

NEGOTIATING MEANING THROUGH THE LABYRINTHINE MEANDERINGS OF PERIODIC AND CUMULATIVE ENGLISH SENTENCES

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ABSTRACT

When we acquire fluency in the mother tongue, or when we achieve it in another language, in both cases including fluency in grammatical and communicative competence, we are able to construct sentences with a rich variety of structures, which sentences we appropriately deploy for communication in a diverse range of discourse contexts. Our communicative competence is displayed partly by our ability to use language judiciously when we construct sentences that communicate our thoughts and feelings in specific contexts. This is the classical Hymes (1972) knowledge of what to say, to whom, why, when, and how. The “how” has to do partly with the structural complexity or simplicity of the sentences which we use and partly with whether we are communicating in the spoken or the written mode. It is with the latter that this paper is concerned. Long sentences are generally unsuitable when used in oral communication for taxing the listener’s memory, whereas they are serviceable in the written mode since the reader can always return to the point at which they lost their way through the syntactic labyrinth. The legacy which English syntax owes to the Classical languages includes the so-called periodic or Ciceronian sentence. In addition to this, writers sometimes resort to and exploit that resource which is immanent in all natural human languages, namely the productivity of syntactic rules that is evident in their amenability to cyclical application in the construction of the so-called cumulative or loose sentence. In this paper I focus on the strengths and weaknesses of both these sentence types by highlighting their dissimilarities, similarities, as well as the overlaps between them and, crucially, their stylistic elegance. Overall, I argue that the ability both to construct and to extract meaning from such sentences is an index of one’s fluency in English.

Keywords: periodic sentence, cumulative sentence, syndetic coordination, asyndetic coordination, dualism.

1.0 Introduction

... every discourse must be organized, *like a living being*, with a *body of its own*, as it were, so as *not to be headless or footless*, but to *have a middle and members*, composed in *fitting relation to each other* and to *the whole*.²

We shall not cease from exploration

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² Plato, in *Phaedrus*. From Michael Von Albrecht: *Cicero’s Style: a synopsis*. (2003. p. 161). What is remarkable about Plato’s definition of discourse is the metaphor which it is based on, the mutual interdependence of parts of discourse viewed as equivalent to that of parts of the human body. All subsequent definitions have amounted to meanderings leading back to Plato.

And the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time.³

The focus of this paper is on two types of sentence, the periodic and the cumulative. The periodic is one in which the meaning of the grammatical structures, which may be linked by conjunctions, is suspended until the end or near thereto. This feature of it serves to trigger and sustain curiosity in the reader, enticing them to continue reading until its climactic ending. The cumulative one, by contrast, is one in which clauses follow each other with only a few, but mostly, no conjunctions to indicate the relations between them. It flows like a deluge of ideas bombarding and posing the danger of drowning the reader. These two are said by Quirk et al (1985) to be instances of syndetic and asyndetic coordination, respectively (p.550). Concerning both types of sentence, the reader could ask whether the same message could have been conveyed in a series of shorter sentences. If not, why not? If yes, then why did the writer opt for this type of sentence? In other words, I adopt what in stylistics is called the dualist approach. I seek to answer the questions *what is the meaning of the text*, and *how is it conveyed*, concentrating on the latter.

One possible reason why the writers whose work is discussed in this paper employed periodic and/or cumulative sentences, I shall suggest, has to do with each one of them being a committed observer. From this perspective, the personal, empathetic Dickens' engagement with the subject (un)consciously releases his thoughts and emotions in cumulative or periodic sentences, especially in the opening one in *A Tale of Two Cities*, just as Shakespeare did through Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, Gogol in "The Overcoat", Peacock in *Nightmare Abbey*, and Lawrence in "Tickets Please!" The expression of such emotions and thoughts apparently does not come in discrete portions. Rather, it does so in a deluge, and the committed writer reflects this in the syntax which he employs to articulate them, thereby adding realism to the text.

The data for this paper comes from randomly selected passages from works of fiction written by authors who have employed periodic and cumulative sentences. These range chronologically from Shakespeare to D. H. Lawrence, with Thomas Love Peacock, Nikolai Gogol, and Charles Dickens in between. Given that the focus of this paper is on the syntax of these texts, there is no thematic preoccupation linking them, unless only coincidentally. Although fiction is about a world of make-believe,

³ T S Eliot: 'Little Gidding.' In this poem, Eliot is writing about the vicissitudes of life, which can take such a meandering course that we feel lost and anxious until, somehow, we find a resolution where we least expected it, at the very point at which we got lost. This is parallel to our search for meaning as we stumble through the syntactic labyrinth of the periodic sentence.

its themes are articulated by characters who are situated in contexts which are close to lived reality. The reader is thus able to relate empathetically to the themes which the authors seek to explore and communicate.

