature, no place [...] I seek heavenly steadfastness in earthly monotony. If I were a Roman Catholic [...] I might become a nun. [...]’ (400)

This soliloquy represents the culmination of several earlier moments of temptation—for example, some 70 pages previous, while Margaret was still in Milton, and following yet another disappointing missed opportunity to correct Thornton’s misperceptions, her thoughts turned to the house in Harley Street, where she had not yet been consigned to live: “Margaret yearned after that old house, and the placid tranquility of that well-ordered, monotonous life. [...] [S]he had been buffeted about, and felt so exhausted by this recent struggle with herself, that she thought that even stagnation would be a rest and a refreshment” (329). As wearied as she has since been by the monotony of her aunt’s house, Margaret still entertains the fantasy of a static, unchanging existence, isolated from the buffets of speed, when she retires to bed in Helstone; but by the next morning, as she rises and prepares to return to London, these yearnings have been conquered, and Margaret is prepared to acknowledge that “[i]f the world stood still, it would retrograde and become corrupt [...] the progress all around me is right and necessary [...]” (400). In this moment, Margaret makes her peace with a life and a future defined by an ever-accelerating pace of change. This understanding signals the end of her long listlessness—

and the revival of the narrative momentum that will carry Margaret, and the novel, to an imminent end.

In one sense, then, Gaskell breaks with melodramatic formula, by making it clear that you can't go home again—but in another sense, *North and South* is entirely in line with the underlying purpose that many critics have read into nineteenth-century melodrama: to help its audiences adjust to the shocks of speed that increasingly defined their urban lives. Indeed, Gaskell stages this process of adjustment through Margaret's coming to terms with a world in constant motion. In making this choice, Gaskell revises the wish-fulfillment plots of earlier industrial novels, which often ended with a return to a pre-industrial, agrarian idyll of idealized relations between the nobility and their tenants (like Benjamin Disraeli's notorious Tory fantasy, *Sybil, or The Two Nations* [1845], in which the eponymous character really does become a nun). Stage melodrama, too, as we know, hearkened after a return to "a space of innocence," at least in the events of its plot: but in its narrative form, the audience is actually taught to experience the buffets of shock and sensational velocity as pleasurable—which they did, of course, with such unreasonable enthusiasm that the scale of collective reaction was utterly without precedent.¹⁰⁹ The advent of melodrama is typically dated, following Peter Brooks's influential account, to the aftermath of the French Revolution, and as such it has always

¹⁰⁹ Matthew Buckley captures this very well in his discussion of audience reaction to Pixérécourt's early melodrama, *Coelina* (1800), translations and adaptations of which would sweep across Europe in the years that followed (including what is credited as the first English melodrama, Thomas Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery* [1802]): "Although other recent plays had catalyzed analogous crazes, the mania for *Coelina* was both far greater in intensity and different in kind, for it was driven not by the play's matter—which was incidental, confused, and clichéd—but by its *effect*. Audiences in Paris, throughout France, in London, and all across Europe were not merely entertained by the play: they were—in a manner that seemed strange, inexplicable, and unquestionably new—riveted by it, gripped and absorbed by it, moved and terrified by it, emotionally and sensationally *intoxicated* by it." See "Early English Melodrama," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama*, ed. Williams, *ibid.*, p. 13.

had something of a special relationship with modernity as such: indeed, this is, for Brooks, what explains its obsession with the legibility of virtue, its seeking after sharp clarities in a “post-sacred” age in which traditional arbiters like church and crown have lost legitimacy.¹¹⁰ More specifically, though, melodrama has been read as a product of modern speed, a narrative mode with a historical basis in a faster pace of life; as well as, as Jeffrey Cox has put it, “a key form of serving and managing this early nineteenth century accelerated culture.”¹¹¹ This process of “managing” the threatening pace of modern life is explicitly thematized in the plot of *North and South*: a novel that ultimately refuses to pretend that a return to an earlier, slower way of life is possible, even as it also advocates for inclusive processes of democratic dialogue and deliberation that will impose a reflective slowness on industrial decision-making.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995 [1976]), p. 15.

¹¹¹ Jeffrey N. Cox, “The Death of Tragedy; or, The Birth of Melodrama,” in *The Performing Century*, eds. Davis and Holland, *ibid.*, p. 174. Also see David Mayer, “Encountering Melodrama,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. Kerry Powell (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), which discusses melodrama’s connection to “a period of rapid and profound change” (pp. 147-8); Nicholas Daly, *Literature, Technology, and Modernity, 1860-2000* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), for his discussion of melodrama’s relation to a “more general acceleration of the pace of everyday life” (pp. 13-20); and Sue Zemka, *Time and the Moment in Victorian Literature and Society* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2012), which argues that melodrama is about not only about the adjustment to speed but also a nostalgic longing for slowness and stasis, embodied literally in the frozen tableau (pp. 35-9 and 65-6).

¹¹² Scholars have readily noted the centrality of questions of speed and slowness to the representation of political change in Gaskell’s fiction: as Nancy Henry has remarked, “[Gaskell’s] work as a whole contrasts two models of change: abrupt and violent on the one hand, slow and continual on the other.” Amanda Anderson echoes this understanding, writing in 2012 that, “In Gaskell politics is generally conceived in two ways—as irruptive and violent, and as reformist and institutional,” with Gaskell preferring “the more desirable form of piecemeal, reformist politics.” In Anderson’s assessment, the concern in *North and South* is not to advocate for any particular political resolution, but rather to uphold the value of ongoing argumentation and dialogue, through the “privileging of continuing collective deliberation, which is a primary component of democratic practice.” See Nancy Henry, “Elizabeth Gaskell and Social Transformation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2007), p. 148; and Amanda Anderson, “Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Gaskell: Politics and its Limits,” in *The Cambridge History of the English Novel*, eds. Robert L. Caserio and Clement Hawes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), p. 348, 347.

In short, *North and South* tends to eschew melodramatic resolutions at the level of *plot*, while making extensive and sophisticated use of melodramatic *form*: in the process, revealing a canny understanding that the two may encode very different kinds of political messages and relationships to modernity. Recognition of this complicated dynamic has been uneven: Gaskell criticism has been quick to point out the ways that her novels pull back from melodramatic expectations—beginning with Catherine Gallagher’s influential argument about *Mary Barton*, in which she asserts that Gaskell’s fidelity to realism ultimately leads her, by the end of the novel, to reject melodrama as “a mere conventional distortion, a genre inappropriate to modern reality”—but has been much slower to acknowledge her technically savvy adoption of melodrama’s formal devices.¹¹³ There are problems with overemphasizing the first half of that tradeoff: aside from the fact that it often implied a critical dismissal of melodrama—which surely spoke more to the modern prejudices of the critic herself than it did to Gaskell’s nineteenth-century views—such arguments also tended to reify melodrama as a kind of ‘given’, a known quantity, which one could simply decide to let in or keep out: as opposed to an entire, interlocking system of narrative rhythms, tropes, formal structures, plotlines, character types, modes of address, spectacles, set-pieces, affective appeals, and theatrical innovations, representing such a sprawling and influential repertoire of narrative tools that no one could be altogether exempt from their use. Indeed, we are still a long way from adequately answering Carolyn Williams’s injunction to Victorianists, “to imagine the melodramatic tableau as a primary resource” for the realist novel.¹¹⁴ Recently, however, John Kucich’s new reading of *North and South* has begun to show us the way: while scrupulously

¹¹³ Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, *ibid.*, p. 75.

¹¹⁴ Williams, “Moving Pictures: George Eliot and Melodrama,” *ibid.*, p. 106.

tracking every instance in which the narrative veers away from an apparent melodramatic climax, Kucich also highlights many of the ways that the novel is structured by melodramatic forms: dialogue that comes with stage directions, Thornton's theatrical entrances, and so on. Down this road there is, and remains, much uncharted territory. For example, Kucich points out, rightly, that the scene of the riot at Thornton's mill—or, more accurately, the defused riot, as the confrontation between Thornton and a violent mob of his striking mill workers, which threatens to descend into pandemonium, is averted when Margaret flings herself onto Thornton's chest, thus interposing herself between him and the mob—raises the expectation that what is about to transpire will be the kind of apocalyptic clash between the forces of good and evil that regularly features as the climax in political melodrama, a subgenre which often pitted striking factory hands against their masters (though which side was portrayed as villainous varied from play to play): in other words, "apocalypse dissolves into anticlimax," as "*North and South* invokes and neutralizes the conventions of political melodrama."¹¹⁵ But our understanding of Gaskell's citation of melodrama in this scene could be deepened still further if we recognize that the very act by which Margaret defuses this climax—her introduction of her own body into the scene, interjecting the spectacle of her feminine vulnerability into the enraged workers' line of sight, in order to force a reflective pause and evoke a feeling of shame—itself operates, strikingly, as an arresting image, a *tableau*. Like a tableau, Margaret's clinging, pitiful pose "interrupts and punctuates the ongoing action with its silent, composed stillness—calling for the audience to be likewise arrested yet all the while to be actively feeling and interpreting."¹¹⁶ The "audience" in

¹¹⁵ Kucich, "Political Melodrama Meets Domestic Fiction," *ibid.*, p. 5, 7.

¹¹⁶ Carolyn Williams, "Moving Pictures," *ibid.*, p. 105.

this case is, of course, the mob: a designation that feels right, given that Thornton and Margaret are standing, in this moment, on the steps leading up to Thornton's door, which effectively function as a kind of raised dais or stage—with the crowd of workers ranged below, in row after row, and all facing towards the steps. Spatially, then, the scene is set up as a theater. As such, when Margaret's intervention brings the escalating hostilities to an abrupt halt ("The clogs were arrested in the hands that held them—the countenances, so fell not a moment before, now looked irresolute, as if asking what this meant"), the sudden silence, the frozen bodies, and the rows of startled faces, their stares straining to decipher the picture that they suddenly find before them, must have exactly resembled the spectacle of a melodramatic tableau as seen in any London theater (178).

For the tableau, as Carolyn Williams reminds us, is a composed picture to be both felt and interpreted. And this is, in fact, what Margaret does by throwing her arms around Thornton: she composes a picture, which is meant both to have an emotional effect—in this case, shame and remorse—and open a space for reflection. "If she thought her sex would be a protection,—if, with shrinking eyes she had turned away from the terrible anger of these men, in any hope that ere she looked again they would have paused and reflected, and slunk away, and vanished,—she was wrong" (179). Margaret hopes that her "sex," the sight of an imperiled woman, may be enough stop the mob in their tracks, by confronting them, precisely, with a picture that bears an emotional charge and a moral meaning. In the event, however, this image is not yet potent enough to arrest the workers' fury, which is already boiling over—and in fact, it is the mob themselves that complete the tableau, when a thrown pebble grazes Margaret's cheek, drawing blood. It is this act that converts Margaret fully into a tableau of feminine suffering, which the workers take

in with frozen expressions of shock, “open-eyed and open-mouthed”: “the sight of that pale, upturned face, with closed eyes, still and sad as marble, though the tears welled out of the long entanglement of eyelashes, and dropped down; and, heavier, slower plash than even tears, came the drip of blood from her wound. Even the most desperate—Boucher himself—drew back” (180). In discussing the effect that melodrama’s mute, visually expressionist aesthetic has on the performer’s body, Peter Brooks has written “of the body wholly seized by affective meaning, of message converted on to the body so forcefully and totally that the body has ceased to function in its normal postures and gestures, to become nothing but text, nothing but the place of representation.”¹¹⁷ Margaret’s unnatural, almost saintly, expression here, like a devotional statue of a Christian martyr—“that pale, upturned face, with closed eyes, still and sad as marble”—is just such a body, which “has ceased to function in its normal postures” and instead become a kind of pure signification, an affective emblem.

But while the tableau, which tends to arrive abruptly at the highest pitch of the escalating action, offers a searing image of maximal affective solicitation, it also encodes more subtle meanings that require a more extended scrutiny (which is why the performers hold their poses for a length of some seconds). We should recall here Carolyn Williams’s description of the tableau as a form that “look[s] both before and after, summarizing the import of the action so far and suggesting plot development to come.”¹¹⁸ Some members of the audience would thus have been able to detect foreshadowings of future narrative events, or undercurrents that had not yet risen explicitly into the plot, in the relationships

¹¹⁷ “Melodrama, Body, Revolution,” in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, eds. Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook, and Christine Gledhill, *ibid.*, p. 22.

¹¹⁸ Carolyn Williams, “Melodrama,” *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. Kate Flint, *ibid.*, p. 208.

between the various composed figures—their gazes, stances, gestures, and expressions. Thornton's mother is one such spectator, and is convinced, after watching Margaret clutch against her son, that this passionate young woman has set her cap at him. She's wrong: but Margaret's embrace of Thornton in this moment does, of course, prefigure that much later embrace that the two will share in the novel's concluding scene, when Margaret finally admits her love for the Milton manufacturer. And for that spectator who is the reader, too, Margaret's sudden clasping of Thornton in the face of danger is the first intimation that we receive (aside from their Lizzie-and-Darcy bickering) that there are currents of romantic attraction between the two. Further, the image of Margaret stepping between Thornton and his workers may also be seen to prefigure the conclusion of the novel's industrial plot, hinting at the mediating role that Margaret will play in brokering a less hostile relationship between master and men. Far from anticlimax, then, the riot scene climaxes in an electric moment of “dramatic condensation, a freeze-frame [...] that suggests both past and future”—both Margaret's long career of past suffering and the future resolution of her story arc.¹¹⁹

Such a reading could help to explain some of the more puzzling aspects of the scene, as well: for example, the odd way that Margaret seems to lose her voice when she steps onto the ‘stage’ with Thornton (“She could not speak [...] her words died away”) (178). Kucich reads this as a moment of theatrical failure, another way that the scene fails to rise to the ringing, declamatory pitch of melodrama: “as if she were an actress rushing onstage for her big scene only to forget her lines.”¹²⁰ But in light of the recognition that

¹¹⁹ Carolyn Williams, “Melodrama,” *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. Kate Flint, *ibid.*, p. 197.

¹²⁰ Kucich, “Political Melodrama Meets Domestic Fiction,” *ibid.*, p. 6.

Margaret is engaged in a tableau, her sudden muteness feels melodramatically appropriate: another sign that she is being “converted,” to use Peter Brooks’s word, by melodrama’s mute, bodily, pictorial aesthetic into a still, signifying image. Margaret’s intervention signals, not the averting of melodrama, but the takeover of the scene by a melodramatic aesthetic. In this moment, what we witness is the migration of melodrama from the plot to the form, happening, as it were, in real time—as if a switch has been flipped, as Margaret intervenes, and the melodramatic citation suddenly switches tracks, goes underground, and becomes a commentary on melodramatic representation itself. The desire to arrest speed in a moment of stasis, to halt the catastrophic onrush of events; the last-second rescue; the il/legibility of virtue to the broader community; all of these melodramatic obsessions, with which *North and South* has been so preoccupied, are crystallized and compressed in Margaret’s tableau: as the centerpiece of the novel, it amply bears out the novel’s pervasive rehearsal of melodramatic form.

It is, then, on the tableau that we now zoom in: a form, I will argue, that ought to figure prominently among those Victorian narrative structures that I am endeavoring to inventory in this dissertation, which all, in one way or another, served to broker the long transition from rhetoric to style. Indeed, when we survey the history of critical commentary on the tableau, we find that it has always been significantly shaped by critics’ opinions on rhetoric. Doubtless the most influential of these commentators was Denis Diderot, whose theorizations of the theatrical tableau are still routinely cited by scholars of melodrama today (Carolyn Williams calls him “the first great theorist of the tableau”).¹²¹ Diderot’s theater criticism is primarily contained in two key works, his

¹²¹ “Moving Pictures,” *ibid.*, p. 111.

“Discussion on *The Illegitimate Son*” (1757) and his “Discourse on Dramatic Poetry” (1758); a central leitmotif running through both works is Diderot’s condemnation of the theater of his day for directly addressing its scenes and speeches towards the audience, thus destroying the theatrical illusion—in other words, for being overly *rhetorical*, in the way that I’ve been using that term in these pages. This sample from the “Discussion” is representative:

In a dramatic representation, the beholder is no more to be taken into account than if he did not exist. Is there something addressed to him? The author has departed from his subject, the actor has been led away from his part. They both step down from the stage. I see them in the orchestra, and as long as the speech lasts, the action is suspended for me, and the stage remains empty.¹²²

It is in the “Discourse,” though, that Diderot dilates at greater length on this critique, arguing that a playwright who is too eager to play to his audience will end up imparting this overeager, soliciting quality to the performers: “And the actor, what will become of him if you have concerned yourself with the beholder? [...] You thought of the spectator, he will address himself to him. You wanted to be applauded, he will wish to be applauded. And I no longer know what will become of the illusion.”¹²³ Diderot’s constant refrain here, that maintaining the dramatic illusion depends on non-acknowledgement of the spectator, is, of course, precisely the same critique that will gain traction in Britain a century later, in not only theater, but also the novel and painting (as Michael Fried points out in his seminal *Absorption and Theatricality*, from which these quotes have been drawn, Diderot extended this critique to painting, as well, and was representative of a larger eighteenth-century French art discourse that favored paintings whose subjects

¹²² Quoted and translated by Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 94.

¹²³ Quoted and translated by Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, *ibid.*, p. 94.

seemed absorbed in their tasks, and thus unaware that there was a spectator watching). Indeed, Diderot, in the 1750s, was already arguing explicitly for the fourth wall: imploring actors to “[i]magine, at the edge of the stage, a high wall that separates you from the orchestra. Act as if the curtain never rose.”¹²⁴ Further, he extended this governing principle to every conceivable aspect of stagecraft, from costumes (“Actors, if you ruin yourselves buying costumes for the sake of the beholder, you have no taste, and you forget that the beholder means nothing to you”) to blocking (“the leading actors arrange themselves in a circle; they arrive with careful, measured steps; they seek applause, they depart from the action; they address themselves to the audience”).¹²⁵

Given, then, his distaste for any aspect of drama in which the performers seem to “arrange themselves” for the sake of the spectator—which he characterizes as a form of “address [...] to the audience”—one might be forgiven for assuming that Diderot would also hold the theatrical tableau to be a prime offender. Surprisingly, the very opposite is true: Diderot viewed the tableau as a salutary antidote to all that was rhetorical about the French theater. His reasoning here is fascinating, and perhaps best clarified by his distinction between the tableau and the *coup de théâtre*: the latter being defined as “[a]n unexpected incident that happens in the course of the action and that suddenly changes the situation of the characters,” while he defined the tableau as “[a]n arrangement of those characters on the stage, so natural and so true to life that, faithfully rendered by a painter, it would please me on canvas.”¹²⁶ Fried’s gloss of this distinction is a useful one:

In other words, a *coup de théâtre* took place as it were *within* the action and marked a sudden change of consciousness of the characters involved; whereas the grouping of figures and stage properties that constituted a *tableau* stood *outside* the action, with

¹²⁴ Quoted and translated by Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, *ibid.*, p. 95.

¹²⁵ Quoted and translated by Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, *ibid.*, p. 95.

¹²⁶ Quoted and translated by Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, *ibid.*

the result that the characters themselves appeared unaware of its existence and hence of its effect on the audience.¹²⁷

To Diderot, the tableau is not rhetorical—is not an example of an address to the audience, and therefore does not break the dramatic illusion—precisely because it is an extradiegetic effect: the tableau does not exist for the characters who are in it, it has no reality within the story-world. Unlike a character who knowingly addresses the crowd, the characters in the tableau display their non-acknowledgement of the audience by maintaining the poses that are “natural and [...] true to life” for their characters, and their diegetic interrelationships. This stands in marked contrast to Diderot’s contempt for an actor who displays too much consciousness of the audience in his performance, a fault which will destroy the believability of the character: “Every personage who departs from what is appropriate to his state or his character—an elegant magistrate, a woman who grieves and artfully arranges her arms, a man who walks and shows off his legs—is false and *mannered*.”¹²⁸ To be “*mannered*” in one’s performance was to deviate from the strictly naturalistic depiction of the character by seeking after applause: but when a character freezes suddenly in a tableau, it doesn’t detract from the naturalism of the character’s representation—indeed, for Diderot, it actually *accentuates* it, by fixing the character in an absorbed, self-contained, and diegetically representative posture.

Put another way, we have here to do with the two levels of theatricality that I discussed at such length in my previous chapter, on Charles Dickens: the first being the level of diegetic representation, and the second the level of extradiegetic theatrical reception, what Charles Lamb, in his 1825 essay on “Stage Illusion,” called “a perpetual

¹²⁷ Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, *ibid.*

¹²⁸ Quoted and translated by Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, *ibid.*, p. 100.

subinsinuation to us, the spectators” that no matter how distraught the actor on the stage appears, in reality all of his signs and tokens of distress are trained appeals made to the audience.¹²⁹ In the mannered actor, the “subinsinuation” is too emphasized, it is too apparent that all of the character’s actions are an artful and calculated performance; as Diderot puts it, such a character “seems to tell you: ‘Look how well I cry, how well I become angry, how well I implore’.”¹³⁰ The sub-level of theatrical reception—the level at which we know that it is only a play, and are able to appraise and rate the actor’s performance—comes to impinge upon the diegetic representation: and the character disappears into the actor, rather than vice versa. Here, the two levels are displeasingly blended together. In the tableau, on the contrary, the two levels are highlighted but *separated out*: as Carolyn Williams points out, the tableau is a moment in which “the audience pauses to remember that the actors are acting”—one can’t help but notice the blatant artificiality of the actors suddenly freezing on stage, and recall that they are witnessing a performance—while at the same time, “the actors act as if their absorption in their acting has not been broken.”¹³¹ Here, too, the level of theatrical reception is emphasized for the audience: but, unlike in the performance of the mannered actor, it is emphasized in such a way that, remarkably, does not touch the diegetic level, but allows that diegetic representation to continue in its self-contained state, only along a different track, as it were—for, in the story-world, the tableau does not exist, the action has not frozen, the characters are still going about their lives. The illusion has been broken, but the illusion remains untouched. The characters have not lost an ounce of their naturalism,

¹²⁹ Quoted in David Kurnick, *Empty Houses*, p. 16.

¹³⁰ Quoted and translated by Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, *ibid.*, p. 99.

¹³¹ “Moving Pictures,” *ibid.*, p. 113.

even as the artifice of theatricality has literally brought the performance to a halt. This is the miraculous aspect of the tableau that so fascinated Diderot: it is as if the world of the characters has broken off completely from the action taking place in the theater—as if, in that moment, for those characters, the audience has never existed less.

I've already discussed, in my previous chapter, the dramatic analogy that began to gain currency in Britain around the middle of the nineteenth century, which compared the rhetorical novelist to the theatrical "showman" and the discrete, withdrawing author to the modern dramatist. It should be clear, by now, that the tableau—the formal signature of stage melodrama—belongs to neither category, but borrows something of both, existing in an odd kind of in-between. On the one hand, it has undeniable elements of rhetoric—like a passage of authorial apostrophe inserted into a novel, the tableau interrupts the narrative action to open up a kind of surplus space of extradiegetic hints and interpretations that reflect back on the story; as Williams writes, "the tableau rises out of the action, yet detaches from it to turn around and function as commentary on it [...] It poses a mystery that is left over or left out of the action, and it is 'excessive' in this precise respect."¹³² At the same time, of course, the tableau is not a direct address in the same way as a rhetorical passage in a novel—it is not a theatrical prologue, something told to the audience—it is rather something shown, something constructed: it is a *composition*, in which meaning is oblique and indirect, needing to be ciphered out and interpreted. In other words, if the tableau is rhetoric, it is also style—in which presence is not a given, but must be traced back through the details of composition. This dissertation is occupied with transitional forms that express the continuity of Victorian rhetoric and

¹³² "Moving Pictures," *ibid.*, p. 113.

modernist style: forms by which the author's direct presence in the text, the author's address, was relocated into the interior of the story-world, or made into a mute feature of the text's arrangement and construction. Some of these forms (like the frame narrative, as we will see later on) had been around for centuries: but all of them found a new resurgence and a new life in nineteenth-century British fiction, as they were discovered by novelists wrestling with the prohibition on the vocal author and were found to be a useful bridge to a new kind of writing. I would suggest that the melodramatic tableau, too, was one such form: a form that had always served, in some way, to highlight—and heighten—the gap between the two levels of theatrical reception. In the nineteenth century, the tableau became a way for both playwrights and novelists to preserve a function of audience address, and metafictional commentary, without bursting the bubble of a self-enclosed diegetic world. It is an essential example of what I would call “rhetoric as style”—direct address folded into composition.

Revising Diderot (and Fried), Carolyn Williams—undoubtedly the leading theorist of the tableau today—has written that “paradoxically, the tableau represents—both within the action of the play and within the dynamics of spectatorship—absorption and theatricality bound up together.”¹³³ Williams is commenting here on the fact that the tableau in Diderot's own play, *The Illegitimate Son* (*Le fils naturel*), is in fact dependent for its effect on a series of convenient *coups de théâtre* immediately preceding; as such, when she writes that the tableau is both “outward and inward turning,” she has in mind both its generic status within the narrative, as an “absorbed, inward-turning, sentimental, and domestic scene” that is nevertheless interwoven with sensational and highly

¹³³ “Moving Pictures,” *ibid.*, p. 112.

theatrical plot twists, and the tableau's effect on its spectators: "While audience members pause to look at the compositional syntax of the stage picture, they turn inward to contemplate an interpretation of its significance in relation to the suspended action."¹³⁴ But implicit in Williams's account is another sense in which the tableau is both "outward and inward turning": that the characters in the tableau both "address themselves to the audience" *and* withdraw from the audience, recede to some other, inaccessible diegetic space for the duration of the freeze-frame. The abrupt, shocking solicitation that the tableau represents—shocking both because it depicts a breathless and sensational climax *within* the diegesis and because it throws the audience *out* of the represented diegetic events, breaking their immersion in the story—is one that can't be attributed to the characters themselves, for whom the moment of the tableau does not exist; they are locked into strenuous, agonized poses of maximal appeal to the spectator's emotions, but are also strangely absent. Where the characters have gone is, precisely, into the details of the tableau's "compositional syntax," to use Williams's phrase; for it is only by unpacking these telling details of construction that the viewer may detect the characters' personalities and relationships—not only as they are in the present moment, but also what they may become in the future. If the story has stopped, in terms of the action on the stage, it continues in the signifying syntax of the stage picture. Narrative presence becomes indirect, stylistic—is only accessible through a process of detection. In this way, the melodramatic tableau stages a preview of the textual processes that would later define the modernist author.

¹³⁴ "Moving Pictures," *ibid.*, p. 113.

“Inward” and “outward” are, of course, highly freighted terms for melodrama: a genre that is, after all, all about the externalization of what is interior. This brings us back to the drama of recognition, the externalizing of inner virtue—with the new understanding that this plot’s formal analogue in the tableau, in which the inner truth of the characters is printed on the composition of their outward postures and expressions, is always also, at least in its novelistic incarnation, a drama of the author’s in/visibility: a space to reflect on those strategies by which the unseen author’s presence is made legible in composition. In a more literal sense, too, the tableau has been a crucial accomplice to the plot of recognized virtue and guilt: Williams points out that some of the more famous melodramatic tableaux, such as the ‘vision scene’ at the end of Act 1 of Leopold Lewis’s *The Bells* (1871), involve the staging of a character’s memories or interior thoughts.¹³⁵ In *The Bells*’s vision scene, the rich burgomaster Mathias—who, it will turn out, made his fortune by robbing and murdering a “Polish Jew” on a snowy road 15 years prior to the start of the play’s action—hears sleigh bells while sitting alone, on a similarly snowy night, unlacing his boots: suddenly the backdrop of the stage opens up, revealing a tableau of the Polish Jew riding through the snow in his sleigh, with Mathias creeping up behind him. By this device, Mathias’s secret guilt, and the way it continues to gnaw at his mind, is externalized in pictorial form for the audience. What’s more, the tableau is subsequently compounded, when the actor playing Mathias turns around and recoils in shock at the sight of the tableau staging his guilt: in portraying the way that this private image torments him, Mathias himself freezes in a tableau of horror and despair. Thus

¹³⁵ See “Moving Pictures,” *ibid.*, pp. 107-9.

Lewis's tableau extends to incorporate its own spectator, modeling the intended effect of the stage picture on the beholder, who is himself fixed in shock by the arresting image.

This notion of the 'vision scene' may remind us of Margaret's dream in *North and South*, discussed earlier in this chapter. That dream is worth recalling here in its entirety:

Mr. Lennox [...] haunted her dreams that night. He was climbing up some tree of fabulous height to reach the branch whereon was slung her bonnet: he was falling, and she was struggling to save him, but held back by some invisible powerful hand. He was dead. And yet, with a shifting of the scene, she was once more in the Harley Street drawing-room, talking to him as of old, and still with a consciousness all the time that she had seen him killed by that terrible fall. (43)

We have already discussed the dream's radically condensed temporality, as well as the way that it progresses by a series of almost cinematic splices: an oddly static succession, in which the passage between states of being ("climbing [...] falling [...] dead") occurs through abrupt 'cuts', without any transition or gradation. In this way, the dream enacts Williams's formulation of melodramatic temporality as one in which "narrative time is built around a sequence of pictures," what she has elsewhere called "a form of serial pictorialization" (and the anticipation of film that this form implies is a point that Williams argues for explicitly).¹³⁶ With this in mind, Margaret's dream may be seen to offer a fascinating citation of the tableau: not only because it sets up a relation of spectatorship between Margaret and the dream-images—in which she is the beholder of these pictures even as she feels herself to be participating in them—but also because the images themselves are both shocking and weighted with enigmatic significance, inviting

¹³⁶ The first quotation is taken from Williams's talk at the 2018 NAVSA conference, "Melodramatic Form Writ Large in *Little Dorritt*," a transcript of which she has generously shared with me (North American Victorian Studies Association sixteenth annual conference, St. Petersburg, FL, October 14, 2018); the second quote is from Williams's piece on "Melodrama" in the "Keywords" issue of *VLC, Victorian Literature and Culture* 46.3/4 (Fall/Winter 2018), p. 771.

interpretation. It is in the final phase of the dream (a segment cued up by the explicitly theatrical language of “a shifting of the scene”) that the resonance of the tableau is most discernible: here, the logic of simultaneous spectatorship and participation, present from the start, finds representation within the dream itself, as Margaret is divided between two positions—at once engaged in conversation with Lennox and studying “the scene” from the outside, unsure of whether Lennox is alive or dead. By this “shifting,” the preceding images, of Lennox’s prior fall and death, become reframed as visions in Margaret’s “consciousness,” a purely mental picture that is, for her, overlaid with the apparently present conversation in the Harley Street drawing room. In this way, Margaret’s status as the spectator of the dream-images is itself staged within the dream. Like Mathias’s vision scene, the tableau of Margaret’s internal dream-vision incorporates the figure of its own (self-divided) spectator into its “sequence of pictures”: modeling the seized reaction of the beholder to the shocking image as two static compositions overlaid together.

But there is, as we have already seen, another way to view this scene: not as stasis, but as speed. By this reading, the “sequence of pictures” suggests a situation of extreme temporal compression, in which the transitional states between pictures, the ‘middles’, have been removed, or abbreviated out of all existence. The dream scene seems to want to be read in this way: after all, Margaret’s nightmare—with its distressed awareness that Lennox is chatting “as of old,” and yet has secretly suffered a “terrible fall”—clearly has its basis in her bewilderment, earlier that day, at the unnatural speed with which Lennox was able to shift back into “light and careless talking” with her father following the rejection of his proposal, showing no outward sign of the blow he had just suffered (30). The knowledge of Lennox’s suffering was only in Margaret’s

consciousness (Mr. Hale being unaware of the proposal), and was, for her, overlaid with the present conversation that she was witnessing. The pictorialism of the static tableau inscribes, in Gaskell's account, an anxiety about speed, about the abruptness with which momentous events, and the emotions they give rise to, begin and end—an anxiety that is also, we might say, the content of melodrama's form. What Margaret's dream ultimately demonstrates, then, is the contiguity of the tableau's static picture with the speed of melodramatic pacing—that, as I've been arguing, these two aspects of melodramatic form are two sides to the same coin, two ways of understanding the same narrative phenomena.

As such, if we want to understand how Gaskell uses the tableau as a transitional form for the repurposing of rhetoric into style in *North and South*, the place to look, I would argue, is in fact to that singular pattern of on-cue, telegraphed entrances from which we began: those abrupt fulfillments that shock precisely because they seem to leap immediately to a realization, eliminating any intervening 'middle' process. I'd like to close, then, by taking a look at one of these moments in particular: namely, the revelation of Boucher's corpse, coming just after Margaret has accused Higgins of making Boucher "what he is." It is one of the most stunningly stagey scenes in the novel. The scene begins when Margaret and her father pay a visit to Nicholas Higgins, a mill worker with whom Margaret has struck up an unlikely friendship; Higgins is also active in the labor union that has recently organized a failed strike against Thornton and the other manufacturers. Before long, Margaret begins to remonstrate with Higgins about what she sees as the "tyranny" of the union—a complaint which grows more fervent as the conversation turns to Higgins's neighbor and fellow mill worker, the unfortunate John Boucher, who went to

the masters offering to inform on the union in exchange for work during the peak of the strike, and has now been blackballed by both sides. The cue that triggers the relay of prefiguration and fulfillment is Margaret's accusation that Higgins is personally responsible for Boucher's desperate state:

"[...] Don't you see how you've made Boucher what he is, by driving him into the Union against his will—without his heart going with it. You have made him what he is!"

Made him what he is? What was he?

Gathering, gathering along the narrow street, came a hollow, measured sound; now forcing itself on their attention. Many voices were hushed and low: many steps were heard, not moving onwards [...] Yes, there was one distinct, slow tramp of feet, which made itself a clear path through the air, and reached their ears; the measured laboured walk of men carrying a heavy burden. They were all drawn towards the house-door by some irresistible impulse; impelled thither—not by a poor curiosity, but as if by some solemn blast.

Six men walked in the middle of the road, three of them being policemen. They carried a door, taken off its hinges, upon their shoulders, on which lay some dead human creature [...] (294)

So manifestly theatrical is this scene that the passage itself almost reads as a playscript—with the description of the "gathering [...] hollow, measured sound," the heavy steps and muttering voices that suddenly seize the characters' attention, resembling a stage direction for a series of mysterious, backstage noises, which then emerge into visibility moments later as the six somber pallbearers walk onstage. The moment feels as choreographed as the arrival of divine retribution in some classical tragedy, as Margaret's prophetic words are echoed immediately by the portentous rumbling of indistinct murmurs, growing closer and closer, and apparently coming directly towards Higgins's house; the fateful, indeed supernatural quality of the sound is emphasized by Gaskell's statement that it is "drawn towards the house-door by some irresistible impulse, impelled thither." But of course there is no supernatural causation in this novel: rather, what the uncanny, miraculous quality of the scene signals here is that this occurrence, happening

in the way it does, is utterly implausible by the diegetic standards of the narrative, and indeed, can only be understood by recourse to an agency that transcends the naturalistic reality of the story-world: namely, the novelist herself. So evident, in fact, is the theatrical relationship between Margaret's accusation and the funeral procession that it instantly conjures up, that it is obvious at once whose body is being brought out—even to those within the scene, as a terrified Higgins begins to ramble, unprompted, before the corpse is even visible, "It's not John Boucher? He had na spunk enough. Sure! It's not John Boucher! Why, they are a' looking this way! Listen! I've a singing in my head, and I cannot hear" (294).

This moment, too, functions as a kind of melodramatic 'vision scene', but in a somewhat different way than Margaret's dream: here, we detect the tableau's influence in the externalization of Higgins's guilt in a spectacular, visual form, which causes this guilt to be recognized before the greater community—indicated by Higgins's horrified realization that the whole neighborhood is beginning to turn accusing eyes on him ("Why, they are a' looking this way!"). But this melodramatic fulfillment—which originated, after all, in Margaret's concern for Boucher's desperate position and unwell state of mind, telling Higgins that he "drove him mad"—is also the actualization of Margaret's own worst fears, and in this way fits a larger pattern that may be observed across the novel's many 'speak of the devil' entrances, almost all of which involve the shocking realization of an anxiety that Margaret had just framed in her mind: from the appearance of Frederick's enemy, Leonards, on the train platform just as Frederick is making his escape (and just after Margaret has commented on her fear that Leonards may happen to be at the station), to the distressing appearance of Thornton, just when

Margaret has resolved not to think of him (and we may also include here the death of Mr. Hale, which occurs just after he has expressed his worry for what would happen to Margaret if he were to die). These abrupt fulfillments, which we have discussed in relation to narrative speed, must also be considered as a kind of externalization, a staging of what is worried over in the private spaces of the mind. The fears that are expressed in thought or speech must be rendered as public, visual spectacles: what is *told* must be *shown*.

