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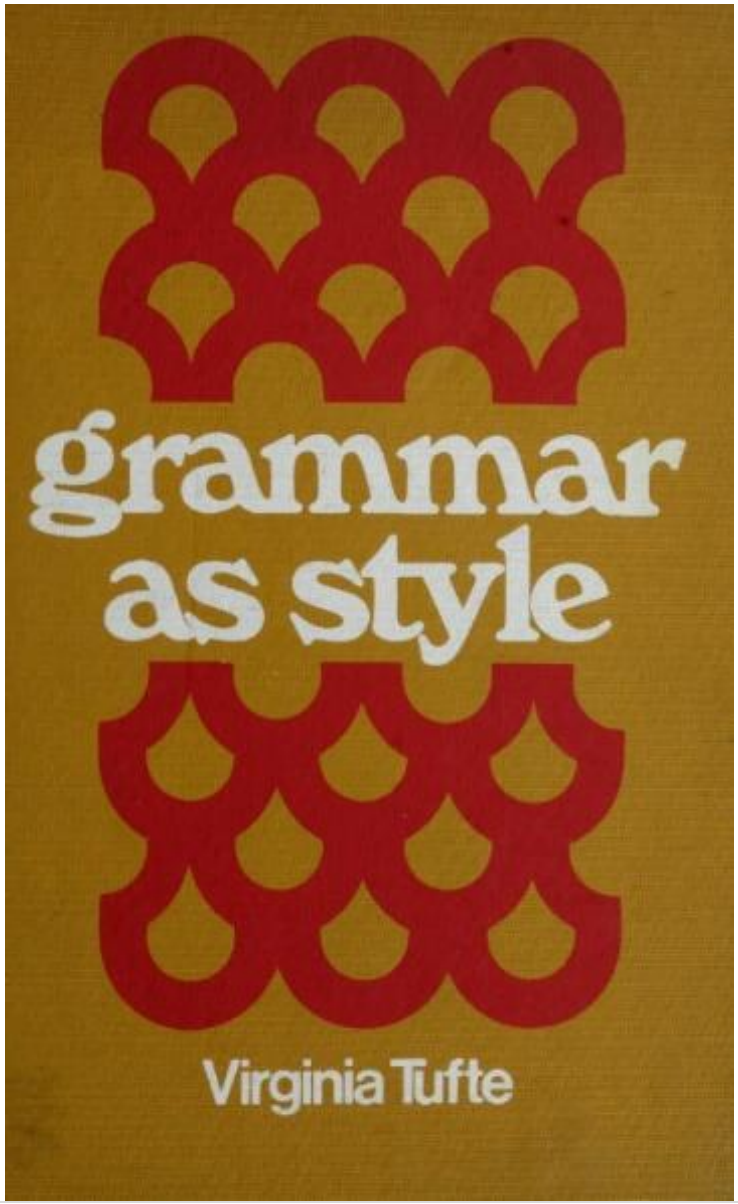