Since, according to Plato's metaphorical definition, a sentence and its parts are "members" of a discourse, "members" in the sense of limbs of the body, the quality of discourse, "the whole", crucially depends on that of the sentence and its parts, specifically on whether those parts have "a fitting relation to each other and to the whole." It is the argument of this paper that failure to discern this interconnectivity and interconnectedness, or the cohesion and coherence, between and among members of the body of a text often presents both mother-tongue speakers and those learning a new language with intractable reading difficulties. These challenges are often apparent when people attempt to write or speak using sentences with structures more complex than the skeletal one, namely the "Rewrite S as NP + VP" type, such as "Birds fly", "Things happen", "People talk", and so on. So far as demonstrating the ability to construct grammatically correct sentences is concerned, one which I read while serving as an External Examiner at a certain University remains permanently etched in my memory for two reasons. One of the examination candidates introduced his response to a question thus:

The issues which this question demands that I pay attention to are big, in fact, they are of *elephantine proportions*, such that I have to use, in my response to it, only words of one syllable, so as not to confuse the examiner.

I was struck, first by the patronizing stance which the candidate had adopted thus and, secondly, by how that sentence provided yet further proof that language can be used both to inform and to misinform, since that candidate went on neither to use words of one syllable, as is apparent in that opening sentence, nor to address the issues demanded by the question.

As I do with all the texts to be discussed in this paper, below I begin by attempting to disentangle the parts of one of Shakespeare's syntactic labyrinths. In doing so, I isolate word groups which do not necessarily always coincide with those recognized in modern syntactic theory as phrases or clauses. This is because I am guided by Demetrius' (in Moxon 1940. p. 200) elegant definition of what constitutes a "member" of discourse. He writes that "The member ... will comprise an idea which is *either complete in itself or an essential part of a complete sentence*" (my emphasis). Further, and given the fact that my focus is on the characteristically long periodic and cumulative sentences, I am attracted to Demetrius' (in Moxon 1940. p. 202) metaphorical view of it, when he writes that such a syntactic structure functions thus:

As wild beasts gather their limbs together for an attack, so language also should gather itself as it were into a coil to acquire force ... Brevity is suitable to apophthegms and proverbs, and the contraction of a large idea into a small compass is a sign of superior wisdom, just as whole trees exist potentially in seeds.

Demetrius thus argues for the need for a writer to be perspicacious in their choice of which sentential structures to employ and on which subject, as well as for which readership. Subject matter and context should determine such a choice.

2.0 The matter of “degree” in *Troilus and Cressida*

In this paper I begin by looking at a sentence, in fact part of a stanza, from Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*. Given my intention to compare the periodic and cumulative types of sentence, this text is ideal since it combines both. In it, Ulysses invites his comrades to reconsider the way in which they have been conducting themselves in their military campaign against the Roman army. There is a real danger that they could be routed by the enemy because each one of them has been flouting that protocol on which any military force places a premium, what he calls “degree”:

When that the general is not like the hive
 To whom the foragers shall all repair,
 What honey is expected? Degree being vizarded,
 The unworthiest shows as fairly in the mask.
5. The heavens themselves, the planets and this centre
 Observe degree, priority **and** place,
 Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,
 Office and custom, in all line of order;
And therefore is the glorious planet **Sol**
10. In noble eminence enthroned and sphered
 Amidst the other; **whose** medicinable eye
 Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil,
And posts, like the commandment of a king,
 Sans cheque to good **and** bad: **but** *when* the planets
15. In evil mixture to disorder wander,
 What plagues **and** what portents, what mutiny,
 What raging of the sea, shaking of the earth,
 Commotion in the winds, frights, changes, horrors,
 Divert **and** crack, rend **and** deracinate
20. The unity **and** married calm of states
 Quite from their fixture! 1. 3

Given, for example, the structure of the latter part of the above text, beginning at “but” (line 14), a contrastive conjunction, the reader cannot stop at the word “horrors” (line 18) because the flow of the text would thereby leave him/her marooned on a slippery syntactic precipice. All the noun phrases which are listed after “What” (line 16) are the subjects and are inextricably and tightly “married” to the double compound verb phrases, “Divert and crack, rend and deracinate”, whose co-ordinate object, “The unity and married calm”, is post-modified by a prepositional phrase, “of states”, and is then followed by an adverbial, “Quite from their fixture”, where “quite” means “completely”, and which adverbial the reader must remember to link with the earlier mentioned double compound verb phrases. This profusion of syntactic forms and their meanings is parallel to the earlier comprehensive listing of the indices of that decorum which the planets must observe in order to avoid celestial anarchy and its concomitant calamities, namely “degree, priority and place/insisture, course, proportion, season, form,/Office and custom, in all line of order ...”. I read “Degree”, coming first as it does in that list, as the superordinate value of which all the others are the building blocks. Degree and its component parts, as well as “the married calm of states”, take on metaphorical force when linked to verbs which normally have solid objects. For to “divert”, a dynamic verb, is to violently change the course of an entity moving along its prescribed or chosen path, just as to “crack” is to destroy the body composition of an otherwise whole entity, whereas degree and the others, the objects of these verbs, are abstract values. The same applies to the verbs “rend and deracinate”. As far as “rend” is concerned, Shakespeare is exploiting, by extrapolation, its metaphorical use when it collocates with clothing fabric being violently torn apart, as in “rending the fabric of society”. In order to drive his point home, Shakespeare co-ordinates “rend” with “deracinate”. The latter verb means to “uproot”, presumably to uproot and throw away, as we do weeds growing among crops. The conflicting and varied nature of these verbs serves to suggest that no one occupying any space whatsoever on the social ladder will be left untouched by the calamitous consequences for a community that subverts society when degree is “vizarded”, the verb which Shakespeare has strategically placed at the point where “the married calm of states” is replaced by Armageddon. The part of this text which begins at “When” and extends to “mask” (lines 1 – 4) is made up of two short sentences, relative to the one which follows, the one which begins with “The heavens themselves ...” (line 5) and ends at “Sans cheque to good and bad” (line 14). The first of those two sentences is a double-complex one with subordinate time and relative clauses and is made up of:

- a) When that the general is not like the hive ... What honey is expected?
- b) To whom the foragers shall repair, ...

The second is one complex sentence:

- Degree being vizarded, The unworthiest shows as fairly in the mask.

In the latter, the first part can be read as “When degree is vizarded ...”, the other time clause. These sentences are part of the introduction to Ulysses’ speech. They are appropriately short since he is concerned to make his audience understand his ensuing contribution to the debate about how best to proceed in their war against the Roman army. Once this is achieved, he resorts to a much longer periodic-cum-compound sentence, and that, for a good reason. With a captive audience now on board, Ulysses proceeds to portray a metaphorical, celestial and peaceable dispensation in which degree is observed, and one that is far removed from the chaotic one in which his army finds itself for failing to observe degree, which the next sentence is about.

That sentence, which begins from at “The heavens themselves” (line 5) and stretches to “in all line of order” (line 8), is the metaphorical portrayal of the celestial dispensation as created at the beginning of things. Planets with different shapes and sizes each have their place and course as they rotate around the sun, “... the glorious planet/Sol in noble eminence enthroned/And sphered amidst the other; ...”. The prepositional phrase used to describe the sun’s rightful place in this scheme of things achieves lexical coherence because it is of the type used in discourses about royalty: “in noble eminence enthroned”. Just as when the other planets push the sun from its place celestial anarchy ensues, so the same happens in human affairs when subjects commit treason by dethroning their king.

From the third “what” (line 14) to the end (line 21), where “what” has been ellipped and the elements come linked asyndetically, there is no exclamation mark until after the last word of the text, where it serves partly to emphasize the adverbial “... quite from their fixture” and partly the whole series of disasters triggered by failure to observe degree.

I draw attention to Shakespeare’s deployment of both asyndetic and syndetic coordination, mainly the former, a syntactic option which he used deliberately to resonate with the unbridled, cataclysmic chaos unleashed on the universe by humanity’s failure to observe degree. Both the periodic sentence and the diction are thus tailor-made choices for expressing Ulysses’ fears in hyperbolic terms. Note also the suspense created by delaying the mention of the objects of two coordinate verb phrases. The reader is left wondering what the nine, horror-inspiring subjects in lines 3 to 5 “... Divert and crack, rend and deracinate”, only to realize in the next line that these objects are the very foundations of humanity’s peaceable existence here on earth. Further, the reader comes to know both to what extent and with what ferocity these monstrous harbingers of imminent Armageddon will destroy, namely “The unity and married calm of states”, only in the last line, through the adverbial phrase

“Quite from their fixture!” And that adverbial phrase comes with an intensifying pre-modifier, in which “quite” means “completely”, and “their fixture” refers to the pre-ordained condition in which “degree” is observed. This condition is described as “The unity and married calm of states”. The latter phrase draws a relationship of equivalence between a dispensation in which people accept that some are more equal than others on the one hand, and holy matrimony, in which the wife must honor her husband, which the husband must reciprocate, on the other.

Both the cumulative and the periodic parts of the above sentence are judiciously placed. They complement each other. In the former, only two agents are identified, “plagues and portents”, reflecting how impending disaster initially surreptitiously manifests itself, like a terminal disease invading the human body, a headache now and then an itch. Only for that body to later succumb to an apparently inexplicable panoply of life-threatening ailments. And that is what the periodic part carries, five other agents each inflicting its own portion of “deracination” on the fragile “unity and married calm of states.”

3.0 The opening sentence in *A Tale of Two Cities*

3.1 *Dickens’ personal engagement with the subject of the novel*

Dickens (1967. p. xvii) has a revealing Preface to his novel in which he explains what inspired him to write *A Tale of Two Cities*. It reads:

While I was acting, with my children and friends, in Mr. Wilkie Collins’ *The Frozen Deep*, I first conceived the main idea of this story. *A strong desire was upon me then, to embody it in my own person ... I have so far verified what is done and suffered in these pages, as that I have certainly done and suffered it myself* (emphasis added).