No scene in *North and South* better captures this melodramatic dynamic of translating ‘telling’ into ‘showing’ than the reveal of Boucher’s corpse. Indeed, the most remarkable part of the passage is the line that comes right after Margaret’s accusation, “You have made him what he is!” “Made him what he is?” the narrator replies. “What was he?” A reader might be forgiven for assuming—as I did, the first time I read this line—that this is Higgins’s skeptical reply to Margaret’s assertion; the line is, after all, indented like a line of dialogue, and is apparently spoken in direct reply to Margaret’s speech. Only on a second reading did I realize that there are no quotation marks around this reply: this is not a line being spoken diegetically, by a character in-scene—it is a line of extradiegetic, rhetorical address, directed from the author to the reader. Indeed, it is perhaps the only line of unvarnished direct address in the entire novel: the only place where the author steps forward and speaks *as herself*, as a present commentator reacting to the story, rather than merely a neutral narrating voice, reporting Margaret’s thoughts in free indirect discourse. It is the one moment when Gaskell is directly present in the text—and it is not by accident that this moment of address happens to coincide, in the scene, with such a highly theatrical narrative fulfillment: an on-cue entrance so stagey that we

can *feel* ourselves being addressed by the author through the very construction of the story-events, the overbearing implication of which is all too obvious. In fact, the former kind of address *becomes* the latter: it is as if Gaskell began to write a rhetorical sermon to the reader about Boucher's misery, and the role of Higgins and the union in bringing it about, and then instead decided to stage this message within the plot, to convey the meaning indirectly, through the signifying sequence and arrangement of the narrative materials. What begins as rhetoric is theatricalized and becomes telling composition. It is in this way—through the adoption of melodramatic forms—that the Victorian novel began to learn to tell itself.

Chapter 3

Style as Mystery: Late James and the Story of the Story

1. The Short Story in the Age of Style

Thus far, this project has been centered on novels of the 1850s, the hinge decade during which critical opinion on rhetorical narration in Britain began to shift. My intention has been to show how early, and by what unexpected means (character tics, theatrical narration, compressed plotting, melodramatic tableau), British novelists were already thinking through the aesthetic transition that the novel would undergo, from a model in which the author purports to appear as a candid, vocal presence in her own text, to a model wherein the author is only traceable through the telling details of composition—the model of style as we have known it since modernism.

For the final two chapters of this dissertation, we now leap ahead to the closing decades of the century: the period of style's ascendancy, what Travis R. Merritt has called "a great speculative and practical vogue of style [...] whose central concern seems to have been the elevation of the prose medium to new heights of expressiveness, distinction, and finesse."¹³⁷ What was only nascent in the 1850s had, by the '80s and '90s, come into full flower: these decades would witness a flood of journal articles, books, anthologies, and reviews dedicated to the now-pressing topic of prose style, by the likes of George Saintsbury, T. H. Wright, John Earle, W. H. Mallock, Walter Raleigh, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Walter Pater, to name only a few—and the authors that we'll be considering in these chapters, Henry James and Joseph Conrad, are themselves

¹³⁷ "Taste, Opinion, and Theory in the Rise of Victorian Prose Stylism," in *The Art of Victorian Prose*, eds. George Levine and William Madden (Oxford: Oxford UP: 1968), p. 4.

synonymous with the new aesthetic commitment to, and disciplined practice of, prose style.¹³⁸ In these years, the model of style as we know it today achieved a new kind of prominence and overtness in the critical discourse around the English novel: and the idea that the term ‘style’ names that peculiar process whereby the author’s subjective personality is dispersed into a work’s linguistic and technical features was openly articulated—as in T. H. Wright’s representative 1877 essay in *Macmillan’s Magazine*, simply titled “Style”:

In any written composition, the less the author’s personality is involved in the matter treated, the simpler the language which suffices [...] As we ascend the scale of literary composition the author’s personality creeps in, and brings with it a corresponding complexity of language, not merely the complexity of structure of sentences, but of choice of words, use of figures of speech, and all the refinements of elaborate writing.¹³⁹

For Wright, evidence of intricacy and detail in the composition of a work is always indexical to the writer’s unique personality: and the higher the quality of a work of literature, the more its author will be traceable in the text in this way.

If these technical details, then, are where the author *was*—that is, in the “structure of sentences, [...] choice of words, use of figures of speech, and all the refinements of elaborate writing”—then it is equally clear where the author was *not*: she was decidedly *not* present as a centralized, chatty, vocal speaker in the text—and it is no coincidence that by 1880 the use of authorial rhetoric in the British novel was fast becoming a memory, a dead letter living out a whimsical, self-mocking afterlife in the pastiches of comic writers like George Meredith (as well as, of course, in the dwindling ranks of those

¹³⁸ Merritt remains the best source on this literature. See “Taste, Opinion, and Theory in the Rise of Victorian Prose Stylism,” in *The Art of Victorian Prose*, eds. Levine and Madden, *ibid.*, pp. 19-30.

¹³⁹ T. H. Wright, “Style,” *Macmillan’s Magazine* 37 (November 1877): 78-80.

older authors who remained resolutely behind the times). For the younger generation of writers, it was clear, the posture of authorial address was no longer a live option for the novel. Indeed, the novelists who aligned themselves with the new “stylism” (as Merritt terms the “vogue” for prose style in this period) agreed that it was predicated on the effacement of the author as a naively visible, vocal presence in her own text: as Conrad wrote, in discussing the way in which “a novelist lives in his work,” the author must be “a figure behind the veil, a suspected rather than a seen presence”; and James writes, in a very similar key, of “the creative power [...] veiled and disembodied.”¹⁴⁰ This veil was necessary if the author was only to inhabit the writing as a dispersed agent of style.

But for all that, my aim in these final chapters will be to show the surprising extent to which, even as they articulated and debated a new understanding of style, novelists of the period remained, in their efforts to enact this new style regime in their work, captivated and preoccupied by the rhetorical address that style had seemingly vanquished. After all, it is one thing to *say* that style means the personality of the author distributed into the details of composition—another thing to know what this actually looks like on the page, how to go about creating a new kind of narrative prose that will reflect this modern understanding. To invent this new writing was the task of the authors of the ‘80s and ‘90s: and they did not invent it out of whole cloth, but proceeded, like their forebears in the 1850s, who were the first to begin to think through these issues, by crafting the new style *out of* the older pose of rhetoric—by *remaking* rhetoric into style,

¹⁴⁰ “Taste, Opinion, and Theory in the Rise of Victorian Prose Stylism,” in *The Art of Victorian Prose*, eds. Levine and Madden, *ibid.*, p. 4. The Conrad line is quoted in Allon White, *The Uses of Obscurity: The Fiction of Early Modernism* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 42; the James quote is from the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, in *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, introduction by R. P. Blackmur, reprinted (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962 [1934]), p. 327.

rather than discarding it. To recognize the ways in which putative pioneers of style like James and Conrad were in fact following a pattern cut out by much earlier, mid-century novelists like Dickens and Gaskell is to recognize not only the deep continuity of rhetoric and style as literary strategies, but also the unexpected continuities in those forms that served as the relay points of this aesthetic transition: the continuity, for instance, of melodramatic form in the Victorian novel and a *fin de siècle* aestheticism.

In the two preceding chapters, I've emphasized the role of the theater as the key interlocutor for the mid-century Victorian novel as it began to move into this state of transition. In what follows, theatricality will remain a useful term to think with—as the theater continued to be a productive foil and example for novelistic aesthetics into the 1880s and '90s—but the locus of our discussion will shift to a very different literary medium, which I will argue began to provide a crucial space for novelists to experiment with, and reflect upon, the kind of formal strategies that could broker the conversion of existing storytelling conventions into a new regime of style writing in the final decades of the nineteenth century: namely, the *short story*. The emergence of the modern short story in Britain—often dated to 1880 and reaching new heights of popularity in the 1890s—charted a trajectory remarkably parallel to the arrival of the new stylism. Short stories were written and published in Britain throughout the nineteenth century, of course, and nearly every well-known mid-Victorian novelist also produced volumes of short fiction (Thackeray, Dickens, Gaskell, Trollope): but the short story in Britain in these years was viewed more or less as journal filler, entirely in the shadow of the three-volume novel that so dominated the British literary scene—having none of the prestige or formal independence that the short story enjoyed in the United States and France, where

practitioners like Edgar Allan Poe, Prosper Mérimée, and Guy de Maupassant understood themselves to be practicing a distinct literary art from the novel, with its own constitutive laws of concision. It was not until the '80s and '90s that the British short story would attain this kind of aesthetic autonomy and be theorized as a specific medium of literary expression in its own right: a recognition that attended upon the rapid rise of the short story to a new kind of mass popularity in those same years, as the number of journals devoted to short fiction proliferated at an unprecedented pace.

The rise of the British short story in the 1880s is generally attributed to a trifecta of historical factors—the decline of the circulating library system (and the concomitant waning of the triple-decker novel); the passing of the Elementary Education Acts, beginning in 1870, which provided for the compulsory education of all children, generating a literate mass readership; and technical improvements in the efficiency of printing, particularly in typesetting—all “prompting a flood of new cheap magazines and papers, many of which gave a central place to short fiction.”¹⁴¹ Meanwhile, contemporary commentators understood the new popularity and prominence of the short story—and the new kind of narrative aesthetic that it represented—as a reflection of the times, of the forces of modernity, urbanization, and secularism that seemed poised to define the next century. As G. K. Chesterton eloquently put it,

Our modern attraction to short stories is not an accident of form; it is the sign of a real sense of fleetingness and fragility; it means that existence is only an impression, and, perhaps, only an illusion. A short story of to-day has the air of a dream: it has the irrevocable beauty of a falsehood; we get a glimpse of grey streets of London or red plains of India, as in an opium vision; we see people—arresting people with fiery and appealing faces. But when the story is ended the people are ended. We have no instinct of anything ultimate and enduring behind the episodes. The moderns, in a

¹⁴¹ Emma Liggins, Andrew Maunder, and Ruth Robbins, *The British Short Story* (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 30. See also Clare Hanson, *Short Stories and Short Fictions, 1880-1980* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985), pp. 10-11.

word, describe life in short stories because they are possessed with the sentiment that life itself is an uncommonly short story, and perhaps not a true one.¹⁴²

As Chesterton makes clear, the new aesthetic of the short story was associated with a kind of imagism, an impressionism of vivid but fleeting glimpses: with brevity came the need for a higher concentration of intensity, for a piece that could make its impact on a reader all at once—in a single, crystallized moment—rather than building and cultivating that impact over the course of many chapters. At the same time, this impressionism signified a turn to the visual, to seeing, to *showing*—an aesthetic that also stood as an implicit reproach of the meandering, chatty discursivity of the rhetorical three-volume novel, with its aesthetic of *telling*. We’ve already noted, in Chapter 1, that the Victorians had understood the drama, too, to be an art of economy: and the insistent calls for “dramatic presentation” in the novel that became such a potent vehicle for the critique of rhetorical storytelling in the 1850s and ‘60s were themselves also a critique of the novel’s sheer *length*, of its sprawling shapelessness and superfluous digressions: as G. H. Lewes wrote in *Blackwood’s* in 1860, “the art of the dramatist consists in having everything in its proper place,” for “in the drama there is less time to tell the story in”; nonetheless, its “requirements as to construction” pertained to the novel, too, and since “the object of construction is to free the story of all superfluity,” any authorial “[r]emarks *away* from the immediate business of the scene [...] are faults.”¹⁴³ Critics of the period readily connected this “art of the dramatist” to shorter forms of prose narrative: to the “slender” French novel, in which, as one critic wrote in *Fraser’s*, “none of the actors ever come

¹⁴² Charles Dickens: *The Last of the Great Men* (New York: The Press of the Readers Club, 1942 [1906]), p. 63.

¹⁴³ *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* LXXXVII (March 1860): 333-4. Quoted in Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 121.

upon the stage without having something indispensable to do” (as this critic had complained earlier in the same piece, “The novel, in our sense of its weight and dimensions, is utterly unknown in Europe”); or to Jane Austen’s supposed miniaturism, which another critic of 1860 compared favorably to a “microscope,” writing that “the field of view may be in some sense a small one; but [...] the minutest markings of character are beautifully shown in it.”¹⁴⁴ Austen was also, of course, Lewes’s prime exemplar of “*dramatic presentation*”: as he had written one year earlier, in 1859, “instead of telling us what her characters are, and what they feel, she presents the people, and they reveal themselves.”¹⁴⁵ In this way, the new critical consensus that began to favor dramatic showing over rhetorical telling as early as the ‘50s had already carried with it a negative association between rhetoric and novelistic length, as both connoting a kind of inartistic excess and formlessness. The rise of the short story in the ‘80s, then, must also be understood as the arrival of a narrative form capable of responding to, and capitalizing upon, the increasing prevalence of these kind of critiques, which had been gaining steam for the last 20 years.

Indeed, a kind of mutually productive symbiosis subsisted between the critical discourse of stylism and the short story at the end of the nineteenth century, as both came into their own: for the privileging of prose style involved, crucially, the forwarding of a set of aesthetic values cognate with the modern short story form itself. What is fascinating, however, is the extent to which this style discourse of the ‘80s and ‘90s may be seen to represent an outgrowth of the anti-rhetorical critiques of the ‘50s and ‘60s,

¹⁴⁴ *Fraser’s* LII (June 1856): 727-31; *Fraser’s* LXI (January 1860): 31. For a discussion of this criticism, see Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England*, *ibid.*, pp. 115-21.

¹⁴⁵ Italics in original. *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. LXXXVI (July 1859): 101.

now become a positive articulation of style—and as such, the extent to which arguments that were originally made by way of analogy to the theater and the “dramatic” now seemed to find their ideal vehicle in the emergence of the short story. Just as the earlier critiques of rhetoric had invoked an ideal of eliminating superfluity (an ideal notionally authorized by the drama), style was now understood as intrinsically dependent on processes of selection, rejection, and concision: in Stevenson’s essay “On Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature” (1885), the first element listed is “Choice of Words”: “every word, phrase, sentence, and paragraph must move in a logical progression, and convey a definite conventional import”¹⁴⁶; while Pater’s “Style” (1888) posits that “in truth all art does but consist in the removal of surplusage,”¹⁴⁷ and Vernon Lee’s 1895 article “On Literary Construction,” later published as the introductory essay to her book-length study of style, *The Handling of Words* (1923), argues (in an echo of Lewes) that “construction [...] means finding out what is important and unimportant, what you can afford and cannot afford to do.”¹⁴⁸ Such theorizations seem implicitly aimed at the modern short story: a narrative art based on, in the words of one critic writing in 1898, “omissions [...] [and] the brevity of its allusiveness,” a form in which every detail must be made to tell and no word is wasted; and it is worth remembering that Stevenson and Lee were themselves noted writers of short stories.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, the emphasis in Pater and Lee on literary style as a process of *rejection*, of paring away unwanted meaning, resonates with a short story form conceived by eminent practitioners

¹⁴⁶ Collected in *Essays in the Art of Writing* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1905), p. 6.

¹⁴⁷ Collected in *Appreciations* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1922), p. 19.

¹⁴⁸ *The Handling of Words* (London: John Lane, 1923), p. 6.

¹⁴⁹ Frederick Wedmore, “The Short Story,” *Nineteenth Century* 43 (1898); quoted in Liggins, Maunder, and Robbins, *The British Short Story*, *ibid.*, p. 68.

like Rudyard Kipling as the whittled product of repeated “cuttings.”¹⁵⁰ Style asked one to consider the minutiae of linguistic construction, to seek maximum effect with a minimum expenditure of words—practices familiar to writers of short fiction; like the short story, style was open to charges of triviality, littleness, and indulgent miniaturism. What’s more, ‘unity of effect’—a clear holdover from the dramatic analogy, and the classical notion of the dramatic unities—was now considered an essential feature of style, no less than of short fiction; Saintsbury deplored “diffuseness,” and actually included the novel (along with journalism, science, and democracy) on his list of the four factors responsible for style’s neglect.¹⁵¹ Meanwhile, the fleeting and impressionistic nature of the short story’s “allusiveness” bore an intriguing parallel with the putative impressionism of style—style understood as an individual writer’s unique way of apprehending the world, and aligned with the effort to cultivate the fineness of one’s own impressions. In this way, the individuality of the writer was expressed at the level of the linguistic surface and technical construction of the narrative text, rather than—as had been the case with the classic realist novel—by the discursive presence of the author affecting to speak in her own person. What the discourse of stylism proposed in the latter decades of the century was that the writer’s personality did not have to perform itself directly to be felt, but would instead be expressed naturally as an attribute of the work’s composition: as Havelock Ellis remarked in 1894, “An artist’s private opinions concerning the things that are good and bad in the larger world are sufficiently implicit in the structure of his own

¹⁵⁰ Hanson, *Short Stories and Short Fictions*, *ibid.*, pp. 35-6; see also Liggins, Maunder, and Robbins, *The British Short Story*, *ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁵¹ See Merritt, “Taste, Opinion, and Theory in the Rise of Victorian Prose Stylism,” in *The Art of Victorian Prose*, eds. Levine and Madden, *ibid.*, p. 27.

smaller world.”¹⁵² This “smaller world” of composed and ordered art, built on selection and paring away (and we might recall here, too, James’s sense of the essential *boundedness* of art, its drawing of a necessary, delimiting circle around potentially infinite relations) was once represented in the Victorian imagination as a stage: now it was realized in the short story.

We can think, then, of the continuity of the theater and the short story, as the two key aesthetic interlocutors of the novel considered in this dissertation, as adhering primarily in three shared formal qualities: a mode of representation that is at once *efficient*, *presentational*, and *indirect*. We have already discussed the narrative efficiency or economy that the Victorians ascribed to both arts: each was understood to operate within a confined duration of narrative time (not diegetic time but storytelling time), and as such had, of necessity, to observe a strict self-discipline that forbid any extraneous matter not immediately contributing to the furthering of the story at hand—of which a digressive, chatty, rhetorical commentary would have, of course, been an obvious offender. Related to this was the identification of both with a *presentational* aesthetic. Theater was, of course, with its characteristic dispersal of the author’s storytelling agency into a performance, the very type and model of an art where the narrative must be *presented*, enacted, shown rather than told: but, as we have seen, the short story, too, in its break from the vocal narration practices of the long novel, signified a turn towards the visual and the intensities of the crystallized image—bearing an aesthetic that, in some ways, may be seen to extend the expressionist pictorialism of Victorian melodrama (discussed in Chapter 2), in which what is interior to character must be externalized,

¹⁵² “Zola: the Man and his Work,” *Savoy* 1 (1896), quoted in Kenneth Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel, 1865-1900* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965), p. 94.

made transparent before the viewer, in moments of telling, representative imagery. While in the novel, a character could be dissected and described at leisure in a narratorial sidebar at any point prior to or during a scene, the efficiency of the short story meant that the revelation of character had to occur through the action of the scene itself, encapsulated in a signifying moment: in short, characters had to present themselves. This association between presentation in the short story and in the drama was not lost on writers of the time: for example, as we will see, the mantra of Henry James, in his struggles with the constricting word limits of short fiction, was always to “Dramatise it, dramatise it!”¹⁵³ This brings us, finally, to the notion that both arts depended on *indirect* means of communicating with one’s audience—that precisely because direct authorial address was not available, the reader’s understanding of the story had to be guided through, in the case of the drama, such means as the dialogue of the characters, the incidental cues of staging (stage music, lighting, and other effects), and the meaningful arrangement of the story-events themselves. In the aesthetic of the modern short story, too, there was a recognition that much of the important communication with the reader had to occur through the strategic construction of the narrative materials—including, notably, what *doesn’t* appear, its “omissions [...] [and] the brevity of its allusiveness,” representative of a narrative form that strove continually to speak volumes with few words, to ‘tell’ through the suggestiveness of its composition. In this respect, it is unsurprising that novelists would look to these two arts, theater and the short story, at successive moments in the century, for insight into how their own authorial address could be integrated as a feature of the technical construction of the text.

¹⁵³ From the preface to “The Altar of the Dead,” in *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 251.

But from all this, one could well get the idea that the short story in the period of its late-century popularity was strictly an affair of aestheticism: that every short story writer was a proto-Joyce, weaving his fine tissue of impressions and epiphanies, and every journal *The Yellow Book*. Of course, this was far from true—for the ascendance of the short story was propelled in large part, as we've already noted, by the mass of newly literate readers, and as such a great amount of the short fiction on the market naturally catered to a populist taste for more formulaic genre fiction: tales of adventure, detective stories à la Conan Doyle, stories of ghosts and vampires, early science fiction (H. G. Wells began publishing stories in 1887, a year after Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), and thrillers and potboilers of all kinds. But it would be equally misleading to overstate the separation between genre stories and self-consciously aestheticist fare: for while it was true that they were largely sorted into distinct journals (art stories and impressionism into journals like *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*, detective stories and colonial adventure tales into middle-class-oriented journals like *The Strand*), no such partition was observed by the writers themselves—after all, several of the names that I have cited above as central contributors to the theorization of style in their critical writings were also publishing genre tales: Stevenson wrote thrillers and adventure stories, and Henry James and Vernon Lee both published a great many supernatural tales, often inflected with aestheticist themes. There are a number of potential factors that could help to explain why such authors, devoted as they were to the new stylism and interested in the affordances of a modern short story aesthetic, would write so prolifically in well-trod genres like the ghost story (for one, the short story was seen as an easy way for an author to make a little money, and there was a ready market

for these kind of tales), but what I want to suggest here is that one of the key reasons is one that mirrors our earlier point about the efforts of authors in the '80s and '90s to enact the new model of style in their fiction: namely, that a writer raised on the storytelling strategies of the Victorian novel did not simply sit down and write a modern, *Dubliners*-type short story out of whole cloth—instead, these writers adapted existing forms of storytelling towards the aesthetic of the new medium that they envisioned. The formulaic and repetitive narrative devices of genre stories did not stand apart from the aesthetic project of the modern short story, I'll argue, but were, in fact, crucial transitional forms that helped to midwife that new story into existence. What's more, I'll argue that these generic narrative forms, by assisting writers in transitioning to the post-rhetorical aesthetic of the modern short story, also played an important facilitating role in the efforts of these authors to frame and enact a proto-modernist style writing: not only in the short story, but also within the novel.

The best example to illustrate this process, and the focus of the current chapter, is a narrative form that I will be calling the *mystery plot*. What defines the mystery plot is its uniquely doubled narrative structure, which is composed of two stories: there is the story, and then there is the story *of* the story. The overall structure plays out something like this: in the beginning, the reader—along with the central character(s)—encounters a number of odd and seemingly inexplicable events, which lack any unifying sense or logic. These disjointed and unintelligible events demand an account, a story, that will make them coherent and explicable: but the characters and reader are unable to access this story, which remains mysteriously hidden. The characters' task now becomes to piece together, assemble, or otherwise discover the hidden story that will explain the

mysterious events. This secret, hidden story is revealed only at the conclusion of the narrative, and generally appears as a diegetically embedded account, narrated by one of the characters. The narrative theorist Tzvetan Todorov, who first theorized this form in 1971, called it simply “the whodunit”: and famously coined the two stories as “the story of the investigation” and “the story of the crime,” respectively.¹⁵⁴ As is well known, Todorov also pointed out that the two stories can be understood to represent, and schematically separate out, the two constituent aspects of narrative: what the Russian Formalists called the *fabula* and *syuzhet* (or, as I’ll be calling them, “story” and “discourse,” following Seymour Chatman).¹⁵⁵ The story of the crime (the hidden account that is revealed only at the end) is the “story” proper of the narrative, the coherent sequence of its real events in their actual order of occurrence: while the story of the investigation is the story-of-the-story, the story of how that story came to be constructed and told, and thus corresponds to discourse, to the representation of the story events in narrative—events which might be told out of order, or in any kind of jumbled or disjointed fashion. In short, the mystery plot is a tale about its own telling. The driving purpose and interest of the central characters within the narrative is their effort to tell the story that they themselves exist within—to comprehend and narrate their own narrative; by the same token, the tension and drama of the narrative for the reader—the suspense of the story—is the suspense of waiting for the story itself to be told. It is this oddly recursive, self-referential quality of the mystery plot that has made it a critical darling of

¹⁵⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 44. First published in French as *La Poétique de la prose* in 1971.

¹⁵⁵ Todorov, “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Howard, *ibid.*, p. 45. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978).

narrative theorists—and this self-reflexivity also made it, I will argue, a supremely useful form for short story writers of the 1880s and ‘90s to reflect upon the discursive strategies of their own storytelling, and the relation of the storytelling agency to the composed narrative itself.

In my above account of the mystery plot—which Todorov identified exclusively with “classic detective fiction”—I have intentionally refrained from any reference to the figure of a detective or a criminal (although, for the sake of ease and clarity, I will continue to follow Todorov in referring to the two stories as “the story of the crime” and “the story of the investigation”).¹⁵⁶ This is because I wish to emphasize that the mystery plot, as a narrative form, was hardly unique to the detective story at the end of the nineteenth century: it was also the form that defined most supernatural tales, and tales of mystery of all kinds, including, notably, Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Sheridan Le Fanu’s seminal vampire story *Carmilla* (1872), and many of the earliest H. G. Wells stories. It is not, then, essential that there be a detective or even a crime: in fact, decades before the popularity of Sherlock Holmes—doubtless the figure with which, today, we would most readily associate this type of narrative—the mystery plot had already been widely in use as the signature form of the Victorian ghost story, exemplified by classic tales like Elizabeth Gaskell’s “The Old Nurse’s Story” (1852). In this version, the mysterious events are the manifestations of a haunting (odd sightings, eerie sounds, etc.) that are encountered by an outside visitor to the house: and the hidden story is generally revealed in the end, not by a detective or investigator, but by an elderly servant, who finally provides an account of the unfortunate fate of a former occupant of the house,

¹⁵⁶ Todorov, “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Howard, *ibid.*, p. 44.

which serves to explain the specific noises heard or figures seen, as well as their regularity of time and place—the story of the crime is here the story of the ghost. In *Jekyll and Hyde*, meanwhile, Utterson the lawyer is the amateur investigator attempting to piece together the truth, but the hidden story is finally narrated, not by him, but by Jekyll himself, in a final written testament before his death (“Henry Jekyll’s Full Statement of the Case”). In the 1880s and ‘90s, then, the mystery plot form would have been identified, not only with the wild success of Conan Doyle’s Holmes stories, and the detective genre that they helped to formalize, but with the whole gamut of thrillers, spooky stories, and tales of horror and suspense then popping up like mushrooms all over the literary market—and even a writer like Henry James, who never wrote a formal detective story, would return repeatedly to the mystery plot structure in the numerous ghost stories that he penned during these two decades. Thus, while its use predated the rise of the short story in the 1880s, the recursive structure of the mystery plot was unmistakably one of the generic forms that experienced a resurgence with the explosion of short fiction in this period—precisely *because* its utility was not limited to any specific generic content.

But the *fin de siècle* mystery plot was also one of the most significant transitional forms by which late-century authors began to rehearse the aesthetic practices of the modern short story during the years of its first emergence—and, in so doing, to rehearse the practices of style. Consider, for example, one of the most influential recent accounts of the short story aesthetic, Ricardo Piglia’s “Theses on the Short Story” (2011), of which the first thesis is that “a short story always tells two stories”:

The classic short story—Poe, Quiroga—narrates Story One (the tale of the gambling) in the foreground, and constructs Story Two (the tale of the suicide) in secret. The art

of the short story consists in knowing how to encode Story Two in the interstices of Story One. A visible story hides a secret tale, narrated in an elliptical and fragmentary manner. The effect of surprise is produced when the end of the secret story appears on the surface.¹⁵⁷

The example that Piglia is referencing here is the one-sentence germ of a story from Chekhov's notebooks, in which, Piglia proposes, "[t]he classic form of the short story is condensed": "A man in Monte Carlo goes to the casino, wins a million, returns home, commits suicide." What makes this enigmatic snippet so representative, Piglia claims, is that it "disconnects the story of the gambling and the story of the suicide": we think we are being told one story (a tale of surprising luck and fortune), but in the end it becomes apparent that we were being told a different story all along, a story that was shadowed forth only implicitly in the matter that had come before—the story of a man's decision to end his own life.¹⁵⁸ In such a story, meaningful details in the surface-level story "encode" the hidden story by a method of "implication and allusion," such that its final emergence into visibility at the end carries a payout of surprise, but has also been stealthily prepared for all along the way: after all, the ending can't seem totally arbitrary.¹⁵⁹ Piglia's account makes clear the formal linkages between a mystery plot that operates by schematically separating out the "real" story, which is kept secret until the end, from the narrative process whereby that story is decoded out of a series of seemingly random details (what he calls "Story Two" and "Story One") and a short story aesthetic rooted in the interplay of suggestive omissions and telling narrative construction with crystallized moments of epiphanic transparency. Indeed, the nineteenth-century detective story or tale of supernatural mystery, as we've traced its form above, would itself be a signal example of

¹⁵⁷ Ricardo Piglia, "Theses on the Short Story," *New Left Review* 70 (July–August 2011): 63.

¹⁵⁸ Piglia, "Theses on the Short Story," *ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Piglia, "Theses on the Short Story," *ibid.*: 65.

Piglia's "classic form of the short story"—which he ties, after all, to Poe¹⁶⁰: and the difference between this "classic" model and "[t]he modern version of the short story that descends from Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield, Sherwood Anderson, the Joyce of *Dubliners*" is, for Piglia, merely that in the latter "the secret story is told in ever more elusive fashion," such that "it abandons the surprise ending [...] [and] works the tension between the two stories without ever resolving it."¹⁶¹ Piglia's chief example of this modern version is the Hemingway story, "Big Two-Hearted River," which appears to be "a trivial description of a fishing trip," but is actually about the indelible marking of the protagonist by wartime trauma: this hidden story is never announced, however, not even in the end—it is visible only in its telling omission.¹⁶² By this accounting, the modern short story is no more than a refined version of the mystery plot; both revolve around the same set of "technical problems," which may be summed up in the question, "How to tell a story while another is being told?"¹⁶³

Fascinatingly, Fredric Jameson makes a remarkably similar claim in his 2013 study *The Antinomies of Realism*. In his chapter on narration, "The Swollen Third Person" (which I also discussed in Chapter 1), Jameson posits that the shift from realism to modernism may be grasped in the emergence of a new kind of narrative opening—the primary examples that Jameson offers include the first sentence of James's "The Beast in

¹⁶⁰ It has been argued, in fact, that the mystery form bears an innate affinity with the short story. For example, Franco Moretti: "[Detective fiction's] syntax consists in combining the same elements in two different ways so that the combination enacted in the *fabula* (that is, the solution) detracts all value from the combination proposed by the *sjuzet*: in this way, detective fiction abandons the narrative form of the novel in favour of that of the short story." Moretti, "Clues," in *Signs Taken For Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, and David Miller (London: Verso Edition and NLB, 1983), p. 134.

¹⁶¹ Piglia, "Theses on the Short Story," *ibid.*: 64.

¹⁶² Piglia, "Theses on the Short Story," *ibid.*: 65.

¹⁶³ Piglia, "Theses on the Short Story," *ibid.*: 64.

the Jungle” (1903), as well as the representative opening sentences of a number of Faulkner’s short stories. For example, Faulkner’s “Golden Land” (1935): “If he had been thirty, he would not have needed the two aspirin tablets and the half glass of raw gin before he could bear the shower’s needling on his body and steady his hands to shave.”¹⁶⁴ This new mode of narration, which Jameson calls the “swollen” or “subjective third person,” bypasses the formal introductions of character and setting that had characterized the opening lines of realist narratives written in the objective third person (for example, “Alex Fyodorovich Karamazov was the third son of a landowner in our district, Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, so noted in his time,” etc.), launching us instead with an enigmatic, *in medias res* opening sentence in which there are no names, just pronouns.¹⁶⁵ In this way, the subjective third person initiates a narrative mystery and ‘plot’ of discovery that exists, not in the story-world, in which there is nothing mysterious going on at all—and, in fact, what most characterizes these stories is precisely a new kind of plotlessness in the narrative content—but solely at the level of the narrative discourse, solely in the storytelling. Jameson calls this device by its rhetorical name, “cataphora”:

In effect, this kind of beginning incorporates our own confusion and perplexity, our own narrative curiosity, into the plot to come; and as such it supplements the growing plotlessness of the new narrative with a superimposed plot of its own. [...] This is the deeper structure of Faulknerian cataphora, to construct a secret and a mystery which is the result only of the author’s withholding of information, rather than latent in the plot itself. The author of a detective story withholds the identity of the criminal no doubt, but this mystery is part and parcel of the plot itself, as all the characters experience it. In Faulkner, only the reader is inflicted with this mystery [...]¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ See Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2013), p. 163, 174-6.

¹⁶⁵ Quoted in Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, *ibid.*, p. 166. The line is, of course, the opening of Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2002).

¹⁶⁶ Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, *ibid.*, p. 165, 176.

The “growing plotlessness” that Jameson refers to here was also, as we can now see, implicit in Piglia’s account of the move towards a modernist short story: after all, for Nick Adams, the protagonist of “Big Two-Hearted River,” there is no mystery to trace in the fact that he has been scarred by the war—this is just his life. The only mystery is for the reader, in the uncovering of that knowledge from a reticent and elliptical narrative discourse. As Piglia himself writes, the “secret tale” that always lies at the heart of the short story “is not a matter of a hidden meaning that depends on interpretation: the enigma is nothing other than a story which is told in an enigmatic way.”¹⁶⁷ In other words, the secret story is always an effect of the author’s strategic construction of the narrative materials; the only difference between the detective story and the modern short story is that in the latter case the mystery does not exist for the characters, but has migrated *solely* into the narrative discourse. This is, in fact, the same thing as saying that the secret tale in the modern short story is never resolved, that what is hidden never rises explicitly into the narrative: because the “mystery” as such simply does not exist at the level of story, and therefore there is nothing diegetically to *be* resolved. (For Nick Adams, simply put, the naïve reading is correct: this *is* just an ordinary fishing trip.)

But Jameson also goes a step further, linking the purely discursive mystery of this new narrative opening to a shift from (borrowing Michael Fried’s terms) “theatricality” to “absorption,” with the latter understood “as the very logic of modernism itself as it more and more turns away from its spectators.”¹⁶⁸ In this way, Jameson points up the fact that the move from a decorous, throat-clearing, *Brothers Karamazov*-type opening to the blank and impersonal opening of a Faulkner story is also a transition between two very

¹⁶⁷ Piglia, “Theses on the Short Story,” *ibid.*: 64.

¹⁶⁸ Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, *ibid.*, p. 176.

different kinds of storytelling agency—and that the former, with its eagerness to tailor the narrative discourse to the reader’s needs, to make explanations and provide all the necessary background, also implies a rhetorical storyteller who addresses the reader directly: while the latter implies, by the same token, an effaced author who no longer makes direct, vocal appeals to the audience, but solicits the reader solely through the mute construction of the narrative text itself, through *composition*. In short, we are, of course, also dealing here with the shift from rhetoric to style. Indeed, it is worth noting, in this regard, that the mystery plot structure rehearses the logic of this new style model, insofar as our modern idea of style is itself a “story of the story”: a kind of “superimposed plot” or “secret tale,” which must be traced in the suggestive compositional details of the text, evoking an inferred authorial persona who never actually appears within the narrative. As a story that refers back to a prior scene of composition, prose style in fiction is always the story of how the story itself came to be constructed and told—and in this sense, it is every narrative’s “story of the investigation.” Or, to put it in terms, once more, of the doubled reception of theater that I have taken in my first two chapters as representative of the style model: just as every detail of the actor’s performance is received in two ways, as simultaneously the diegetic emotion of the character being represented *and* as the actor’s deliberate, trained appeal to the audience, so, in Piglia’s two stories, every detail is read in two ways, at two different levels, for “[t]he essential elements of the story have a dual function, and are employed in two ways in each of the two stories,” they “enter simultaneously into two antagonistic narrative logics”—at one level, an incidental detail in an evening of gambling, but at

another level, a hint heavy with fatal implication.¹⁶⁹ This shared structure of reception—which is perhaps the ultimate testimony to a formal continuity or isomorphism between the theater and the short story—is also the logic of style, of a work of fiction in which every narrative detail is both diegetically significant and significant of something (or *someone*) else, the unseen individual that composed the text. It is precisely in this sense, then, that I want to suggest that Victorian authors of the 1880s and ‘90s who were grappling with the “technical problems” of the modern short story at the moment of its first articulation in Britain—“How to tell a story while another is being told?”—and who turned to the form of the mystery plot as a model for thinking through these issues, were also, in so doing, thinking through the deeply related problem of how to enact the new stylism in their fiction. The question then becomes, how does one tell a story in such a way that the storyteller appears only as a kind of “secret tale” embedded in the narrative details, rather than a direct presence?

In this chapter, I’ll examine the surprisingly generative facilitating role that the mystery plot played in the work of one particular author who was wrestling with these questions in the last decade of the nineteenth century: namely, Henry James. James is an interesting case study for the issues I’ve been discussing here; even, perhaps, a paradoxical one. On the one hand, James’s writing is readily identified with the kind of lengthy, prolix, highly discursive prose that was thought, at the close of the century, to characterize the outdated narratorial approach of the three-volume novel; at the same time, he is just as readily identified as the pinnacle of an aesthetic of fleeting impressions, allusions, and omissions, the very values of the new short story. On the one hand, James

¹⁶⁹ Piglia, “Theses on the Short Story,” *ibid.*: 63.

found the narrative constraints of the short story to be punishing, impossible, a constant source of heartburn; but at the same time, there are a great many critics who consider James to have been, in aesthetic terms, primarily a practitioner of the short form, and a novelist only second: Jameson, for example, in the chapter we've just been quoting from, opines that "it might clarify our view of [James's] work [...] if we step back to recognize that he was essentially a writer of short stories or of their longer cousin, the art-novella—both quite different in their requirements than the novel."¹⁷⁰ But these productive tensions—which speak, of course, to James's historical position at the relay-point of rhetoric and style, Victorianism and modernism, serial novel and short story: with one foot, as it were, on either side—are precisely what makes him so revealing to consider in this connection: for it is just these kind of tensions, I would argue, that led James to rely so heavily on the form of the mystery plot as the template for his short fiction practice—a reliance that would have a profound shaping effect on James's aesthetic ideas, becoming a key heuristic for both his late novels and his influential critical thought.