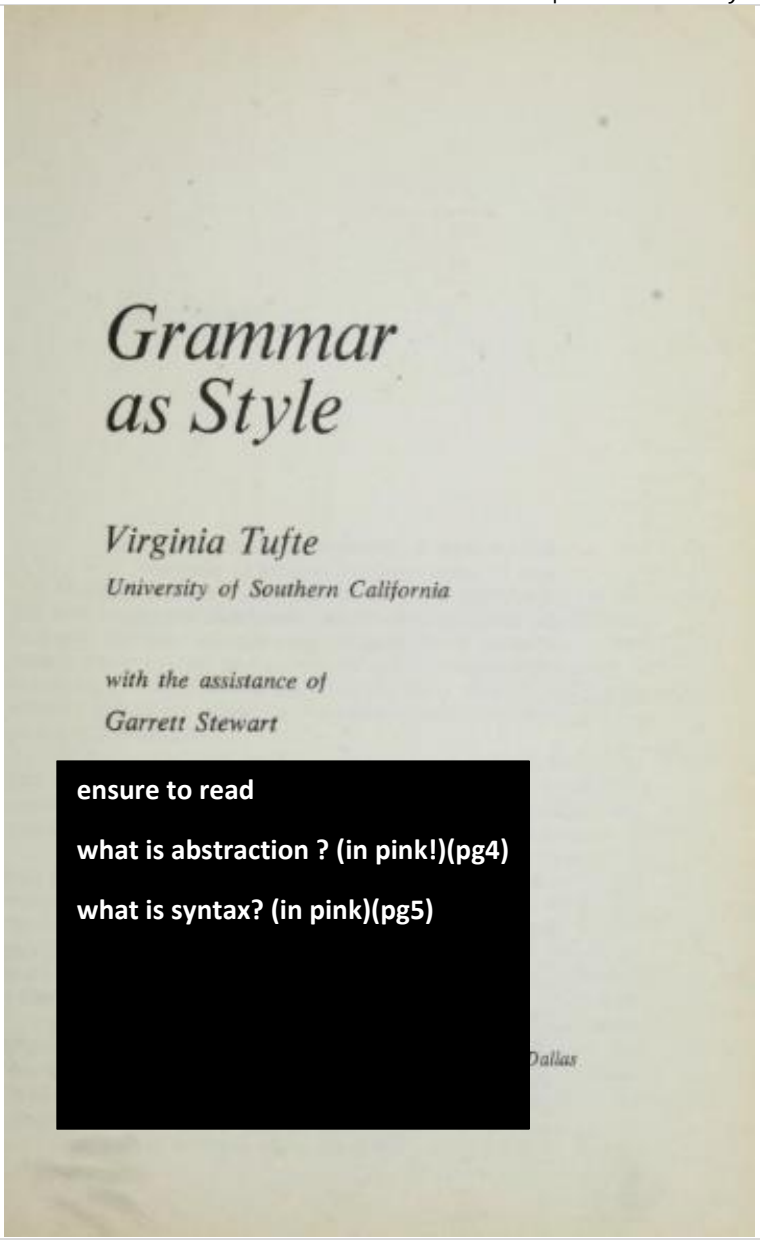

Contents

Chapter 1

The Relation of Grammar to Style

The goal of this book is to explain its title. The task is quite ambitious enough, for *Grammar as Style* is not just a topic, or two topics. It is a thesis. It does not merely advertise that the book it names will discuss the paired subjects of grammar and style, but it presumes that grammar and style can be thought of in some way as a single subject.

There are those who would at once take objection. To view grammar as style blurs the traditional distinction between the grammarian and the critic of style, and it threatens another time-honored division of labor, the separate teaching of grammar, composition, and literature. As a thesis, then, the title must be defended, and it must seem to deserve a book to explain and justify it. Its proponents must show what its claim for the merger of grammar and style can conceivably teach the amateur writer and the student of literature. Once the writer has ceased committing dramatic, showstopping blunders, once he has mastered the notions that a sentence needs a subject and predicate, that a plural subject needs a plural verb, that a pronoun usually needs a referent, and all such matters, how much further can grammar possibly take him toward improving his style? "A very long way indeed" is the answer upon which these first pages will enlarge, and which the coming chapters will exemplify. And what of the student of literature? Can viewing grammar as style add anything to his appreciation of a play, or a novel, or a poem? These chapters will suggest that it can, and that details of technique, illustrated here in samples from twentieth-century prose, can be helpful in studying the prose and poetry of any era.

This set forth, there is no escaping that ubiquitous requirement to define one's terms. Grammar? It is an account of the formation of words

and of the structures for putting them together in sentences. Words and compounds must of course come to be; the investigation of this process is morphology, but it is only occasionally relevant to style. A single word may well catch our attention in continuous prose, but nearly always for reasons of diction rather than morphology. It is when words are hooked together and made to work as a unit, when *syntax* is involved, that grammar makes its main contribution to style. Grammar, then, for purposes of this book, is narrowed to syntax: it is mainly as syntax that we can know grammar as style.