The last sentence in it is incontrovertible evidence of Dickens’ personal, nay visceral, engagement with his theme. He placed himself in the shoes of his characters as they underwent the frightening and stormy vicissitudes of life. This in a sense explains his choice of syntax, namely the opening sentence, a cumulative one which is a veritable dirge about the tantalizing extremes of his characters’ fortunes in the thick of the French Revolution:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of the noisiest

authorities, insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

3.2 *The structure of the opening cumulative sentence*

It seems that Dickens is himself conscious of the fact, and intends that, his opening sentence will and should strike the reader as being out of the ordinary, for, in the middle of it he uses the coordinating conjunction “- in short”, which normally would begin with a capital letter since what follows is in fact an independent sentence. In the text as a whole, where the only punctuation marks separating the fifteen sentences are the capital letter of the first word “It”, the commas between abutting word groups, otherwise sentences, a dash before “in fact”, and the full-stop at the end, cohesion and coherence are marked only by the paired antonyms “best ... worst”, “hope ... despair”, “wisdom ... foolishness”, “going direct to Heaven ... going direct the other way”, and so on. These serve to underscore the quandary in which humanity found itself. The text is about contemporary, universal confusion among people about the present as well as the future, in both of which only “some of the noisiest authorities” could see method in the otherwise all-encompassing madness. But it is significant that Dickens dismissively describes them as “... the noisiest”. This is because even they were forced to concede that there was no middle ground, urging others to accept and, apparently being convinced themselves, that things had gone way away from the norm. In the view of “some of the noisiest authorities”, humanity’s lot had to be viewed as “good” or “evil”, “in the superlative degree of comparison only.” Well, the superlative degrees of “good” and “bad” are “best” and “worst”, respectively, a small matter in English grammar. This leaves one wondering why Dickens replaced the former in the latter part of his text, leading him to using a complex adverbial phrase after “good or evil”. The architecture of the sentence can be captured in a table such as the one below:

The best of times	The worst of times
It was the age of wisdom	It was the age of foolishness
It was the epoch of belief	It was the epoch of incredulity
It was the season of Light	It was the season of Darkness
It was the spring of hope	It was the winter of despair
We had everything before us	We had nothing before us
We were all going direct to Heaven	We were all going direct the other way
= The superlative degree	of comparison ONLY

Cohesion and coherence through antonymy.

There was thus no middle ground. The text configures a confrontation between “Light” and “Darkness”, equivalent to that between Christ’s and the Devil’s dispensations,

and thus portrays a people caught up between the choice of, or being forced into, “going direct to Heaven” or “going direct *the other way*”. The word “direct”, otherwise an adjective, is here used as an adverb. But, given the uncompromising nature of the dilemma in which humanity finds itself, its use here could be read as having the imperative force of a verb, with some omnipotent force commanding, “I direct you to go to Heaven” or “I direct you to go to *Hell*”, depending on one’s fate.

This cumulative sentence is stylistically appropriate in that the meanings of its parts, otherwise sentences in themselves, come in the manner of ice-balls haphazardly and remorselessly pounding the earth which, in turn, involuntarily, uncontrollably and discordantly reverberates as it disintegrates beyond recognition, leaving people confused and having to choose between extremes.

4.0 Lawrence on the social deprivations of industrialization

In his introduction to Lawrence’s *Selected Tales*, Ian Serrailier (1972), quotes that author as having observed that “The human soul needs actual beauty more than bread” (p. x). However hyperbolic Lawrence’s claim may sound, it can be understood as having been inspired by the socio-economic environment in which he was born and lived, the coal-mining districts of Nottinghamshire. This is evident in the text on which this discussion of his style is based and also resonates with Serrailier’s (1972) view of Lawrence’s work generally, that “Few great writers have put more of themselves and their background into their writing” (p. ix) than Lawrence did. Concerning the value that Lawrence (1972) places on beauty in human life, in the story “Tickets Please” he comes across in the text below as being horrified by “... the long *ugly* villages of workmen’s houses”, the “... *stark, grimy* cold little marketplaces”, “... the last little *ugly* place of industry”, “... the edge of the wild, *gloomy* country beyond”, and by “... the *sordid* streets of the great town”, where “great” means “vast” rather than “magnificent” (p. 65 – 70):

There is in the Midlands a single line tramway system which boldly leaves the county town and plunges off into the black, industrial countryside, up hill and down dale, through the long ugly villages of workmen’s houses, over canals and railways, past churches perched high and nobly over the smoke and shadows, through stark, grimy cold little marketplaces, tilting away in a rush past cinemas and shops down to the hollow where the collieries are, then up again, past a little rural church, under the ash trees, on in a rush to the terminus, the last little ugly place of industry, the cold little town that shivers on the edge of the wild, gloomy country beyond. There the *green* and creamy colored tram-cars seem to pause and purr with curious satisfaction. But in a few minutes – the clock on the turret of the Co-operative Wholesale Society’s shops gives the time – away it starts once more on the adventure. Again there are the reckless swoops downhill, bouncing the loops: again the chilly wait in the hill-top market-

place: again the breathless slithering round the precipitous drop under the church: the patient halts at the loops, waiting for the out-coming car: so on and on, for two long hours, till at last the city looms beyond the fat gas-works, the narrow factories draw near, we are in the sordid streets of the great town, once more we sidle to a standstill at our terminus, abashed by the great crimson and cream-colored city cars, but still perky, jaunty, somewhat dare-devil, *green* as a jaunty sprig of parsley out of a black colliery garden.