In the section that follows, I'll begin by tracing James's struggles with the demanding restrictions of the short story during the 1890s—it was in the midst of these struggles, as I'll show, that James turned decisively to the readymade device of the mystery plot, and specifically, to the genre of the ghost story, which would be central to his fictional output during these years. Ultimately, I'll argue, it was through his decade-long practice of writing ghostly tales that James conceived and rehearsed the narrative strategy that would go on to define his later novels: a strategy of authorial delegation, in which the reflector enacts, within the story, the aestheticist processes of fine receptivity

¹⁷⁰ Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, *ibid.*, p. 181-2.

to experience and discriminating analysis of one's own impressions that were, at this time, coming to define the Jamesian author. By the end of the decade, James was exporting this narrative model to other kinds of short stories: including, notably, stories that explicitly thematized issues of writing and authorship. In the third section, we'll take a closer look at one of these stories, "The Great Good Place" (1900), to see where James's engagement with the mystery plot had led him by the end of the century.

Reading in this tale an allegory of authorial effacement, wherein the intrusive author is sublimated into a dispersed, invisible curator that is knowable only by its effects, I show how the mystery plot had become a venue for James to reflect upon, and dramatize, the transition from rhetorical to stylistic authorship. This will bring us, finally, to my fourth and final section, in which I'll examine the novel that has long been read as the blueprint for an effaced, modernist narrative construction, *The Ambassadors*, as well as the novel's New York Edition preface, in which James describes the process of its composition—in tropes, fascinatingly, that have been borrowed from detective fiction. After tracing the way that James's preface relates the "drama" of composition as a plot of investigation, I'll show, in turn, how the novel itself draws on a mystery plot structure to stage the authorial process of stylistic composition within its narrative. To close, I'll demonstrate how *The Ambassadors* shows us the persistence of Victorian rhetoric in modernism's plot of investigation—a persistence that critical accounts of the detective genre's influence on modernist narrative have missed—concluding that the novel's two stories reveal, in the end, the way that James has repackaged a meandering, digressive rhetorical chattiness into an image of style, not as authorial *presence*, but as authorial *process*: an open-ended,

discursive process that, in its very resistance to resolution, continues to bear the repressed trace of rhetorical telling.

2. Finer Shades: The Jamesian Reflector and the Ghost Stories of the 1890s

Henry James spent much of the 1890s locked in a grim struggle with the short story. This was the decade in which James had abandoned long serial novels and dedicated himself to the theater (the disastrous *Guy Domville* premiere would come in 1895) and to churning out short tales. As he wrote in a letter to Robert Louis Stevenson in 1888, “with God’s help, I propose, for a longish period, to do nothing but short lengths”; two years later, in 1890, he told his brother William that *The Tragic Muse*, then in serialization, would be the last of his long novels.¹⁷¹ Thus began, for James, a ten-year period of near-constant frustration and desperate wrestling with the short form. In the notebooks of the early ‘90s, we see James urging himself, again and again, to “make it tremendously succinct [...] and keep down the lateral development,” to “make it purely dramatic, make it movement and action.”¹⁷² As such invocations of the “dramatic” plainly show, James viewed the short story as requiring a more presentational aesthetic, an aesthetic of “movement and action” rather than description or analysis. His later, New York Edition prefaces to “The Author of Beltraffio” and “The Altar of the Dead,” which, taken together, cast a backward glance on the short fiction he would pen in these years, make repeated reference to his mantra of this period, what he called “my inveterate

¹⁷¹ Quoted in Krishna Baldev Vaid, *Technique in the Tales of Henry James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 2.

¹⁷² *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 56, 59. Also see Matthew Rubery, “Henry James, In Short,” *The Henry James Review* 29.3 (Fall 2008): 224-225.

‘Dramatise!’”: or, as puts it a few pages later, “The ever-importunate murmur, ‘Dramatise it, dramatise it!’ haunted, as I say, one’s perception.”¹⁷³ As such, it’s clear that James understood his parallel efforts to conquer the stage and to master the short story as aesthetically allied, demanding a shared narrative toolkit: and indeed, within a few years, it began to seem that his attempts at short fiction would be doomed to the same ignominious fate as his abortive theatrical career. Knowing what the story *ought* to look like was not, it turned out, the same thing as being able to execute it on the page. In the notebooks of these years, we see James continually fixing himself word counts, and continually exceeding them: attempting to keep a story within 10,000 words, he ends up “irremissibly, incurably, in almost 30,000.” From his frequent references to Maupassant during this period, it’s evident that James had a genuine admiration for the economy of the short tale; but in practice, he found it all but impossible to contain himself within its exacting strictures: he was too much in love with “developments [...] my temptation and my joy.”¹⁷⁴ Indeed, in his perpetual struggles with word counts, he frequently invokes Maupassant as his ideal: telling himself, in February 1891, to make his next story “as admirably compact and *selected* as Maupassant”; another time, he bursts out abruptly, while in the middle of planning a new story, “Oh, spirit of Maupassant, come to my aid!” All in all, it would be an exhausting and a trying decade.¹⁷⁵ By 1893, he was already in despair, complaining that to attempt to write within “a fixed and beggarly number of words is a poor and a vain undertaking—a waste of time.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 239, 249.

¹⁷⁴ *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Edel and Powers, *ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁷⁵ Leon Edel, of course, called the period between 1895 and 1901 James’s “treacherous years” (the phrase that lends the title to the fourth volume of Edel’s five-part biography of James); along with the collapse of his theatrical ambitions, James lost several friends in the mid-1890s, including Stevenson and Constance Fenimore Woolson in 1894.

¹⁷⁶ *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Edel and Powers, *ibid.*, p. 57, 45, 77.

There were two reasons for James's determination, in the 1890s, to channel his fictional efforts exclusively into the short form. The first was financial. James had written three very long novels in the 1880s—*The Bostonians* (1885-6), *The Princess Casamassima* (1885-6), and *The Tragic Muse* (1889-90)—and none had sold well.¹⁷⁷ As his notebooks make clear, he needed to recoup his losses: "Thus I come back inveterately—or at any rate necessarily—to the little question of the really short thing: come back by an economic necessity."¹⁷⁸ The abundance of magazines soliciting short fiction in the '90s provided something like a stable income, if one worked deftly enough; a fact that makes easier our understanding of the exhausting effort that James was willing to expend for the sake of staying within word counts. It does not require much of an imaginative leap to suppose that James was also simply tired of being unread and felt in need of a fresh strategy to take on the literary marketplace. This ties in with his second reason, which was a longer-term consideration, reflecting on the kind of legacy he wanted to leave behind as an artist. In the same letter to Stevenson quoted above, he explains: "I want to leave a multitude of pictures of my time, projecting my small circular frame upon as many different spots as possible and going in for number as well as quality, so that the number may constitute a total having a certain value as observation and testimony."¹⁷⁹ The following year, in 1889, he discusses in his notebooks a new book on Turgenev, writing that the work has "consecrat[ed] [...] the wish and dream that have lately grown stronger than ever in me—the desire that the literary heritage, such as it is, poor thing, that I may leave, shall consist of a large number of perfect *short* things,

¹⁷⁷ See Peter Rawlings, "Introduction" to *Henry James' Shorter Masterpieces, Vol. I*, ed. Peter Rawlings (Totowa: Barnes & Noble Books, 1984), p. xi.

¹⁷⁸ *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Edel and Powers, *ibid.*, p. 144.

¹⁷⁹ Quoted in Vaid, *Technique in the Tales of Henry James*, *ibid.*, p. 2.

nouvelles and tales, illustrative of ever so many things in life.” Again, in 1891, he confirms what he calls his “artistic” reason: “simply the consideration that by doing short things I can do so many, touch so many subjects, break out in so many places, handle so many of the threads of life.”¹⁸⁰ James was, it seems, inspired by the affordances of the modern short story: an art that promised, not a deep dive into a single life or locale, but the thrill of *multiplicity*, of fleetingness, of subjects vividly seen and briskly left behind, of constant novelty—in which, as Chesterton put it, one can receive “a glimpse of grey streets of London or red plains of India,” but will remain in neither place for long, precisely because there is always another vista beckoning. Something about this short story model chimed with James’s love of varied impressions, prompting him, in the late 1880s, to fundamentally rethink the basic shape of his body of work as a totality.

It is in this context, then—simultaneously fascinated by the possibilities of the short story and driven to despair by its exacting limitations—that James rediscovered the mystery plot: a narrative form that, for him, had always been associated with the classic Victorian genre of the ghost story. As we’ve noted, the proliferation of short fiction journals in the 1880s and ‘90s had led to a renewal of market demand for ghost stories, and it is probable that James’s return to this genre was initially impelled more by an economic than an aesthetic motive. It was, at that time, not a genre with which James was much identified; prior to 1890, he had written only four ghost stories in the entire thirty-year period since his earliest published stories in the 1860s, and it had been almost fifteen years since his most recent, “The Ghostly Rental” in 1876. But in the 1890s this would change dramatically: and between 1891 and 1900, James would publish no fewer than

¹⁸⁰ *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Edel and Powers, *ibid.*, p. 54, 57.

twelve supernatural tales, suddenly giving the ghost story a central position in his fictional output.¹⁸¹ This change in quantity would also be accompanied by qualitative changes in the way that James approached the material and made use of the ghost story's narrative form: and it is in the formal evolution of his supernatural tales over this decade, I would argue, that we can begin to see how the self-referential structure of the mystery plot would become integral to his later fiction, and indeed, to Jamesian "late style" itself.

James's earlier supernatural tales had been standard generic exercises in the traditional Victorian ghost story, in which the focalized character stumbles upon a site of mysterious haunting and seeks to uncover the story behind it—a story that is not disclosed until the end of the narrative. In "The Ghostly Rental," published in *Scribner's Monthly* in September 1876, at a time when James had recently moved to Paris and was in need of income (the story was never collected until Edel's *Ghostly Tales*), a young divinity student happens upon a vacant house, which he immediately intuitively, by an unaccountable leap of "induction," to be haunted.¹⁸² This assessment seems confirmed by mysterious goings-on observed around the house, including the eventual sighting of a spectral figure; the student is driven to discover the hidden narrative behind these phenomena, which is unveiled when he realizes—again, by an inductive leap—that the specter is no ghost, but a cloaked young woman with an unhappy past: her confession closes the tale. This fairly genre-typical mystery plot structure is still in evidence some fifteen years later, in James's first ghost story of the 1890s, "Sir Edmund Orme" (1891).

¹⁸¹ I follow, here, Leon Edel, who collected eighteen of James's short stories under the title *The Ghostly Tales of Henry James* (1950), which was intended to be a comprehensive survey of all James's ghost stories: of these eighteen, twelve were originally published between 1891 and 1900, while only four were published prior to 1890. In 1970, the volume was retitled *Henry James: Stories of the Supernatural* and given a new introduction and headnotes by Edel (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1970).

¹⁸² "The Ghostly Rental," in *Henry James: Stories of the Supernatural*, ed. Edel, *ibid.*, p. 108.

Here, a young man becomes intrigued by the strange behavior of a Mrs. Marden, mother to the girl he is courting, who evinces sudden and inexplicable moments of distress, as if aware of “some shock that escaped our detection.”¹⁸³ This apparently unintelligible conduct functions, in the idiom of the mystery plot, as the enigmatic phenomena that demand investigation and, eventually, a diegetic explanation—which, in the event, turns out to be connected to the tragic story of a ghost from Mrs. Marden’s past, that only she, and then the male narrator himself, are able to see.

Such early forays into the investigatory form of the mystery plot, hinging on the deferral and eventual revelation of a secret story, were fully in line with the mainstream of the Victorian tale of haunting. What feels distinctively Jamesian about the tales, however, is their emphasis on the heightened sensitivity of the investigating character to subtle impressions and intuitions—a newfound sensitivity that appears, in fact, to be the product of the encounter with the ghostly itself. In “Sir Edmund Orme,” the narrator’s first sightings of the ghost are attended by a “mystic enlargement of vision”: “I desired a renewal of the sensation—I opened myself wide to the impression. [...] I felt beneath my feet the threshold of the strange door, in my life, which had suddenly been thrown open and out of which unspeakable vibrations played up through me like a fountain.”¹⁸⁴ After this point, he begins to have unusual intuitions, flights, and quickenings of insight, highly reminiscent of the sudden, almost divinatory, leaps of discernment that would, a decade later, mark the interior discourse of supersubtle figures like *The Ambassadors*’ (1903) Lewis Lambert Strether and the unnamed narrator of *The Sacred Fount* (1901). This

¹⁸³ “Sir Edmund Orme,” in *Henry James: Complete Stories, 1884-1891* (New York: Library of America, 1999), p. 854.

¹⁸⁴ “Sir Edmund Orme,” in *Henry James: Complete Stories, 1884-1891*, *ibid.*, p. 866-7.

faculty of instant, intuitive apperception can be traced back to the narrator of “The Ghostly Rental,” for whom the “impression made upon me at first sight, by that gray colonial dwelling,” produces an “induction [...] near akin to divination.”¹⁸⁵ In these early ghost stories, the spectral encounter serves to identify a broadening of the bandwidths of perceptual experience—the “impression” to which one must “open” oneself; it denotes a special kind of receptivity or attunement, the vibrations of a finer wavelength of meaning, which one must be fine enough to apprehend.

In this way, such ghost stories demand to be connected to the model of receptive experience that characterized the ideal of the Jamesian novelist—an ideal that James had begun to articulate in the decade separating “The Ghostly Rental” and “Sir Edmund Orme.” As he had written in “The Art of Fiction” in 1884, this type “takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations”; experience, for such a one, is “a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue.”¹⁸⁶ As such, when the narrator of “The Ghostly Rental” repeatedly emphasizes the need to “gather all possible impressions” in his confrontation with the specter, as well as “to analyze my impressions” of the ghost after the fact, he is rehearsing the aestheticist language of cultivating and scrutinizing one’s impressions of life that would be constitutive of the Jamesian artist.¹⁸⁷ The ghostly marks precisely that realm of ultra-rarefied, aestheticized experience that necessitates and requires a sharpening of the perceptual and analytic

¹⁸⁵ “The Ghostly Rental,” in *Henry James: Stories of the Supernatural*, ed. Edel, *ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁸⁶ “The Art of Fiction,” in *Henry James: Major Stories and Essays*, eds. Leon Edel, Mark Wilson, John Hollander, David Bromwich, Denis Donoghue, William L. Vance, and Edward Said (New York: Library of America, 1999), p. 580.

¹⁸⁷ “The Ghostly Rental,” in *Henry James: Stories of the Supernatural*, ed. Edel, *ibid.*, p. 130, 131.

faculties; the stand-off with the supernatural hones the narrator-figure into, in James's famous phrase, "one of the people on whom nothing is lost."¹⁸⁸ In "The Ghostly Rental," Miss Deborah, an elderly seamstress and repository of community lore—whose expository function and frequent troping as a "thread" and "needle" may earn her the distinction of being James's first *ficelle*—assists to train the narrator in how to extract the most from his impressions:

"Observe closely enough," she once said, "and it doesn't matter where you are. You may be in a pitch-dark closet. All you want is something to start with; one thing leads to another, and all things are mixed up. Shut me up in a dark closet and I will observe after a while, that some places in it are darker than others. After that (give me time), and I will tell you what the President of the United States is going to have for dinner."¹⁸⁹

An exactly parallel faculty would be described in "The Art of Fiction" some eight years later, as definitive of the "gifts" that distinguish the literary artist: "The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it."¹⁹⁰

"The Ghostly Rental," then, though it was certainly written primarily for money and would remain uncollected and largely forgotten for decades, also turns out to anticipate and prefigure, in some intriguing ways, the influential critical ideas on aesthetic authorship that James would elaborate in the 1880s; and, as we have seen, when James returned to the ghost story in 1891, these associations would also be revived. Indeed, throughout the 1890s, the protagonists of James's ghost stories continue to be marked by an aestheticist sensitivity to the fine vibrations of experience—a quality that

¹⁸⁸ "The Art of Fiction," in *Henry James: Major Stories and Essays*, eds. Edel et al, *ibid.*, p. 581.

¹⁸⁹ "The Ghostly Rental," in *Henry James: Stories of the Supernatural*, ed. Edel, *ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁹⁰ "The Art of Fiction," in *Henry James: Major Stories and Essays*, eds. Edel et al, *ibid.*, p. 581.

becomes increasingly central to the tales as the decade progresses. In the 1896 story “The Way It Came” (later retitled “The Friends of the Friends” for the New York Edition), the narrator’s fiancée, who has claimed to see a ghost, is noted for his “magnificent distinction”: “Your accessibility to forms of life [...] your command of impressions, appearances, contacts closed—for our gain or our loss—to the rest of us.”¹⁹¹ By the end, the narrator comes to believe that this “rare extension of being,” as she terms it, has “caught [her] up,” as well: and indeed, her own perceptions undergo a concomitant honing—as she makes clear to her fiancée, when she ends the engagement: “I’ve watched you in silence, played my part too: I’ve noted every drop in your voice, every absence in your eyes, every effort in your indifferent hand.” “Everything in the facts was monstrous,” she winds up, “and most of all my lucid perception of them.”¹⁹² Two years later, the lucid perception of apparently monstrous facts would, of course, become the core premise of *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), James’s most enduringly famous spectral tale, with its feverishly sensitive and impressionable heroine. Over the course of the ‘90s, this quality of heightened sensitivity to vanishingly fine impressions increasingly became the primary field of interest that the Jamesian ghost story sought to stage, reflect upon, and investigate.

But as my earlier reference to Strether and the narrator of *The Sacred Fount* has already implied, this kind of sensitivity to the finer degrees of experience must be linked, not only to James’s ideal of the author, but also to that all-important Jamesian device, the *reflector*—a device that was also, as it happens, beginning to be developed in the late

¹⁹¹ “The Way It Came,” in *Henry James: Complete Stories, 1892-1898* (New York: Library of America, 1996), p. 632.

¹⁹² “The Way It Came,” in *Henry James: Complete Stories, 1892-1898*, *ibid.*, p. 633, 634.

1870s.¹⁹³ James describes the reflector in his preface to *The Golden Bowl* as “the impersonal author’s concrete deputy or delegate, a convenient substitute or apologist for the creative power otherwise so veiled and disembodied.”¹⁹⁴ In keeping with this logic of authorial delegation, we tend to see the reflector as that highly receptive, acute witness who serves as the vehicle for the super-subtlety of the Jamesian author himself within the story: and indeed, this is what the reflector had become, by the time we get to the late novels, beginning with *The Ambassadors* (which, though it was published after *The Wings of the Dove* [1902], was actually, as James points out in *The Ambassadors’* preface, written before¹⁹⁵). But preternatural perceptiveness and discernment had not always been essential features of the reflector. In his New York Edition prefaces, James traces his discovery of the reflector to *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880-1), during the composing of which he realized that, in order to wring the greatest effect from his intended material, he had to “place the centre of the subject in the young woman’s own consciousness.”¹⁹⁶ His reasoning was simple: because “her adventures are to be mild”—lacking utterly in “the moving accident, of battle and murder and sudden death”—“without her sense of them, her sense *for* them, as one may say, they are next to nothing at all”; “isn’t,” James concludes, “the beauty and the difficulty just in showing their mystic conversion by that sense, conversion into the stuff of drama or, even more delightful word still, of ‘story’?”¹⁹⁷ Isabel Archer, James argues, is the proper center for

¹⁹³ See T. J. Lustig, who points out that “many of James’s characters possess an almost psychic sensitivity to shades: shades of meaning, certainly, but also shades in their sense as ghosts,” leading him ultimately to argue that the 1890s ghost stories “laid much of the groundwork for his representation of the haunted, phantasmagoric consciousnesses which inhabit the vast and shadowy spaces of his later novels.” *Henry James and the Ghostly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 2, 88.

¹⁹⁴ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 300, 327.

¹⁹⁵ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 310.

¹⁹⁶ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁹⁷ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 56.

the novel's events, the proper lens through which the reader may experience them as maximally dramatic and infused with a rich narrative interest, simply because they are "her adventures," because, in short, she is the most interested party *in* them: as he reasons, "put the heaviest weight in *that* scale, which will be so largely the scale of her relation to herself. Make her only interested enough, at the same time, in the things that are not herself."¹⁹⁸ In later prefaces, James will emphasize that Strether has "the note of discrimination," "imagination galore," and a "lifelong trick of intense reflexion," all of which make him the perfect character to "express every grain [...] that there would be room for" of the narrative situation; similarly, of the Prince, the first reflector of *The Golden Bowl* (1904), James stresses that "[h]aving a consciousness highly susceptible of registration, he thus makes us see the things that may most interest us reflected in it."¹⁹⁹ No such claims are made for Isabel Archer: at this stage, the reflector was, for James, not the most finely discriminating and susceptible character, but simply the character who is most centrally concerned in the narrative events, the character who will have the greatest interest in their development. It is in this way, James argues, that events that are not in themselves narratively dramatic may be converted into "the stuff of drama, or even [...] of 'story'": precisely by our experiencing them through the lens of that individual who is closest to the events, and thus best positioned to appreciate their interest.

What I want to argue, then, is that we need to look to the sequence of ghost stories that James wrote in the 1890s—which, as we've seen, came increasingly to revolve around the exploration of states of heightened receptivity to fine, rarefied gradations of perceptual experience—to understand how the reflector had, by 1901, become a super-

¹⁹⁸ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁹⁹ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 316, 310, 316, 317, 329.

sensitive register and discriminator of impressions: the “concrete deputy” of the Jamesian author. It is not unusual to look to the ‘90s to explain the origins of this authorial deputy: but scholars have tended to localize the significance of this decade to the collapse of James’s theatrical ambitions—and even when they expand their scope to encompass the prolific short fiction that James penned during this period, the short stories are often viewed as passively reflecting aesthetic ideas that were forged in the crucible of theatrical failure. Julie Rivkin, for example, assumes that “James’s interest in a thematics of delegation developed when he was writing for the stage, no doubt because of the often painful substitutions necessary to dramatic representation”; she cites the infamous *Guy Domville* curtain call as “paradigmatic” of these “painful substitutions,” and credits this humiliating incident with “suggest[ing] the absolute incompatibility of the authorial presence and the stage performer,” thus prompting James to adopt an authorial deputy in his subsequent fiction.²⁰⁰ As Rivkin goes on to observe, this “logic of delegation” is foregrounded thematically in a number of James’s “tales” of the same period—she cites “The Private Life” (1892), “Nona Vincent” (1892), “The Figure in the Carpet” (1896), “The Turn of the Screw,” and “In the Cage” (1899).²⁰¹ The question of why so much of this work should be happening through the medium of the short story—and, even more specifically, the ghost story, under which heading three of the five stories that Rivkin refers to (“The Private Life,” “Nona Vincent,” and “The Turn of the Screw”) may be ranged—is not one that is ever asked. This omission is all the more striking when we recall that James himself, in his prefaces to the “major phase” novels of the early 1900s, persistently asserted that the super-sensitive, authorial reflector-figures that define these

²⁰⁰ Julie Rivkin, “The Logic of Delegation in *The Ambassadors*,” *PMLA* 101.5 (Oct., 1986): 830, endnote 1.

²⁰¹ Rivkin, “The Logic of Delegation in *The Ambassadors*,” *ibid.*

works were, in fact, derived from his short fiction practice. For example, when James refers to *The Golden Bowl*'s Prince as "[h]aving a consciousness highly susceptible of registration"—a quote that I've given in part above—the remainder of the sentence, given in full, actually reads, "he thus makes us see the things that may most interest us reflected in it as in the clean glass held up to so many of the 'short stories' of our long list."²⁰²

Earlier in the same preface, James had, in fact, emphasized an association between the narrative strategy of the reflector and the short story: there James spoke of "my preference for dealing with my subject-matter, for 'seeing my story', through the opportunity and the sensibility of some more or less detached, some not strictly involved, though thoroughly interested and intelligent, witness or reporter," and adds:

Again and again, on review, *the shorter things in especial* that I have gathered into this Series have ranged themselves not as my own impersonal account of the affair in hand, but as my account of somebody's impression of it—the terms of this person's access to it and estimate of it contributing thus by some fine little law to intensification of interest.²⁰³ [*italics added*]

Similarly, in anatomizing Strether's imaginative and analytic gifts, James remarks that

This personage of course, so enriched, wouldn't give me, for his type, imagination in *predominance* or as his prime faculty, nor should I, in view of other matters, have found that convenient. So particular a luxury—some occasion, that is, for the study of the high gift in *supreme* command of a case or of a career—would still doubtless come on the day I should be ready to pay for it; and till then might, as from far back, remain hung up well in view and just out of reach. The comparative case meanwhile would serve—it was only on the minor scale that I had treated myself even to comparative cases. I was to hasten to add however that, happy stopgaps as the minor scale had thus yielded, the instance in hand should enjoy the advantage of the full range of the major [...]²⁰⁴ [*italics in original*]

Here James admits that even Strether does not possess a "*supreme* command" of imagination's "high gift"—which would represent a character type so advanced that

²⁰² *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 329.

²⁰³ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 327.

²⁰⁴ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 310-1.

James can, for now, only dimly imagine it. He goes on to say, however, that the only precedents in his work for even such a “comparative case” as Strether exist in his short fiction: what he calls the “happy stopgaps” of the “minor scale.” If Strether, then, represents an evolved version of the reflector type, with a heightened imagination and sensitivity to experience, making his consciousness a more perfect medium for expression, it was, by James’s account, through the practice of writing short stories that this more refined model of the reflector first emerged.

In truth, this affinity between the Jamesian reflector and the short story is about much more than just the generic content of James’s supernatural tales—the recourse to the ghostly as a convenient way of narrativizing the finer vibrations of experience, etc.—rather, it drives to the heart of the modern short story aesthetic that I discussed in the last section: a recognition that becomes clear when we return our focus to the significant form of the mystery plot. A formal affinity with the modern short story was already implicit in James’s account of his discovery of the reflector model, in which he emphasized that the need to center the story in Isabel Archer’s consciousness was a result of the “mild[ness]” of her “adventures,” their lack of intrinsic drama: it is only by recasting the narrative as the story of Isabel’s perception and experience of these narrative events—as opposed to a straightforward telling of the events themselves—that they may be converted into “the stuff of drama, or even [...] of ‘story’.” This description hearkens back to Fredric Jameson’s account of the “plotlessness of the new narrative” characteristic of modernism, in which readerly interest and curiosity are not generated by the story events themselves, but rather by the way that those events are constructed in the narrative discourse: the discourse effectively comprises a “superimposed plot” that compensates for the lack of

intrinsic plot interest in the story proper. This structure of modernist narrative, as we saw in both Jameson and Piglia, may be understood as a refinement or development of the mystery plot form, which, in its two plots, schematically separates out story and discourse within the narrative itself. In fact, it seems evident that the mystery plot *already* exemplifies this modernist conceit: for by supplementing the story proper (the story of the crime) with the plot of its discursive construction *as* a story (the story of the investigation), the mystery plot tacitly acknowledges a lack in the story itself—and, indeed, who would read Sherlock Holmes if all we got was the story of the crime, the straightforward and linear account of the commission of a murder and the murderer’s subsequent arrest? Who would ever read a ghost story if all we got was the forthright telling of the origin of a ghost? The mystery plot, though its story events may be filled with precisely the kind of “moving accident, of battle and murder and sudden death” that was, as James noted, so absent in *The Portrait of a Lady*, is nonetheless the very model of a story that is unable to stand alone, but requires the discourse to provide a “superimposed plot” to infuse it with readerly interest. And the Jamesian reflector, too, is a version of this structure. Like the mystery plot form, it effectively schematizes story and discourse into two separate plots, one of which (the one we, as readers, are given) is precisely the plot of how the story events themselves are discursively constructed and realized as narrative—their very “conversion into the stuff of drama or, even more delightful word still, of ‘story’.”

In this connection, it’s worth noting that James himself understood the ghost story to be the one genre in which the device of the reflector is not just a benefit, but a positive *requirement*—and for just the reasons we have given above. In his preface to “The Altar

of the Dead,” the volume of the New York Edition in which most of his 1890s ghost stories were collected, he suggests that one insight he gained during this period was that the reflector was intrinsically necessary to the telling of a supernatural tale. This is because the supernatural is unable to stand alone “in itself,” but requires to be experienced by a witness:

We but too probably break down, I have ever reasoned, when we attempt the prodigy, the appeal to mystification, in itself; with its “objective” side too emphasised the report (it is ten to one) will practically run thin. We want it clear, goodness knows, but we also want it thick, and we get the thickness in the human consciousness that entertains and records, that amplifies and interprets it. That indeed, when the question is (to repeat) of the “supernatural,” constitutes the only thickness we do get; here prodigies, when they come straight, come with an effect imperilled [sic]; they keep all their character, on the other hand, by looming through some other history—the indispensable history of somebody’s *normal* relation to something.²⁰⁵

The straightforward, “objective” representation of the supernatural (“prodigies, when they come straight”) is bound to feel “thin,” lacking in interest: supernatural phenomena achieve interest, or “thickness,” only when reflected in the subjective consciousness of some baffled or terrified mortal witness. In making this point about the necessity of the reflector, James is also justifying why the ghost story has to be constructed in the form of a “secret tale,” as Piglia would put it: or, as James says, “looming through some other history [...] of somebody’s *normal* relation to something.” What James is describing here is a narrative model evocative of Piglia’s Story One and Story Two: the first, a seemingly banal account (the story of the gambling, or the “trivial” fishing trip)—an account, in short, of “somebody’s *normal* relation to something”—and a second, secret tale that “loom[s] through” this “other history,” accessed only indirectly (the suicide, the war trauma).

²⁰⁵ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 256.

For Piglia, every short story writer has their own version of Story One and Story Two, which represents their own individual solution to the problem of the short story form itself, “How to tell a story while another is being told?” Thus, “Kafka tells the secret story clearly and simply, and narrates the visible story stealthily, to the point of turning it into something enigmatic and dark”; while “[f]or Borges, Story One is a genre and Story Two is always the same.”²⁰⁶ This way of thinking is useful for my purposes, for what I ultimately want to suggest here is that it was the discovery of the reflector as authorial deputy that gave James his Story One and Story Two, his solution to the problem of the short story—a solution he arrived at through his decade of composing ghostly tales. This solution was not, interestingly, what James had thought it would be at the start of the 1890s—it was not a story that sacrificed analysis and description in favor of “movement and action”; on the contrary, it was a narrative model that leaned into an aestheticist analysis and specification of the finer shades of experience, and found its license to do so in the ghost story’s plot of supernatural investigation. This narrative model, too, was fundamentally based on *dramatization*: but what was dramatized was not, as James had originally assumed, the story events themselves, but rather, the processes of receptivity and discernment that had come to define the Jamesian author, staged within the diegetic world by the figure of the reflector, his “concrete delegate.” As in the ghost story, James’s Story One would be the tale of the subjective, narrativizing processes that converted the “thin” events of the secret story into “the stuff of drama,” into story as such. It was this narrative model that would go on to receive its fullest treatment in the “major phase” novels of the 1900s.

²⁰⁶ Piglia, “Theses on the Short Story,” *ibid.*, p. 65.

Aside, then, from a growing emphasis on the super-sensitivity and divinatory flights of the supernatural investigator, there is one other important way that James's ghost stories evolved over the course of the 1890s that is relevant for our purposes: namely, the progressive *abstraction* of the ghost or supernatural phenomenon into an increasingly ambiguous, undefinable situation. In the latter half of the decade, the site of spectrality comes, less and less, to assume a figural presence—a walking, speaking ghost—and begins instead to denote an obscure and unknowable set of relationships, existing between two or more characters.²⁰⁷ In “The Way It Came,” two ostensible ghostly sightings are referred to in the plot, but the real source of the story's uncanniness is the idea of two independent friends of the narrator, who have never met or spoken, seeming to carry on an impossible, occult relationship—and the narrator's growing, destabilizing conviction that this relationship has continued to exist, even after one of the friends has died. In “Maud-Evelyn” (1900), likewise, the realm of ghostly mystery surrounds an inexplicable and unheard-of relationship: a young man—again, friend to the narrator—decides to ‘wed’, and carry on a kind of pantomime married life with, the daughter of two acquaintances who had died as a young girl, and whom they continue to speak of as if alive. Doubtless the culmination of this progression can be found in “The Beast in the Jungle” (1903), in which the agent of haunting (“the Beast”) has rarefied into nothing more than the *idea* of a potentially climactic situation, which is always yet to occur; a situation that is, by definition, impossible to define or articulate—though, of

²⁰⁷ “The Turn of the Screw” is a notable exception to this trend, since it features actual walking ghosts. At the same time, I would point out that the ghosts themselves are not what the governess is investigating: rather, the real enigma is the secret minds of the children—what they're hiding, whether they really see the ghosts, if they're deceiving the governess, what their relationship is to the ghosts, and so on. In this way, the novella is very much in line with James's other late ghost stories, which are more about impossible and inexplicable relationships (sometimes between the living and the dead) than figures of haunting as such.

course, the two characters concerned never cease to try. Part of what differentiates these later ghost stories, then, is the shift in the status of the ghostly encounter from a literal scene of confrontation with a spectral figure, to the protagonist's confrontation with an incomprehensible and utterly singular narrative situation—often an impossible relation between two people—which she continually attempts to probe and account for.

In this way, we also see the investigation itself become more and more predominant in these later ghost stories, while the secret story as such withers away to the point of being an afterthought, if it appears at all. The nature of the mystery itself has changed: no longer a site of haunting with a specific backstory attached to it—a revelatory account deferred to the end of the narrative—it becomes, instead, an ongoing, relational situation of an inherently inexplicable nature, which may be endlessly analyzed and investigated without ever being explained. It's not hard to see that such stories provide more and more of an opportunity for the kind of "thickness" that James increasingly valued in this decade, for subjective probing and interpretation; and once the doubled, investigatory structure of the mystery plot has been extracted and reproduced in the strategy of the reflector, there is, of course, no need for the particular generic trappings of the ghost story to feature at all (this is one of the consequences of the mystery plot's schematic separating-out of story content from discursive construction, implied in the form itself). In fact, the other significant trend that we observe in the later 1890s is that James begins to export the mystery plot form to other kinds of short stories—and, in particular, to stories that explicitly revolve around problems of art and authorship. This last point is significant, and requires a bit more explanation, before we close out our discussion of this pivotal decade.

Aside from the ghost story, there was one other genre that became especially prominent in James's *fin de siècle* short fiction: what Rivkin calls the "tales of writers and artists"—a genre particularly interested, as she points out, in themes of authorial delegation.²⁰⁸ Here Rivkin is implicitly following F. O. Matthiessen, who, in 1944, collected James's art stories under the title *Henry James: Stories of Writers and Artists*; of the eleven stories therein, eight were originally published between 1893 and 1903—like the ghost story, this was a genre that would hold a special attraction for James in this decade.²⁰⁹ And while his enthusiasm for narratives with explicitly literary or artistic themes far predates the 1890s, it is at the beginning of this decade that many of his most celebrated stories in this vein begin, with steady regularity, to appear: "The Real Thing" and "The Private Life" in 1892, followed immediately by "The Middle Years" in 1893 and "The Death of the Lion" in 1894. Of these four well known tales, one ("The Private Life") is already a supernatural story; as the decade progressed, his continued pursuit of artistic themes, relating specifically to the work and status of the author, would begin to overlap, more and more, with his steady output of ghostly short stories. The loose grouping of later stories that I have in mind begins with "The Figure in the Carpet" in 1896 (with "The Private Life" as a key precursor), and includes "The Real Right Thing" (1899) (not to be confused with "The Real Thing"), "The Great Good Place" (1900), and "The Birthplace" (1903). What unites these four stories is, first off, that all of them combine a plot of investigation with a thematic focus on problems of authorship; they exemplify the evolved mystery plot structure of James's later ghost stories, in which the secret tale is never revealed—we never do, of course, find out what that "figure in the

²⁰⁸ Rivkin, "The Logic of Delegation in *The Ambassadors*," *ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *Henry James: Stories of Writers and Artists*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen (New York: New Directions, 1944).

carpet” is—while transposing the aestheticist analysis that this structure afforded into an explicitly literary context: the staging of authorial processes within the story-world here approaches a new kind of literalness. The stories vary in the directness of their proximity to the supernatural: “The Real Right Thing” features an encounter with an actual ghost—the ghost of an eminent late author, of whom the protagonist is writing a biography—and “The Great Good Place” hinges on an expressly magical–supernatural conceit, while “The Figure in the Carpet” and “The Birthplace” follow many of the later ghostly tales in focusing more ambiguously on obscure, occult relationships between living and dead characters. Each tale, in short, retains some generic residue of its lineage to the ghost story. But their most specific, and telling, commonality is that each story is centrally concerned, at a thematic level, with the figure of an *absent author*: a dead, spectral, or otherwise unseen author whose absence organizes and motivates the tale’s plot of investigation. The secret tale that is never revealed in the story here becomes the figure of the author who never shows herself in the text—a purely speculative authorial agency, of which the protagonist tries to produce an account. This author is, as Conrad put it, “a suspected rather than a seen presence”: “suspected” both in the sense of *inferred* rather than given and in the sense of *under investigation*. In this way, these stories seem to reflect candidly on the effacement of the rhetorical storyteller that underwrites the Jamesian reflector’s “logic of delegation”—“the creative power otherwise so veiled and disembodied”—and, as such, on the transition to a new model of stylistic authorship. They register, in short, that our modern idea of style is itself a mystery plot: one in which authorship is constructed as a concealed identity, which can be traced and discovered by the tokens and clues that the absent writer has left behind. Thus the ghost—that ultimate

figure for the paradox of an absent presence—has ultimately become, by the end of the 1890s, the oblique, enigmatic author of style.