What of the remaining term in our quasi-equation of grammar (as syntax) as style? When we come to think of grammar as style, what in fact are we thinking of grammar *as*? What is style? Its Latin ancestor, *stilus*, was a writing tool, but the term has wandered into modern English to mean roughly "a way of writing." If we were asked to describe someone's "way of writing," would we not be fair in choosing our answer from among such different ones as "by fits and starts" or "in French" or "sitting at the beach" or "for money" or "with a mechanical pencil" or "gracelessly"? If the poser of such a question were annoyed with any of these answers, it would serve him right. The case, of course, is fanciful, for anyone wishing to know about another's style would be likely to ask about it directly, and not about his "way of writing." He would rely on common assumptions about the meaning of "style," which he would probably have trouble articulating, and he would expect an answer like "graceless" rather than any of those above. The point is simply that both questions and answers about style are likely to be ambiguous and to produce very little objective information.

Most talk about style, by professional critics as well as amateurs, leaves much to be desired: it is often subjective, impressionistic, unhelpful, sometimes misleading. The natural way to react to a piece of writing is to take it personally, to perform private acts of association, without worry over precision. But we need only see how vague, how various, even how contradictory these intuitive, untutored reactions to language can be to appreciate the need for a more certain vocabulary in discussing style, to wish that something at least resembling the clear categories of syntax might be available to stylistic analysis.

In the summer of 1966, I conducted an experiment at the NDEA Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, asking forty-four college and high school English teachers to jot down a half-dozen words or phrases they would use to describe the style and tone of thirty sentences, the opening of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. Their lists included 222 different adjectives, and there was only one adjective that was used by as many as twelve of the teachers. These are some of the words they used: *plain, elaborate, formal, informal, detailed, general, specific, objective,*

matter-of-fact, stylized, literary, poetic, conversational, pedestrian, taut, over-drawn, visual, direct, lucid, dramatic, dispassionate, forceful, harsh, suspenseful, brisk, meditative, mysterious, polished, graceful, precise, blunt, symbolic, omniscient, prosaic, conventional, unconventional, clear, crisp, cadenced, colorful, drab, graphic, photographic, concise, verbose, wordy, moving, uninvolved, detached, balanced, discerning, alliterative, well-developed, orderly, impressionistic, rhythmic, ominous, reportorial, natural, artificial, easy, pretentious, methodical, rambling, compact, vivid, thoughtful, imagistic, sensitive, incisive, clinical, chiseled, and *sterile.*

The reports of professional critics on a given style betray as much seeming confusion and difference of opinion. Louis T. Milic gives evidence of this when he points to some of the adjectives other critics have applied to the prose style of Jonathan Swift, among them *civilized, clear, common, concise, correct, direct, elaborate, elegant, energetic, graceful, hard-round-crystalline, homely, lucid, manly, masculine, masterly, muscular, nervous, ornamented, perfect, perspicuous, plain, poor, proper, pure, salty, simple, sinewy, sonorous, strong, vigorous.*[1]

The classification of different types of prose style has evoked a similar variety of labels, with commentators naming one type by analogy with another, or describing it, as if definitively, with submerged metaphors of no exact application. These tendencies characterize five centuries of talk about English prose style. In the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth, descriptions such as *Ciceronian, anti-Ciceronian, Attic, Senecan, Stoic,* and *Tacitean* linked certain English styles to classical rhetoric. Adjectives like *baroque, curt, libertine, loose, plain, courtly,* and *grand* carried aesthetic, cultural, and even moral overtones. Others like *trailing, rambling, circuitous, hopping, tumbling,* and *jog-trotting* suggested affinities of language with motion, exercise, even acrobatics. Sir Francis Bacon, in contrasting what he called *magistral* or *peremptory* prose with *probative,* associated prose techniques with those of law and science. Critics later than Bacon, with labels such as *metaphysical, prophetic, romantic,* and *democratic,* brought into the description of prose an aura of religion, sentiment, and politics. A recent classification of prose styles distinguishes five primary types: the *deliberative style* of persuasive prose; the *expository,* that of the treatise, the lesson, and the sermon; the *prophetic* style, of biblical prophecy, of Stoic philosophy, and of the essay (all of these styles with counterparts in narrative writing); the *tumbling* style, itself a narrative style of energy and heavy accent; and the *indenture* style of legal documents and private formal messages.[2] The twentieth century has made frequent use of the label *colloquial* to align written prose with the speaking voice. And

[1] Louis Tonko Milic, *A Quantitative Approach to the Style of Jonathan Swift* (The Hague, 1967), pp. 15–39.
[2] Huntington Brown, *Prose Styles: Five Primary Types* (Minneapolis, 1966).