4.1 *The reflection of social environment in Lawrence's syntax*

From the structural point of view, one of the striking features of this text is how generously Lawrence deploys adverbs of direction and speed of movement going with dynamic verbs, as well as the numerous prepositional phrases modifying both verb phrases and noun phrases, the latter being additionally modified by both adjectives and yet more prepositional phrases. I have divided the text into three parts: the opening long compound-complex sentence, followed by two relatively short ones, which come before Lawrence resorts to yet another long compound-complex sentence. This way, his syntax, perhaps unintentionally but certainly stylistically successfully, mimics the movement of the tram as it flies from the beginning of its journey to a momentary stop at one station, before it resumes its way to the next. As the tram travels through the intervening terrain between stops, Lawrence gives the reader a panoramic portrayal of the countryside, of workmen's settlements, and of human as well as motorized traffic.

He writes about "... a single line tramway system ...", using a noun phrase in which the head word "system" is pre-modified by the indefinite article, a compound adjective, and a noun functioning as an adjective. This "system" does not merely leave but "... boldly leaves the country town", and that town is not just another town but "a country town ...". Its movement is a "plunge", and the plunge is naturally dynamic, since the tram "plunges off into the ... countryside", the latter being "the black, industrial countryside". And it is not just "black" and "industrial" since, from the manner of the tram's movement, it is portrayed as undulating, for the tram goes "up hill and down dale", the hill and dale being the locations of "the long ugly villages of workmen's houses." This profusion of descriptive detail of the terrain continues to the point where we are given a vivid, picturesque depiction of the tram's destination, the terminus, which is appositively portrayed as "the last little ugly place of industry, the cold little town that shivers on the edge of the wild, gloomy country beyond." In constructing this part of his tale, Lawrence achieves an effect which is, perhaps unintentionally but certainly aesthetically titillating, because of his deployment of eleven words, all in close proximity to each other and all with the consonant [l]: "long ugly villages", "last little ugly place ... cold little ... wild ... gloomy." This

consonant is one of those which a choir conductor uses as a cue to the tune which his charges must adopt in rendering a song: doo tii laa soo va mi re dooo! Along with the vowel which accompanies this consonant, it is singable since it is one of those which phonologists call “sonorant”, meaning sounds during the pronunciation of which the vocal cords are positioned in such a way that they vibrate maximally and effortlessly. Given this, one could ask whether Lawrence wrote this aspect of the text while unconsciously substantiating what Richard Wagner⁴ observed about music and language: “*It is a truth for ever* that where the speech of men stops short, there, music’s reign begins” (emphasis added). Is the text a song about the ugliness of the terrain and of the lives of its doomed inhabitants? For Lawrence uses the word “ugly” twice, and the words “gloomy”, “grimy”, and “sordid” once each in this short extract from a fourteen page tale. This is not an advertisement for enticing tourists to visit his hometown, Nottingham.

This sentence is thus remarkable not just because of its length, but also because of the wealth of information that it generously conveys through the innumerable modifiers that serve to buttress the meaning of nouns and verbs. Concerning the nouns, the sentence brings to life those human settlements through which the tram travels by describing them as “the *long* ✧ *ugly* **villages** of workmen’s houses”, the terminus as “the *last* ✧ *little* ✧ *ugly* **place** of industry”, the town as “the *cold* ✧ *little* **town** that shivers”, and its location as “the **edge** of the wild, ✧ *gloomy* **country** beyond.” Each of the head words of these noun phrases which I have highlighted in black, namely “villages, place, town, edge, country”, comes flanked by pre-modifiers and post-modifiers. Similarly the verbs, namely “leaves” and “plunges”, also in bold face in the following, where they are preceded, followed, or surrounded by adverbials. The tram “*boldly* **leaves** the county town”, then it “**plunges** off ✧ into ... the countryside”, it **plunges** “*up hill* and *down dale*”, [**goes**] “*through* the long ugly villages”, meandering “*over canals* and [*over*] *railways*” and “*past* churches” [*situated*] “*high* and *nobly* ✧ *over* the smoke and shadows”, and so on and on, until it reaches “the cold little town that **shivers** on the edge ...”. It is thus a providential gift to one seeking to understand not just the structure, but also and crucially, the function, of the “members” of discourse as employed by fluent users of English such as Lawrence.

4.2 *Peacock’s satirical-comical portrayal of the intellectualism and manners of 19th Century Englishmen*

The text to be discussed here comes from a part of Peacock’s *Nightmare Abbey*, where an attempt to arrange a marriage between two young people has nearly collapsed.

⁴ Richard Wagner: n.d. <http://azquotes.com/quote/797289>

The two had come to the conclusion that they were incompatible, to the surprise and chagrin of their respective sponsors. But, Peacock (1961. p.205) writes, even as the two are exchanging angry words in bidding each other a final farewell,

The sudden change of her voice in the last few words, and the burst of tears that accompanied them, acted like electricity on the tender-hearted youth; and, in another instant, a complete reconciliation was accomplished *without the intervention of words* (my emphasis).