In this way, these four stories give us perhaps the best vantage—not only on where James’s practice of the short story has arrived by the end of the ‘90s, but also on the real formal and aesthetic stakes of his decade-long experiment with the mystery plot. To illustrate this point, let’s examine one of these stories in more detail.

3. The Host Who Never Shows: Stylistic Authorship in “The Great Good Place”

“The Great Good Place” was first published in *Scribner’s Monthly* in January 1900, was swiftly reprinted in James’s short story collection *The Soft Side* later that year, and was subsequently selected for inclusion in the New York Edition; by every indication, James was fond of the story, though in his prefaces and notebooks he was remarkably close-lipped about its provenance, and its interpretation.²¹⁰ Its subject is one that must have been particularly resonant for James at the end of the 1890s: the sheer exhaustion of the overworked author. In the first section of the story, we meet George Dane, a writer plagued by his own success: deluged by unfinished work, unanswered letters, periodicals unread and books unreviewed, Dane is at the brink of a nervous breakdown. Babbling to his manservant, Brown, to cancel the day’s engagements, Dane dreams of escaping the ever-growing pile of work on his desk, but finally resigns himself to meeting his breakfast appointment—if only to defer his confrontation with the pile.

²¹⁰ It was collected in Volume 16 of the New York Edition, alongside James’s stories of writers and artists: “The Author of Beltraffio,” “The Middle Years,” “Greville Fane,” etc.; the following volume, Volume 17 (“The Altar of the Dead”), would contain most of his supernatural and ghostly stories.

The section ends just as the unidentified “young man” enters the room and takes Dane’s outstretched hand.²¹¹

At the start of the second section, a great change has taken place: we are informed immediately that Dane is now ensconced—and has been for at least a week—in “the scene of his new consciousness” (157). Gradually, it emerges that this unnamed place is a kind of utopian retreat resembling a sanitarium, to which Dane has apparently been spirited by magical means: here at last he can find a sought-after respite from the hectic demands of modern life. In this way, the ghostly element of the story is not a spectral figure (though there are, as it happens, certain oddly featureless presences who may be described as ghostly within this world—more on these in a moment), but rather an essentially enigmatic and impossible place, evidently positioned outside of space and time, and perhaps existing purely in the mind, the encounter with which poses the narrative situation. Further, the abrupt, proleptic jump between the first and second sections of the story, which lands us in this unlocatable place without telling us where it is or how Dane got there, sets up the logic of a mystery plot: we have an ellipsis in narrative time, which it will be the job of the story to go back and fill in. Dane, too, has landed in this place *in medias res*, as it were, his consciousness only gradually coming back to itself (his mind lolling, it seems, in a kind of warm “bath,” almost like a state of suspended animation), to note the strangeness of his surroundings and reflect on how much time has passed: as the first sentence of the second section tells us, “He might have been a week in the place—the scene of his new consciousness—before he spoke at all.” As such, Dane is placed, right from the start, in the position of a retrospective

²¹¹ “The Great Good Place,” in *Henry James: Complete Stories, 1898-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1996), p. 156. Cited parenthetically hereafter.

investigator, trying to discover where he is. It's worth noting the similarity of this opening line to the "Faulknerian cataphora" that Jameson identifies as a foundational modernist form; and indeed, this second section, which suddenly throws the reader into a new narrative situation without any explanation, is almost like a second opening to the story itself, relaunching us with an alternate first line. The original first line—the opening line of the first section—was in the vein of a traditional, realist opening ("George Dane had opened his eyes to a bright new day, the face of nature well washed by last night's downpour," etc.), and as such, the spatial passage from Dane's familiar reality to "the scene of his new consciousness" is enacted formally in the shift between the first and second sections as a transition from nineteenth-century realist storytelling to anachronic modernist construction. The signal difference, of course, is that, unlike Faulknerian cataphora, the mystery here is not solely for the reader, but is actually experienced by Dane, as well—it is as if the protagonist of a Faulkner story were to wake up not knowing his own name or where he was, but only his pronoun: it's a cataphora dramatized *within* the story itself. This is suggestive of the logic of delegation that defines James's engagement with the mystery plot: after all, in many ways, James's development of the mystery form is in line with the more refined, modernist version posited by both Piglia and Jameson—in which the secret tale, the story of the crime, withers away, and the investigation is never resolved—but what ultimately characterizes this refined version, as we saw, is that the mystery ceases to exist at the level of story, having no existence for the characters. In James, the case is different, and rather singular: in his later short stories, the secret tale may cease to appear, but the mystery is still experienced diegetically by the investigating characters. This is, in fact, key to the premise of the reflector as authorial

deputy: no matter how much the mystery becomes “discursivized,” becomes about narrative construction, it never migrates entirely to the discourse, but continues to be staged at the level of plot.

Dane finds himself seated on a bench, in a space described as a “great cloister,” with a “portico” and “old statues,” reminiscent of an Italian convent or monastery; a vague figure has just sat down beside him, with whom Dane—in the “bath” of his blissful, luxuriating state—feels an immediate and intuitive bond (158). This “Brother” appears as “the reflection of his own very image,” and is described only as “a man of his own age, tired, distinguished, modest, kind” (157-8). The soothing quality of this self-recognition seems to harmonize with Dane’s relaxed, almost narcotized, feeling of placid immersion: “the broad, deep bath of stillness” (158). In keeping with James’s ghost stories, much of the knowledge that Dane gains about his new, enigmatic reality will come intuitively and instantaneously, through a kind of inductive leap. Here, in fact, these sudden flashes of certainty, of perfect assurance, are depicted as part and parcel of the total ease, relief, and freedom from anxiety that the Great Good Place (let’s just call it the GGP) serves precisely to spatialize: the supernatural situation is what licenses this kind of intuitive knowledge—as in, for example, the instant bond that Dane forms with the Brother: “It could pass quite sufficiently without words that he and his mate were Brothers, and what that meant” (158). Likewise, as Dane and his new friend begin to converse—dreamily, without urgency—each intuitively understands and sympathizes with the other’s every thought. This feature of the GGP interestingly anticipates a common observation that turn-of-the-century critics would soon be making about the later novels: that, as one reviewer of *The Ambassadors* put it, James’s dialogues enact “a

kind of telepathy between persons of an extraordinary sensitiveness”; or, to quote a different critic’s account of the same novel, “The conversation is carried on not so much by the natural words and gestures of the man and woman as by their secret comprehensions, it is a mute conversation, so to say, between their lively apperceptions analyzing each other’s situation, a spiritual interchange.”²¹² In this sense, what is auditioned in “The Great Good Place” through an explicitly supernatural premise—a purely aspirational, otherworldly communion—would go on to become a discursive ‘reality’ in the major novels.

By an intuitive understanding, then, Dane is made blissfully aware, right from the start, that the GGP is a paradisiacal place: the essential goodness of his surroundings, their perfection, is never in doubt. On the truly fundamental questions, however—the essential *what* and *where* of the place—there is no knowledge at all given, and none forthcoming: this idyllic fantasy-space simply *is*. Gradually, these basic unknowns become the focus of Dane’s ongoing speculation. In this, the Brother seems at first reluctant to join him: Dane’s curiosity is, perhaps, the only differentiating feature between them. When Dane first asks what the GGP is, the Brother replies negligently and almost without interest: “Oh, it’s positively a part of our ease and our rest and our change, I think, that we don’t at all know and that we may really call it, for that matter, anything in the world we like—the thing, for instance, we love it most for being.” It is at this point that Dane divulges the private name he has already adopted:

“I know what *I* call it,” said Dane after a moment. Then as his friend listened with interest: “Just simply ‘The Great Good Place.’”

“I see—what can you say more? I’ve put it to myself perhaps a little differently.” They sat there as innocently as small boys confiding to each other the names of toy

²¹² Quoted in Kevin J. Hayes, *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 392, 400.

animals. “The Great Want Met.” (160)

In this “innocent” way, what begins as a kind of game progressively moves to the center of the story: the effort, precisely, to name and articulate what the GGP is, to provide some kind of descriptive account of its essential “mystery” (161). In the sections that follow, we witness Dane’s continuing endeavors to translate the unrivalled pleasures of the GGP into language, often by means of metaphor: comparing it to a “kindergarten,” to the “bosom” of an “invisible mother,” to a “*pension*” in the Swiss Alps, to a “convalescent home” (173). This naming effort becomes Dane’s primary pastime during his stay, a form of play that he shares with any Brother who happens to be around (or is it always the same Brother...?): the other inmates of the place are always more than happy to chime in in any way that harmonizes with Dane’s thoughts. In this way, “The Great Good Place” is, of course, fully in line with James’s other late mystery tales, in which the story is about the reflector’s subjective efforts to discursively construct the inexplicable situation he is faced with, to convert it into story. What “The Great Good Place” makes clear, however, is that this investigative activity does not index—in the traditional generic manner of a ghost or detective story—any problem or troubling adversity that must be resolved in order for peace to be restored: rather, the investigation is *itself constitutive* of the state of eternal and unalterable peace that the GGP represents. In another words, the fact that one is constantly trying to produce the right account of the GGP, to capture it in a linguistic formula, does not signify a break or flaw in its utopian logic; rather, the GGP is utopia precisely *because* all you do is sit around and debate metaphors. As the Brother says, it is “positively a part” of the place’s relief that one is never able to conclusively define it—and, as such, one can articulate it, endlessly, in any and all terms one wishes.

The GGP is, in this sense, a sort of ultimate prompt for the kind of “thickness” of subjective analysis that James so privileged in his own writerly process, endless food for “the human consciousness that entertains and records, that amplifies and interprets it.” It is the paradise of perpetual composition—an ironic retreat, surely, for an overworked writer.

It may thus be seen that everything in the GGP revolves around an infinitely rich and therefore inexpressible core experience, which—as in “The Great Good Place” or “The Great Want Met”—every inmate has his own private name for:

At the end of three weeks—so far as time was distinct—Dane began to feel there was something he had recovered. It was the thing they never named—partly for want of the need and partly for lack of the word; for what indeed was the description that would cover it all? The only real need was to know it, to see it, in silence. Dane had a private, practical sign for it, which, however, he had appropriated by theft—“the vision and the faculty divine.” (166)

Despite the passage’s assertion that this unsayable something need not be named, but only experienced “in silence,” Dane and his Brothers do, manifestly, continue to test out handles and analogies: on the very next page, we find Dane cycling through “a dozen halting similes,” which “but flickered and went out—they lasted only long enough to light up the difference” (167). All comparisons, here, serve only to point up their own inadequacy, in the face of that which is incomparable: the core experience can never be satisfactorily articulated, but only approximated by personal tags and associative references—as in the line from Wordsworth that Dane uses to designate that quality in himself that the GGP has restored (“the vision and the faculty divine”): a line that in its original context refers, not coincidentally, to the innate gift for poetic expression. In truth, it is clear that this “faculty” that the GGP reclaims is indistinguishable from the highly literary and, indeed, poetic effort to define the GGP itself, the pursuit of its inarticulable

essence through successive figures and tropes: the benefit and blessing of the GGP, and the necessity of translating it into language, are one and the same—the utopian quality *is* its very unnameability, and thus its perpetual availability for discursivization. Further, the figurative activity that occupies Dane is ultimately inseparable from the figurative activity of the story’s narrator, as the lines directly following the above block quote show: here, the narrator goes on to remark of Dane’s Wordsworthian slogan:

That, doubtless, was a flattering phrase for his idea of his genius; the genius, at all events, was what he had been in danger of losing and had at last held by a thread that might at any moment have broken. The change was that, little by little, his hold had grown firmer, so that he drew in the line—more and more each day—with a pull that he was delighted to find it would bear. (166-7)

This passage is typical of a story in which we spend most of our time reading about one man’s efforts to figure and analogize an elusive state of affairs, in an impersonally narrated prose that is itself highly figurative and full of extended analogies. In this case, we are told about Dane’s “private, practical sign” for the sense of recovery that he is undergoing, and immediately afterwards given another practical image of this recovery process by the story’s narrator: that of the thread being slowly drawn in. There is no clear differentiation here, however, for the two images are of course connected: what is being drawn in by the thread is, in fact, Dane’s genius, his “vision and faculty divine.” It is also strongly signaled that both images are actually originating with Dane, and part of one continuous thought process, through the blanket use of free indirect discourse, so ubiquitous in James’s later work: here, the narrator’s leisurely musings on Dane’s situation, offering up and pursuing various metaphors in turn, are impossible to distinguish from Dane’s own leisurely musings, Dane’s own metaphors. For all intents and purposes, what Dane is attempting to compose *is* the narrative discourse of the story

we are reading, for it is through his consciousness that all of its descriptive language is being weighed and considered: the story is, quite literally, the drama of its own process of composition.²¹³

But if the GGP is the indefinite narrative premise that must be specified and composed into language, it is also, at the same time, the finished work itself. Indeed, of all the analogies that Dane invents to define the GGP, the most central and enduring is that of the master artwork:

“[...] The thing’s so perfect that it’s open to as many interpretations as any other great work—a poem of Goethe, a dialogue of Plato, a symphony of Beethoven.”

“It simply stands quiet, you mean,” said Dane, “and lets us call it names?”

“Yes, but all such loving ones. We’re ‘staying’ with some one—some delicious host or hostess who never shows.” (173)

The likeness to art springs, crucially, from Dane’s dawning understanding that the GGP is a “work,” a composed and achieved effect: that “all the sweetness and serenity were created, calculated things” (169). It is for this reason that the recognition of being ‘hosted’ is linked, naturally, to the metaphor of the artwork; if the GGP is a “triumph of art” then it follows that there must be, as the narrator puts it, a “great artist in the background”: one’s experience has been curated and arranged by a discreet intelligence

²¹³ The notion that James’s characters are themselves composing the novelistic discourse from within the story has been a central theme pursued by Leo Bersani: probably his most direct statement of this idea comes in his reading of *The Turn of the Screw*: “The governess is the Jamesian character idealized to the point of parable, that is, to the point where the essentially conventional distinction between character and author disappears and the character, released from the obligation of having to operate within a clearly and distinctly given world of fictional events, assumes the function of novelizing. The governess is in pursuit, but she is, quite literally, in pursuit of the story itself.” This seems to me an apt characterization of the narrative model one finds throughout late James. See Leo Bersani, “The Jamesian Lie,” in *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature*, 1st ed. (Boston & Toronto: Little, Brown, and Co., 1976), 140; see also Bersani, “The Narrator as Center in ‘The Wings of the Dove,’” *Modern Fiction Studies* 6.2 (Summer 1960): 131–44. In this regard, also see Sheila Teahan, who argues that “the rhetorical medium of the central consciousness is inextricable from the projection or production of plot itself”; both Teahan and Bersani see this feature of the reflector as reversing the conventional priority of story preceding discourse. Sheila Teahan, *The Rhetorical Logic of Henry James* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), p. 4.

(169). This intelligence is the GGP's unseen author—and it is striking how resonantly the story's description of this inferred personage rehearses the critical discourse of tactful, effaced authorship that was current in James's day:

The author might remain in the obscure, for that was part of the perfection: personal service so hushed and regulated that you scarce caught it in the act and only knew it by its results. Yet the wise mind was everywhere—the whole thing, infallibly, centred, at the core, in a consciousness. (168)

What we have here is a vision of style: the invisible author knowable only by her effects, never appearing openly but always indirectly present in the pervasive sense of artful construction organizing the linguistic surface of the text; the sense that all of these telltale details are the signature of a highly individual consciousness, hovering, out of sight, behind the words themselves. This image of stylistic authorship is everywhere present in “The Great Good Place”: the sense of a “masterly general control” that the place impresses upon Dane is produced by the constant, smoothing activity of certain “unobtrusive, effaced agents”—ghostly servants who hover just outside one's peripheral vision, tidying up after one has passed through and discreetly preparing the next scene of relaxation (170, 167). Nor should we neglect to attend to the specific connotations of service (“some delicious host or hostess”; “personal service so hushed and regulated”) that are so persistently highlighted here. The notion of the stylistic author as discreet servant is closely connected to the rhetoric of “tact” pervasive in both James and Percy Lubbock's various polemics on the virtues of effaced authorship (“Isn't simplification the secret?” a Brother asks Dane: “Yes, but applied with a tact!” he enthuses); the effaced author's “tact” is the opposite term to the rhetorical, loquacious author's “obtrusiveness” (173). As familiar as this distinction has become, its irony has always been that the rhetorical narrator was itself, in its heyday, based on a model of tactful service—the

chatty author of the Victorian novel puts you at your ease, ushers you in, entertains you, takes you around by the elbow and makes introductions: what more could a “delicious host or hostess” do? The truth is, both models—that of rhetoric, and that of style—are *service* models: but the underlying values have changed. In the first, the author–servant is a kind of personable guide or escort (Lubbock’s term, of course, is “showman”), full of charm and personality, who is always paying you personal attentions: nudging you to point out a particularly fine view, or confiding gossip in your ear (being, of course, highly knowledgeable about the locals).²¹⁴ In the second, the author–servant is esteemed, not for its ready charm and attentiveness, but for its invisibility, its total discretion: the mark of this servant, as James makes clear, is that everything will be perfectly arranged, but you will never know it was there.²¹⁵

These observations help us to illuminate exactly what kind of shift is occurring between the first and second sections of “The Great Good Place,” in the utopian move from Dane’s harried business life to the magical relief of the GGP—a move in which precisely these two models of service are polemically reproduced. If in the second (and subsequent) sections, the GGP itself is figured as the site of “effaced,” invisible servants, then it must be recalled that the centerpiece of the opening section of the story is, in fact, a harassed Dane’s interaction with his overly officious manservant, Brown. From the first, Brown appears as the representative of an intrusive, endlessly exasperating world

²¹⁴ See, for example, Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (New York: The Viking Press, 1957 [1921]), p. 113.

²¹⁵ Andrew Goldstone sees just this kind of discreet, retiring servant as the figure for James’s authorial self-effacement in *The Ambassadors*: he notes that the moment in which Strether waits up for Chad in Chad’s apartment and is quietly provided with a “novel lemon-coloured and tender” (a literal “yellow book,” or novel wrapped in yellow paper, meant a French novel, a novel connoting a licentious aestheticism) by Chad’s efficient, largely unseen butler Baptiste reflects James’s own quiet curation of the reader’s aesthetic experience—we are “waited on by James himself, intruding narratively only in the most self-effacing ways.” *Fictions of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to de Man* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 48.

that insists on thrusting its face into everything: “Yet he could at last only turn back from the window; the world was everywhere, without and within, and, with the great staring egotism of its health and strength, was not to be trusted for tact or delicacy. He faced about precisely to meet his servant and the absurd solemnity of two telegrams on a tray” (153). The prophecy that “the world” is “within” as well as without is immediately fulfilled by the realization that Brown is already in the room, bearing telegrams: he is the agent of the world’s insistence for recognition. Following this entrance, Brown swiftly wears out his welcome by relentlessly reminding his master of his obligations, driving Dane to despair and even madness: “If you insist, Brown, I’ll kill you!” (154). Brown is inexorable, implacable: even when Dane turns away, trying to block him out, he still knows “exactly how straight and serious and stupid and faithful he stood there” (154). In the context of the story’s thematization of effaced authorship as a form of perfect service, Brown’s servant becomes the “obtrusive” Victorian author, the very caricature of the obnoxious, interrupting nuisance that was deployed against authorial narration—the unwelcome servant that one is unable to dismiss, bearing his “absurd” and superfluous messages. Indeed, in this light, the gargantuan mountain of papers that confronts and haunts Dane, with its connotative evocation of sheer excessiveness, begins to resemble the discursive surplus of loose and baggy Victorian narration, the superabundance of written *text* (in the form of asides, apostrophes, digressions, confidences) that was seen to plague the desperate reader. The shift to the GGP, then, offers us the transformed image of this unpleasant paradigm: now become a model of absent curation, reserve, tactful withdrawal, and impersonality. It is only fitting, then, that the narrator refers to the GGP as a kind of “cancelled list,” the whittled product (much like the modern short story itself)

of an inventory of cuts: “Slowly and blissfully he read into the general wealth of his comfort all the particular absences of which it was composed” (169).

Furthermore, at the same time as this shift is happening in the story, reproducing the move toward authorial impersonality, Dane himself, as author-figure, is also shedding his identity. This loss of being, of selfhood, is a fantasy he indulges in the story’s first section, when cornered by Brown and the dreadful paper-pile: “he knew again as well as ever that leaving was difficult, leaving impossible—that the only remedy, the true, soft, effacing sponge, would be to *be* left, to be forgotten” (153). His removal to the GGP, of course, provides the fulfillment to this wish; as Dane will later reflect, while musing over the Place’s many felicities, “The real exquisite was to be without the complication of an identity” (168).²¹⁶ Dane, after all, is not personally recognizable by any of the Brothers, remaining as anonymous to them as they are to him; in the GGP, he himself becomes a vague specter among others—and even considers the possibility that he may be in the afterlife. In yet another way, then, the shift of scene to the GGP offers an allegory of an author embracing impersonality and self-effacement: thus becoming a kind of parallel figure to the GGP’s own enigmatic and self-concealing “author,” “the great artist in the

²¹⁶ This formulation calls to mind D. A. Miller’s theorization of style as a wish to transcend and escape one’s personhood—style’s feats and flourishes of virtuosic self-concealment then become the index of this very wish, the giveaway that reveals, in negative, the marginalized or abject subject position that is style’s motive and underpinning: for Miller, this is most often a socially unrealizable position within the sexual economy, whether that of the gay man (Barthes, Wilde) or the “Old Maid” (Austen). It would certainly be natural to extend that argument to James—whose own stylistic feats have, of course, been so productively read in connection to a queer sexuality—and I have no doubt that there’s a good amount of truth that could be got at that way: but “The Great Good Place” would be a very odd fit for the specific contours of Miller’s argument—largely because homoeroticism is, in fact, so much on the surface in this story, from its evocation of a pleasurable bathhouse anonymity to the exquisite feeling of release, the “sense of an ache that had stopped” (166), that Dane experiences at the sight of the young man’s turned back (see footnote 80, below). Indeed, one of the most fascinating aspects of this tale is the disarming directness, even ingenuousness, of its magical premise, which seems to license it to be unusually literal in some surprising ways: about homoeroticism, no less than about the effacement of the author. At a psychological level, these concerns are clearly connected for James. See D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen; or, The Secret of Style* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton UP, 2003).

background.” Indeed, the story’s aesthetic allegory operates continually on two mutually reinforcing levels: one in which Dane figures as the effaced author, and another in which he is the reader, interpreting the stylistic author’s masterpiece.

At the close of the story’s second section, Dane’s conversation with the Brother on the bench turns to his reminiscences on the life he escaped: and, at his companion’s prompting, he agrees to share the story of how he came to find himself in the GGP (which, it seems, he now remembers, having regained some of his memories with the fuller return of his lucidity). This diegetic story, narrated by Dane—with scattered interjections from the attentive Brother—comprises the third section of “The Great Good Place”; thus, this third section serves to fill in the ellipsis between the first and second sections and answers the lingering question of how Dane’s transformation came about. It is a convention of mystery plots, of course, that ellipses in the story (the unknown past events that the investigators seek to uncover) are later narrated, after the fact, by a character in the know: either an investigator who tells of her findings, a witness who reports, or a villain who confesses. In Dane’s telling, we return to the cliffhanger where the story’s first section left off, with Dane meeting an unnamed “young man” who has just arrived for breakfast. This young man, as it turns out, is also an author, though one as unlike Dane as possible: if Dane is burdened by success and longs for anonymity, this young man is driven to desperation by his inability to make a name for himself—his envy is all for what Dane has and is. A kind of intuitive, ‘telepathic’ understanding is, once again, rapidly reached between the two men: “How can I say what passed between us?—it was so strange, so swift, so much a matter, from one to the other, of instant perception and agreement” (164). The agreement, simply put, is that the young man will take his

place—literally *become* Dane—and thus take on his shoulders all of the mounting pressures and deadlines that Dane feels unable to manage; in exchange, the young man promises to make Dane’s fantasies of disappearance a reality, assuring him that such a place as he dreams of, a place outside of the world itself, really exists. What is being described in this deal, wherein the young man becomes what Dane calls his “substitute in the world,” is, of course, a process of delegation—Dane’s absence is made possible by a surrogate who takes over his position and discourse: “It meant that he should live with my life, and think with my brain, and write with my hand, and speak with my voice” (162, 165). In yet another way, then, the story rehearses a move from direct authorial storytelling to the impersonal affordance of the reflector, staging the process of arriving at a Jamesian model of stylistic authorship. This aesthetic understanding is cemented by the revealing image that James chooses to represent the moment of change-over:

He suddenly sprang up and went over to my study-table—sat straight down there as if to write me my passport. Then it was—at the mere sight of his back, which was turned to me—that I felt the spell work. I simply sat and watched him with the queerest, deepest, sweetest sense in the world—the sense of an ache that had stopped. All life was lifted; I myself at least was somehow off the ground. He was already where I had been. (166)

It is in this precise moment that the deputization is accomplished, and the delegate assumes the position of the author: by sitting down, naturally, at the writing desk, to take up the act of composition; in this moment, as Dane subsequently puts it to the Brother, he became “Nobody,” his effacement achieved (166). The sight that initiates this momentous transference of authorial agency, however, is—crucially—Dane’s vision of the young man’s turned back: an image laden with unusual significance in the

contemporary critical discourse surrounding James's work.²¹⁷ As a reviewer of *The Sacred Fount* would write of James in 1901, the year after "The Great Good Place" was published, "He works with his back to the reader and does not really care whether anybody looks on to admire the performance or not." This critic goes on to complain that James "never gives [his reader] a friendly tip in an 'aside' [...]. After the way we have enjoyed the confidences of such as Scott and Bulwer Lytton, and of recent writers even, the refusal to recognize us on the part of Mr. James is mortifying."²¹⁸ In the years following, this idea of James as an absorbed craftsman who is so engrossed in the minutiae of his work that he never acknowledges that there is an audience present would become a mainstay of the reviews of James's late novels. As one review of *The Golden Bowl* put it, in evaluating James's recent output, "Each successive performance has come to resemble less and less a diverting trick with cards, done with one eye on the audience, and more and more a game of solitaire which—for the reader—sometimes fails to 'come out'"; similarly, a reviewer of *The Wings of the Dove* opined that "there is no novelist whose brain one can watch working as one watches Mr. James': he sits in the remoteness of his knowledge and analyzes the children of his brain."²¹⁹ In this light, it is hard not to

²¹⁷ The image of the turned back has continued to be resonant in more recent critical commentary of James, as well. Readings of *The Sacred Fount*, in particular, have noted what Daniel Hannah calls "the erotic and epistemological figure of the turned back," which she describes as "a pivotal trope for the queer flux of the narrator's impressions in *The Sacred Fount*, for the novel's epistemological-erotic play with scenes of uncovering." This queer valence ought to be connected (as Hannah does) to Kaja Silverman's discussion of James's penchant for "rear-subject positions," and "go[ing] behind" his characters in his prefaces, as a form of "sodomitical identification"; as well as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's analysis of a dynamic in James of the rectum "presented and averted," as "a switchpoint not only between homo- and heteroeroticism, but between allo- and autoeroticism [...]. and between the polarities that a phallic economy defines as active and passive." Daniel Hannah, *Henry James, Impressionism, and the Public*, rpt. (London & New York: Routledge, 2016 [2013]), p. 83, 82; Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 158, 179; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 2nd ed. (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 101.

²¹⁸ Quoted in *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Hayes, *ibid.*, p. 351.

²¹⁹ Quoted in *Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Hayes, *ibid.*, p. 420, 376.

read the image of the composing writer's turned back as James's reflection on his own refusal of direct address, his turn away from the reader (Jameson: "the very logic of modernism itself as it more and more turns away from its spectators"), as vitally connected with the hand-off of the authorial discourse to a deputy who takes one's place.

Indeed, what perhaps most remains for us to reckon with, in the end, is the very overdetermination and relentless reinscription of the thematics of authorial effacement in "The Great Good Place": a reinscription that also re-signifies Dane, by turns, from author (enacting the loss of selfhood, the embrace of the "effacing sponge") to reader (marveling at the perfect discretion of the "great artist in the background," the "masterly control" of the "unobtrusive, effaced agents"); from the author who deputizes (transferring discursive agency to his delegate under the sign of the turned back) to the deputy (the investigator who negotiates and composes the narrative discourse; the reflector who narrates exposition to the *ficelle*). What is finally most striking about the story is not so much the fact of its allegorizing a shift from narratorial rhetoric to style, but rather the exuberant and copious redundancy of the ways in which it does so: the almost maniacal insistence with which the same figure is scrawled, again and again, into the narrative, at multiple levels of content and form. Ultimately, then, what "The Great Good Place" gives us is not so much the author's effacement, but, on the contrary, the *universalization* of the author. The "tactful" withdrawal of the vocal author from the text now appears as the precondition for the reproduction of the authorial process itself as a kind of proliferating figure that gradually comes to colonize the diegesis: the author's concealment is actually the author's secret ubiquity. James's authorial presence, then, does not so much vanish, as sublimates into the very plot structures and devices of his narrative, which now become

emblems of the author at work. This sublimation of the speaking author into the mute, patterned fabric of the text, invisible in the same degree as he is everywhere traceable, is the very logic of style's modern dispensation; it is a logic that, in a curious way, James dramatizes, makes *literal*, by actually staging his own compositional process as the drama of the story. The discursive construction *is* the represented story: a dynamic typified by the reflector, who is at once a means of representation and a central element *of* that representation. It is in this way that the mystery plot—as that recursive narrative structure in which the discourse is pieced together within the story—provided an essential heuristic for James's aesthetic project.

To put it another way, style in fiction is understood to be a way of telling that bears the imprint of a unique consciousness; as Pater has it, in his essay on "Style," it is "representation [...] as connected with soul, of a specific personality, in its preferences, its volition and power."²²⁰ It is, most succinctly, writing that reflects its author. James's central principle, then, of moving from "the immediate [...] [to] the reflected field of life," from direct presentation of events to the reflection of those events in consciousness—his vision of art as a singular individual's "impression" of reality—installs style's logic as the motive force and obsession of his aesthetics: insofar as his art is *about* representation that reflects an individual mind, about reflectorhood.²²¹ James's preoccupation with an emergent paradigm of style draws out the concept for us, renders it starkly visible, by adopting its logic as the formal and representational logic of his fictions. Style is itself a mirroring—the identificatory self-sameness of an author and her products—and in James this mirrored sameness is as all-pervasive as it is bluntly

²²⁰ Pater, "Style," in *Appreciations* (St. Martin's St., London: Macmillan & Co., 1922, rpt. [1889]), p. 10.

²²¹ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 65.

concrete. To the extent that the paradigm that arose in the nineteenth century is still dominant today, what Jamesian late style has to show us is the historical emergence of style as such.

4. “The Story of One’s Story Itself”: The Style of *The Ambassadors*

I have been arguing here that the famous style of James’s late novels was, in fact, its author’s dramatization of stylistic authorship taking the place of rhetorical storytelling: of a “delegate” who takes the place of the author’s vocal presence in the text, precisely in order to act out and stage that author’s characteristic aesthetic and literary-compositional practices—these practices of story construction become the plot, the story itself. I have further alleged that it was James’s efforts to master the short story in the 1890s—leading him, as we have seen, to a searching and sustained engagement with the mystery plot—that ultimately proposed this strategy of authorial dramatization to James, and lent it its recursive, double-plotted structure. To see how all of this came to be constitutive of the distinctive style of James’s “major phase” novels, we turn now, at last, to *The Ambassadors*. There are a number of reasons why this novel is a particularly fitting place to conclude my argument. Not only was it the first-written of the late novels (as I’ve already noted) and thus follows in an immediate line from stories like “The Great Good Place,” which I wish to position as its direct forebears and aesthetic models, but—more significantly—it is situated in a place of special relevance with respect to modernism: and especially that strain of modernist thinking that emphasizes the effaced, impersonal author and the aesthetic construction of the text. Andrew Goldstone, in his study of modernism, remarks that “*The Ambassadors* is in fact James’s most aestheticist creation,”

and adds, “More than his other works, even more than the other monuments of his late style, *The Ambassadors* occupies a crucial juncture in the history of aesthetic autonomy. Combining the theme of aesthetic experience with conspicuously heightened structural and stylistic effects, the novel sets a modernist pattern.”²²² Perhaps most famously, *The Ambassadors* was the James novel that Percy Lubbock held up as a model for all future narratives in *The Craft of Fiction*, largely because it exemplified the narrational strategy of the reflector in such a clear and teachable fashion. Interestingly, as we will see, *The Ambassadors* is also the James novel that has most interested theorists of detective fiction—a fact which is not coincidental, but is in fact emphatically related to its position at the aesthetic crux between the literary forms of the *fin de siècle* and an incipient modernism, as well as to its emblematic representation of the Jamesian reflector.

In deference to the tradition of the mystery plot, however, I would like to withhold the story of *The Ambassadors* for a short time, and instead turn first to the story of that story: that is, to *The Ambassadors*’s preface. James’s approach in this preface, as with all of the prefaces that he wrote, was to cast himself back in time to the period of the novel’s composition and narrate the process by which he worked out his incipient vision (or “germ”) for the work in question, and all of the forking artistic possibilities that flowed from this initiatory glimpse, as a story of enchanted discovery; an intention he signaled in his very first preface, to the first volume of the New York Edition, *Roderick Hudson*: proposing (in a permissive third-person) to take “fondly [...] under this backward view, his whole unfolding, his process of production, for a thrilling tale, almost a wondrous adventure.”²²³ In his preface to *The Ambassadors*—20 volumes later—he

²²² Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy*, *ibid.*, p. 45.

²²³ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 4.

refers to this process of tracing his original intentions as “the charm, as I say, of the adventure *transposed*—the thrilling ups and downs, the intricate ins and outs of the compositional problem, made after such a fashion admirably objective, becoming the question at issue and keeping the artist’s heart in his mouth.”²²⁴ The adventure is the process of composition itself, and James’s palpable enjoyment in these prefaces is in watching himself—from the vantage of retrospect—sally forth to meet the artistic challenges posed by each of his particular works: the thrills of the chase relived again. What is most intriguing about reading the prefaces, then, on a basic level, is their relative lack of interest in the narrative that they purport to be *about*—the narrative, that is, of the novel or tale itself, as a completed work; it is a different narrative that they are concerned with: the narrative of how the novel or tale came to be composed. There are thus two stories that we must track here—a fact about which James is perhaps unusually candid in his *Ambassadors* preface:

it comes to me again and again, over this licentious record, that one’s bag of adventures, conceived or conceivable, has been only half-emptied by the telling of one’s story. It depends so on what one means by that equivocal quantity. There is the story of one’s hero, and then, thanks to the intimate connexion of things, the story of one’s story itself. I blush to confess it, but if one’s a dramatist one’s a dramatist, and the latter imbroglio is liable on occasion to strike me as really the more objective of the two.²²⁵

What holds out the keenest interest for James is not the story, but the story of the story; and, if anything, one suspects him of downplaying his true feelings when he makes the qualified suggestion that the second of these two stories is, “on occasion,” the one that most captures his imagination. Indeed, one sense in which to understand his assertion of the “adventure *transposed*” is that it marks the transposal, precisely, of the scene of

²²⁴ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 319.

²²⁵ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 313.

drama from the fictional narrative itself to the compositional process of *writing* that narrative: a conclusion hard to evade when the latter process is narrated in such terms of gripping intensity as “the suspense and thrill of a game of difficulty breathlessly played [...] this business of looking for the unseen and the occult, in a scheme half-grasped, by the light or, so to speak, by the clinging scent, of the gage already in hand.”²²⁶

Furthermore, if *The Ambassadors*’s process of production is a “thrilling tale”—the telling of which compels James, revealingly, to resort to the language of genre fiction (with audible echoes of railway novels and sensation)—then the genre in which this tale must be classed is certainly that of the detective story. It is on a direct loan from the detective story that James borrows the tropes for his story of the story: he speaks throughout the preface of “the clue to its whereabouts,” “inductive steps,” “my ‘hunt’ for Lambert Strether,” “cross-examination in the witness-box,” “the determination of *this* identity,” “a certain *principle* of probability,” “my clue,” “links multiplied,” “a perfect train of secrets [...] in the light [...] to be sifted and sorted,” “things continued to fall together [...] [a]s the case completed itself,” and a “general probability” that “one had really but to keep under the lens for an hour to see it give up its secrets.”²²⁷ An imaginary of interrogation, examination, investigation, evidence, induction, testimony, and man-hunts abounds. To make sense of this language, it behooves me to step back for a moment, and say a bit more about the actual artistic process that James is figuring in these terms. What James is describing here is a process of lending form, detail, and specificity to the somewhat vague or indefinite idea of his novel, still in its most embryonic stages of conception. We have, in fact, already seen this compositional

²²⁶ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 311.