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Walker Gibson's book *Tough, Sweet & Stuffy* uses a kind of colloquial language itself to designate in the title what its author believes to be the three reigning styles in American English today.[3] Professor Gibson, unlike many critics, offers some precise and observable characteristics to identify the three categories.

With a few exceptions, however, most efforts to divide and classify style do not succeed in telling us very much more than do impressionistic definitions of style, of the sort collected by Professor Milic: *"Le style, c'est l'homme même"* (Buffon). "Proper words in proper places make the true definition of a style" (Swift). "Style is the ultimate morality of mind" (Alfred North Whitehead). "Style is not a dance, it is an overture" (Jean Cocteau). Or "In stating as fully as I could how things really were, it was often very difficult and I wrote awkwardly and the awkwardness is what they called my style" (Hemingway).[4]

The welter of impressions summoned up by the very idea of style, like the many reactions a single piece of writing can awake in us and the parade of labels we muster to approximate our feelings—all this merely attests to the richness of language, and should not in itself hinder our appreciation of it. The beginning writer, however, like the critic, needs a more accurate and consistent method, and a more concrete vocabulary, for examining the work of others and for making and remaking his own. The emotive and the metaphoric should not be lost to the study of language—and could never be to reading itself—but should be accompanied by and grounded in some more careful and specific observations. The intuitive approach must not be cured, it must be educated. To this end it is a premise of *Grammar as Style* that an understanding of syntax can be most instructive.

This confidence rests on another premise, namely that style can be found to depend closely on grammar and can be thought of in this way at no cost to the subtlety and strength and emotional variety of its effects. To defend this assumption we must now brave the crossfire of the debate about the nature of style and its relation to meaning. A stand must necessarily be taken on this issue before style's relation to grammar can be adequately decided.

A position must be secured somewhere between the opposing forces of the *ornamental* and the *organic* schools, between those who think that meaning precedes and is then decorated by style, and those who feel that meaning and style are simultaneous because the same. If style is purely ornamental, if it only adorns written ideas, it can hardly be possible to consider grammar as style. Grammar is itself the carrier of ideas, syntax

[3] Walker Gibson, *Tough, Sweet & Stuffy: An Essay on Modern American Prose Styles* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1966).

[4] Louis Tonko Milic, "Metaphysics in the Criticism of Style," *College Composition and Communication* (October, 1966), p. 124.

no accessory but the very means of meaning. This fact seems also at first to exile grammar-as-style from the opposing organic view, in that the same grammatical form must carry many different meanings. Thus, if style is meaning, grammar can claim only small and unconvincing credit for the full impact of any piece of prose. The grammar-as-style idea could, of course, reconcile itself to this organic theory, which is certainly much sounder and more useful than thinking of style as ornament. Grammar could, if it had to, live with the rudimentary role thus assigned it in comprising the whole meaning that is style. But the title-thesis of this book would welcome a more complete marriage of grammar and style, performed with benefit of theory, and it is worth contending briefly with the organicists in order to have this.

They have almost won the day. Their position is established as a kind of orthodoxy, and they defend their truth against all heretical comers. Richard Ohmann observes that their cause, which champions the union of form and content, "has nearly attained the status of dogma, of an official motto, voiced in the triumphant tones of reason annihilating error."[5] We can catch these tones in William K. Wimsatt's rendition of the ornamental view he is opposing: "It is as if, when all is said for meaning, there remains an irreducible something that is superficial, a kind of scum—which they call style."[6] But is there not in fact something left to talk about, after all is said for meaning—not a "scum" to be sure—but some essential quality that gets slighted if only meaning is considered?