What occurred between the suitor, Scythrop, and Marionetta, the object of his love, is the justification for Peacock's learned pronouncement on the troubled and troubling modalities of traditional courtship. While the author portrays a series of encounters in which his characters incessantly and spiritedly engage each other in discussions of various academic subjects, he surreptitiously but judiciously inserts passages in which he pronounces his own views on them, this text being one such instance. On the loquaciousness of Peacock's characters, Burns (1985. p.1) observes that

His characters talk incessantly ... it is almost the only thing that they do ... and even a superficial reading would distinguish the pre-eminence of matters of literary health and social justice among the endless topics by which their exotic verbal resources are encouraged into life.

As for those characters' preference for "exotic verbal resources," Peacock himself does not shy away from them either, if only to satirize those same characters' assumption of a hollow learnedness, including in discussions of mundane subjects. For he labels them "some learned *casuists*," a term which, according to Onions' (1933) *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, is used to refer to people who engage in "resolving moral problems, especially by the use of clever but false reasoning, sophistry". In explaining why prospective couples often fall out before they get married, Peacock proffers a most learned explanation when he writes that

There are, indeed, some learned casuists who maintain that love has no language, and that all the misunderstandings and dissensions of lovers arise from the fatal habit of employing words on a subject to which words are inapplicable; that love, beginning with looks, that is to say, with the physiognomical expression of congenial mental dispositions, tends through a regular gradation of signs and symbols of affection, to that consummation which is most devoutly to be wished, and that it neither is necessary that there should be, nor probable that there should be, a single word spoken from first to last, between the two sympathetic spirits.

The noun phrase which has "expression" as its headword comes flanked by verbose pre-modifying and post-modifying prepositional phrases. It could well be followed by, "As my learned characters would naturally put it", given Peacock's intention to sardonically mimic them. He employs this trope not only in the words

that he puts in their mouths, but also in the names that he gives both to those characters and to the title of his novel. This passage comes from his novel with the title *Nightmare Abbey*. “Nightmare” is a blatantly suggestive word. For the goings-on in the said Abbey constitute a veritable intellectual free-for-all. He also wrote one with the title *Headlong Hall*. The word “headlong” is a dynamic adverb meaning “with the head first”, as in “fall headlong”. It can be used metaphorically to suggest taking action “in a hasty and rash way”, thereby exposing the agent to danger.

4.3 *Retrieving meaning from Peacock’s syntactic labyrinth*

One way in which the reader can negotiate their way through Peacock’s syntactic labyrinth is by focusing on the transitive verb “maintain” in the first line of the text, which comes with “learned casuists” as the subject. The reader has to ask, “What do these casuists maintain?” Four answers are provided in the form of four object noun clauses, three of which are themselves also complex:

There are, indeed, some learned casuists who

- a) maintain
- b) that love has no language,
- c) that all the misunderstandings and dissensions of lovers arise from the fatal habit of employing words on a subject to which words are inapplicable,
- d) that love, beginning with looks, that is to say, with the physiognomical expression of congenial mental dispositions, tends, through a regular gradation of signs and symbols of affection, to that consummation which is most devoutly to be wished,
- e) and that it neither is necessary that there should be, nor probable that there should be, a single word spoken from first to last, between two sympathetic spirits.

The whole text is one multilayered complex sentence, the foregoing being only a part of it. While (b) is a skeletal noun clause serving, as the others do, as the direct object of the verb “maintain”, it is followed by one, (c), with a coordinate noun phrase subject, “that the misunderstandings and dissensions”, with the latter post-modified by a prepositional phrase, “of lovers”. The verb “arise” has “from the fatal habit” as an adverbial, while “habit” is post-modified by yet another prepositional phrase, “of employing words”, with the verb “employing” post-modified by the adverbial “on a subject”, and “subject” post-modified by the relative clause, “to which words are inapplicable”.

The next noun clause object, (d), carries yet more evidence of Peacock himself as being afflicted by the same ailment that sees his characters resorting to “their exotic verbal resources”. It reads, “... that love, beginning with looks, ...”. The word “looks”, being apparently insufficient in conveying his meaning, comes paraphrased

by an appositive phrase which is introduced by "... that is to say, ...". This is as if to suggest that, "I, Peacock, am also as learned as these fellows, if not more so. In fact, 'looks' refers to "... the physiognomical expression of congenial mental dispositions, ...". The condition of being in love, Peacock proceeds, is arrived at in stages that constitute "... a regular gradation of signs and symbols of affection ..." which lead "to **that consummation which is most devoutly to be wished.**"

While the above noun clauses are introduced by "that" as the direct objects of the verb "maintain", the last one, (e), is an even more circuitous labyrinth due to Peacock's employment of the correlative co-coordinator "neither ... nor". The "learned casuists", he writes, "[maintain] that it *neither* is necessary that there should be, *nor* probable that there should be, a single word spoken from first to last, between two sympathetic spirits." Necessity and probability :: compulsion and likelihood, are thus placed in a delicate, nuanced relationship of equivalence but also one of opposition to each other, and all this, in an effort to explain the modalities of courtship.