²²⁷ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, pp. 313-15.

process played out dramatically in “The Great Good Place,” in Dane and the Brother’s ongoing attempts to affix concretizing language to the formless mystery of the GGP; there, too, of course, this discursivizing process was notably troped as a plot of investigation. The preface to *The Ambassadors* helps us to understand the special aptness of the investigatory analogy. For James, the narrative points and particulars that he is filling in are not something that he is ‘making up’ or inventing, in any kind of purely subjective way, but something with a more objective existence, that he is gradually uncovering and coming to understand. The germ or *donnée*, from its moment of germination in the artist’s mind, takes on a life of its own, a life apart from the artist; as James himself tells us, quite directly:

It is part of the charm attendant on such questions that the “story,” with the omens true, as I say, puts on from this stage the authenticity of concrete existence. It then *is*, essentially—it begins to be, though it may more or less obscurely lurk; so that the point is not in the least what to make of it, but only, very delightfully and very damnably, where to put one’s hand on it. In which truth resides surely much of the interest of that admirable mixture for salutary application which we know as art.²²⁸

Elsewhere, what James reverently calls “the Story” is said to “seem to offer itself in a light, to seem to know, and with the very last knowledge, what it’s about”; we “flatter ourselves,” he adds, “that we negotiate with it by treaty.”²²⁹ The story lurks; it is coy; it is essentially mysterious. The author, in Jamesian aesthetics, is excluded from accessing this story (he is on the *outside* of it), and in this sense, it functions as a kind of hidden plot, for which the compositional process is the investigation. It is for this reason that this process comes, so naturally, to be described in the language of detective fiction. The author, as detective, has only his germ to go on: only the one piece of the puzzle that he

²²⁸ *The Art of the Novel, ibid.*, p. 311-12.

²²⁹ *The Art of the Novel, ibid.*, p. 315.

has glimpsed, which he is not yet able to make sense of, to narrativize. In the case of *The Ambassadors*, that germ is an anecdote told to him by a friend, about an elderly American man (actually the novelist and editor William Dean Howells), who, while standing in a “charming old garden” in Paris (he is visiting the city, for the first time in his life, to see his expatriate son), seems to sadden, and tells his companion to be grateful for his youth—the older man suddenly feels that he has missed his life.²³⁰ This will eventually become the scene in *The Ambassadors* in which Strether speaks to little Bilham in Gloriani’s garden (“Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to”)—but at this point, the details, context, and characters are obscure: all James has are the old man, the garden, and the sense of regret. This bare hint is, as he says, the “dropped grain of suggestion” from which the whole of his novel “sprung.”²³¹

The problem, however, is how to generate the story from this single clue: and now comes the part of the process that James describes as “looking for the unseen and the occult, in a scheme half-grasped, by the light or, so to speak, by the clinging scent, of the gage already in hand.” Like a detective, his purpose here is to take a seemingly arbitrary, inchoate event and fit it within a larger story that will lend it meaning; and like a detective, he begins, inductively, with the most basic aspects of the problem, “where has he come from and why has he come”:

Possessed of our friend’s nationality, to start with, there was a general probability in his narrower localism; which, for that matter, one had really but to keep under the lens for an hour to see it give up its secrets. He would have issued, our rueful worthy, from the very heart of New England—at the heels of which matter of course a perfect train of secrets tumbled for me into the light.²³²

²³⁰ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 308. Also see *The Notebooks of Henry James*, *ibid.*, Oct. 31, 1895.

²³¹ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 307.

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 313, 314.

The tense here is instructive: James is attempting to reconstruct—after the fact, as it were—what the as-yet-unnamed Strether “would have” done, where he “would have” been from. It reads more as a process of investigative inference, than one of imaginative creation. It assumes, further, that there is a hidden plot, a chain of logical and necessary events, behind the fragment of narrative that he has in his possession. In this logic, the discovery of one fact—the fact, for example, that his American protagonist is from New England—in turn proposes other inferences, the probability of other facts: it is in this way that James gradually fills in the details of his narrative. Facts that at first seemed merely arbitrary, lacking in coherence, are slowly embedded in a causal account that explains and justifies their necessity. For example, James hears his unidentified protagonist speaking to his companion in a plaintive, even despairing, way, while he is standing amid the delights of the Parisian garden, and attempts to uncover the explanation for this “peculiar tone”:

the clue to its whereabouts would lie in a certain *principle* of probability: he wouldn’t have indulged in his peculiar tone without a reason; it would take a felt predicament or a false position to give him so ironic an accent. One hadn’t been noticing “tones” all one’s life without recognizing when one heard it the voice of the false position. The dear man in the Paris garden was then admirably and unmistakeably *in* one—which was no small point gained; what next accordingly concerned us was the determination of *this* identity.²³³

“What the ‘position’ would infallibly be,” James later muses, “and why, on his hands, it had turned ‘false’—these inductive steps could only be as rapid as they were distinct.”²³⁴ In truth, this rhetoric of detection is omnipresent in James’s account of his own artistic process: a process of following out “the links” to arrive at “the determination of poor

²³³ Ibid, p. 313-4.

²³⁴ Ibid, p. 314.

Strether's errand and for the apprehension of his issue."²³⁵ By the end of the preface, one could well be unsure whether James has written a novel or made an arrest.

In the preface's framing, the plot of *The Ambassadors* is the story of the crime: or, as James calls it, "the story of one's hero"; his process of working out and composing the novel is the story of the investigation, "the story of one's story itself." And indeed, what the paratext of the preface seems to insist on is an emphatic underlining of the issues of narrative reflexivity that mystery plots necessarily raise. These issues are present within the preface itself—as we can see if we revisit James's statement, quoted earlier, regarding "the charm, as I say, of the adventure *transposed*—the thrilling ups and downs, the intricate ins and outs of the compositional problem, made after such a fashion admirably objective, becoming the question at issue and keeping the artist's heart in his mouth." Here, James is referring to his retracing—from the diegetic present in which he is writing the preface—of the compositional process by which he wrote *The Ambassadors*, which happened a few years earlier: a process that, through the operation of time and memory, has come to seem "admirably objective" to him, like an unfolding drama that he watches with avid spectatorship, following along with his "heart in his mouth."²³⁶ And yet, if we didn't know this context, the same words could just as easily be interpreted as describing the "thrill" that James felt in the novel's original composition: for, as we have seen, the story itself during this process takes on for its author an "objective" character—"puts on [...] the authenticity of concrete existence"—and closely resembles, in its description, the

²³⁵ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, p. 315.

²³⁶ This is clear from the lines that come just before what I have quoted here: "Again and yet again, as, from book to book, I proceed with my survey, I find no source of interest equal to this verification after the fact, as I may call it, and the more in detail the better, of the scheme of consistency 'gone in' for. As always—since the charm never fails—the retracing of the process from point to point brings back the old illusion. The old intentions bloom again and flower—in spite of all the blossoms they were to have dropped by the way. This is the charm, as I say, of the adventure *transposed* [...]" (318-9).

reconstruction after the fact of a narrative that has already happened. In other words, the diegetic past and present of the preface come to mirror each other: James's retracing, in the present, of the process of writing *The Ambassadors* reproduces the process by which James 'retraced', in the past, the plot of *The Ambassadors* itself. The upshot of this is that the preface, too, may be divided into a double structure: one in which, signally, the story of the investigation (the story of the writing of the preface itself) happens to recapitulate, and, in a sense, restage, the story of the crime that it seeks to uncover (that is, the story of composing the novel).

Moreover, all of this extra investigative plotting that the New York Edition layers on top of the novel (what Fredric Jameson might call a "superimposed plot") only serves, of course, to extend and reinscribe the mystery plot structure that organizes *The Ambassadors* itself: it's authors all the way down. As we know from James's late tales, the story of the investigation is here the story that is cast through the consciousness of the reflector—the authorial delegate who stages the contingent process of assembling the narrative discourse—while the hidden plot is the murky, "occult" situation or relationship that demands to be inquired into and accounted for. In *The Ambassadors*, these two plots may be schematized, very simply, as the story of Strether and the story of Chad.

Strether's plot is, of course, the one that we are given as readers: it is the story of an aged and rather resigned American man, of some intellectual capacity but little accomplishment, who has been dispatched by his employer and probable fiancée—that grimly respectable grande dame of Woollett, Massachusetts, Mrs. Newsome—to retrieve her son, Chad Newsome, heir to the lucrative family firm, who has been living, almost incommunicado, in Paris for some years, and is believed to be ensnared in a shameful

relationship with a Frenchwoman of ill repute. Strether's mission is to convince Chad to come home, and take up the sober mantle of family responsibility: but when he arrives in Paris, he finds that what he had imagined to be infamy turns out to be a life abounding in all of the easy, cosmopolitan refinements, the graces of youthful ardor and exquisite taste, that he had, without knowing it, so sorely missed in his own parochial and workmanlike career. In short, what Strether, the small-town literary editor, finds in Chad's life—of which he is, as it were, contractually obligated to disapprove—is nothing less than the absent supplement of his own life: a vision of the magnificent youth that he never had, but which somehow would have completed him, and justified all. Able, now, only to feel this lack, the time he gratefully spends among Chad's Parisian circle—who take him in quite like a long-lost uncle—upends his entire sense of himself, and scrambles all of his loyalties and commitments. In keeping with the novel's mystery plot structure, Strether experiences this plot as disorienting, inexplicable, marked by obscure and enigmatic glimpses; throughout the novel, we find him ruminating on the uncertainty of his position, feeling himself to be “moving verily in a strange air and on ground not of the firmest.”²³⁷ He is unsure of the proper interpretation to put on his own motives, as well as on the events that transpire around him. The first encounter with Chad himself—whom Strether had known as a callow New Englander, now almost unrecognizable in his adopted persona of the consummate and polished expat sophisticate—marks his severest moment of disorientation: “both vague and multitudinous,” his impression of Chad opens a floodgate of unforeseen “notes” and “sensations” of indeterminate meaning, which must be gone over and parsed, “again and again,” for days (84). “It was a *case* then,

²³⁷ *The Ambassadors*, ed. Nicola Bradbury (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), p. 167. To be cited parenthetically hereafter.

simply,” as Strether puts it to himself, “a strong case, as people nowadays called such things, a case of transformation unsurpassed” (85). He will receive still further cause for bewilderment, later on, when he makes the acquaintance of Marie de Vionnet, evidently the Frenchwoman with whom Chad has been ‘ensnared’, but who turns out, in the event, to be a 38-year-old countess of scrupulous cultivation and sincerity, whose relationship to Chad is far more undefinable (and, it seems, far less sinful) than Strether could ever have counted on—and who persistently evades the terms by which he tries to classify and understand her, having “taken all his categories by surprise” (170). Even her Frenchness, apparently, is open to debate.²³⁸

In short, it is Chad’s “case,” considered from all of its potential angles, that becomes the obsessive focus of Strether’s analysis; and, indeed, if he is originally sent forth as Mrs. Newsome’s ambassador, he quickly becomes, in point of fact, something much more like her private eye: probing, making inquiries, and filing regular reports. Even as Strether understands that he is, in some sense, being seduced by the very people that he is supposed to be investigating—that he is, to use the noirish cliché, ‘in too deep’ (and Strether’s situation practically requires the use of such clichés, as the novel itself is the first to acknowledge: “The sense he had so often had, since the first hour of his disembarkment, of being further and further ‘in’, treated him again, at this moment, to another twinge [...] He had allowed for depths, but these were greater”)—at the same time, he persists in maintaining a constant line of communication with his dispatchers in Woollett, and notifies Mrs. Newsome dutifully of all his shifting impressions on the state

²³⁸ Mme. de Vionnet is, it turns out, “the daughter of a French father and an English mother”: “It would doubtless be difficult to-day, as between French and English, to label her and place her” (143).

of her son's "situation" (264, 179).²³⁹ The result is that, for the majority of the novel, Strether conveys something of the awkward position of a detective at a party: trying doggedly, if almost apologetically, to get a useful clue out of someone, to carry out the pretense of conducting interviews, even as the subjects of his investigation circulate about him, drinks in hand, smiling and providing half-answers to his earnest questions. He is, of course, enjoying the party as much as anyone, and frankly admits to finding his suspects enchanting: but this very enjoyment only heightens his self-doubt, and the felt ambiguity of his own position.

Not the least fascinating part of all this is that the party guests have all promised, at least nominally, to cooperate with his inquiries: and the probing conversations that Strether conducts with Chad's associates become, in this way, collaborative attempts to formulate the truest version of Chad's narrative; they wear quite explicitly on their face the aspect of provisional brainstorming, of seeking to assemble an adequate explanation for all of the available facts: "Strether quite felt how it all fitted; yet there seemed one stray piece"—or, one page later: "It hung beautifully together, but with still a loose end" (293, 294). Like the Great Good Place, the mystery of Chad is a discursive problem: it is a problem of description. What Strether is truly after in his investigation is not so much the hunt for some concealed plot point or unknown event—indeed, he repeatedly brushes off the possibility of such a disclosure, declaring that Chad's private life is his own business²⁴⁰—rather, it is a search for *the terms* by which Chad's situation can be

²³⁹ Indeed, in some ways, *The Ambassadors* feels more like the twentieth-century, noir-style detective fiction that would come after it (Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler) than it does like the late-Victorian, Conan-Doyle detective story: a sense that is curiously confirmed by the anecdote that Hammett himself, apparently, cited *The Wings of the Dove* as the inspiration for *The Maltese Falcon*. See Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 60; and Charles Rzepka, *Detective Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p. 190.

²⁴⁰ See, for example, p. 113.

narratively understood: the proper name, the proper label, that will clarify and domesticate its meaning—what the novel calls, in a telling moment, “the word of the whole enigma” (301).²⁴¹ Hence the endlessly renewed brainstorming sessions that Strether conducts with Chad’s friends: these are fundamentally attempts, not to glean new information, but to negotiate the terms by which Chad is to be comprehended. As such, verbal formulas that seem to offer the potential for clarity—the possibility of *naming*—come to take on an outsized significance. We first see the power attached to such formulas when Strether is attempting to come to terms with Chad’s transformation:

The intimation had, the next thing, in a flash, taken on a name—a name on which our friend seized as he asked himself if he were not, perhaps, really dealing with an irreducible young pagan. This description—he quite jumped at it—had a sound that gratified his mental ear, so that, of a sudden, he had already adopted it. Pagan—yes, that was, wasn’t it? what Chad *would* logically be. It was what he must be. It was what he was. The idea was a clue and, instead of darkening the prospect, projected a certain clearness. (97)

The tangible eagerness with which Strether here “seize[s]” on the word “pagan,” as the singular key to understanding Chad, is representative of a relationship to language that one finds everywhere in the novel—an apparent conviction, on Strether’s part, that if one could just find the right word, the right phrase, everything would be suddenly illuminated, and one could see one’s way.

Perhaps the best example of this process occurs when Chad’s close friend, little Bilham, offers Strether a phrase that will become his guiding light for much of the novel,

²⁴¹ As such, I am in broad agreement with Mary Cross’s basic thesis, that “the quest for language, the search to ‘find the names’, provide the basic narrative movement of *The Ambassadors*, the thrust of a plot,” and that the characters themselves participate in creating the diegetic world of the text, through their negotiations of language. I disagree, however, with her reading of the novel’s plot, as a progressive movement towards greater knowledge and clarity, ending with Strether’s “acquisition of the right words”; it seems to me that this linguistic investigation is a far more fraught and indeterminate process, which is, furthermore, less about achieving an end than it is about the exhibition of the process itself. See Mary Cross, “‘To Find the Names’: The Ambassadors,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 19 (September 1, 1983): 402–3.

as he attempts to account for the unclassifiable nature of Chad and Mme. de Vionnet's relationship: "a virtuous attachment" (112). The phrase strikes Strether at once as a "revelation," a description that "settled the question so effectually [...] that it had given Strether almost a new lease of life" (113, 112). With this single phrase, Strether at last finds a handle by which to grasp the enigma of Chad's relationship to the countess—and thus, by extension, the personal transformation that Chad has undergone during his stay in Paris. As Strether will later muse to his friend and *ficelle* Maria Gostrey,

such an account of the matter did, after all, fit the confirmed appearances. Nothing, certainly, on all the indications, could have been a greater change for him [Chad] than a virtuous attachment, and since they had been in search of the "word," as the French called it, of that change, little Bilham's announcement—though so long and so oddly delayed—would serve as well as another. (114)

The French word *mot*, to which James refers here, has a double meaning: in addition to "word," it can also mean "key," in the sense of a solution: "the word of the whole enigma," quoted above, is an Anglicization of the French idiom *le mot de l'énigme*, which could also be translated as "the solution to the mystery."²⁴² James's insistence, here, on translating *mot* as "word" deftly captures the novel's conflation of language—in the sense of specific words and phrases—with *explanation*, in the sense of solving a riddle or mystery. It captures, in other words, a mystery whose solution has become completely discursive, a mystery that can be solved only by finding the right terms of description.

This is, of course, precisely the same kind of endless, open-ended discursive negotiation that constituted the utopian routine of the GGP; and indeed, another way to describe what Strether is up to here is as a process of *composition*. Not only is Strether

²⁴² See note 113 in the Cambridge edition of *The Ambassadors*, *ibid.*, p. 417.

preoccupied with the need to provide an adequate account of Chad: he is also concerned, more precisely, with the necessity of putting this account in the proper words, the right language—indeed, the entire point is that the adequacy of the account *depends upon* the chosen words being the right ones. We can already see, in this regard, how James’s *mot de l’énigme* is a version of the Flaubertian *mot juste*, celebrated by Pater as the very essence of style’s pursuit: “The one word for the one thing, the one thought, amid the multitude of words, terms, that might just do—the problem of style was there!”²⁴³ What Strether dramatizes, in this sense, is the exacting compositional process of hunting out the right word, the right phrase, so essential to a late Victorian discourse of prose stylism. And this insight, in turn, ought to put us in mind—once again—of James’s staging, in the preface, of “the intricate ins and outs of the compositional problem” as a “thrilling tale” or breathless “adventure” in its own right. This parallel is driven home if we register the linguistic similarity of Strether’s musings with those of James himself in the preface: when Strether thinks, “Pagan—yes, that was, wasn’t it? what Chad *would* logically be. It was what he must be. It was what he was,” we hear the echo of James’s attempt to determine where Strether “would have” been from; there is the same sense of reconstructing an understanding after the fact, and the same sense of triumphant discovery when the right word, the solution, “tumble[s] [...] into the light.”

Nor is this, by any means, the only place in which Strether’s phrasings sound strikingly like James’s own, as seen in the novel’s preface: consider the language of Strether’s reaction (given in free indirect discourse) to his first meeting with Chad...

the note had been so strongly struck during that first half-hour that everything happening since was comparatively a minor development. The fact was that his perception of the young man’s identity—so absolutely checked for a minute—had

²⁴³ Pater, “Style,” in *Appreciations*, *ibid.*, p. 29.

been quite one of the sensations that count in life; he certainly had never known one that had acted, as he might have said, with more of a crowded rush. (83-4)

...and compare it to James's description of his own mental process, upon first receiving the anecdote that would form the germ of *The Ambassadors*:

The observation there listened to and gathered up had contained part of the "note" that I was to recognise on the spot as to my purpose—had contained in fact the greater part; the rest was in the place and the time and scene they sketched; these constituents clustered and combined to give me further support, to give me what I may call the note absolute.²⁴⁴

Strether receives his impression of Chad in the same way that James receives his *donnée*: as a "crowded rush" of pregnant, unnarrativized material to be sifted ("these constituents clustered and combined") and a spur to composition—an injunction to articulate, to compose, what he has received. The "note" is just that (to use another Jamesian parlance) "vague quantity," infinitely rich and suggestive, that sets the whole process of narrative production in motion.²⁴⁵ The staging of this aesthetic process in the novelistic discourse, in all its impressionistic specification and density, is, of course, what we mean when we refer to James's late style; but this encounter with the hidden plot that is its formal core can, in fact, be traced, as we have seen, back through the short stories that James wrote a decade earlier—for the original of the "vague quantity," the diegetic figure for the Jamesian germ, was the ghost, just as Chad and Mme. de Vionnet's undefinable relation can be traced back to the impossible relationships that lay at the center of stories like "The Way It Came" and "Maud-Evelyn." It was through the mystery plots of those

²⁴⁴ *The Art of the Novel*, *ibid.*, pp. 308-9. The similarity, here remarked, between Strether and James's phrasings recalls David Kurnick's notion of "performative universalism," which not only undercuts the perspectival distinctions between characters but also blurs the line between characters and author. See *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 146.

²⁴⁵ For example, "those vague qualities and quantities" (5), "the vague quantities" (25), etc.

stories that James learned to dramatize his own authorial process within the story itself, and thus to enact a new kind of stylistic authorship in his fiction.

I'm not the first to connect *The Ambassadors* to a detective story: that distinction belongs, perhaps, to Percy Lubbock himself, who makes a suggestive, if offhand, reference to the detective genre in the middle of *Craft*'s famous discussion of the 'reflecting consciousness' in *The Ambassadors*:

In a tale of murder and mystery there is one man who cannot possibly be the narrator, and that is the murderer himself; for if he admits us into his mind at all he must do so without reserve, thereby betraying the secret that we ought to be guessing at for ourselves. But by this method of *The Ambassadors* the mind of which the reader is made free, Strether's mind, is not given away; there is no need for it to yield up all its secrets at once. The story in it is played out by due degrees [...]²⁴⁶

Although Lubbock's ostensible purpose here is to contrast a first-person, homodiegetic narration with James's method of the 'central consciousness', what is more striking is his tacit acknowledgement that *The Ambassadors* and detective fiction are fundamentally aligned in their aims. This makes sense when we remember that Lubbock's opposition to Victorian rhetoric was always framed as a distinction between *telling* and *showing*: in which the essential sin of the rhetorical author was that of being overly divulging, of giving away, by his garrulous intrusions—and the constant interjection of his opinions and commentary—much that should be properly left up to the reader. The Jamesian reflector was, for Lubbock, the antidote to this kind of divulging 'telling'—by presenting the story as it unfolds and comes to be understood in the perception of a centrally concerned character, you dramatize the narrative, rather than simply telling the reader what happened: as a result, the reader is able to make her own observations, and come to her own judgements, about the events being depicted. As such, though Lubbock's

²⁴⁶ *The Craft of Fiction*, *ibid.*, p. 163.

reference to mysteries is made in passing, there is something deeply revealing in its recognition that the very emblem and archetype of the kind of authorial withholding that he valorizes is, in fact, detective fiction: a genre based precisely on the imperative to not ‘give away’ the authoritative version of events, to suspend any definitive interpretation of the narrative and give free play to the reader’s hunches and impressions. By this understanding, the key, implied difference between the detective story and modernism is that in the former we eventually *do* find out what really happened, we get the authoritative version of events in the end; whereas in modernism, this kind of narrative open-endedness is valued for its own sake and is deliberately left unresolved. This echoes, of course, the accounts of Fredric Jameson and Ricardo Piglia that we encountered at the outset of this chapter, in which, similarly, the more advanced, modernist extension of the mystery plot is understood to be a narrative in which the hidden story no longer appears—as Piglia puts it, “it abandons the surprise ending [...] [and] works the tension between the two stories without ever resolving it.”

Scholars of detective fiction, too—who have, in general, been far more interested in Henry James than scholars of James have been interested in detective fiction—have echoed this understanding, arguing that the aesthetic influence of the detective genre on modernist-aligned writers like James can be identified in the similarity of their narratives to the strangely arbitrary and inchoate events that define the story of the investigation. As the critic Dennis Porter writes, in his book *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (1981),

The detective encounters effects without apparent causes, events in a jumbled chronological order, significant clues hidden among the insignificant. And his role is to reestablish sequence and causality. Out of the *nouveau roman* of the offered

evidence he constructs a traditional readable novel that ends up telling the story of the crime.²⁴⁷

Porter argues that James's work is "informed" by this "detective story structure," for his fiction tends to feature "an investigator struggling to make sense of ambiguous data."²⁴⁸ The novel he cites as most representative of this motif is, once again, *The Ambassadors*—a novel that, for Porter, ought more properly to be characterized as a work of what he calls "antidetection," because the novel is not actually interested in producing a definitive solution, but rather in the process of investigation for its own sake: more interested in depicting the struggle to interpret, than in providing the correct interpretation.²⁴⁹ Other scholars have broadly reproduced this assessment: Martin Priestman, for example, in his book *Detective Fiction and Literature: The Figure on the Carpet* (1991) associates James with the "anti-detective story," in which we are teased by the search for an elusive or hidden meaning that is deliberately never revealed. Priestman links this form to "the 'symbolist' phase of modernist development," characterized by "an intensification of metaphor wherein the referent [...] can theoretically never be given."²⁵⁰ Indeed, as Porter's formulation has it, the mystery plot's two stories can be seen to schematically represent the period distinction between modernist and Victorian literature: with the story of the investigation as the ambiguous and anachronic modernist novel—or as he puts it, the "*nouveau roman*"—and the lucid, linear story of the crime as the "traditional" novel of nineteenth-century realism. By this view, then, what James does with the mystery plot is to simply discard the second story—the part associated with Victorian rhetoric, with

²⁴⁷ Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime*, *ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

²⁴⁸ Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime*, *ibid.*, p. 247.

²⁴⁹ Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime*, *ibid.*, p. 249.

²⁵⁰ Priestman, *Detective Fiction and Literature: The Figure on the Carpet* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 136.

telling and divulging—leaving only the story of the investigation, the open-ended struggle for interpretation and meaning: thus setting the blueprint for the modernist novel.

It's certainly true, as we've seen, that the secret story, as an element of James's mystery plots, tended to wither away over the course of the 1890s; the hidden truth of the Great Good Place, for example, is never revealed (and as the story suggests, the absence of such a definitive account is precisely the point of the GGP). But I want to conclude, nonetheless, by disputing the widely held notion that James and modernism were able to dispense with rhetoric by making their narratives all investigation and no crime. What this implicit account misses is the extent to which traces of Victorian rhetoric persisted in the modernist plot of investigation—and the best text to make this case, I would argue, is, in fact, *The Ambassadors*.

As I argued at the start of this chapter, the mystery plot experienced a new resurgence in the short story boom of the 1880s and '90s; but the Victorian history of the mystery form goes back further than this, of course, and it is necessary to trace something of that history if we want to grasp how the Victorians understood the relationship between detective stories and rhetorical storytelling. Indeed, when we trace detective fiction's rise in Britain back to the late 1850s and early 1860s, the same period in which the turn from rhetoric to style first began—with Dickensian proto-mysteries like *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations* anticipating the imminent explosion of sensation novels, driven by authors like Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins, in which the figure of the investigator and the plot of detection appear for the first time—we see that the relationship of the mystery plot to novelistic rhetoric was conceived very differently by these early practitioners than it would subsequently be by a later cohort of modernist

critics. Porter himself gives us the clue to this different understanding when he writes of the “garrulous assistant,” the chatty character who often features as the sidekick and foil to the “taciturn Great Detective.”²⁵¹ While this description puts us in mind, immediately, of Conan Doyle’s Dr. Watson, this type was already a feature of the genre in its earliest Victorian instances. Take, for example, Gabriel Betteredge, from Wilkie Collins’s 1868 novel *The Moonstone*, who not only assists the detective, Sergeant Cuff, in his investigations, but also serves as the narrator for large swathes of the novel. Let me give you a taste of the chattiness of his narration:

I wonder whether the gentlemen who make a business and a living out of writing books, ever find their own selves getting in the way of their subjects, like me? If they do, I can feel for them. In the meantime, here is another false start, and more waste of good writing-paper. What’s to be done now? Nothing that I know of, except for you to keep your temper, and for me to begin it all over again for the third time.²⁵²

What’s fascinating is that this is so clearly a *parody* of the apostrophizing, confiding, digressing rhetorical author that was, at this time, still the dominant storytelling stance of the triple-decker novel: Collins’s send-up of this author’s intrusiveness and irrelevance express a new recognition of this bantering stance as already conventional, dated and ridiculous. The detective novel was an important vehicle for this kind of critique: but the critique operates, significantly, in a way that is exactly the opposite of its later modernist iteration. As narrators, the role of figures like Betteredge and Watson is to relate the story of the investigation; just as it is the role of the detective to relate the story of the crime. This account of the investigation, with its unresolved confusions and red herrings, is the means by which the reader’s understanding of the story is deferred and distracted by

²⁵¹ Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime*, *ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁵² Collins, *The Moonstone*, ed. Sandra Kemp (London and New York: Penguin Classics, 1998), p. 26.

irrelevant details; because the position of the narrator is necessarily one of ignorance, narration in the detective story—the narrative discourse itself—is, in essence, a device of suspension and impediment. This is what Franco Moretti means when he writes, in his essay “Clues,” that the detective story “abolishes narration”: that is, that the ‘reveal’ of Holmes’s solution retroactively erases Watson’s storytelling, which is revealed to have been nothing more than a barrier and a delay to readerly knowledge, obstructing our access to the real story.²⁵³ Narration—in all its associations with description, dilation, commentary, and so on—is, in the construction of the mystery plot, an encumbrance to be overcome: and it was in this way that Victorian authors understood this plot to be a critique of the loquacious, obtrusive rhetorical author: those authors who were forever, as Betteredge puts it, “getting in the way of their subjects.” Far from being identified with a self-dramatizing modernist novel, the story of the investigation was originally regarded as an intensification and parodic *heightening* of the rhetorical storytelling posture of Victorian fiction.

It’s important to recognize that this is the understanding that James would have inherited 30 years later in *The Ambassadors*: and in this regard, what is most noteworthy about the novel’s citation of the mystery plot is the way it negotiates between Victorian and modernist accounts. This negotiation is embodied in the figure of Strether himself, who is both the investigator of the story and the “garrulous assistant” who obstructs our access to it—Holmes and Watson in one. For while it is true that Strether’s compositional process never succeeds in producing a definitive account of Chad’s story—and that *The Ambassadors* is thus, in this sense, a story of the investigation without a story of the

²⁵³ Moretti, “Clues,” in *Signs Taken For Wonders*, trans. Fischer et al, *ibid.*, p. 148.

crime—there *is*, in fact, a Piglian “surprise ending” in the novel, a moment when a secret tale, which has hitherto been only implicit, “encode[d]” in the “interstices” of the visible story, emerges suddenly and dramatically on the surface: the moment when Strether discovers, quite by accident, that the still-married Mme. de Vionnet is Chad’s mistress.²⁵⁴ In this moment, Strether comes to realize that he had built up what was no more than a simple adulterous affair into something obscure, rich and undefinable: “He almost blushed in the dark, for the way he had dressed the possibility in vagueness, as a prattling little girl might have dressed her doll” (378). What we understand here is that there is actually nothing particularly ambiguous about Chad’s story, *in itself*; it is Strether’s discursive investigation, his ceaseless probings and parsings, that has *produced* it as ambiguous. James acknowledges that his story of the investigation is, in narrative terms, little more an engrossing distraction from the real, unknown story of Chad, which is probably not worth telling: while Strether’s “prattling” aligns his focalized position of ignorance with the chatty digressiveness of the rhetorical author. In this way, James shows us that the unresolved and open-ended discursive process that is the modernist novel still bears, in its willful and free-wheeling obscurantism, the repressed trace of Victorian rhetoric. What we ultimately find in *The Ambassadors*, then, is the meanderings of authorial rhetoric repackaged into an image of style—of the author not as

²⁵⁴ There is, of course, a long tradition in James criticism of recognizing sex and sexual knowledge to be the hidden plot that the Jamesian reflector is on the outside of and voyeuristically peering in upon; as Ruth Yeazell writes, “Beginning with the fiction of the late nineties—*What Maisie Knew*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *The Awkward Age*—and continuing through *The Sacred Fount* and the novels of the major phase, sexual passion becomes the major mystery, the hidden knowledge which the Jamesian innocent must at last confront.” That this kind of voyeurism was significant for James, psychologically, I think is probably indisputable; but I haven’t pursued that angle in this chapter, preferring to track the hidden plot as a narrative structure back through a close attention to Jamesian form and aesthetics—an aesthetics that was responding to a larger context of shifting aesthetic values at the close of the nineteenth century. Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 20.

a *presence* in the text, but as the very *process* of textual construction itself. The mystery plot is, for James, the narrative form that brokers and mediates this transition.

Chapter 4

Rhetoric as Style; or, Marlow

1. Framing Conrad

Joseph Conrad, like Henry James, has long been identified with a proto-modernist ideal of style, the very cornerstone of which is the rejection of Victorian rhetoric: the total effacement of the rhetorical author as a garrulous, apostrophizing, preaching, confiding, bantering, speechifying, and, in short, *speaking* presence within the text. Indeed, the author of style—knowable only as an abstraction, distributed across the linguistic surface of the prose, and waiting silently to be discovered in every intimate detail of composition—was, as I have been arguing, implicitly understood to be incompatible with his predecessor, that affable author who hails the reader familiarly from the page: and could only emerge, it seems, by attacking this loquacious figure's position, and precipitating his decline. In this way, there would appear to be a basic opposition between the self-effacing discipline of style, as it was theorized in the later decades of the nineteenth century, and the aspirational *orality* of an earlier Victorian author, whose habitual intrusions only made more manifest his evident nostalgia for the genial confidences and asides of oral storytelling. This older, nostalgic storyteller—in a distinction that the new cohort of post-Jamesian novelists was quick to establish—does precisely that: he *tells*; while James and Conrad became emblematic of those more advanced crafters of fiction who merely, and mutely, *showed*.

As such, it is a highly peculiar irony, to say the least—as well as a fact that, to my knowledge, has yet to be accounted for—that both James and Conrad should be so

inordinately preoccupied with creating, precisely, *a narration that sounds like oral speech*: full of the digressions and backtracking, the second thoughts and qualifications, that mark the spontaneity of rhetorical address. In point of fact, one would be hard-pressed to find two British writers at any point in the nineteenth century who more assiduously cultivated the tonalities and tics of the meandering, musing, after-dinner raconteur—the consummate *talker*—in their prose. How to explain this paradoxical fact? At one level, one could say that this interest in orality is actually much broader than just Conrad and James—is even, perhaps, somehow characteristic of the literary scene of the 1880s and ‘90s. I am thinking, here, of contemporaries as different as Oscar Wilde—his fascination with the dialogue form, as well as his famous affinity for ‘talk’ as such, the laconic, drawing-room rhythms of which his writings are always zealously concerned to capture—and Rudyard Kipling, whose entire oeuvre, beginning with his early pieces for the *Civil and Military Gazette*, and their subsequent collection as *Plain Tales From the Hills* (1888), strikes the oral pose of the barracks storyteller, with his easygoing wisdom and endless fund of yarns. By these lights, it seems highly likely that a revival of orality as a literary fad at the very close of the nineteenth century speaks (no pun intended) to the, by then, near total disappearance of the rhetorical, chatty author from the novels of the day: such revivals tending to occur, of course, when the object of newfound interest has become a curiosity, on the verge of extinction—a kind of last gasp. It is no coincidence that orality becomes briefly fascinating at just the moment when a large-scale transition in literary values, away from an authorial speaking ‘presence’ and towards the mute diffusion of authorial style, is all but accomplished. At the same time, this revival must be referred, in some measure, to the rise of the short story itself,

occurring in these same years (as we saw in the previous chapter), and the attendant interest in narrative at an anecdotal scale: the long prehistory of the oral “tale,” always more or less implicit in any turn to short fiction. Indeed, the fact that short fiction tends, by its very nature, to meditate on the situation of its own storytelling is precisely what made it such a crucial vehicle for Victorian authors to reflect upon the transition from rhetoric to style then underway.

On another level, however, one wants to say that there is something profoundly different about orality in Conrad and James: insofar as it in no way signifies the quality of being *artless*. In Kipling and Wilde—as well as in most other devotees of orality in writing that spring to mind: like, say, the lyric poets of the Romantic era—it is clear that the marking of orality goes towards a general aesthetic of artlessness: either a tossed-off, effortless brilliance and flaunting of *sprezzatura* (Wilde), or an untutored, plain-speaking vernacular aligned with a working-class voice (Kipling, Wordsworth). In both cases, the note of the oral solicits the understanding that little to no painstaking went into the production of this text (and the rhetorical author, of course, represents his own kind of appeal to artless immediacy). In Conrad and James, the case is entirely different: here, by some strange paradox, the hesitations, amendments, and digressions that evoke oral spontaneity are also the very features that enforce our impression of the text as irreducibly *constructed*, meticulously composed, in all its syntactical complexity—think of the densely layered and nested qualifications in an average sentence in late James, as simultaneously conjuring our sense that the Master is, indeed, dictating out loud, working through his thought as it unfolds in real time—and constituting, at the same time, our notion that this composing is a formidably laborious, virtuosic process, of delicately

balancing clauses and sustaining grammatical structures. Far from artlessness, the present and unfolding spontaneity of the oral—its revisions, feints, detours, and sidebars—becomes the high-wire act on which the most breathtaking feats of aesthetic mastery are performed. It is as if, in James and Conrad, the oral quality in narration—formerly, in the hands of the rhetorical author, so invisible, so standard—had now become an *affectation*, a gimmick, conscious and mannered: had become, in short, style.