Perhaps we can call forth an example that will help settle this, at least for all practical purposes. The example comes from C. S. Lewis, from the famous conclusion to his chapter on "Courtly Love" where he summarizes the retractions of medieval writers with an implied metaphor of truancy:

> In the last stanzas of the book of Troilus, in the harsher recantation that closes the life and work of Chaucer as a whole, in the noble close of Malory, it is the same. We hear the bell clang; and the children, suddenly hushed and grave, and a little frightened, troop back to their master.[7]

There is some controversy about Lewis's ideas here, his reading of Medieval literature, but it would widely be agreed that his last sentence, say, is quite well done. Subscribers to the organic theory, where style and meaning are inseparable, if they happened to disagree with Lewis's attitude toward

[5] Richard Ohmann, "Prolegomena to the Analysis of Prose Style," in *Essays on the Language of Literature*, ed. by Seymour Chatman and Samuel R. Levin (Boston, 1967), p. 398.

[6] William K. Wimsatt, Jr., "Introduction: Style as Meaning," *The Prose Style of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven, 1941), p. 1.

[7] C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (London, 1936), p. 43.

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Chaucer and Malory, would be forced to say something like: "This has a fine meaning, but it is false." Yet doesn't this kind of example begin to show what we can obviously say about style apart from meaning? Lewis might have written "We hear the bell sound; and the children, suddenly taciturn and solemn, and somewhat alarmed, return to their master." He did not, and he has our gratitude. The organicist might rightly insist that, if he had, he would have *meant* something different from what his actual sentence managed to say. We can object that changes in diction have made the sentence flaccid and lifeless, but we should also notice that they have caused it to say something not quite the same as the original. Changes in syntax, however, alter meaning, if at all, much less obviously. Endure one more revision as example: "We hear the bell clang, and the children are suddenly hushed, grave, and a little frightened, and they troop back to their master." Again great damage has been done, but it is hard to see how meaning itself has suffered any change. One may surely say that more is lost to our enjoyment in reading the idea than is lost to our understanding of it. There may be an enlightened sense in which meaning and emphasis have been minutely altered, but to nothing like the extent to which rhythm and impact have been violated. Our first revision suggests that diction, a major element in what is usually called style, is so much allied with the specific meaning of words, as well as with levels of usage, that it lends itself easily to the organicist position. It is in the area of syntax, as seen by comparing Lewis's original with the second revision, where style can best be recognized as something not exactly like meaning, and where one feels justified in talking at some length about grammar as style.

When the example from Lewis was brought to the rescue, it was said to be recruited "for all practical purposes." This can now be read "for all pedagogical purposes." Indeed, a very large objection to the organic theory of style's oneness with meaning is the difficulty in finding the idea at all useful when trying to write better sentences, or when helping others to write them. It is all very well for teachers to ask their students to improve their thinking, to refine their powers of meaning, until their new brand of thought warrants nice, stylish sentences, but this is almost certain to produce no results. Better to instruct them, with practice and example, in the many possibilities of English prose—and, importantly, of English syntax—so that they can make anything they might have to say clearer, more assured, more attractive. With this new access to the countless effective ways of putting ideas down on paper, writers may well become eager to make use of appositives, say, or of nominative absolutes, of devices learned for subordinating ideas, of right-branching sentences maybe, or of the previously undreamed of benefits of parallelism. Doing this, writers are likely to think through their ideas, elaborate and sharpen them, until they deserve such professional treatment. When this becomes habitual, the actual teaching of style is over.

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One last excursion into theoretical waters, however, may yet be worthwhile, to find out a bit more exactly what those qualities of style are that we enjoy in a sentence of C. S. Lewis, for instance, and how those qualities owe, for a large measure of their success, a discoverable debt to the nature of English syntax. Venturing once more into theory, we again need to adopt a compromise position. It profits us to consider Richard Ohmann's modest but important one, in the essay already cited. He divides style into "epistemic choice" and "emotional form." By the first he means the selections and decisions a writer must always make with respect to his materials and their arrangement, as he sorts out his experience of the world. Grammar figures importantly in this phase of "style."

> A heavy dependence on abstraction, a peculiar use of the present tense, a habitual evocation of parallel structure, a tendency to place feelings in syntactic positions of agency, a trick of underplaying causal words: any of these patterns of expression, when repeated with unusual frequency, is the sign of a habit of meaning, and thus of a persistent way of sorting out the phenomena of experience.[8]

Ohmann admits, as he must, that this does not amount to much of a departure from the conventional organic view. He is talking about a writer's persistent manner, not about particular sentences in isolation. Stylistic tendencies thus accompany tendencies in meaning, and style as a "habit of meaning" is little more than a generalization, for a particular writer, about style as meaning, and grammar as its carrier.