4.4 *Peacock's debt to his predecessors*

Although Peacock was not "educated", in the sense of being a University graduate, he was a self-made intellectual with a deep immersion in the English as well as the Classical literary canons, which he emulated and added to in his own writings. The last quoted words above, "to that consummation which is most devoutly to be wished", suggest that his emulation of his predecessors came close, at least in this instance, to almost repeating their memorable expressions verbatim. I refer here to his probable debt to a part of Hamlet's moving soliloquy:

... Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
 And by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep ...
 No more, and by a sleep to say we end
 The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
 That flesh is heir to; **'tis a consummation**
Devoutly to be desired.

Peacock came close to repeating the highlighted words verbatim, only replacing "desired" with "wished". Since to "desire" designates a stronger emotion than to "wish", and is therefore more appropriate for designating the strong feelings of young lovers, it would have been a better option for the context in which Peacock replaced Shakespeare's word.

5.0 The autobiographical slant in Gogol's "The Overcoat"

5.1 Gogol's empathetic portrayal of Akakay's tribulations

McFarlin (1979) writes that "Gogol himself initially considered the civil service his calling", but that his academic achievement was such that it "qualified him to enter service at the lowest ranked level ... The fact that Gogol's [academic achievement] qualified him for only rank fourteen while a few of his more studious classmates were awarded the next higher, twelfth, rank was a serious disappointment to him as well as his mother." Given this background, it seems logical to conclude that, just as Dickens and Lawrence did in their texts above, Gogol was also being autobiographical in his. Periodic and cumulative sentences seem to be suitable for one who is writing about heartrending, life-changing experiences which one has gone through, those that inspired and gave credence to the English proverb "It never rains but pours". That is why Gogol (McFarlin, 1979) "calls the civil service workforce surrounding Akakay 'the entire nation of civil servants'", from which the protagonist, with whom Gogol empathizes, is ostracized (emphasis added). His exclusion from what others regarded as routine work-place and recreational activities left him feeling imprisoned in a pariah's enclosure from which he could see no exit. Akakay is portrayed like a leaf that has fallen from a tree and is bound to atrophy and die. Otherwise, why would Gogol describe some of the recreational activities which "the entire nation of civil servants" participate in as "a pleasure which a Russian man can never, under any circumstances, deny himself"? Akakay's "circumstances" are thus portrayed as being beyond the ordinary. This is parallel to Gogol's own frustration at being condemned to occupying a menial position in the state bureaucracy, one which was way below those which his former classmates assumed. The text below thus comes from the writer's visceral feelings of undeserved exclusion "from the entire nation of civil servants". This team of workers constitutes a "nation" because, in the text below, which is one long and meandering sentence, Gogol writes about thousands of people whose lives are both circumscribed and prescribed by rules within the strict confines of an all-encompassing bureaucracy, a dispensation which they all apparently accept as the norm:

Even at those hours **when** the grey St. Petersburg sky is completely overcast ... **and when** the whole population of clerks have dined and eaten their fill, each as best he can, according to the salary he receives **and** his personal tastes; **when** they are all resting **after** the scratching of pens **and after** the bustle of the office, **after** their own necessary work **and after** other people's, **and after** all the tasks that an overzealous man voluntarily sets himself even beyond the necessary; **when** the clerks are hastening to devote **what is left of** their time to pleasure; **when** some more enterprising are flying to the theatre, others to the street to spend their leisure staring

at women's hats, some to spend the evening paying compliments to *some attractive girl, the star of a little official circle*, while some – and this is the most frequent of all – go simply to a fellow clerk's apartment on the third or fourth storey, two little rooms with a hall or kitchen, with some pretensions of style, with a lamp or some such article that has cost many sacrifices of dinners and excursions – at the time when all the clerks are scattered about the apartments of their friends, playing a stormy game of whist, sipping tea out of glasses, eating cheap biscuits, sucking in smoke from long pipes, telling, as the cards are dealt, some scandal that has floated from higher circles, a pleasure which a Russian man can never, under any circumstances, deny himself, or, when there is nothing better to talk about, repeating the everlasting anecdote of the commanding officer who was told that the tail had been cut off the horse on the Falcon monument – in short, even when everyone, was eagerly seeking entertainment, Akaky Akakievich did not indulge in any amusement.

5.2 The structure of Gogol's text

McFarlin (1979) characterizes the excerpt above as "... the now-famous periodic sentence culminating in Akakay's lack of leisure time diversions before the advent of his trauma". Its fame arises from it being structured in such a way that it consists of one complex sentence which frames the rest of the text and begins with a dependent relative clause introduced by the subordinating conjunction "when" in the first line, ending with the main one right at the end of it, all of twenty lines later. The intervening part of the text constitutes a cinematic narrative made up of an array of simple and compound sentences, as well as dependent relative and time clauses. Its cohesion is marked by both coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, while the coherence is anchored on the theme, namely the enervating routine of civil servant office drudgery and the various but predictable after-work forms of entertainment and socialization, from all of which the protagonist, Akakay Akakievich, is excluded and thereby marked off as a social misfit. The framing sentence reads, "Even at those hours when the grey St. Petersburg sky is completely overcast, ...Akakay Akekievich did not indulge in any amusement."