No author better exemplifies the paradoxical dynamic by which rhetoric becomes style than Joseph Conrad, the subject of this chapter. More, perhaps, than any other Victorian, Conrad's work expresses an artistic fixation on orality, as both a texturing feature of narration (at a linguistic level) and a delineated moment of storytelling that must be itself integrated into the story (at a narrative level): as, that is, both style and rhetoric. It is in the device of the *frame narrative* that these levels come together—a device that, in Conrad, went by the name of Marlow. In what follows, I'll be organizing my discussion by tracing Conrad's use of Marlow through the three central texts in which he appears: beginning with the short story "Youth" (1898), proceeding through the novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and concluding with the novel *Lord Jim* (1900) (Marlow's far-flung, final bow, in the significantly later novel *Chance* [1913], belongs to a different discussion). As these dates make clear, the chapter will be tightly focused on unpacking the output of a short, but highly consequential, three-year stretch of productivity early in Conrad's career. It is this three-year period of Conrad's work that is of most relevance for our purposes: positioned at the twilight of a century of Victorian rhetoric, in the brief conjunction of an emergent stylism and a revived orality's last revels, this period marks Conrad's sustained and deepening experimentation, across three

texts, with one specific narrative form—a form, as I’ll argue, invoked in response to the unique headwinds of this very particular moment.²⁵⁵ What the framing device of the oral tale offered, as Conrad understood, was a narrative capable of diegetically accounting for its own situation of storytelling—that is to say, its own *rhetorical* situation, the situation of an author addressing a reader—now fully integrated within the self-enclosure of the fiction. Rather than Conrad addressing us as a rhetorical author (but who could imagine him doing something so gauche?), we get, in Marlow, a rhetorical narrator who is also a diegetic character; one who affords and enjoys the full range of rhetorical appeals—gossiping, dilating, digressing, grandstanding—without popping the rounded bubble of the story-world. Apparently, but not *actually*, a figure of direct address, it feels as if Marlow is speaking to us as readers, when ‘in reality’ (or, rather, in fiction) we are aware that he is merely speaking to other (often, minimally specified) characters, in what amounts to nothing more than an extended piece of narrative dialogue. No matter how many direct appeals Marlow makes to “you,” the reader always knows that she is, *technically*, not the “you” being addressed (even if, at another level, we are precisely the ones being knowingly implicated by all that Marlow says, precisely the ones to whom all of these appeals are being directed); we are treated, as it were, to the form of rhetoric, without the fact. Hence the reason why Marlow, when he narrates, is never the *first* narrator: Conrad is always careful, at the outset of the text, to set a scene in which

²⁵⁵ Although I’ll be considering these three works in the order of their publication, it’s worth being aware of their rather jumbled and entangled composition history, which does not neatly correspond to this sequencing. Although the earliest draft of the short story version of *Lord Jim*, in which it was “Tuan Jim: A Sketch,” is undated, it was probably written in 1896, two years prior to the writing of “Youth” in 1898. It was shortly after, at the end of 1898, that Conrad had the idea for *Heart of Darkness*, and just a few days later (January 2, 1899) that Conrad wrote to his publisher, William Blackwood, to tell him that *Lord Jim*, which had originally been conceived as written in omniscient narration, would now be narrated by Marlow. For a useful discussion of this history, see Julie Beth Napolin, “‘A Sinister Resonance’: Vibration, Sound, and the Birth of Conrad’s Marlow,” *Qui Parle* 21.2 (Spring/Summer 2013): 74-5.

Marlow is given occasion to share his story, to show us that this situation of storytelling, too, is occurring as a story-event within the fiction, for which certain fictional characters are the intended recipients. Nor does Conrad himself narrate this first scene, for this opening narrator—the frame narrator—is himself a character, as well; and, invariably, an anonymous one, who never receives a name: thus underscoring his purely functionary and expedient narrative role.

By these elaborate means, Conrad safeguards his ability to have, at the same time, both rhetoric and style—or, rather, rhetoric *as* style; the frame narrative is the device that achieves this unique synthesis. The free play of rhetoric that it licenses—within the established parameters of a specific story-structure, which guarantees that the extradiegetic author is not the one speaking (just as it establishes that the reader is not the one being addressed)—becomes, as I have suggested, the stage for all manner of syntactic virtuosity, in which Conrad, as abstracted author of style, is distributed. Succinctly put: the frame narrative's diegetic parameters constitute a space in which rhetoric, evacuated of authorial presence, becomes merely a formal *performance*—the performance of Conrad's style.

We can get a feel for the kind of synthetic role that the frame narrative plays when we reflect on its capacity to collapse two opposing narrative temporalities: on the one hand, there is the temporality of the story being told; on the other, there is the moment of its telling. This is significant, because, as I've suggested, the only difference between using a frame narrative and using a simple first-person, homodiegetic narrator (e.g., if Marlow was the first and only narrator we were given), is that in the latter case, the moment of telling is not included in the story—Pip tells us the story of *Great*

Expectations, but we have no idea where he is at the time or what the situation of telling might be: we don't even know if his account is being written or spoken. The first-person narrative has only one temporality represented in its story (though of course Pip's present judgments on his past are central to Dickens's novel, the moment in which the adult Pip is making these judgments is not narratively represented *as* story, but is merely an element of that story's discourse): the innovation, and sole difference, of the frame narrative, then, is that it includes this second, additional temporality in its structure—the temporality of the storytelling situation itself. This temporality is mimetically aligned, as we know, with the rhetorical scene of address, the author's actual address to the actual reader, and as such is, for us, one of present immediacy, of being addressed in the moment—this is true even when, as is the case with the Marlow texts, the frame narrator is relating the story of Marlow's telling in the past tense; for even then, the moment of Marlow's telling is 'present' *with respect to* the 'past' story he tells. But if this second temporality of the frame narrative, that of the storytelling, corresponds to rhetorical immediacy, it must be added that the first temporality—that of the past story itself—corresponds, in turn, to a temporality of style: for the story of prose style is always narrated in the past tense, as the linguistic trace left by an author who *was* here, but is no longer—whose labors of composition, and individuating writing process, are the inferred origin and prehistory of the textual monument we peruse. The differentiating details of style (literally "tell-tale") relate to us, as it were, the narrative of a prior moment of writerly presence and investment: the prose stylist is always reconstructed retroactively. It is appropriate, then, that Marlow's past story is precisely that part of the text that is marked and textured by the performative complexities of style, precisely that part where

we find ‘Conrad’ hiding in the details; while the frame narrator’s account is generally neutral and workmanlike in its linguistic construction: a competent, but colorless prose, which could have been written by anyone. The irony, of course, is that the markers of stylistic texture in Marlow’s storytelling are also the markers of its orality; and indeed, by a complex equation of indirection, it is the very fact that they are the latter that allows them to be the former.

The frame narrative, then, is all about juxtaposing these two temporalities, and keeping them both in front of us as we experience the text: our tracking of the ‘past’ story continually interrupted and punctuated by an awareness that all of it is being narrated in a ‘present’ situation of telling, by a particular speaker to a particular audience. This double awareness, in which the ‘foreground’ and ‘background’ of story and frame are held in a flickering, oscillating suspension, is of the essence of that synthesis that the framing device affords—a fact especially true in the case of Conrad, for whom the punctuating moment of the frame’s surfacing into the story is always a central, structuring form in the narrative project of a Marlow text: and nowhere is this more apparent, as we will see, than in his first such experiment, “Youth.”

Meanwhile, the reader will have noticed that the organization of this chapter does not only proceed chronologically but also progresses, as it were, up a scale of narrative length: from a short story, to a novella, to a novel. This movement is an intentional piece of the critical story I mean to tell: for it is part of my contention that the frame narrative, like the mystery plot, though also deployed in certain Victorian novels, is a formal device especially keyed to the problems and affordances of short fiction—a device peculiarly native to the short story. Like the short story itself, the history of the frame narrative

could be traced back to some of the most venerable premodern story sequences, all of which gesture to an oral tradition of tale-telling: the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*; the *One Thousand and One Nights*; the *Decameron*; the *Canterbury Tales*; even the epics of Homer (most of the *Odyssey*, of course, takes place within a frame narrative). In its beginnings, the frame narrative was a kind of story-producing machine: a licensing occasion that allowed for the endless proliferation of entertaining tales, while also providing a readymade organizational scheme for each new tale to slot itself within. In this way, it is perhaps the earliest conceived form for the collection and systematization of an oral canon, as it begins to cross over into a written literature—the frame as a kind of threshold, set at the borders of orality. In the nineteenth century, its history begins in the Romantic period, where it makes its first notable appearances in the *Lyrical Ballads* (1799) of Wordsworth and Coleridge (recall, for example, that “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” pivots around the use of a frame narrative); from there, it began to enter the work of fiction writers, including Edgar Allan Poe and Mary Shelley. These Romantic authors shared a keen interest in representing the narration of deranged and agitated minds, and found the frame narrative a useful device for couching the accounts of such disturbed storytellers within an additional, and more rational, narratorial perspective—one capable of providing some narrative distance and context to the framed account, while also vouching for its supposed authenticity. Though frame tales feature memorably in select novels of this era, such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818)—as well as in somewhat later Romantically inflected novels, like *Wuthering Heights* (1847)—they were being utilized more prolifically in the less-well-known short stories that such authors were also producing: Shelley’s “The Sisters of Albano” (1828), “The Mourner” (1829),

“The Swiss Peasant” (1830), and “Eurphrasia: A Tale of Greece” (1838), to name only a few.

Elsewhere, during these same decades, the frame narrative was being used for very different ends in the comic tales and sketches of writers like Washington Irving and William Makepeace Thackeray: these authors made frame narratives central to the satirical story sequences that they were then publishing under pseudonymous names (for Irving, “Geoffrey Crayon”; for Thackeray, “Charles J. Yellowplush,” “Ikey Solomons, Esq., Jr.,” “Samuel Titmarsh,” and many others); Crayon’s *Tales of a Traveller* (1824) represents perhaps the high-water mark for the giddy proliferation of intersecting frame tales in this vein. Joseph Addison and Richard Steele’s pseudonymous, parodic writings in their eighteenth-century journals, *The Tatler* (1709-11) and *The Spectator* (1711-12)—as “Isaac Bickerstaff,” “Mr. Spectator,” etc.—are obviously the key reference point for the popularity of such work at the beginning of the nineteenth century; in the case of Addison and Steele, the magazine itself represented a kind of frame narrative, coming, as it did, with the house fiction of its invented editor character, who serves as the licensing occasion and diegetic narrator for the publication’s ever-expanding output of eclectic anecdotes and commentaries. One is reminded, here, of the story sequences of the premodern tradition, like the *One Thousand and One Nights*, which used the frame narrative to install a single diegetic narrator, a Scheherazade, capable of occasioning and organizing a diverse succession of varied stories; indeed, this affinity for *seriality* has always been latent in the frame narrative form, and it is not difficult to see, in this sense, why its newfound popularity among writers like the young Thackeray coincided with the boom in magazine publishing of the 1820s and ‘30s. As with that other magazine boom,

in the 1880s and '90s, this was a period marked by a surge of short fiction—the sketch and Romantic tale being, here, the operative forms.²⁵⁶

Further into the century, as the three-volume novel came into its ascendancy, the frame narrative remained closely associated with the creative possibilities of short fiction practice and publication. As an editor, Dickens made innovative use of frame tales in the special Christmas issues of *All The Year Round*, for which he traditionally offered so-called ‘portmanteau’ stories, like *The Haunted House* (1859) and *Mugby Junction* (1866); these collaborative narratives would feature individual short stories by the likes of Wilkie Collins, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Augustus Sala, and others, organized by a common conceit—each story corresponding to a different room of the haunted house, or a different branch line on a fictional railway—all convened together under an overarching frame narrative, which would be penned by Dickens himself. In similar fashion, Gaskell would occasionally write a frame narrative to lend unity to a volume collection of her short stories: as in *Round the Sofa* (1859), in which the framing premise is that each story is being told by one of six narrators, respectively—all assembled, aptly enough, around the same sofa. In addition to a device for uniting multiple stories, both Dickens and Gaskell used frame tales routinely within individual stories: particularly in their Gothic-tinged tales, like Dickens’s “To Be Read At Dusk” (1852), or Gaskell’s “The Grey Woman” (1861). The frame tale would continue to figure prominently in the Victorian ghost story up through the end of the century—think James’s “Turn of the Screw” (1899), as well as “Maud-Evelyn” (1900)—eventually enjoying a similar pride of place in the pioneering

²⁵⁶ For an excellent account of this first magazine boom, and the sketch form that it gave rise to, see Amanpal Garcha, *From Sketch to Novel: The Development of Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

science fiction stories of the '80s and '90s, from “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” (1886) to the early short fiction of H. G. Wells (seen most frequently, here, in its non-oral variation, that of the ‘found manuscript’—the finder of this mysterious document being invariably a moderating, rational voice that serves to authenticate the excessive oddities of the framed story itself, in a logic very similar to that of the Romantic tale in the first decades of the century).

The status of the frame tale, then, during the short story boom of the 1880s, was functionally similar to that of the mystery plot, as detailed in the previous chapter: it was one of the most available, readymade short-fiction forms for writers just beginning to explore the aesthetic and affordances of the modern, self-consciously ‘literary’ short story. If the central formal problem of this new short story, as Ricardo Piglia argues, is “[h]ow to tell a story while another is being told”—that is, how to “encode” a second story into the “interstices” of the surface narrative, such that it emerges only by “implication and allusion,” lending depth and tension to an abbreviated plot—then it is not hard to see how the frame narrative rehearses this structure in the most schematic way possible: quite literally “tell[ing] a story while another is being told.”²⁵⁷ Indeed, just as, in the modern short story, “[t]he essential elements of the story have a dual function, and [...] enter simultaneously into two antagonistic narrative logics,” signifying both at the level of the surface story (explicitly) and at the implicit level of the second story, so the sequence of events narrated in a frame tale resonates in two ways: first, as a stand-alone story in its own right, which has its own entertainment value for the reader; and second, as a series of events that is significant, in some way, for the diegetic situation of its

²⁵⁷ Piglia, “Theses on the Short Story,” *New Left Review* 70 (July–August 2011): 64, 63, 65.

telling, bearing an implicit reflection upon the original narrative level of the storyteller and the auditor(s) with which the story began.²⁵⁸ Scheherazade's story is entertaining in itself, but it also makes us wonder how the cranky king might be reacting to the turns of the plot that she's relating. Thus, the flickering suspension of story and frame, which oscillate respectively in our awareness between foreground and background as we read, mimes the doubled reading process of registering both explicit and implicit levels that is constitutive of the aesthetic of the modern short story as it emerged in Britain in the 1880s. For late Victorian writers struggling to master the tools of suggestiveness and implication that become necessary within tight narrative constraints—the art of saying much with few words—the frame narrative would have proposed itself as a form readily adaptable to the demands of the new story aesthetic, a container (again, like the mystery plot) that could provide a rounded formal unity to inchoate or digressive elements, making them an organic part of an intentional whole. In this respect, it's significant that Conrad, like James, had a pronounced difficulty staying within the confines of the short story, beginning many works originally intended to be “stories” or “tales” that ended up sprawling into novels (*Lord Jim* being only one of the better-known instances)—and, as we will see, the short story “Youth,” in which he introduces the character of Marlow, is a signal example of a formless and rambling yarn that is lent a sense of organic unity by the structural scaffolding of a frame narrative. As we saw in the last chapter, then, it was precisely the *struggle* of Victorian writers to enact a modern short story aesthetic that led them to discover the utility of forms like the frame tale for working out what an emergent

²⁵⁸ Piglia, “Theses on the Short Story,” *ibid.*: 63.

paradigm of stylistic authorship might look like in practice—an aesthetic of presentation and unspoken implication, of *showing*, rather than telling.

In this way, if the frame narrative, as I've been arguing, bears a certain privileged relation to the short story, then it may also be seen to invoke a privileged relation with *style*. We can get at this relation by way of a suggestive remark made by Garrett Stewart, in his 1996 book *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, in which he describes style “as its own virtual bracket—or frame—around narrative, its own substitute for a personalized site of telling”:

With its enlisted listeners to a read or orally recalled story, the parabolic nature of the frame tale simply delegates to the precincts of explicit narrative that social psychology of motivated telling by which any mainstream Victorian novel is ordinarily rimmed and delimited. *Narrative style might thus be defined as the ensemble of markers which can substitute for a framing metatext in the individuation and direction of a storytelling act.* [italics added]²⁵⁹

To put it simply, style—by referring back, with an individuating gesture, to an earlier moment of authorial composition—functions, in a sense, very like a frame narrative: it identifies and includes the original act of storytelling, of address. The equivalence of the two modes can be measured, as Stewart proposes, by the fact that one can effectively “substitute” for the other—in a novel with multiple narrators, we can discern that a given character is the writer ‘behind’ the section of text we are reading, either by observing the personal patterns of her style in its prose, or by being given a frame tale in which this act of authorship is narratively depicted; both accomplish the same end. The “ensemble of markers,” as Stewart nicely puts it, that allows us to trace the diffusion of the author of style into the text, itself constitutes a kind of “framing metatext” (what I called, in the last

²⁵⁹ Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), pp. 268-9.

chapter, a “story of the story”). But what we see in Stewart is not just style—it is also rhetoric: in his account, what the frame tale integrates into the “explicit narrative” is “that social psychology of motivated telling” that forms the Victorian novel’s discursive container, as well as its diegetic border with the actually existing world of readers and writers (“rimmed and delimited”)—that is, precisely the “motivated telling” of the rhetorical author. In a sense, my chapter will be picking up on the implication of Stewart’s comment, and following out its process in detail: a process by which rhetoric, through its integration into the narrative interior (via the frame tale), undergoes a conversion into that property we know as style.

One of my larger interests in the second half of this project has been to show how the short story served as a key space for Victorian authors to reflect on the emergence of a modern style paradigm in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Because the frame narrative—like the mystery plot—was itself a metaphor for the concept of style, as it was being redefined at the close of the century, it is, for us, particularly exemplary of the kind of self-reflection that was occurring in short fiction during this period. Such widely used narrative metaphors, of course, did not just reflect, but also did active formal work, in setting forth speculative visions of what the submersion and sublimation of rhetoric into style might look like: exploring, in experimental fashion, the recessing and abstracting of the author–reader relation, within their own diegetic plotlines. In Conrad’s Marlow texts, we see some of the last, and most significant, experiments of this kind, as well as the conclusion of that process by which rhetoric becomes style; to follow that process in more detail, then, it is to Conrad that we now turn. In the section that follows, I’ll begin with the first appearance of Marlow, in the short story “Youth,” focusing in on

the repetitive, spoken refrains that mark and pattern Marlow's framed narration: as I'll argue, these moments serve to remind us of the frame itself, breaking our absorption in the tale to point to the very distance that separates story and discourse, the tale from its situation of telling. It is here that a dynamic of rhetoric as style begins in Conrad: for the refrains serve both to signify the oral telling and to refer us, implicitly, to the mute appeals of textual construction devised by the unseen author. This dynamic is subsequently heightened in *Heart of Darkness*, in which orality increasingly becomes a texturing feature of the narration that betokens both the rambling spontaneity of Marlow's spoken address, at the diegetic level, and the stylistic construction of the text, at an extradiegetic level—the most conspicuous moments of modernist, anachronic construction are also the moments in which we are most reminded of the oral, meandering quality of Marlow's narration. Indeed, as I demonstrate, Conrad seems to deliberately play up this contrast: a contrast between two different levels of reception that invokes, once more, the concept of theatricality—a concept necessary for understanding Marlow's extradiegetically oriented oral performance. Finally, we will turn to *Lord Jim*, where the frame tales have proliferated across multiple speakers and nested situations of storytelling, attended by an intensification of both the oral texture and the modernist construction of the narrative discourse. Reading into this famously nebulous, digressive, and unresolved novel a surprising debt to the aesthetic of the short story that it was originally supposed to be, we'll focus in on the novel's conceit that the truth of a person is disclosed, not through their words, but only through their incidental gestures and thoughtless behaviors, which must be interpreted by an observer: an idea that resonates with the dramatizing of character through revealing, epiphanic moments characteristic of

the modern short story, as well as with the turn from divulging rhetoric to the ‘telling’ traces of stylistic authorship, visible only in the intentional construction of the text.

Ultimately, what *Lord Jim* will show us is the culmination, not only of the logic of the frame narrative, but of a story that we have been telling throughout this dissertation: a story about a decades-long process by which the diegetic level of the represented story was separated out from its discursive, extradiegetic construction, becoming two distinct ‘plots’ that the reader follows independently. It was this change in the understanding of the narrative text that would be the basis for what we know as style.

2. “Pass the Bottle”: The Orality of “Youth”

“Youth,” published in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in 1898, where *Heart of Darkness* would be serialized the following year, sets forth the basic pattern for the Marlow texts, and their driving fascination with orality; but it was hardly the first work by Conrad to fixate on the representation of a naturalistic oral speech. One year prior, he had published the novella *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* (1897); signifying something of a turn in Conrad’s early career (he had, at this point, two published novels and three short stories to his name), it was the first piece he had written that drew explicitly on his own experiences as a seaman, as well as his first piece to engage in the kind of narrative experimentation for which he would later become known. These two “firsts” are connected: for it is clear that Conrad’s fervent wish to, as he put it in a letter, “enshrine my old chums in a decent edifice,” pushed him to pursue more inventive representational strategies in the name of doing justice to the phenomenal experience, and extremity, of

life at sea.²⁶⁰ Central to these experimental efforts was the need to capture the rhythms and cadences of sailors' *talk*.²⁶¹ Throughout "*Narcissus*" we see Conrad preoccupied with making his readers *hear* the jostling and unruly collective speech of a multitude of men in close quarters, fragments of talk blending and overlapping; the following is typical of these frequent, extended passages of dialogue, which represent the speech of many individuals but are enclosed in a single set of quotation marks: "the growling voices hummed steady amongst bursts of laughter and hoarse calls. 'Here sonny, take that bunk! . . . Don't you do it! . . . What's your last ship? . . . I know her. . . . Three years ago, in Puget Sound . . . This here berth leaks, I tell you! . . . Come on; give us a chance to swing that chest! . . . Did you bring a bottle, any of you shore toffs?'," and so on and on, often for half a page or more (6).²⁶² Later on I'll be paying some sustained attention to those interesting ellipses that separate the fragments of the various speakers; for now, however, it suffices to note that "*Narcissus*" is a text obsessed with privileging the atmospheric effect of such ambient passages of buzzing, background chatter.

These bouts of crowdsourced dialogue give us one version of the collective voice of the men on the ship; the other is the first-person plural narrator, the recurring "we" that tells the story. This speaker is strange: frequently privy to scenes that had no witnesses, the "we" seems to enjoy some of the prerogatives of a free-floating, depersonalized

²⁶⁰ *Collected Letters*, vol. I, p. 310; cited in Gail Fraser, "Introduction" to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus" and Other Stories*, eds. J. H. Stape and Allan H. Simmons (London and New York: Penguin Classics, 2007), p. xiv.

²⁶¹ Michael Greaney notes that "Conrad's memoir, *The Mirror of the Sea*, can be read as an introduction for the lay reader to the lexicon of the sea, full of praise for the exemplary clarity of 'sea-talk' and disdain for 'lubberly book-jargon'. Sloppy imitations of 'sea-talk' in the popular press incur Conrad's special displeasure: the bogus romanticization of second-hand versions of nautical life is doubly obnoxious to this sailor-turned-writer." Greaney, *Conrad, Language, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 11.

²⁶² All parenthetical citations of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and "Youth" are from *The Nigger of the "Narcissus" and Other Stories*, eds. Stape and Simmons, *ibid*.

omniscience, while at other times becoming oddly localized in a particular quadrant of the ship, or a particular subset of sailors—not inclusive of everyone that the crew’s “we” would seem to encompass. Conrad, in writing this autobiographical story (based on his own time as second mate of a ship called the *Narcissus* in 1884²⁶³), evinces a conflicted impulse to at once disperse himself into an impersonal, abstracted position of knowledge, and to ground that knowledge in the experience of concrete crewmembers. What’s more, this abstract site of articulation takes on something of a redemptive, or compensatory, value vis a vis the collective crew: the articulate “we” that fluently elaborates the unconscious yearnings and stirrings of the mass is the ideal and impossible version of that jumbled, chaotic collective voice that is the story’s constant background—to quote the narrator, that “immense and lamentable murmur—the murmur of millions of lips praying, cursing, sighing, jeering—the undying murmur of folly, regret, and hope exhaled by the crowds of the anxious earth” (129). In this crew of childlike men, whose “confused current of impotent thoughts” is both matched and belied by an inexpressible experience of the most profound extremities of the earth, and of human endurance itself—whose “thoughts of [a] lifetime could have been expressed in six words,” but who nonetheless grapple daily with vastnesses “too voluminous for the narrow limits of human speech”—we can see the beginnings of a great Conradian topos: the truth that is beyond language, that can be approached in words but never truly enunciated—and the muteness of those who have encountered it (109, 23). In this world, the miraculous eloquence of the “we” narrator carries a wistful pathos, an almost utopian wish to devise a speaking position that is both *of* the “voiceless men” and able to command the full resources of linguistic

²⁶³ Fraser, “Introduction,” to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus” and Other Stories*, eds. Stape and Simmons, *ibid.*, p. xiv.

representation to articulate, or at least *attempt* to articulate, all of the fathomless profundities of their inchoate lives (22).

Interestingly, in the novella's final pages—after the crew have dispersed on shore—this vague and quixotic “we” resolves into an “I”: back on land, the speaker is individuated, the ideal collective voice of the crew revealed to have been a singular, literate seaman of a thoughtful disposition; a seaman rather like Conrad himself. Thus, a narration that began with Conrad bordering uneasily on an omniscient, rhetorical author (complete with gusty speechifying about “men who knew toil, privation [...] but knew not fear”) ends with a Conrad who has (mostly) integrated into the character-world as a lightly veiled, homodiegetic version of himself (22). The conflicted, uneven narration of “‘Narcissus’”—with its final transmutation of a shapeless and ideal collective speaker into a definite, if still nonspecific, chronicler—is the backdrop against which “Youth,” and Marlow, make their entrance.²⁶⁴

Marlow, too, enters as something of a cipher: nondescript to the point of ostentation, he is first introduced, in the opening paragraphs of “Youth,” as one of a small group of men sharing a drink around a table—“a director of companies, an accountant, a lawyer, Marlow, and myself”—and in addition to being the only proper name in the bunch, is singled out doubly, as the passage continues, by being the only one not provided with a brief character gloss (apart from the frame narrator himself, who is, of course, an anonymity) (139).²⁶⁵ The paragraph that follows is one sentence long:

²⁶⁴ As Julie Beth Napolin writes, “Marlow was born” from the “vacillation between first- and third-person plural voices” in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*: “It is as if Marlow first emerges in the conclusion of [“‘Narcissus’”] when the narrator finally utters the word ‘I.’” Napolin, “‘A Sinister Resonance,’” *ibid.*: 76.

²⁶⁵ Paul Wake points out that the choice of these specific types for Marlow's auditors was likely meant to evoke the conservative, Tory readership of *Blackwood's* (the lawyer is described as “a fine crusted Tory, High Churchman, the best of old fellows,” etc. [139]): Marlow is addressing “an imagined cross-section of *Blackwood's* English readership.” In a literal sense, then, the storytelling situation of Conrad rhetorically

“Marlow (at least I think that is how he spelt his name) told the story, or rather the chronicle, of a voyage:—,” after which the paragraph breaks once more, for the beginning of the quotation marks that will bracket the rest of the story until its final page (139). Marlow receives no description: but in exchange, *he gets to speak*. The first is somehow the condition for the second, as if his identity as a character had to be hollowed out in order for him to become that agency that presides over the narrative discourse: Marlow’s blankness is the residual trace of that ideal, collective narratorial position deployed, and awkwardly retracted, in “The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’.” Marlow, like his direct forebear, speaks *for* the assembled group, the voiceless mass, as becomes clear in the summation of his narrative: “But you here—you all had something out of life: money, love—whatever one gets on shore—and, tell me, wasn’t that the best time, that time when we were young at sea; young and had nothing, on the sea that gives nothing, except hard knocks—and sometimes a chance to feel your strength—that only—what you all regret?” (170). What defines Marlow, from the first, is that he is simply that ideal, still semi-miraculous character who can articulate (however haltingly) the unspoken, perhaps even unconscious, yearnings and stirrings of the greater collective; he is the only one with the discursive gift to make a sally at that truth that lies beyond articulation, which all seamen in Conrad have an experiential knowledge of, but none can describe. In this case, however, the collective that he speaks for is precisely that group of minimally specified diegetic auditors within the frame narrative: inside of which his nested account is both a communication *to*, and an emanation *from*. The presence of the collective to hear and

addressing his audience has been transferred into the diegetic story-world through the device of the frame tale. Wake, *Conrad’s Marlow: Narrative and Death in “Youth,” Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim, and Chance* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007), p. 2.

approve Marlow's story ("And we all nodded at him: the man of finance, the man of accounts, the man of law, we all nodded at him") closes the circuit of his address and seals his role as collective agent: the one who speaks the collective's truth to itself (170). Thus, via the frame narrative, Conrad finds a neatly self-enfolded solution to the narratorial awkwardness of the author in "'Narcissus'": it is perhaps for this reason, first, that Marlow's story must be told *orally*; a fact underscored by its contrast with the frame narrator's *written* account (unlike Marlow, he has to spell).

The story that Marlow has to tell is a wryly comic account of his first voyage to Asia at the age of 20, which also happened to be his first berth as a second mate; it's a voyage in which seemingly everything goes wrong, as the rickety ship must be successively bailed out (after it has sprung a leak), bailed *in* (after its cargo, several tons of coal, catches fire), and finally abandoned altogether. Loosely assembled and told at a relaxed pace, as befits its framing as a yarn, the running joke of this loping shaggy-dog story is that each subsequent indignity is received by the young Marlow as an exhilarating episode in a grand saga of adventure; "O youth!" becomes the self-amused refrain of the now older and wiser narrator. But this refrain—which, Pip-like, serves to remind us of the temporal distance between the narrating Marlow and his wet-behind-the-ears narrated self—also performs significant structuring work, providing the note of repetition that lends a sense of pattern to what would otherwise be an almost formless tale; the anticipated and repeated catchphrase ends up offering something of a formal scaffolding to the rambling edifice of anecdote, superimposing the tightness and unity of a modern short story onto narrative materials that lack these qualities in themselves.

But this structuring work is not done by “O youth!” alone; for there is in fact another, less obviously meaningful, refrain, that also collaborates in lending formal patterning and an effect of architectural compactness to this story’s all-too-baggy plot. Periodically throughout the tale, Marlow pauses or trails off in his telling, capping this intermission with a request: “Pass the bottle.” Five times this sentence is uttered in the story, and each time it is preceded by an ellipsis, and comes as the last sentence in the paragraph. Here is the first time it appears:

At the end of that time, the captain being engaged with his agents, I carried Mrs Beard’s bag to the railway-station and put her all comfy into a third-class carriage. She lowered the window to say, ‘You are a good young man. If you see John—Captain Beard—without his muffler at night, just remind him from me to keep his throat well wrapped up.’ ‘Certainly, Mrs Beard,’ I said. ‘You are a good young man; I noticed how attentive you are to John—to Captain—’ The train pulled out suddenly; I took my cap off to the old woman: I never saw her again. . . . Pass the bottle. (144)

The refrain of “Pass the bottle” is, of course, the mark of orality in Marlow’s narrative: it is the recurring reminder that this tale is unfolding within a specific, diegetic situation of telling—even reminding us, quite literally, that this is a situation of *bodily* telling that involves actual physical vocal cords, and a throat that needs intermittent wetting. In this moment, the ‘background’ of the frame narrative briefly surfaces into the foreground, once more claiming our attention, albeit only momentarily. But why would Conrad need to remind us of the tale’s oral situation—and remind us five times, no less? What do these markers of orality really achieve?

If these “Pass the bottle” moments signify a shifting of readerly attention from the framed story to its frame, they also signal that Marlow himself is surfacing back into the ‘present’ moment, breaking his absorption in the flow of memories. In some sense, they are a severing of connection with the narrated material that has come directly before, and

whatever affective charge it may hold for Marlow; it hardly seems a coincidence that these moments invariably follow upon a note of generalized melancholy, pathos, dread, or ambiguous feeling (to take another example, just after Marlow describes an explosion on the ship: “I was amazed to see the ship still afloat, the poop-deck whole [...] Also the peace of the sky and the serenity of the sea were distinctly surprising. I suppose I expected to see them convulsed with horror. . . . Pass the bottle.”) (155). And yet, the notion of an access of emotion could easily be taken too far; after all, to take the example above, it scarcely seems plausible that Marlow would be choked up, 20 years later, over the fact that he never saw his former captain’s elderly wife again: this is not a tearful farewell, but a formality between relative strangers, and there is nothing particularly emotional about his escorting of Mrs. Beard to the station. Rather, the melancholic savor of the passage is all in its form: specifically, in the abrupt breaking-off of Mrs. Beard’s final words (platitudinous as they may be) by the sudden departure of the train, and the way that this abrupt severing of ties is followed up immediately by the even more vertiginous leap over all of the intervening years, in which Mrs. Beard is nevermore to be seen; it as if the train’s sudden pulling away, in one continuous movement, also whirls poor Mrs. Beard off into the oblivion of vanishing decades (and very likely, by now, to the grave).

Perhaps another way to say this would be to observe that what this moment of the frame imposing itself in the story ultimately points to *is itself*: that is to say, its affective charge lies in precisely that recognition of the temporal distance between the past scene being narrated and the present occasion of its telling that the frame tale serves to constitute. This is the same retrospective distance of time, to be sure, that the story

“Youth” is manifestly ‘about’: and in this way the “Pass the bottle” refrain may be seen to mirror and extend that other, more thematically central, one, “O youth!” Most of the “Pass the bottle” moments follow exactly this formula (the second one, for instance, is about Marlow’s somewhat perverse fondness for the leaky old ship: “To me she was not an old rattle-trap [...] I think of her with pleasure, with affection, with regret—as you would think of some one dead you have loved. I shall never forget her. . . . Pass the bottle.”): and even in the example of the explosion’s aftermath, the keen feeling of the scene is all in the gap between the young Marlow’s dazed perception, and his older self’s quiet, backward gaze—with his mature recognition not only of the spectacular death he so narrowly escaped, but of its sheer mundanity in a world that goes on indifferent (146). These are moments when that temporal chasm, that gap between frame and framed story, is sharpened to a point, provoking a stab of feeling: when the story’s discursive form itself generates a pathos. In such moments, Marlow’s telling opens out unexpectedly onto depths—the contemplation of which breaks off the telling itself. This is clearly how we must understand the trailing off of narration that always marks these moments: and after all, is not the typographic stand-in for the “gap” or “chasm” I have just mentioned that inevitable *ellipsis*, token of an interval of empty time opening in the text? The trail of the ellipsis implies a lingering, a tarrying in the precincts of the mute, the inarticulate: where the oral act of storytelling breaks down in a silent fathoming of the depth that, all suddenly, yawns before us—the distance of that very discourse from the story it tells.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁶ As Jeremy Hawthorn recognizes in his work on Conrad’s ellipses, the ellipsis is always an implicit commentary on what has just preceded it, it “inevitably [...] carries with it an interpretive force,” and must be understood as “both representing and commenting on the silence or pause that prompts it or that it represents.” Hawthorn, “‘No need of words’: Joseph Conrad’s Use of the Typographical Ellipsis in *Under Western Eyes* and ‘The Secret Sharer,’” *Conradiana* 43.2-3 (2011): 6.

It is this recognition of temporal distance or gap, then, that summons the frame situation to appear—like some ritual chant—in the refrain of “Pass the bottle” that always answers the ellipsis’s call. While the pause seems to imply that we could pursue these depths further, following the trail of the ellipsis into silence (seeming simultaneously to suggest that ‘more could be said’, and that this more would be unsayable), Marlow instead severs his reverie abruptly, and we are pulled up for air, surfacing in the initial rhetorical situation that we started from. “I suppose I expected to see them convulsed with horror. . . . Pass the bottle.”²⁶⁷

But, of course, this very ‘ritual’ quality, soon recognized, and thus anticipated, produces its own kind of understanding, which adds a new layer to the formula’s effect: now recognized *as* formula, a mantra of repetition. Quite quickly, the refrain of “Pass the bottle” (as well as “O youth!”) acquires a punchline-like quality, becoming a refrain in the truest, most sing-songy sense—that part that everyone sees coming and can belt out in unison. This repetition, I would argue, shifts our entire placement of the trope: for unlike the individual instance of “Pass the bottle,” which seems naturally to invoke Marlow’s psychology for its interpretation, leading, in course, to various speculations about the degree of resignation, or uneasiness, or wry humor that the phrase might reveal, the

²⁶⁷ Interestingly, in the two other instances of “Pass the bottle” that I have not quoted, the refrain is prompted by the story’s coming up against a seemingly interminable span of *diegetic* time: in the first, the crew is waylaid for indefinite months in a harbor while its leaks are slowly repaired: “They towed us back to the inner harbor, and we became a fixture, a feature, an institution of the place. [...] Meantime the owner, the underwriters, and the charterers squabbled amongst themselves in London, and our pay went on. . . . Pass the bottle.”; while in the second, they labor at the equally endless task of low-level fire-fighting: “we were taciturn and serious—and thirsty. Oh! how thirsty! And we had to be careful with the water. Strict allowance. The ship smoked, the sun blazed. . . . Pass the bottle.” (149, 153). The ellipsis in these cases seems to suggest narrative summary: what is being described went on for a very long time, which could be described at greater length, but is needless to detail further. In this way, they invoke the disjuncture between the temporality of the past story—in which the duration of suffering seems to have no end—and that of its present telling, where this suffering is known to have been finite, and long since finished. The refrain of “Pass the bottle” here implies a kind of revulsive breaking with any further contemplation of the first temporality, in order to seek relief in the second.

pattern of instances cannot be comfortably attributed to any affective reasoning on the part of Marlow as speaker: unless it be to the brute verisimilitude of men drinking, or the unthinking tic of the thirsty raconteur. But in these latter cases, one would imagine that the verisimilitude would extend to the natural *variation* that would obviously inhere in such repeated requests: “Pass that bottle again,” “Let me get the bottle,” “Give us a drink,” “Anything left in that bottle?,” and as many other versions as one likes. As such, what the punctual repetition of the phrase combined with its uniform and ritualized *invariance* refers us to, finally, is a purpose that must exceed Marlow—and any “realist” diegetic explanation—gesturing toward a higher formal order attributable only to Conrad himself.