Syntax begins to separate from meaning, as style, only in the second stage of Ohmann's classification, in the area of feeling rather than of choice. Traditional rhetoric tells us about the emotion involved in *persuasion*, and Ohmann adds the feeling of personal *expression*, the recorded emotion of a private speaking voice. "Emotion enters prose not only as disguises for slipping into the reader's confidence, but as sheer expression of self."[9] But beyond persuasion and self-expression, emotion makes a third entrance into prose, in a way that Ohmann finds "almost beyond the power of language to describe."[10] His is a very good try, nonetheless. He suggests that a sentence begins by raising rather than answering questions, and that the incomplete utterance sets up demands for completion.

> These demands for completion of a sequence are of course subverbal; they are the vaguest sort of dissatisfaction with suspended thought, with a rational process not properly concluded. As the sentence progresses, some of its demands are satisfied, others deferred, others complicated, and meanwhile new ones are created. But with the end

[8] Ohmann, p. 405.
[9] Ohmann, p. 409.
[10] Ohmann, p. 410.

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of the sentence comes a kind of balance which results from something having been *said*.[11]

Ohmann speaks here in "the vaguest sort of" terms, making his way toward a feeling for style as itself a matter of feeling, and, consequently, as a matter hard to be exact about.

But is this quality of style really so much a "subverbal" phenomenon, really so elusive as to tax description "almost beyond the power of language"? Is it not, rather, a very sensitive way to appreciate, apart from meaning, and with a real sense of its nature and function, the role of syntax itself at that final level of reading that goes beyond the reception of ideas to the emotional response we have, and the pleasure we take, in the way we are allowed to receive them? Take as examples Ohmann's last two sentences from the passage just quoted. In the first, a parallel syntax, tightened by ellipsis, itself complicates the sentence, and defers its conclusion. Meanwhile, Ohmann adds mention of new created demands by adding a new clause to tell about them. The unmistakable rhythm of his sentence is an effort to give us in his own prose some feeling for what he is saying about sentences at large, and his means are neither mysterious nor subverbal. They are syntactic. Grammatical patterns establish the "demands for completion" and move us along until they are satisfied. So too with his last sentence, which might have run: "But a kind of balance which results from something having been *said* comes with the end of the sentence." Instead, his inversion of normal syntax imparts a quality of anticipation to the prose, holding appropriately till the end the grammatical subject and the idea of balanced completion, and thus balancing his own sentence with a sense of something awaited finally "having been *said*." Ohmann has succeeded here with a rhythm, an "emotional form," that is obviously syntactic. It should be clear, too, that his larger theoretical understanding of a sentence's felt movements rests on the very nature of syntax—on its rhythm as a series of relationships unfolded in time.

A dictionary records that syntax is "the arrangement of words as elements in a sentence to show their relationship." The key to this definition is the phrase "to show." It names the real action of syntax, which should be thought of as a disclosure made piece by piece, not as a revealed frame or pattern to be seen and comprehended at once. Syntax has direction, not just structure. It starts, and goes forward, and concludes. It is an order of grammar experienced *in* a certain order, not a system or arrangement so much as a succession—*syntax as sequence*. As a stretch of verbal space, a sentence has an entrance and an exit and a terrain we cross and track—and all this over a stretch of time. As an emotional span, uniting its movement in space and time, a sentence seems to generate its own

[11] Ohmann, p. 410.

dynamics of feeling, ushering us into its meaning and escorting us across it, anticipating, deflecting, suspending, and finally going to a satisfactory close. As a verbal terrain, as a series of encounters across it, or as the emotional curve that follows them through, the sentence—as a unit of style—is being defined by its syntax. It is often said of prose, as of poetry, that it must be read aloud to be really known. The indispensable quality of prose that is met by the ear in reading, that must be heard as passing sounds and stresses and ideas, that must be listened to as much as understood, followed through as a sequence rather than grasped whole as a structure: it is this quality that brings style and syntax closest together. For it is the effect of syntax on style. It is *grammar as style*.