The sentence as a whole is an archetypal example of a syntactically meandering labyrinth, the defining character of the periodic sentence. Its structure seems appropriate for conveying the-method-in-madness that the bustle of a civil service bureaucracy in full cry typically represents – thousands of people actually being, as well as merely seeming to be, busy, and breathlessly falling over each other to do both the work assigned to them, in addition to what they assign to themselves, as well as even going beyond the call of duty to minding other people's business. For the outsider, the text presents a seamless continuity of the controlled and controlling chaos of deeds and actions which are only loosely concatenated by place, time,

actors, and purpose. There is a resigned pessimism underlying all this which sees the protagonist dying after the overcoat, for which he had yearned for an eternity and eventually got, is conveniently snatched from him by robbers. He gets posthumous justice only when his ghost comes to haunt some of those bureaucrats who had despised and ill-treated him throughout his working life.

All the foregoing is anchored on the time mentioned in the first line, "... those hours when the grey St. Petersburg sky is completely overcast, ...". Because of Gogol's focus on a particular time in the daily routine of his characters, he employs the conjunction "when" in the sense of "at" or "during which", that is, as a conjunction which introduces a descriptive clause. What it introduces is thus a relative, also known as an adjectival, clause. It serves to answer the question "Which hours are you referring to?", rather than "At what time/when did X happen?", thus:

- a) at those hours **when** the grey St. Petersburg sky is completely overcast ...
- b) and [at those hours *when*] the whole population of clerks have dined ...
- c) [at those hours] **when** they are resting ...
- d) [at those hours] **when** the clerks are hastening ...
- e) [at those hours] **when** there is nothing better to talk about ...
- f) even [at those hours] **when** everyone, was eagerly seeking entertainment
- g) at the time **when** all clerks are scattered about the apartments of their friends ...

The clause (c) above comes with a temporal post-modifying prepositional phrase introduced by "after", thus:

when they are all resting **after** the scratching of pens

The latter is coordinated to another of its kind, but from which "after" has been ellipted:

[after the scratching of pens] and [... the] bustle of the office ...

This preposition is also omitted but has to be understood in

[after] their own necessary work
and [after] other people's [work]
and [after] all the tasks

Some of these clerks spend time visiting their fellows in their "apartments". The latter are said to be "on the third or fourth storey" and furnished:

with a lamp
or [with] some such article
and each one consists of
two little rooms,

where “rooms” is post-modified by the prepositional phrases

with a hall
or [with a] kitchen
with some pretensions of style

While there, the clerks are said to pass their time

playing a stormy game of whist
eating cheap biscuits
sucking in smoke from long pipes
telling ... some scandal that has floated from higher circles
repeating the everlasting anecdote ...
... *eagerly seeking* entertainment

In the above, all the verbs in the present participle serve to highlight the simultaneity as well as the generality of the ongoing various forms of after-work entertainment which all the clerks who belong to “the nation of civil servants” “indulge in” but in which Akakay does not and cannot participate.

6.0 Conclusion

The unusually long sentences which the authors discussed here deploy in their texts, whether periodic or cumulative, syntactically resonate with each writer’s or character’s attitude towards what he/she is writing or speaking about. This may come from a sense of being besieged by, or witnessing the natural order of things being “rended and deracinated” by, overwhelming misfortunes, as in the cases of Shakespeare’s Ulysses, of Gogol and of Dickens, to the extent that he/she is unable to tell which one of them is more bearable than the others, or whether humanity is living in “the best of times” or in “the worst of times”. Or, as in the case of Lawrence, this sense of helplessness may come from the author witnessing the powers that be loading unsuspecting citizens on a metaphorical industrialization train which carries them to a dehumanized destination. Shakespeare’s Ulysses is overwhelmed by the unconscionable consequences of a dispensation in which each member of society assumes an untenable independence from the rest. This is what inspired Claudius, in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, to hit the nail on the head when he lamented:

O Gertrude, Gertrude,
When sorrows come, they come not single spies
But in battalions.

And so, in expressing such “sorrows”, the protagonist’s words come as an outpouring of thoughts, emotions, and fears unleashed on him/her in the manner a “battalion” does on one in the thick of battle, except that one has no capacity to return the fire.

The benefits of reading authors such as these are two-fold. First, the meaning

of the text can be arrived at only by the reader succeeding in identifying and grasping the functions of the various and sometimes seemingly isolated textual limbs in making the meaning of the whole, even though some are far-flung from each other. Further, there can be no doubt but that the drudgery that is the journey through syntactic labyrinths such as these is ultimately rewarding for those seeking to enrich their own vocabulary and grammar of a language, whether it be the mother-tongue or another. Emulation of the best that the syntax of literary fiction has to offer is one way of reaching our ultimate goal, namely a command of whatever language it is written in, in this case English, which ensures us maximum international intelligibility when we communicate in this fast globalizing world.

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