It is here that we return to the point we began with, and my suggestion that these “refrains” perform significant formal work, lending a sense of structure and pattern that is otherwise lacking in the rambling content of the tale. One effect of this structuring function, as we now can see, lies in pointing us, precisely, to the structured and *constructed* nature of the text itself—and, by extension, to the originating act of authorial construction that lies behind that text. We are referred implicitly, by the conspicuous artifice of the iterating refrain—its evident textual function as a timely, punctuating device, symptom of an intentional arrangement of discursive elements shaped for the reader’s benefit—to an extradiegetic scene of formal ordering, in which the hand of Conrad as effaced author may be glimpsed: and with it, to an extradiegetic logic of mute appeals made to the reader through the artful disposition of the tale’s linguistic components. In short, we are referred to *style*. The irony, of course, is that it is the very moments that—in diegetic terms—bespeak oral spontaneity that also induce us to

recognize the text in our hands as the product of a prior process of composition. In such moments, orality has been mobilized to allude to a paradigm seemingly very different, even opposed—a modernist stylistic paradigm, of authorial diffusion into the details and traces of the text, that was, at the time of “Youth”’s publication, still nascent. The mutability of these two paradigms outlines an area of fascination that Conrad would continue to probe in *Heart of Darkness*.

3. Rhetoric and Theatricality at the *Heart of Darkness*

Heart of Darkness was more than just Conrad’s follow-up to “Youth”: it was also that story’s narrative sequel. At the opening of *Heart of Darkness*, we find five characters aboard the *Nellie*, an anchored yacht lazing in the Thames: “The Director of Companies” (“our Captain and our host”), “The Lawyer,” “The Accountant,” an unspecified narrator, and Marlow.²⁶⁸ If those professions sound familiar, that’s because this is, in fact, the very group that we met in the frame story to “Youth”—“a director of companies, an accountant, a lawyer, Marlow, and myself”—and in addition to these titles, the brief glosses we receive are sufficient to confirm that the characters are one and the same. The anonymous frame narrator himself, in fact, makes clear that he was also the frame narrator of “Youth,” in a coy offhand remark (“Between us there was as I have already said somewhere, the bond of the sea.”) (3). This “bond of the sea,” he adds, had sustained their friendship “through long periods of separation,” as well as “making us tolerant of each other’s yarns”; evidently, these are five old friends who have remained close despite finding few opportunities to meet (3). As such, it remains unclear whether the storytelling

²⁶⁸ *Heart of Darkness: A Norton Critical Edition (Fourth Edition)*, ed. Paul B. Armstrong (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), p. 3. Cited parenthetically hereafter.

occasion for the recounted events of *Heart of Darkness* is occurring immediately after that of “Youth,” or some years down the road, after one of these “long periods of separation”: the fact that the frame narrator in “Youth” is uncertain of how to spell Marlow’s name (“at least I think that is how he spelt his name”) means that at that time he and Marlow had never had any written correspondence, perhaps implying that this was an earlier period in their acquaintance; on the other hand, it could not have been *that* much earlier, for the five in “Youth” are already men of middle age, if not older (as the story’s conceit makes amply clear). The indeterminacy of the timeline here is, in truth, symptomatic of the bizarre logic of *Heart of Darkness* as a sequel: a sequel, after all, to a story in which nothing happens, except that someone tells a story—and in the sequel, also, nothing happens, except that the same person tells another story to the same group, in a different place, and at a later time. It is, further, a sequel to a story in which we know almost nothing of the characters; and continue to learn nothing in the story’s continuation (except about Marlow’s life, perhaps, but his ‘character development’—if it could even be called that—is hardly what we are interested in as readers). How to understand, then, the strange relationship between “Youth” and *Heart of Darkness* as a *series*—when there is no narrative progression to speak of between the two of them, and none of the satisfactions that we normally expect from a sequel: not even a sense of how much time has passed in the interim? Although *Heart of Darkness* is—in the most literal way—a narrative sequel, it makes more sense to think of it, perhaps, as a kind of *formal* sequel: the continued pursuit, not of a storyline, but of a literary device. Evidently Conrad was so struck by the discovery of Marlow, and the entire situation of the oral frame tale that he represented, that he was not content to leave off after “Youth” was completed, but felt

compelled to continue his exploration of Marlow's capacities and affordances, this time in a different vein. The form of "Youth" had been an experiment, it seemed, that urged a second trial; the narrative content was variable, but the framing, Marlow's discoursing, the oral scene—these were held constant. Between the two works there is a continuity of purpose that demands that they be read together.²⁶⁹

Indeed, *Heart of Darkness*, too, has its "Pass the bottle" moments:

"[...] my sorrow had a startling extravagance of emotion, even such as I had noticed in the howling sorrow of these savages in the bush. I couldn't have felt more of lonely desolation somehow had I been robbed of a belief or had missed my destiny in life. . . . Why do you sigh in this beastly way, somebody? Absurd? Well, absurd. Good lord! musn't a man ever. . . . Here, give me some tobacco." . . .

There was a pause of profound stillness, then a match flared, and Marlow's lean face appeared worn, hollow, with downward folds and dropped eyelids with an aspect of concentrated attention; and as he took vigorous draws at his pipe it seemed to retreat and advance out of the night in the regular flicker of the tiny flame. The match went out.

"Absurd!" he cried. "This is the worst of trying to tell. . . . Here you all are each moored with two good addresses like a hulk with two anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another, excellent appetites, and temperature normal—you hear—normal from year's end to year's end. And you say, Absurd! (47)

Such moments are not ritualized and have none of the regularity and invariance of the refrains in "Youth"; though they remain a punctual device, they have here been integrated in accordance with the codes of verisimilitude. At times, Marlow simply trails off, as

²⁶⁹ Indeed, Conrad originally intended to publish "Youth," *Heart of Darkness*, and *Lord Jim* as a single volume collection, which he planned to title *Three Tales*, as a play on Flaubert's *Trois Contes* (as Robert Kimbrough observes, it "could have been entitled *Marlow*"). This became impossible when *Lord Jim* grew to novel-length, and the volume *Youth: A Narrative; and Two Other Stories* would instead include "The End of the Tether" as its third story. It is evident, then, that Conrad intended the three Marlow texts to be read together, and that he conceived of this intention almost immediately. As William Nelles notes, Conrad's "first three explicit references in the letters to *Heart of Darkness*, also written during the composition of *Lord Jim*, all refer to it as in 'the manner of *Youth*', and Conrad commits himself to a volume made up of the three Marlow stories by the time *Heart of Darkness* begins serialization." Nelles further observes that, although the three texts never appeared in a single volume, their original readership would have encountered them in *Blackwood's* following in close succession, and would thus have read them as a natural series; even so, the Marlow texts still tend to be read today in isolation from each other. Nelles, "Youth, *Heart of Darkness*, and *Lord Jim*: Reading Conrad's Trilogy," *Conradiana* 35.1-2 (2003): 64, 67. Kimbrough, "Conrad's *Youth*: An Introduction," *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 406.

though flummoxed; in certain of these moments, the frame narrator steps in to fill the gap; at other times, we get an ellipsis to indicate the interval, or maybe a single sentence (“He was silent for a while.”); in one memorable instance, one of the perpetually mute and minimally specified auditors actually cuts in to chide our orator, when he has strayed into too cynical a vein (““Try to be civil, Marlow’, growled a voice”) (27, 34). These sudden interruptions, when we surface briefly back into the frame narrative, and the situation of Marlow’s telling aboard the *Nellie*, are, in “Heart of Darkness,” never anticipated: on the contrary, they tend to startle us out of our complacent reverie, just when we are most absorbed in the hypnotic, winding rhythms of Marlow’s journey. Here, the gap between frame and framed tale is brought deliberately into sharp relief—quite literally, in fact, in the impromptu match flare that reveals Marlow’s haggard face, etched in contrasts of light and shadow. The “regular flicker” by which our storyteller’s face “advance[s]” and “retreat[s]” is an apt image for the strategy wherein Conrad allows the narrative frame to recede from view, only to suddenly resurface. We have been lulled, over the course of many pages, into thinking that Marlow was our focalizing character, that we shared his gaze, saw through his eyes; then, abruptly, we are pitched out of this illusion, and reminded that our entire experience of Marlow’s tale is actually being focalized through an anonymous auditor, a frame narrator whom we know nothing about, who is regarding Marlow from a position apart and external: we toggle, all at once, from behind Marlow’s eyes, to being confronted with the strange lines and folds of his face. In the process, we are also flung from a certain assumed intimacy with our confiding orator-guide, our tracing of an impassioned and impressionistic eloquence, into the alien perspective of a stranger, for whom Marlow—for all his voluble openness—has suddenly

become as far-off and opaque as a face that will not return our gaze. But this moment of broken rhetorical ‘recognition’ between narrator and reader lasts only so long as it takes to get Conrad’s hint; a second later, the awkward interval (emphasized, it should be noted, by the grammatical awkwardness of the frame narrator’s description of Marlow’s face, with its repetition of “with” and odd run-on quality: traceable, perhaps, to his omission of necessary punctuation between “appeared” and “worn”) has passed, and we are right back to where we were before: with the difference, of course, that we have been *reminded*. What we have been reminded of, quite simply, is that Marlow was never speaking to us; had, in fact, never recognized us. At the same time, it may be seen that these brief ruptures tend to coincide with those occasions in which Marlow is at his *most* rhetorical: as in the passage above, where his speech about the incomprehension of his comfortable middle-class audience—their inability to truly understand the mental derangements wrought by the experience of being “in the bush,” deprived of the sureties of butchers and policemen—is one of the most evident examples of a case in which Marlow’s address is directed squarely (albeit only by implication) at Conrad’s actual English readers: a polemic staged for the purpose of confronting the unassuming reader with his own, stolidly “normal,” image. Conrad cranks the contrast up as high as possible: it is when we feel most implicated by Marlow’s address, most feel that we are the ones he is ‘really’ speaking to, that Conrad goes out of his way to remind us that there is no direct address here: just a diegetically occasioned dialogue between characters. It is quite as if Conrad is pushing the envelope, flaunting the prohibition against authorial rhetoric, all while scrupulously observing the letter of the law.

Indeed, that gray zone between rhetoric and style—where one seems to wear the face of the other—is where “Heart of Darkness” loves to play. It is also the source of many of its most memorable ‘modernist’ effects: just after Marlow lights his pipe, we get a bravura anachronic sequence à la *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which the narration roves freely across the timeline of the story to visit future scenes that we have not yet encountered, bringing us abruptly into the midst of Marlow’s complex relationship with Kurtz, a character we have yet to meet, and even anticipating the former’s climactic encounter with the Intended. The temporal wanderings that in Woolf would be based in the subtle processes of memory and consciousness, however, are here simply the result of Marlow’s perambulatory speech: the strayings and digressions of the oral. Much as the refrain of “Pass the bottle” does in “Youth,” it is this oral texture to the tale that ironically makes visible its formal patterning as a narrative—the very qualities that mark oral spontaneity are also those that allow us to see the story as a discursive construct that makes its appeals through foreshadowing, anachronic structuring, and other writerly techniques. Only when the narrative form is twisted and manipulated in such ways, of course, does it become legible *as* a form.

The passage in question begins like this:

“[...] I was cut to the quick at the idea of having lost the inestimable privilege of listening to the gifted Kurtz. Of course I was wrong. The privilege was waiting for me. Oh yes, I heard more than enough. And I was right, too. A voice. He was very little more than a voice. And I heard—him—it—this voice—other voices—all of them were so little more than voices—and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean without any kind of sense. Voices, voices—even the girl herself—now. . . .”

He was silent for a long time.

“I laid the ghost of his gifts with a lie,” he began suddenly. “Girl! What? Did I mention a girl? Oh, she is out of it—completely. They—the women I mean—are out of it—should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their

own lest ours gets worse. Oh, she had to be out of it. (48)

The sequence continues in this vein for another two pages, as Marlow falls meditatively into an analysis of Kurtz's motives and character; the short excerpt that I've quoted here should be enough, though, to demonstrate the highly marked orality of this proleptic moment, with its stammers and halting cadence, its self-corrections and indistinct mutterings. The evident agitation that seems to afflict Marlow here simultaneously generates the heightened orality of the passage (when his speech stumbles and breaks down it becomes visible as *spoken* language), and is the cause of Marlow losing his thread and beginning to ramble about people and scenes that haven't been introduced to us yet—in short, the virtuosic and strategic anachronic play that makes us admire Conrad's skillful construction of the narrative form is, in diegetic terms, the very height of oral immediacy. I suppose one could object that the wanderings and associations of Marlow's discourse as he speaks are not fundamentally different from the kind of mental processes that we get in Woolf: in both cases we are able to follow the logic of a mind at work. But if Marlow's anachrony is a stream of consciousness, it is one that he is composing himself, *out loud*—and through conscious deliberation. It is directed at a diegetic audience, and thus includes rhetorical motives and appeals, such as persuasion, in its construction, which make it—as narration—essentially unlike the mute, internal, quasi-conscious trains of mental activity that we associate with Woolf or Joyce. Conrad's modernist stylism keeps always one foot in the rhetorical—whereas in Woolf and Joyce, the only rhetorical appeals are stylistic and indirect, aimed at the reader, from a text that has disavowed any open connection to narratorial rhetoric. At the same time, the prototypically modernist fascination with the associative leaps, detours, and meanderings

of thought and memory may be seen to contain the vestigial trace of oral spontaneity, as a historical principle of narrative discourse: now isolated from any scene of rhetorical address, and submerged in a mind that ‘speaks’ only to itself. In this way, the fertile paradox of rhetoric-as-style that Conrad has helped us to isolate is preserved in—and indeed, becomes definitive of—literary modernism: wherein, in a by-now familiar dynamic, the same textual features that mark the spontaneous immediacy of a free-roving diegetic consciousness, unfolding moment-by-moment, are also the very features that ostentatiously display the aesthetic rigor and calculation that lie behind the text, considered as virtuosic modernist performance. Modernism’s paradigm of style, then, in which an effaced author makes mute and indirect appeals to the reader through the strategic construction and disposition of the textual elements, still carries, at some level, the mark of its vanquished rival—the direct appeal of authorial presence and rhetorical address.

The argument that I’m making here points us back, once again, to the concept of *theatricality*, which was central to the first half of this dissertation. Theatricality, for our purposes, is defined by the double consciousness that is invoked in its reception: in which, even while we follow the performed emotion of the diegetic character represented on the stage, we are still aware all the time that the visible symptoms of this emotion are actually a deliberate artistic appeal made to the audience—what Charles Lamb, in his 1825 essay on “Stage Illusion,” called “a perpetual subinsinuation to us, the spectators,” that the actor—no matter how discomposed he may seem—is actually knowingly entertaining us.²⁷⁰ The same principle is at work in stylistic authorship—style is, if you

²⁷⁰ Quoted in David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 16.

like, the theatricality of prose fiction. It is the awareness that the narrative discourse, the text, has been deliberately and strategically organized by its author to make certain appeals and create certain effects, which are the “subinsinuation” running underneath the story and characters that are its ostensible reality—that even as we note Marlow’s agitation, his faltering attempts to justify himself to his auditors, we also observe and admire the masterful display of composition apparent in his seemingly artless stammerings. This sub-level is the performance itself, that vantage from which all that we see is imputed to the craft and agency of the author, the performer; it is the level at which we *evaluate*, the level to which we apply adjectives like “masterful” or “virtuosic.” When we watch a great actor perform live, we are aware that she is not *herself* present before us, addressing us in her own person (the model of rhetoric); rather, we are accustomed to viewing her selfhood as absent, yet distributed and diffused through all of the gestures, and tones, and looks that comprise her performance: such is style.

In this regard, the theatricality of Marlow’s narration is striking—and highly illuminating of what Conrad is up to in this novella. One difference between “Youth” and “Heart of Darkness,” implied above but not yet stated outright, is that the latter shows a new interest in orality as a *texturing* feature of narration: the markers of speech—the stuttering, the backtracking, the rambling—increasingly come to engrain and pattern the linguistic surface of the text. In one sense, this could be regarded as a move towards greater verisimilitude; Marlow’s oral speech now ‘sounds’ more like actual oral speech, with all its tics and hiccups. But the deeper point of this shift, I want to argue, is not that Marlow’s address is more ‘realistic’, but that it is more *theatrical*. If we reread again the block passage excerpted above, it is impossible not to notice how much it feels like a

dramatic speech: the way it builds momentum through clipped, terse sentences that gradually elongate into rolling, accumulative lists; the trailing off into a dying whisper; the dramatic pause.²⁷¹ From the abrupt pivots and changes of heart—hallmark of the soliloquy—to the momentarily dropped hooks that bait our interest (“A voice. He was very little more than a voice.”), to the gestural, effortful groping for a truth that lies just out of reach: all of these are recognizably ‘marks’ for an actor to hit, which remind us that Marlow is, after all, in a sense, on stage, before an audience. And yet, his consummate performance exists only at the sub-level, only for the reader; as in the case of Lamb’s stage coward, who “let out by a thousand droll looks and gestures—meant at *us*, and not at all supposed to be visible to his fellows in the scene, that his confidence in his own resources had not deserted him,” all of the adroit turns and grace notes of Marlow’s dramatic monologue are for us alone, and oddly fail to register with his diegetic auditors, who clearly regard him as a rather tortured and circumlocutory Rambler.²⁷² Conrad goes out of his way to make this plain early on, when our frame narrator reacts with a pointed lack of enthusiasm to the prospect of a Marlow yarn: “we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences”; he goes on to note Marlow’s exemplifying of “the weakness

²⁷¹ The typographic ellipsis is interestingly significant to the dramatized quality of this passage. Indeed, it’s worth noting, as M. B. Parkes points out, that the ellipsis in narrative fiction was first introduced by Samuel Richardson as a typographic device adapted from dramatic playscripts, thus representing a kind of dramatization of prose, a turn towards a performative text that ‘acts out’ where pauses or interruptions are happening. As Parkes writes, “Samuel Richardson—a master printer as well as a novelist—drew upon his taste for the drama, and his experience of printing plays, to introduce marks like the em-rule, or dash, and a series of points to indicate those hesitations and sudden changes in the direction of thought associated with spoken discourse. Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748) was especially influential on the practice of later authors.” M. B. Parkes, *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 93. We might also recall Edward Said’s remark on Conrad here: “Conrad’s fate was to have written fiction great for its presentation, and not only for what it was representing [...] he led language into a dramatization no other author really approached.” Said, “Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 7.2 (Winter 1974): 116.

²⁷² Quoted in Kurnick, *Empty Houses*, *ibid*.

of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their audience would best like to hear” (7). All of Marlow’s telling is given in inimitable style; but throughout the novella, it never merits more than grumbles and eye rolls from his listeners. This is in marked contrast to “Youth,” which ends, we should recall, with the group nodding silently in affirmation of Marlow’s eloquence and profundity.²⁷³ In “Heart of Darkness,” that eloquence has migrated to the sub-level: no longer diegetic, it is now a purely textual performance, visible to the reader alone. In this way, Marlow’s eloquence is reminiscent of stage devices like the melodramatic tableau (discussed in Chapter 2), which exist only for the extradiegetic audience.

In cranking up the contrast between rhetoric and style, oral spontaneity and the appeals of textual construction, Conrad heightens the theatricality of the text: that doubled awareness that what is inchoate rambling at one level is, at another, a composition of virtuosity. This marks an extension of the strategies we found in “Youth”—in which the ritualized oral refrain, by its very artifice, points us to another level, beyond diegetic signification: the formal construction of the narrative itself. Meanwhile, the keen pathos that attended upon these moments of orality emerged, likewise, out of the narrative form, in a way that seemed peculiarly detached from any diegetic feeling (think of the unmotivated pang we receive from the loss of Mrs. Beard): already, it groped towards an effect that would lie at the level of the textual performance, rather than the represented story.

²⁷³ William Nelles has observed that there is a “progressively widening distance between Marlow and his multiple sets of narratees, from the solidarity of the ‘fellowship’ in *Youth* to the interruptions and sarcastic asides of *Heart of Darkness* to the antagonism attributed to the ‘privileged reader’ at the end of *Lord Jim*.” Nelles, “*Youth, Heart of Darkness, and Lord Jim*,” *ibid.*: 69.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting, by way of conclusion, that such reflections on rhetoric and orality are also, in truth, to be found within the content of the novella's explicit plot: and it is here that we must turn, at last, to the character of Kurtz. Perhaps no quality of Kurtz is more frequently emphasized than his association with oral speech: "of all his gifts," Marlow tells us, "the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk" (47). He is the "eloquent phantom," "the man who can talk so well," possessed of an "unextinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression," "magnificent eloquence," "the unbounded power of eloquence—of words—of burning noble words" (76, 59, 68, 57, 50). Not for nothing does Marlow desire "the inestimable privilege of listening to the gifted Kurtz" (as one of Kurtz's devotees puts it, "You don't talk with that man—you listen to him"): a mode of interaction well suited to the latter's repeated figuration as a disembodied voice ("A voice. He was very little more than a voice.") (53). Indeed, this trope is practically literalized in physical descriptions of Kurtz, which underscore his frail and tenuous materiality, the sheer insubstantiality of his bodily frame, in improbable contrast to the deeply resonant tonalities of his speech: he is all voice, no body (60).²⁷⁴ If ever there was a figure of pure orality, Kurtz is it.

²⁷⁴ Ivan Kreilkamp has written of Kurtz's status as a "man who was 'very little more than a voice'" as significant for the way that Conrad's novella "marks a change in the way fiction understood its relation to speech [...] refigur[ing] the drift of articulation away from agency, of text away from author." For Kreilkamp, this shift in *Heart of Darkness* "away from an idealized scene of storytelling toward the disembodied voice of a circulating textuality" must be referred to the emergent contemporary technology of the phonograph, which, as he argues, "in severing the link between a human agent and speech [...] opened the way to a new conception of voice not as the sign of presence but as the fragmentary material phonemes of a circulating, authorless language." But as I've argued in these pages, what comes after the end of authorial presence in storytelling is not an "authorless," free-floating textuality, but an author who has been relocated precisely into the language of the text, as the inferred, dispersed agent of style—a shift that began much earlier than the phonograph. Ivan Kreilkamp, "A Voice Without a Body: The Phonographic Logic of *Heart of Darkness*," *Victorian Studies* 40.2 (Winter 1997): 215, 236, 214.

And yet, in Conrad's world, a figure of pure orality is, of necessity, a highly mixed and conflicted creature—as befits the rather ambivalent status of eloquence in his oeuvre. In “Heart of Darkness,” as elsewhere in Conrad, a propensity to talk is equated with a fatuous superficiality, while depth and profundity are linked to an inability to speak; think, for example, of the moment when Marlow is attending idly to the pompous, insinuating speech of that station apparatchik that he calls the “papier-mâché Mephistopheles”—in the interval of which he becomes increasingly aware of the “high stillness of primeval forest” that looms all around them: “All of this was great, expectant, mute, while the man jabbered about himself. [...] What were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk” (26). The contrast could not be clearer: this is a world where speech is an exercise in insignificance, if not mendacity; while the immense verities that dwarf our penetration are defined precisely by their muteness. It's the Conradian topos, already mentioned, of an ultimate order of truth that lies beyond articulation; what makes Kurtz such an arresting figure within this world, then, is his non-alignment with its constitutive rubric—he is a figure of eloquence, of speech, who is nonetheless aligned, not with superficiality, but with the unspeakable depths, the vaster orders and magnitudes of hidden and terrible meaning. Such, at least, is the tantalizing reputation that accrues around his name in the first two acts of the narrative, prompting our keen anticipation for his eventual appearance. In the event, however, Kurtz proves to be both an exception to the rubric, and the exception that proves the rule—a figure both for semi-miraculous eloquence, and for the very failure, the humbling, of eloquence, in its encounter with a truth that mocks all expression.

These contradictions are, of course, crystallized most readily in Kurtz's famous final words: "The horror! The horror!" (69). This non-statement statement, with its allusion to a vision huge and awful that is never named or described, is, as it were, a purely *deictic* pronouncement: equivalent to if Kurtz had simply said, "That! That!" He is not so much expressing something, as he is pointing to something that goes unexpressed. As for the "horror" that forms the statement's only real content, it is not a description of what he sees, but a *self*-description, of his own reaction to it. Thus he manages to indicate the scale and terribleness of the insight he has received, in what is, essentially, gestural fashion—in the same way that a dramatic widening of someone's eyes indicates to us that they have just seen something highly surprising—while utterly failing to convey anything else about it. This broken declaration represents the ultimate dashing of his vaunted eloquence on the shoals of a truth that exceeds articulation—thus does Kurtz, the gifted man of talk, the figure of exception who seemed to defy the profundity–muteness rubric, become, in the final analysis, its greatest proof and confirmation. And yet there is a sense in which—without at all negating the obvious failure, the breakdown of language, that these last words represent—they may also be seen to represent the triumph of eloquence: the final confirmation of Kurtz's exceptionality. As Marlow remarks of this moment, "No eloquence could have been so withering to one's belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity" (66). He muses further on the same theme a little later on, when contemplating how close he himself came, in the precarious days following Kurtz's death, to delivering his own last words:

I was within a hair's-breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say. This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare that

could not see the flame of the candle but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up—he had judged. ‘The horror!’ He was a remarkable man.

“After all,” Marlow goes on to say, “this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth [...] I like to think my summing-up would not have been a word of careless contempt. Better his cry—much better” (70). By this logic, in its very failure—its abject reduction to an almost animal “cry”—Kurtz’s final declaration conveys the essence of the shattering, inexpressible truth he means to convey: it takes in hand its vast subject, and “sum[s] [it] up” with a single gesture. It does this not by describing its truth, but by enacting it, performing it. Just as “the horror” refers at one and the same time to Kurtz’s vision and to his own recoil from it, conflating and intermingling subject and object, the thing represented and the agent doing the representing, so is his expression an act that refuses any analytic distance, any standing-apart to anatomize and describe: instead, he performs, in himself, that which he means to represent. It is not possible, perhaps, to directly convey “the whole universe [...] all the hearts that beat in the darkness”: this immense vision is suggested to Marlow only indirectly, in the sheer wildness of the “stare” that seems to encompass it. So it is, by the same token, that what Kurtz makes visible is not the truth itself, but “the appalling face of a glimpsed truth”: the truth reflected, mirror-like, in the horrified reaction of he who has perceived it. In this way, the purely deictic, gestural nature of Kurtz’s declaration proves to be, in Marlow’s account, the most eloquent means of expressing the inexpressible.

In Kurtz’s association with a semi-miraculous eloquence, he is, of course, the double of Marlow himself—who is, prior to the advent of Kurtz, the closest thing in

Conrad to that figure of exception, the profound talker.²⁷⁵ This doubling relation is, in fact, signally underlined in the text when Marlow, in his very act of oral narration, comes himself to be figured by exactly the same trope that will be used to epitomize Kurtz—a disembodied voice: “It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another,” the frame narrator tells us. “For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice” (27). Like Kurtz, Marlow possesses an all-eclipsing capacity for orality: he is a man defined by his quixotic willingness to venture rhetorically upon the misty terrain of the inarticulable. In this linguistic affinity, then, is implied a further kind of kinship—a propensity to go beyond the boundaries of the known and defined. This kinship Marlow seems to recognize, in the unusual bond he professes for Kurtz. After the latter’s death, and his own near-demise, Marlow is especially preoccupied with analyzing the correlation of his own case to that of his late colleague. “True,” Marlow tells us, “he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference” (70). Douglas Kerr has written of the relation between Marlow and Kurtz as emblematic of a “myth of colonial discourse”—a trope that one finds in Kipling, as well—in which the narrator-figure, with whom we identify, becomes the trustee of the truth of a second, more brilliant but more reckless, man, who has gone ‘beyond the pale’, crossing the borderline between putative ‘civilization’ and its native other; the second man being inevitably destroyed, it is up to the narrator to process and reflect over the insight that

²⁷⁵ Marlow escapes being disciplined for his violation of the Conradian rubric, I suspect, for a couple reasons: first, that his profundity is, as we have seen, at least by the time of *Heart of Darkness*, hardly a given within the diegetic world, and, indeed, is clearly regarded with open skepticism by his auditors; and, second—a related reason—that Marlow is and has always been, as Henry James would have said, more a creature of the *treatment* than the *subject*: his proper province is not to be a character in the story, but to be a function of the storytelling structure—and it is for this reason, of course, that his profundity exists only at the discursive level, and not diegetically.

was gained by this unrestrained conduct, and its fatal price.²⁷⁶ This ought to remind us that Kurtz's exceptionality—his violation of the rubric whereby profound depths are aligned with muteness—is also the violation of a color-line, a step past the edge of the prescribed provinces of whiteness, to immerse himself in that which is black, and therefore, dumb (whiteness, language, and civilization being bound up here in a single complex): if Kurtz is the figure of eloquence who is nonetheless on the side of “that thing that couldn't talk,” it is, fundamentally, because he is a white man who has left the well-lit clearing of the colonial station to cross over into that “primeval forest” that is the realm of the racial other. As such, the truth beyond language, in this novella, has much to do with racist *fin de siècle* theories of degeneracy, and a notional primitivism at the dark heart of every Englishman.²⁷⁷ This is the nature of the “appalling [...] glimpsed truth” that Marlow is able to witness, vicariously, through Kurtz's eyes: and the reason why Marlow must not glimpse it too directly. Such vicarious witnessing is, of course, the basic point of the doubling relationship that inheres between these two characters: not only to safeguard Marlow's white identity, but to allow the English reader the *frisson* of following out an exoticist fantasy (to go native, to shrug off every ‘civilized’ restraint), while at the same time maintaining a safely mediated distance, and appropriate posture of disapproval.

In this way, Marlow's discourse frames that of Kurtz, somewhat like the moderating, rational frame narrator who brackets the discourse of the deranged speaker in

²⁷⁶ Douglas Kerr, “Three Ways of Going Wrong: Kipling, Conrad, Coetzee,” *The Modern Language Review* 95.1 (Jan. 2000): 21.

²⁷⁷ Just *how* much has been a subject of some debate: John A. McClure, for example, has argued that the contemporary tropes of degeneracy that one would expect to find in *Heart of Darkness* are largely absent, and thus that these discourses were less of an influence on the narrative than has often been supposed. McClure, *Kipling and Conrad: The Colonial Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

the classic Romantic tale; the only difference here being that we aren't actually given any of Kurtz's discourse. For a character so plumped for his incredible speaking skills, it is striking that we receive none of Kurtz's orations in direct discourse, and, indeed, almost no dialogue from the man at all.²⁷⁸ Marlow's (Conrad's?) style becomes, in effect, a kind of second-order echo of Kurtz's eloquence: an echo of which we never actually hear the original sound. The dramatic aptitude and virtuosity of Marlow's narrative discourse, which has no kind of reality in the story proper, but exists only for us as readers, seems somehow to have as its authorizing source that absent and ideal discourse of Kurtz—the consummate artistry of which is an article of faith within the story's diegesis, but is never substantiated for the eyes of its readers. Marlow, we are thus implicitly given to believe, is what Kurtz would sound like if we could hear him speak. Perhaps another way to get at this would be to assert that the various kinds of *indirection* that are so much at the heart of this novella are all, in fact, mutually related: that, for example, the way that Marlow (and we as readers) are only able to glimpse Kurtz's truth indirectly—the constitutive indirection of Kerr's 'colonial myth'—is necessarily bound up with the narrative's indirect treatment of Kurtz's speech: which in turn must be connected to the indirect, performative expressiveness of the latter's final words. For the one pronouncement that we do get from Kurtz, as we have already seen, is not in the rhetorical mode that we were led to expect—that gift for direct, declamatory address that Marlow links to “a sense of real presence”—but arrives as a very different kind of speech act: one in which the meaning must be read in the performance, above and beyond the strict meaning of the

²⁷⁸ Peter Brooks has also noticed how little of Kurtz's dialogue is given to us in direct discourse, a choice that he believes runs counter to the formal logic of Conrad's narrative. See *Reading for the Plot* (New York: Random House, 1985), pp. 256-7.

words. It is a speech act in which the *way* that Kurtz points to the inexpressible—the “candour” and “conviction” of his gesture, the “vibrating note of revolt” invested in his “whisper”—contains the true message; the eloquence is in the performance. To note, then, that the heightened theatricality of Marlow’s discourse seems to emanate from Kurtz, and is somehow licensed by his absent eloquence, is perhaps to observe that a symbolic move from rhetoric to theatricality is what Kurtz’s eloquence—and its absence—really amounts to.

Yet another way to get at this might be to say that I want to consider all of the novella’s many nested layers of indirection, not for what they might or might not be concealing at their secret core (or, why not say it, their heart of darkness), but for what they are modeling in themselves: for the significance of the chain of indirection itself, which—it surely is no stretch to say—draws the fascination and motive of its repetitive rehearsal in no small part from the indirection of style: its foundational rejection of a direct address, and its concomitant opening up of a plethora of hypothetical avenues for a more subtle, oblique, or performative transmission. It is upon these avenues that Conrad’s work begins to reflect in earnest in “Heart of Darkness”; to see where this multiplying of layers and levels leads, however, we must turn, finally, to *Lord Jim*.

4. Into the Ellipsis: *Lord Jim*

The three-part serialization of “Heart of Darkness” concluded in April 1899; just six months later, the serialization of *Lord Jim*—also in *Blackwood’s*—began. With this, the third of his consecutive Marlow texts, Conrad brought his ongoing experiments with the framing device fully into the realm of the novel—although, interestingly, this was not

his original intention, and the novel's full title, *Lord Jim, A Tale* (in its magazine publication, *Lord Jim: A Sketch*) quietly testifies to the lasting, if vestigial, trace that his initial conception of the narrative as a short story would leave in the completed text.²⁷⁹ It is worth recalling here that Conrad's first deployment of the frame narrative, and its attendant markers of orality, was in fact rooted in the imperatives of a modern short story aesthetic: specifically, the need, in "Youth," to make a rather shapeless, baggy kind of anecdote conform to the sense of efficient form that the art of the short story was seen to demand. It has traditionally been argued by scholars of the short story that the Victorians struggled to produce any notable examples of the art form until late in the century precisely because they lacked the requisite feeling for a tightness and unity of form—accustomed, as they were, to the looser prerogatives of the then-dominant three-volume novel. While there has always been a basic degree of truth in this, one wants to reply, nevertheless, that what makes Victorian short fiction so fascinating *is* just those devices and contrivances by which authors attempted to import, impose, improvise, or simulate an effect of formal cohesion where it was otherwise lacking in the motley nature of the story materials themselves—fairy tale and joke structures, puzzles and mystery plots, allegories, taxonomies, forms of situated telling—and framing devices, too, figured

²⁷⁹ As I noted in the opening to this chapter, this was hardly unusual for Conrad. As Gail Fraser has pointed out, Conrad used the subtitle "A Tale" for six of his novels (describing another as "A Story"), and rarely used the term "novel" as a self-reference to his own longer fiction; she further observes that, in terms of his compositional practice, Conrad frequently referred to his works as "stories" even as they grew to over 500 pages, granting them the label "novel" only when it was clear that they had outgrown their original proportions. In fact, Conrad began only two of his novels *as* novels, rather than as short stories, *The Rescue* and *The Sisters*: of these, the former took 23 years to finish, while the latter remains a fragment. As such, Fraser argues, "the shorter form tended to concentrate his ideas in a way that was essential to the making of his art"; on the other hand, commentators like Ford Madox Ford have remarked that Conrad "never wrote a true short story," and that he had difficulty with the short form. I would suggest that Conrad's liminal state of in-betweenness with respect to rhetoric and style aligns with his state of being perpetually between the novel and the short story. See Gail Fraser, "The Short Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, ed. J. H. Stape (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 25-7.

centrally on this roster. This is the kind of compensatory formal work, definitive of the late development of the modern short story in Britain, out of which Conrad's remarkably sustained experiment with the frame narrative emerged: and the catalyst for his alchemizing of rhetorical and stylistic modes.