And it is, of course, the subject of the present book. The concept of grammar as style will guide our examination of those syntactic effects that are divided over the following chapters. These chapters, incorporating both traditional grammar and more recent ideas about the structure of English, will consider one by one the major elements of sentence-making. At the same time, inevitably, they will suggest the value for stylistic analysis of syntax considered as sequence. They will not have to labor the point. The usefulness of this approach reveals itself at every turn.

Even *kernel sentences*, the spare source from which other structures and sentences are generated, work as a sequence, however compact. They set up a basic pattern of expected order, and are expanded with this in mind. There must be something to talk about, the *noun phrase*, and once the subject has been selected, something must be said about it in a predication, a *verb phrase*. *Adjectives* and *adverbs* help to fill out the patterns, and they do not merely specify or qualify or complicate. They have a place as well as a meaning. They come before or after the word with which they are associated, to anticipate or complete its meaning, sometimes piled around it in groups of two or three, or more, to dramatize what they do. Prepositional phrases, too, expand the patterns. More than just signaling a new relationship, a *preposition* that starts a phrase makes an independent grammatical move, briefly channeling the sentence away from its main course in some new syntactic direction. Simple *conjunctions* and *correlatives* are readily available for compounding, and thus enlarging the parts of a basic sentence, or for hooking two sentences together. They are less important to the drift of a sentence because they weigh the elements they join and tell us they are equal, however, than because they reveal a decision to give us one before the other, to move us along in a determined order. *Coordination* itself is a logical relation, but in syntax it is also a sequence.

Kernels are expanded with *dependent clauses*, for a remarkable variety of effects. The way we leave such clauses and move into the main one, or encounter them in the middle of a main clause, or come to them later, the whole strategy of sequence and transition accounts for the chief

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effects of relative and subordinate expansions. Neither is the *sentence opener* a static factor, a grammatical fixed point to which the elements that follow are attached. On the contrary, the opener can be a crucial first move, overcoming inertia, ushering us into a thought, or nudging us backward for an instant, before activating necessary grammatical momentum to send us off in one syntactical direction or another. *Inversions* other than those necessary for questions and exclamations also have an important stylistic role. They can manipulate the order in which we reach certain parts of a sentence. Varying the way we normally receive information, their effects, successful or not, may shift the focus, may alter the linkage of one sentence to another.

In addition to the familiar means of expanding kernel structures, and of opening all kinds of sentences, a whole class of nonrestrictive modifiers, well-named *free modifiers* by Francis Christensen, also depends on syntactic movement for its effects. When free or even bound modifiers come together in such numbers or are so extensive themselves as to define the overall shape of a sentence, when they accumulate before the subject, or between it and the verb, for instance, or after the predicate of the base clause, their weight and placement are so important to the sentence that we are warranted in using directional labels: *left-branching, mid-branching,* and *right-branching sentences.* Professor Christensen's title for the last, the cumulative sentence, also captures that interest in one-thing-after-another that is at issue here. Often the cumulative sentence makes use of the *nominative absolute construction.* It creates a grammatical subplot quite distinct from the main action of a sentence, and one sequence must be held loosely in mind while the other is assimilated.

Perhaps the most useful of all free modifiers, and one of the easiest to master, is the *appositive.* It renames smoothly without requiring any change in syntactic plan. It simply appears after (sometimes before) the word or phrase it restates, and we are involved as much in the feeling of afterthought, or of arriving clarification, as we ever are in a sense of alternate and equal possibilities. It really matters what comes first, what is named, and how it is then amplified. With appositives as with all free modifiers, and indeed with syntactic expansion in general, order and movement are more important than structure and logical relationship.

The process of transformation is able not only to enlarge the basic patterns with added or embedded materials, but also to deform certain kernels themselves into new arrangements, and these may stay short or themselves receive new material. *Interrogative, imperative,* and *exclamatory* transforms are examples, with distinct emotional patterns of emphasis and expectation set up by their syntax.

With the *passive transformation,* minor changes in meaning and emphasis may occur, sometimes with deadening results. But when passives

are cleverly used, it is often their syntactic features on which a writer is capitalizing. The passive can serve as a kind of tactical inversion. It can be used to arrange ideas for a special stress, or to move them into positions from which they can be more easily modified.

Within a single sentence or across wider verbal spaces, syntax also has an important part to play in the experience of *parallelism* and *cohesion.* It is a role that assumes an audience reading one thing after another and feeling how things begin to take shape as they have done before, or how one idea grows out of another comfortably, coherently. The dramatic analogy here, of a role played to a reading audience, is deliberate. It is meant to suggest again what the recent discussion has said about syntax as sequence, with every sentence performing its own separate drama and involving the emotions of its readers in the way it develops syntactically and is worked out. The main grammatical action of a sentence and its subplots should never be at odds with meaning, of course, but they have a motion and a rhythm all their own. Yet when the rhythm and sequence of syntax begins to act out the meaning itself, when the drama of meaning and the drama of syntax coincide perfectly, when syntax as action becomes syntax as enactment, this last refinement of style is called *syntactic symbolism.* It is the subject of the last chapter of this book. Beginning with a thesis that allows us to talk separately about style and meaning, we naturally work toward the organicist's equation of the two, the fusion of form and content, not as the inevitable condition of language, but as a very special achievement.

These last few paragraphs have rapidly surveyed the syntactic topics that head the remaining chapters of *Grammar as Style.* This summary has hastily sketched some idea of the gains to be made by thinking of these topics in terms of syntax as sequence. This concept will be touched on repeatedly in the remaining chapters and demonstrated with many examples. The syntactic phenomena selected for discussion have earned a place in such a book because of their considerable bearing on the subject of style. Much has been overlooked. What has not, it is hoped, is the most important.

Excerpts from contemporary writers are everywhere in these chapters. They have been gratefully borrowed for their capacity to perform the double duty assigned them here: to exemplify the syntactic phenomenon in question, and to demonstrate its contribution to style. They are chosen, in general, to be representative samples of good prose. Some are very fine; a few poor ones are included now and then to show an amateur what not to do to improve. As a rule, they are the findings of a search not for mannerism and brilliant eccentricity, but for what is most often done with success in contemporary writing, and for what can be imitated by the novice with best results. The search was made through reviews, quarterlies, and journals, learned and otherwise; through all sorts of popular magazines,

newspapers, and collected journalism; through biography, history, studies in social and political science, art, and literature; and through original literature itself, essays, stories, and novels. The examples are ordinarily sorted and arranged after some general discussion about the grammatical topic, and they appear with a minimum of additional comment. The assumption is that once we know what to listen for when we read, we can learn most by allowing good sentences to speak for themselves. It is high time to let our examples have their say.

Chapter 2

Kernel Sentences

> And the words slide into the slots ordained by syntax, and glitter as with atmospheric dust, with those impurities which we call meaning.
>
> —*Anthony Burgess*, Enderby, *p. 406, closing paragraph.*

This epigraph may sound like the work of a grammarian caught in a rare use of metaphor and simile. The novelist, indeed, is using the term "slots" as some grammarians do, to identify the key locations fixed by syntax, the important grooves into which words fit to make sentences.

Just as the sentence is the basic unit of English speech, so the kernel is the basic unit, the core, of the English sentence. It is the germ from which other patterns grow and branch, and to which still others can be grafted, whole or in part. It is defined by its "slots." Each of the four main types of basic sentences is recognized by positions than can be filled with only certain types of words, the carriers of "those impurities which we call meaning." It is this contamination of syntax by words that makes meaning, makes style. Diction resides at that level of writing where style and meaning, as we have seen in the first chapter, are one. Diction, not syntax, is probably the most important single aspect of style, as it is of meaning. Burgess is right: it is the words that give off the real light of a sentence, that shine and sparkle and glitter, sometimes radiant with an author's inspired choice. All syntax can do, and it is a very great deal, is to make the right word shine to its best advantage, as brightly as possible and in just the right place, set off from others or clustered with them. Syntax ordains position in the constellation of words that is meaning. This book is about what happens when words participate with syntax in this way. A study of diction itself is indispensable, but syntax rather than diction is our particular subject, although something can be learned about diction from the masterful choices in many of the coming syntactic samples.