But what could any of this have to do with *Lord Jim*—a novel that is, after all, about the very failure of its story elements to cohere into any kind of determinate account, obsessed with its own internal misalignments and loose ends: and with a narrative form that is, famously, as nebulous and shapeless as a fog bank? Despite possessing a sprawling and cobbled-together structure that is, at first glance, about as far from a short-form aesthetic as one could imagine, *Lord Jim* is, in truth, a novel remarkably haunted by the short story that it almost was. Take, for example, its method for disclosing character. If the aesthetic of the Victorian novel is, essentially, one of divulging, of telling all, then the short story operates in a much more economical fashion: making use of the elliptical, the pregnant, the suggestive, to make the reader understand more than has been said. Central to this short-form practice is an enormous emphasis on the illuminating, epiphanic moment: the single detail or token that is invested with an outsized revelatory significance—seeming, all at once, to encapsulate a much larger, unspoken truth. By these means, character in the modern short story is typically revealed through a kind of slight, yet highly meaningful, demystifying incident: the stray gesture, accident, or flash of emotion that ‘tells’, offering a sudden vantage or opening from which the whole person, laid bare in all their human weakness or pretension or tragedy, may be seen through to their most vulnerable (or hideous) core. Behind this convention is the faith that an entire personality can be crystallized—and made luminously

transparent—in a single gleaming, jewel-like moment of exposure: but such moments do not only clarify, they are also ambiguous, dense with shades and implications that are left open to readerly interpretation.²⁸⁰ In this notion of a single, meaning-rich gesture that is capable of summing up, and passing judgment on, an entire individuality, we might recognize Marlow's rumination on Kurtz's last words in "Heart of Darkness"; in *Lord Jim*, these moments are multiplied, and become a focus of explicit and obsessive reflection within Marlow's narration—particularly, in his attempts to understand, and adequately characterize, Jim. Indeed, such moments are a near-constant occurrence in Marlow's interviews with his various interlocutors:

After these words, and without a change of attitude, he, so to speak, submitted himself passively to a state of silence. I kept him company; and suddenly, but not abruptly, as if the appointed time had arrived for his moderate and husky voice to come out of his immobility, he pronounced, '*Mon Dieu!* how the time passes!' Nothing could have been more common-place than this remark; but its utterance coincided for me with a moment of vision. [...] there can be but few of us who had never known one of these rare moments of awakening when we see, hear, understand ever so much—everything—in a flash—before we fall back again into our agreeable somnolence. I raised my eyes when he spoke, and I saw him as though I had never seen him before.²⁸¹

These "rare moments" are, for Marlow, anything but: only 11 pages earlier, we had been told of his receiving "another glimpse through a rent in the mist in which [Jim] moved and had his being": a "rent in the mist" being Marlow's personal nomenclature for these sudden, crystallizing glimpses that seem to make briefly, tantalizingly visible the unseen and unfathomed essence of Jim's nature (99). Another 10 pages earlier: "It was one of

²⁸⁰ In a similar vein, Owen Knowles writes of Conrad's dialogue that "specific conversations are often much less important than the piecing together of illuminating moments which capture people in the act of revealing expression." Knowles, "'To Make You Hear': Some Aspects of Conrad's Dialogue," *The Polish Review* 20.2-3 (1975): 165.

²⁸¹ *Lord Jim*, ed. Allan H. Simmons (New York and London: Penguin Classics, 2007 [1900]), p. 110. Cited parenthetically hereafter.

those bizarre and exciting glimpses through the fog. It was an extraordinary disclosure” (89). As Marlow had earlier told his auditors, “I don’t pretend I understood him. The views he let me have of himself were like those glimpses through the shifting rents in a thick fog—bits of vivid and vanishing detail, giving no connected idea of the general aspect of a country.”²⁸² They fed one’s curiosity without satisfying it; they were no good for purposes of orientation” (60). The pessimism, or modesty, that Marlow expresses here in downplaying the practical usefulness of the insights that these “rents” afford is interestingly contradicted by many of the epiphanies themselves, which are often accompanied by a confident sense of clarity and penetration: “He would give himself away; he would give himself up. I could see in his glance darted into the night all his inner being carried on” (66). As such, this definitive short story device, as a method of narrative representation, is not only highlighted and reflected on by the diegetic narrator, within the diegesis—it is actively debated for its relative efficacy, its capacity to shed light on a complex narrative subject. It is as if the novel is arguing with itself over whether or not it should have been a short story after all—or, to what degree these tools of the short story ought to be adopted, to complement or replace the more rhetorical novelistic toolkit.

These “rents in the mist” testify to a novel in which what is *told* is of less importance than what *tells*: Jim’s words, his explicit self-justifications, mean less, and

²⁸² Marlow’s description here of “bits of vivid and vanishing detail, giving no connected idea of the general aspect” audibly echoes the type of language by which the newly popular short story was being characterized by Conrad’s contemporaries; recall, for example, G. K. Chesterton’s discussion, quoted in the previous chapter, of the link between the “modern attraction to short stories” and “a real sense of fleetingness and fragility”: “A short story of to-day has the air of a dream: it has the irrevocable beauty of a falsehood; we get a glimpse of grey streets of London or red plains of India, as in an opium vision; we see people—arresting people with fiery and appealing faces. But when the story is ended the people are ended. We have no instinct of anything ultimate and enduring behind the episodes.” Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (London: Methuen, 1906), p. 69.

offer less truth, than the inadvertent signs that can be read in his gestures, his glances, his silences. In this regard, it is striking how often Marlow's "moment[s] of vision" are occasioned by the breakdown of Jim's speech:

"He heard me out with his head on one side, and I had another glimpse through a rent in the mist in which he moved and had his being. [...] 'You are an awful good sort to listen like this,' he said. 'It does me good. You don't know what it is to me. You don't' . . . words seemed to fail him. It was a distinct glimpse. (99)

By the same token, it is when Jim finds his tongue again that Marlow registers, with some frustration, that his glimpse has been cut off: "The mists were closing again" (100). As Marlow elsewhere puts it, "These were things he could not explain to the court—and not even to me; but I would have been little fitted for the reception of his confidences, had I not been able at times to understand the pauses between the words" (82). In truth, Jim's pauses often seem, for Marlow, to be far more eloquent than his statements.²⁸³ This distrust or devaluation of what can be stated outright was, of course, already implicit in the short story aesthetic, and its key representational strategy of the luminous moment—with its latent rebuke of an older aesthetic of novelistic rhetoric, premised on the transparency of all that is narrated and told. In the short story, such transparency is not assumed: one tends to find, instead, the constant presumption that characters are not what they claim to be—or even as the narrator, more or less dryly, describes them—but must be carefully watched for that moment of irony (inevitable twist!) in which they unwittingly 'give themselves away'. The implication is that a person will not tell you the truth about herself, but will only disclose that truth by her incidental gestures and unthinking behaviors, which may be plumbed and interpreted; not for nothing did the rise

²⁸³ Later on, Marlow tells us, "there are moments when our souls, as if freed from their dark envelope, glow with an exquisite sensibility that makes certain silences more lucid than speeches" (232).

of the modern short story in the 1880s coincide with the earliest developments in psychoanalysis.²⁸⁴

If you were to infer from this, however, that *Lord Jim* represents a diminution or curtailment of the status of the oral and the rhetorical in the Marlow texts, you would be sorely mistaken. On the contrary: that use of oral tics and markers to texture the narrative discourse—first observed in “Heart of Darkness”—is here thrown into overdrive; and the diegetic situation of oral telling is extended and reproduced in the proliferating scenes of storytelling that now populate the entire narrative. For the first time, Marlow is not only a framed narrator, but himself frames the oral accounts of further diegetic narrators—is both framed, and framing. Rather than relating an experience of his own, as in his previous narratives, Marlow is here concerned to relate the story of another—of Jim—which means, practically, that he must relate his own investigative efforts to piece together that story from the multiple witnesses who *were* actually present at its various scenes. Marlow’s ‘framing’ of Kurtz in “Heart of Darkness” may be seen, in retrospect, to foreshadow this progression; and indeed, we can observe a trajectory through all three Marlow texts, in which Marlow himself becomes less and less an actor or subject in the story that he relates, and more and more a purely discursive figure, a ‘reflector’, to use the Jamesian parlance. In this way, the diegetic situation of Marlow’s telling—as before, occurring at a minimally specified place and time, before a room of minimally specified and mostly bored diegetic auditors (not the same four, however, who were his audience in the previous two texts)—gives view, in turn, on a series of further diegetic situations,

²⁸⁴ For a related discussion, see Allon White on the connections between the rise of symptomatic reading and modernist literature; Chapter 1, “Obscurity and Enlightenment,” in *The Uses of Obscurity: The Fiction of Early Modernism* (Routledge & Kegan Paul: 1981).

related by Marlow, in which various witnesses relate their accounts to *him*. Far from abandoning orality, Conrad here doubles down on it, offering us a kaleidoscope of nested frames, and speeches within speeches.

What's more, that conspicuous ellipsis that marks the trailing into silence of Jim's speech ought to remind us that orality in Conrad has *always* been about the breakdown of language—the gaps, “the pauses between the words”—and that such interruptions are, in his oeuvre, the very essence of the oral. This was already the case as early as “The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’,” in which the ellipsis served to proclaim the orality, not only of the speech of the jumbled multitude (as we've already seen), but of the dialogue of *individual* sailors, as well: whether it be Mr. Baker, the chief mate, who, as Conrad explains, “had that trick of grunting so between his words” (“Now [Mr. Baker] was giving his last orders. ‘Ough! . . . You, Knowles! Call all hands at four. I want . . . Ough! . . . to heave short before the tug comes!’”), or James Wait, the ship's sole black man and chronic invalid, who “spoke spasmodically, in fast rushes with long pauses between, as a tipsy man walks” (“‘You chaps kicked up such a confounded row above. . . . Enough to scare anyone. . . . I didn't know what you were up to. . . . Bash in the blamed planks. . . .’”) or even the detested agitator Donkin, possessor of “a picturesque and filthy loquacity,” whose oily “orations” are just as pocked with pauses: “‘Ain't ‘ee a-drivin’ yer wusse’n hever? . . . Let ‘im slip hoverboard. . . . Vy not?’” (19, 84, 80). We have already discussed at length, of course, the key role of the ellipsis, the trailing off of Marlow's narration, to signify the oral storytelling situation in “Youth”; as well as its use in “Heart of Darkness” to remind the reader of the diegetic, oral scene of Marlow's telling, at just those moments when the reader is most implicated by its rhetoric. If the oral is anywhere

in Conrad, we must now conclude, it is in the ellipsis: the pause, the faltering, the falling silent. It is signaled less in the words, than in the spaces between the words.²⁸⁵ Little wonder, then, that Kurtz, as a figure of orality, must also be, at one and the same time, a figure for the breakdown of language, of speech—in Conrad, this breakdown *is* the oral.²⁸⁶

If we begin to think of orality in Conrad, then, as something like a radio signal that becomes audible *as* radio only by its glitching, its static, its interference, then we swiftly see that *Lord Jim* elevates this principle to a new kind of ubiquity in the narrative discourse: for it is hard to imagine a novel more marked by such an astonishingly fertile range and quantity of verbal hitches, hiccups, and abnormalities. Let's start with the stuttering: this is a text uncommonly stuffed with stammers—particularly evident in Marlow's conversations with Jim (in one exemplary exchange, Marlow is tagged with the word "stammered" three times within a single five-page span) (58, 60, 62). This sudden speech impediment Marlow seems to have caught from Jim himself, whose general callowness and chronic shame are plainly audible in the abashed stutter that marks so much of his dialogue: "'And you don't think yourself' . . . he gulped something . . . 'you don't think yourself a—a—cur?'"'; "'I ought to have known . . . I am—I am—a gentleman too . . .'"'; "'I did not want all this talk. . . . No . . . Yes . . . I won't lie . . . I

²⁸⁵ As Owen Knowles notes, in discussing the dramatic quality of Conrad's dialogue, "it exploits broken and interrupted speech, short bursts of conversation and indeterminate pauses which, in form as well as function, seem much nearer to latter-day Pinterese than Edwardian stage-language." Knowles, "'To Make You Hear,'" *ibid.*: 166.

²⁸⁶ In thinking about the difficulty of speech, its breakdown—the gasp, the stutter, the *body*—as the meaning of orality for Conrad, it's, of course, worth noting that this dynamic is inseparable from his own status as an ethnically Polish, Anglophone writer: a writer who complained to a Polish friend, as late as 1907, that "English is still for me a foreign language," and who would be described by the *Times Literary Supplement* in that same year as "an alien of genius"; it was also in this year that Conrad would remark, in response to the reviews of *The Secret Agent*, that he'd "been so cried up of late as a sort of freak, an amazing bloody foreigner writing in English." See Wake, *Conrad's Marlow*, *ibid.*, p. 3.

wanted it: it is the very thing I wanted—there. Do you think you or anybody could have made me if I . . . I am—I am not afraid to tell.” (64, 101, 102). Indeed, a considerable amount of Jim’s speech is so riven through with dashes and ellipses that its actual content has become all but incoherent: one quickly loses the thread of what is being said, by the third or fourth time that the thought has been broken off, and all that is ultimately conveyed by the dialogue is the tumult of conflicting impulses and sentiments roiling within Jim himself; as well as his earnest attempt to pick his way through these emotions, as he picks his words. This is to say nothing of the further stuttering that crops up in the more minor characters: such as the substitute captain who replaces Brierly in Mr. Jones’s account, notably plagued by a pronounced “stammer” (““Aw—I am—aw—your new captain, Mister—Mister—aw—Jones.””), or the chattering teeth of the freezing men on the lifeboat of the *Patna* (““Ju-ju-st in ti-ti-me. . . Brrrr.””) (50, 88). Adjacent to this are those foregrounded instances of misspeaking—for example, the captain of the brigantine that is to bring Jim to Patusan, a “dapper little half-caste” whose “flowing English” Marlow mines for all its malapropisms with a certain superior glee, rather unpleasant in its racial tinge: “He was going to carry the gentleman to the mouth of the river, but would ‘never ascend.’ [...] Had Mr Stein desired him to ‘ascend,’ he would have ‘reverentially’—(I think he wanted to say ‘respectfully’—but devil only knows)—‘reverentially made objects for the safety of properties.’ If disregarded, he would have presented ‘resignation to quit.’” (183). This, in turn, brings us to the novel’s profuse exhibition of various national and regional dialects: there is the German captain of the *Patna* (““Bah! the Pacific is big, my friendt. You damned Englishmen can do your worst; I know where there’s plenty of room for a man like me: I am well aquaintd in Apia””);

the “elderly French lieutenant” who tells Marlow of the abandoned *Patna*’s recovery (““Ah! *Patt-nà. C’est bien ça. Patt-nà. Merci.* It is droll how one forgets. I stayed on that ship thirty hours. . . .””); the Swiss Siegmund Yucker, of Yucker Brothers, who vouches for Jim’s services as a water clerk (““Ach! It’s a great ting in dis goundry to be vree vrom tispesh-shia””); and the wealthy trader and naturalist Stein, Bavarian by birth, who hires Jim to take charge of his post on Patusan (““I tell you, my friend, it is not good for you to find you cannot make your dream come true, for the reason that you not strong enough are, or not clever enough. *Ja!* . . . And all the time you are such a fine fellow too! *Wie? Was? Gott im Himmel!*””)—among others (34, 106, 108, 151, 163). Finally, there are those idiosyncratic, miscellaneous cases, where the static in the signal is not easily categorizable: Egström’s “bothered perfunctory ‘Sssh’” (““Glad to see you, Captain. . . . Sssh. . . . Been thinking you were about due back here. What did you say, sir? . . . Sssh . . . Oh! him!””) or the dying Gentleman Brown’s “profound gasps” (““You . . . you here. . . . I don’t know your name—I would give you a five-pound note if—if I had it—for the news—or my name’s not Brown. . . .””) (146, 147, 263).

As even this superficial inventory shows, there is hardly a character in the novel, major or minor, who does not exhibit some kind of ‘glitch’, or audible interference, in their speech: whether it be a pronounced accent, a stammer, a tendency to mangle phrases, or even a certain breathiness.²⁸⁷ All of these, of course, are irreducible markers

²⁸⁷ It’s worth noting how many of these oral markers are tied to race and class, to the identification of a speaker as ethnically marked or of a subservient caste in the colonial order. In this way, we might think about the impersonal, blank, non-orally marked frame that surrounds the orality of these diegetic speakers in *Lord Jim* as another version of the racialized framing hierarchy that we saw in *Heart of Darkness*, in which characters like Kurtz who have gone ‘beyond the pale’, and thus are on the other side of whiteness, are placed in lower diegetic levels, further from direct interface with the reader—while the ‘highest’ framing speakers, the original frame narrator and Marlow, represent the whitest position in the discursive hierarchy.

of orality; and all involve the interpolation of hyphens, dashes, and ellipses into the text, a highlighting of the silences and spaces between the words. In this respect, Jim's spectacularly jerky, halting, and constipated speech—unrivalled in the narrative—remains something like the pure type and paradigmatic exemplar of the novel's oral obsession:

“[...] I [Marlow] was thinking how I had best approach him (I did not want to be flung off again) when he gave a little laugh. ‘No better than a vagabond now’ . . . the end of the cigarette smouldered between his fingers . . . ‘without a single—single,’ he pronounced slowly; ‘and yet . . .’ He paused; the rain fell with redoubled violence. ‘Some day one’s bound to come upon some sort of chance to get it all back again. Must!’ he whispered distinctly, glaring at my boots. (137)

Dialogue like this—typical of Jim's painfully introverted discourse—amounts to almost a kind of shorthand: we are able to piece together the shape of the overall thought that Jim is expressing (if not the precise substance), even if most of the words that would be needed for its complete articulation are absent, having fallen away into the gaps of its silences. As in a short story, Jim's elliptical statements are less discursive than suggestive: their sense depends heavily on the implication of the few, pregnant words that we are given. Nonetheless, we are left with the sense that there is a complete thought there—only most of it is submerged in the unseen recesses of Jim's mind, not actually spoken. This hidden interiority within Jim himself is really what is being signaled by the ellipses here: they imply the secret self, the inward processing, that mysterious calculus that we can't see. Recall the conflicted dialogue I quoted above: “‘I did not want all this talk. . . . No . . . Yes . . . I won't lie . . . I wanted it: it is the very thing I wanted—there. Do you think you or anybody could have made me if I . . . I am—I am not afraid to tell.’” The ellipses are where Jim's hidden thought process happens, where he vacillates, is swayed and checked by unseen impulses; they serve to constitute the essential

inaccessibility of Jim's inner being—a withheld self that becomes visible precisely when it falls silent. As such, the highly elliptical nature of Jim's speech must be connected back to Marlow's "moment[s] of vision," his epiphanic glimpses into the private truth of Jim's individuality—which often coincide quite literally, as we have seen, with the breaks and ellipses in Jim's dialogue—and connected, by extension, with the novel's reflections on the representational affordances of the short story aesthetic.

But the extensions, in truth, go much further than this: for this notion of a 'secret self' to which I've been referring is also, of course, the central conceit of *Lord Jim's* plot—as the unidentified frame narrator tells us of Jim at the beginning of the novel, "in time, when yet very young, he became chief mate of a fine ship, without ever having been tested by those events of the sea that show in the light of day the inner worth of a man, the edge of his temper, and the fibre of his stuff; that reveal the quality of his resistance and the secret truth of his pretences, not only to others but also to himself" (10). Such an "event"—in the form of the fateful leap by which Jim abandons the sinking *Patna*—provides the crux of the novel's narrative, the moment in which Jim realizes that there is some essential part of his very substance as a person that is alien to all his ideas of himself, what Marlow calls "the subtle unsoundness of the man": "He looked as genuine as a new sovereign, but there was some infernal alloy in his metal" (70, 37). Not only are a person's oral statements unreliable witnesses in divining the truth of their identity—even their private self-conceptions, it seems, fail to reflect this truth: that innermost, hidden core that is opaque even to its possessor (here we may recognize the inner native in "Heart of Darkness"). What's more, that pivotal event in which the veiled truth of Jim's secret self 'tells'—the act or choice of jumping—is, famously, *an ellipsis*

(in the Genettian sense): for though the narrative shows us the lead-up to the jump, and spends a great deal of time dissecting its aftermath, the moment of the jump itself is never actually represented—even in Jim’s oral account of the *Patna* disaster, he chooses (as is well known) a roundabout formulation that skips over the jump itself, placing us in the moment directly *after* this act has occurred: “‘I had jumped. . .’ He checked himself, averted his gaze. . . . ‘It seems,’ he added.” (86).²⁸⁸ Not only that, but this narrative ellipsis is itself accompanied, as we can see, by grammatical ellipses—is itself a moment of trailing off, of the breakdown of what can be spoken.

The narrative of *Lord Jim*, then, is acting out at a macro scale what we see unfolding within the micro level of Jim’s dialogue: the ellipsis as the window (or “rent”) through which the ordinarily obscure inner self may be glimpsed. But what I’m driving at here is not simply the recognition that Jim’s jump, as a single incident invested with an immense revelatory significance, to crystallize and pass judgment on an entire personality, is another example of the novel’s dialogue with a short story aesthetic; rather, I want to suggest that the shared formalism of these narrative and linguistic levels points us to the most flagrant example that we’ve yet seen of *rhetoric as style*—for if the Conradian ellipsis is the sign of the oral, the rhetorical, it has also become, by the time of *Lord Jim*, the sign of an entirely different, and entirely new, way of disclosing a personality through language.²⁸⁹ This new model is based precisely on the *silencing* of

²⁸⁸ The theme of the secret self appears again in the story of the equable and rigorously correct Captain Brierly, one of the nautical assessors sitting in judgment, alongside the magistrate, at the inquiry that is, for all intents and purposes, Jim’s trial—and who afterwards shocks his colleagues by methodically committing suicide, for no apparent reason at all: “we never know what a man is made of,” as his first mate puts it (47).

²⁸⁹ In her discussion of Conrad’s affinity for the short story, as the form that was able to “concentrate his ideas in a way that was essential to the making of his art,” Gail Fraser points to the importance of what she calls the “single episode” as the kernel of his novels, its conflicting implications developed out expansively, as opposed to the multiple developing plotlines of the classic Victorian novel. It seems that Conrad also

talk—on all that may be revealed when the author ceases to speak. In opposition to any direct display, it privileges the self that is exhibited in the gaps and interstices of that story that is ostensibly being told: a veiled self that we catch out in scattered, revealing glimpses. An expression as involuntary as it is inevitable, style postulates that the author will always be ‘given away’ by the trivial yet telling details of construction; like the ellipses in Jim’s dialogue, these details indicate an unseen calculus, a process of thought, of composition—hidden from view yet legible by its textual symptoms. This self-expression will be present in everything that the author writes, all of her works amounting to so many signatures of this secret self: as Conrad himself put it, “a novelist lives in his work. He stands there, the only reality in an invented world, among imaginary things, happenings, and people. Writing about them, he is only writing about himself.” And yet this self that is constituted by style is ultimately only inferable, a presence that we reconstruct: the author “remains,” in Conrad’s words, “a figure behind the veil, a suspected rather than a seen presence.”²⁹⁰ More than anyone else in Conrad, Jim is the figure for this stylistic self—just as Kurtz was a figure for orality, and the waning of rhetoric. For even as Jim’s private nature remains an enigma, never to be seen directly, his very manner, his tones and gestures, strike Marlow as richly, even obscenely divulging—his “slightest shades of expression” seeming to thrust upon one “some unprovoked and abominable confidence” (57). Jim stands poised between the two extremes of masked, impenetrable opacity and almost unbearably intense expressiveness:

saw the short story as more revealing of an author’s style than the novel: Fraser quotes Conrad writing, in a letter to Marguerite Poradowska, that “it takes a small-scale narrative (short story) to show the master’s hand.” See Fraser, “The Short Fiction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, ed. J. H. Stape, *ibid.*, pp. 25-7.

²⁹⁰ Quoted in White, *The Uses of Obscurity*, *ibid.*, p. 42.

the identity both utterly effaced, and profusely, copiously self-eloquent. Like the most expressive performers, Marlow feels that he “could see in [Jim’s] glance [...] all his inner being carried on”; in his inaccessibility, one finds an unlooked-for and appalling intimacy. As such, it is in *Lord Jim* that Conrad’s narrative imagination of an emergent logic of style—and the exchange that it represents—attains its most lucid realization.

So much for Jim: but if this line of inquiry is to be complete, we must broaden our discussion to include that wider proliferation of characters with diversely marked or ‘glitched’ oral speech; and it is here, too, that *Lord Jim*’s unique formal features, particularly its multiplication of nested frames, must finally claim our attention. Indeed, these two kinds of proliferation may be found, on closer inspection, to be significantly correlated—a fact we can begin to see when we observe that all of the accented, stuttering, shushing, or gasping speech of those characters surveyed above is, in fact, *doubly* oral: it exists within two sets of quotation marks, being spoken not only by the original character, but by Marlow in his oral account of that character’s speech. We could go further, in fact, and note that some of the most radically marring and outlandish glitches from this inventory—the extreme stammer of the substitute captain, for instance, with its dashes and “aw’s” between every word, or the chattering, chopped syllables of the freezing men on the lifeboat—occur in speeches *trebly* oral, being pronounced out loud at three different diegetic levels: that of Marlow’s oral account, that of the oral account he is relating (belonging, in these examples, to Mr. Jones and Jim, respectively), and finally that of the primary speakers themselves. In this recognition, we begin to discern an unwritten rule: though all speakers are orally marked, the discourse of the speaker being quoted is always *more* oral than that of the speaker doing the quoting—

Marlow's speech is audibly marked, but not so marked as those speakers whose speech he is relating: whose speech, in turn, is not so marked as those speakers that *they* are ventriloquizing. The correlation between orality and narrative framing, then, could perhaps be expressed by the following equation: *the more enframed the discourse, the more oral it will be.*

This makes a basic kind of sense, of course: a heavily marked speech, like that of the substitute captain, is highly distracting to read, and will only be tolerated in small doses; it is perfectly logical that such dialogue would be limited to a 'lower' diegetic level (i.e., a character quoted by a character quoted by a character), of which there is relatively little to speak of, rather than a first-order framed discourse, like that of Marlow, who narrates for long stretches. Diegetic levels are like an inverted pyramid: the lower you go, the less there tends to be—while the upper levels, which are closest to the initial narrator whose address is directed at the reader herself, end up filtering the majority of the narrative. For this same reason, it would make little sense to give a first-order narrator a marked stammer or hitch to their speech, if one wished to differentiate the various speakers by their individual ways of speaking: for this stammer would naturally have to filter the speech of all the speakers that this narrator was quoting, thus making all of their dialogue equally marked and indistinguishable. What is required is a gradient, in which the first narrator's speech is slightly marked, the second narrator's somewhat more marked, and the lowest narrator's very marked—in this way each new discourse is able to be audibly distinguished from that of the narrator who is quoting it: and this is indeed what we find in *Lord Jim*. These practical considerations, however, hardly exhaust the

resonance of this phenomenon for our purposes; nor do they exclude other kinds of significance.

In this regard, it is worth returning to some of the starting propositions about frame narratives with which we began this chapter—in particular, that the fundamental purpose of the frame in Conrad has always been to situate a rhetorical address within a story-world situation, with a diegetic speaker and diegetic auditors, thus licensing a kind of rhetorical play without ‘actually’ addressing it to an extradiegetic reader. Another way to put this would be to say that Marlow’s discourse could be increasingly engrained with a bantering oral texture—redolent of a rhetorical author—as long as that discourse was framed by the functional, unmarked discourse of an anonymous frame narrator. In this way, the fact that Marlow’s discourse is more orally marked than the discourse of the frame narrator who quotes his speech, has always been more than a matter of basic practicality: it is an essential part of Conrad’s project of forcing rhetoric and style to coexist within the same text—his experiments with hybrid or transitional rhetorical–stylistic forms. The frame narrator’s unmarked discourse is the buffer between Marlow’s orally inflected rhetoric and the reader. The point, simply put, is to isolate orality—and thus, the rhetorical—in a lower diegetic level: one that doesn’t share a border with the extradiegetic world. These reflections give us a new purchase on the equation whereby discourse that is more oral is positioned lower on the diegetic scale. By these lights, the proliferating layers of framing that we find in *Lord Jim* would seem to represent an acceleration and advancement of the frame tale’s foundational function: even as orality multiplies, it is also buried deeper and deeper within the recessed interior of the diegesis—not just one level, but two, or three levels deep. More tellingly: at the same

time as this is happening, the upper diegetic levels—in at least a couple of salient ways—begin to show signs that they are quietly scrubbing themselves of their remaining oral traces. We see this, firstly, in the frame narrator of *Lord Jim* who, for the first time in the Marlow texts, is not a diegetic character in the story, but a blank and unaccounted-for omniscience: in effect, a purely textual device. This is significant: no longer does the text address us as a person—not even an anonymous, unspecified person—instead we encounter the writing on the page as a kind of pure medium, an openly linguistic, literary work, not pretending to any diegetic provenance.

To make sense of the new blankness of this frame narrator, we might compare it to Fredric Jameson's theorization of "Faulknerian cataphora" (discussed in the previous chapter), an *in media res* narrative opening characteristic of modernism, in which we are given no names, no referents, no context—e.g., "The telephone waked him. He waked already hurrying, fumbling in the dark for robe and slippers, because he knew before waking that the bed beside his own was still empty," etc.²⁹¹ Indeed, *Lord Jim*'s opening, which gives us the first words of the frame narrator, is notably of this type: "He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet, powerfully built, and he advanced straight at you with a slight stoop of the shoulders, head forward, and a fixed from-under stare which made you think of a charging bull." (5). The point is that the "mystery" of such openings, as Jameson suggests, is not any mystery that exists in the story-world—it is rather an entirely extradiegetic mystery, produced by a deliberately ambiguous organization of the text: what generates our readerly interest is not any enigma at the level of the story

²⁹¹ For Jameson, this type of opening exemplifies a form of address that he calls "the swollen or blank unidentified third person." Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2013), p. 174-5. The example that Jameson is quoting here is the opening of William Faulkner's short story "The Brooch" (1936).

events, but a plot of unknowing and discovery “superimposed” on those events by the way that the story is presented.²⁹² This represents, I would argue, a shift in the way that the narrative text itself is understood: no longer emanating from a source that has a status, and is accounted for, within the diegetic fiction, the linguistic medium of the text is now regarded as a wholly extradiegetic construct, existing on an utterly different order of reality from the fiction it tells of—with its own independent logic and readerly appeals. The separating-out of these two layers—diegetic and extradiegetic, the world of the story and the constructed text by which that world is presented—involves, in truth, a heightening and emphasizing of the theatricality of the text, similar to what we observed in “Heart of Darkness”: we are cued to be attentive to the level of authorial performance, to the way that the author has organized the narrative materials, as a separate “plot” in our readerly experience from the “plot” of the diegesis. The separating-out of these two “plots,” as we have seen in previous chapters, was a development that occurred over a span of decades, through forms as different as the melodramatic tableau and the mystery plot—and was tied as much to the doubled reception of theatricality as it was to the ‘two stories’ of the modern short story. What the blank frame narrator of *Lord Jim* ultimately speaks to, then, is a redefinition of the text, now divested of its last traces of a personated, rhetorical mode, to anticipate a model of style in which the author and acknowledged source of the text is abstracted into the performance of the prose. This redefinition must, naturally, be prepared for by the shedding of oral markers from the upper diegetic levels, as the text that the reader encounters discards any pretense to oral spontaneity or immediacy—any pretense to being the statement or address of a present person—in favor

²⁹² Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, *ibid.*, p. 176.

of reidentifying itself as the linguistic artifact of an already-past compositional process. It is for this reason that we see orality increasingly submerged in the innermost layers of the fiction, ever more insulated from the primary narrative address. The frame that began as a way to license rhetorical play—to provide a ‘safe space’ for rhetoric within the diegesis—over time, becomes a site for the theatricality of prose: the two diegetic levels that the frame narrative constitutes coming to organize the two ‘levels’ of the theatrical—the level of diegesis, and the ‘sub-level’ of the performance—ultimately introducing a logic of stylistic abstraction that leads to the withering of rhetoric itself.

Allan H. Simmons, in his 2007 introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *Lord Jim*, proffers a much simpler explanation for the novel’s blank frame narrator, which is also of interest here: that the novel’s third-person opening is “almost certainly a hangover from its origin as a short story.”²⁹³ But this rationale hardly excludes the explanatory account that I have been elaborating above: on the contrary, it tends to support it—particularly when one notes that the examples of a “blank third person” that Jameson cites all, without exception, come from short fiction; specifically, short works from a period spanning the late Victorian proto-modernism of James’s “Beast in the Jungle,” to the high modernism of Faulkner’s *Collected Stories*. Although Jameson doesn’t say it, the strong implication is that the shift in narratorial approaches that he is describing was largely debuted and tested through short works, becoming almost definitive of the Anglo-American, early twentieth-century short story, before it began to be taken up by the novel. The “blank third person” is a signal example of the way that the rise of the short story at the turn of the century provided a key space for the kind of new

²⁹³ *Lord Jim*, ed. Simmons, *ibid.*, p. xxiii.

narrative techniques that would constitute style's modern dispensation—and it is, perhaps, to this fact that much of *Lord Jim*'s formal innovativeness is owed.

The other sign that the higher diegetic levels of *Lord Jim* are beginning to separate themselves from the oral may be seen in Marlow's narration: which, towards the end of the novel, peters out abruptly, as (following a last ellipsis!) the quotation marks vanish, and we are told that "Marlow had ended his narrative, and his audience had broken up forthwith, under his abstract, pensive gaze" (257). With these words, we are returned to the care of the impersonal frame narrator—but not, as it happens, for long: for within a couple of paragraphs, Marlow's narration picks up again, in the form of a *written* account that he has mailed to one of his auditors (referred to only as "the privileged man") (257). The strange decision, very late in the narrative, to transfer Marlow's storytelling from an oral to a written form—the first time we have ever encountered Marlow in writing—is undoubtedly highly curious, and deserving of a more thoroughgoing and multifaceted explanation than it will be receiving from me here; certainly there is no evident *narrative* reason for this switch, nothing in the narration itself that could not have been just as easily (more easily!) delivered out loud. But part of this explanation, it now seems clear, has to do with a text in the process of reimagining itself as an openly composed and *written* work, a work that gestures back to its own past compositional process: a work, in short, of style. Here again, we see a subtle effort to shrug off the trappings of rhetoric, of oral telling—although, to be sure, it is only *technically* that Marlow's narration has changed: qualitatively, the 'written' account reads almost exactly the same as his accustomed 'spoken' narration had, with the same digressions, ruminations, rhetorical questions. The difference, perhaps, is in how we are

led to regard these features: no longer attributable to the typical looseness and long-windedness of an oral yarn, these traits now become legible as something like Marlow's personal style—the distinctive quality of his discourse, constant throughout all of its forms and iterations. We see this idea, too, in the new multiplicity of orally marked speakers throughout the novel: not partaking of a universal and generalized orality, but *each orally marked in their own unique way*—thus invoking the pluralistic variation of personal expression that is a natural aspect and corollary of style's doctrine. The proliferation of storytelling frames expresses a shift in the status of the frame's content: from an authorial address to the reader, to a spectrum of individually marked discourses.

In all of these ways, *Lord Jim* represents a culmination of the rhetoric-as-style logic that we have been tracing throughout this chapter—a culmination in which the mediating role of rhetoric and orality begins to vanish, and a more fully envisioned paradigm of style begins to claim the center stage. With the waning of the pole of the rhetorical, the frame narrative itself—which had always been, in Conrad, about the synthesis, the co-presence, of rhetoric and style, their mutual entanglement—reaches the end of its usefulness: and as such, it is no coincidence that in the novels, stories, and novellas that would follow on the heels of *Lord Jim*, the framing device—and Marlow—is notably absent.²⁹⁴ As we have argued, the first symptoms of this disappearance are present in *Lord Jim* itself, in the conversion of the central 'scene' of the frame

²⁹⁴ As I mentioned earlier, there is one exception: in 1914, a decade and a half after *Lord Jim*, Conrad published the novel *Chance*, wherein Marlow makes his final appearance. It's an odd book in many ways, in which we find Marlow reinvented as a kind of aging Victorian sage and cultural contrarian, with his wry punditry primarily directed at the New Woman and the issues raised by an emergent feminism; generically, too, the narrative is a throwback, to a mid-Victorian domestic novel of tragic coincidence and tormented womanhood whose heyday one would have presumed to be long over. Bizarrely, it was Conrad's most popular novel. I spent a good while trying to incorporate it into this argument but found its connections to the above discussion to be so tenuous that I ultimately concluded that it just wasn't relevant to the ideas under consideration.

narrative—the present situation of address, implicitly aligned with rhetorical immediacy—into a blank, decontextualized text without diegetic status or provenance; a ‘de-diegeticization’ of the frame, we might say, that is accompanied by a move to diegeticize orality, to digest it fully into the interior of the fiction: to make it, in short, merely a part of the story, rather than an aspect of the discourse. With these two opposing movements, the two dimensions of narrative that the frame tale served to unite—the diegetic and the extradiegetic, that which is of the story and that which is of its situation of discourse, its telling—are peeled apart: and in the process, we see the emancipation of style, of a discourse made newly mysterious, attributed to inferred and abstract persons, that has begun to come into its own as a rival ‘plot’ independent from the plot of the story we read. A new modernist literature would not be far behind: but it was the frame narrative, and the other diverse narrative devices considered in this dissertation (from Dickensian caricature, to melodramatic compression, to the mystery), that were the transitional forms that enabled this shift—and imagined that alchemy whereby a Victorian, rhetorical address became the mode of style that we know today.

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