

High Style and Misdemeanors: The Virtues and Vices of Elevated Prose
Thursday, March 5, 10:35 am, Room 211, Meeting Room Level

Style Examples

Our first round of remarks from the panel will center on the question of how style intersects with substance. Elevated prose style has historically centered on subjects that are disengaged and apolitical, but can writers whose work is socially engaged, that concern issues of immigration, displacement, and belonging, embrace a stylistic approach? Can formal devices of voice, wordplay, figurative language, sentence length, and colloquialism intersect with socially and politically engaged work?

Anita Felicelli

Deep in her soul, however, she was waiting for something to happen. Like a sailor in distress, she would gaze out over the solitude of her life with desperate eyes, seeking some white sail in the mists of the far-off horizon. She did not know what this chance event would be, what wind would drive it to her, what shore it would carry her to, whether it was a longboat or a three-decked vessel, loaded with anguish or filled with happiness up to the portholes. But each morning, when she awoke, she hoped it would arrive that day, and she would listen to every sound, spring to her feet, feel surprised that it had not come; then at sunset, always more sorrowful, she would wish the next day were already there.

— Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*

She had the distinct impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold. Like the miller's daughter—the one who sat at night in a straw-filled room, thrilled with the secret power Rumpelstiltskin had given her: to see golden thread stream from her very own shuttle.

— Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

What do we want from our mothers when we are children? Complete submission. Oh, it's very nice and rational and respectable to say that a woman has every right to her life, to her ambitions, to her needs, and so on--it's what I've always demanded myself--but as a child, no, the truth is it's a war of attrition, rationality doesn't come into it, not one bit, all you want from your mother is that she once and for all admit that she is your mother and only your mother, and that her battle with the rest of life is over. She has to lay down arms and come to you. And if she doesn't do it, then it's really a war, and it was a war between my mother and me. Only as an adult did I come to truly admire her--especially in the last, painful years of her life--for all that she had done to claw some space in this world for herself.

— Zadie Smith, *Swing Time*

Lillian Howan

“Then I got the urge to return to China. To those rising and falling cities, now and then uncovered by the tide of memory. To pursue the emptiness of things disappearing all around.

“One day, feeling extremely strange after a brisk walk in the rain with my dog along the complex trails behind my cabin in the mountains, I packed a suitcase and walked out of my marriage and my life forever. I experienced an ataraxia, which they say is the tranquillity of God. Wild spaces no longer controlled the anxiety in me, and I had only an immediate resolution of putting one step after the other. Pulled the hood over my head. It fixed me in its path as if I were a holy man on a pilgrimage.”

— Brian Castro, *Shanghai Dancing*

“And though the implication is that I am the sort who is always careful and preparing, I think that's not right, either; in fact I feel I have not really been living anywhere or anytime, not for the future and not in the past and not at all of-the-moment, but rather in the lonely dream of an oblivion, the nothing-of-nothing drift from one pulse beat to the next, which is really the most bloodless marking-out, automatic and involuntary.”

— Chang-rae Lee, *A Gesture Life*

“Charles Darwin stumbled upon evidence of God's happiness soon after his arrival in heaven, while still in a tourist-abroad state of mind: overexcited, underrested, struggling with a new diet and foreign languages. Despite these difficulties, he took copious notes, albeit not on paper.”

– Julia Whitty, “Darwin in Heaven” from *A Tortoise for the Queen of Tonga: Stories*

Olga Zilberbourg

That very same morning, after his wife had gone to work and his daughter to school, having easily persuaded his son, in just ten or fifteen minutes Dr. Farzani completed that which the Prophet considered the primary responsibility of every Muslim before Allah. Who would have thought that for an experienced surgeon of the Sklifosovksy Hospital that very simple operation could result in complications? However, whether from fright or some other reason, towards evening the boy's temperature spiked to 104 degrees. And the mother who, on returning from work, found her son in that condition lost the gift of speech in stupefaction.

— Akram Aylisli, *Stone Dreams*, translated by Katherine E. Young

The geraniums arrived in droves, during my last year of high school. They invaded our house, shouting red, shouting orange on their way to a synchronized death. Mamá had read about geraniums in a magazine—versatile, pretty, easy to grow—and, after that, had seen them featured in the home of a Navy captain's wife. The wife had placed a few cheery painted pots near the windows, that was all. Not enough for Mamá. Her geraniums would be extravagant, unparalleled. She would have a fiefdom of geraniums if she would have any. She became possessed with a vision of a house flooded with flowers, accosting you with their bright colors everywhere you turned, drowning out the chairs and shelves and carpets, more flowers than any

other house in Buenos Aires—so that when you enter, she said, you feel as though you’re swimming through petals. The notion ignited her and propelled her into motion. She spent a small fortune on elegant plant stands, imported flower pots inlaid with mosaic, and armies of fully grown geraniums.

— Carolina de Robertis, *Perla*

Aatif Rashid

And all these people are heading for the same room. The final space. A big room, one of many in the Perret institute; a room separate from the exhibition yet called an Exhibition Room; a corporate place, a clean slate; white/chrome/pure/plain (this was the design brief), used for the meetings of people who want to meet somewhere neutral at the end of the twentieth century; a virtual place where their business (be that rebranding, lingerie, or rebranding lingerie) can be done in an emptiness, an uncontaminated cavity; the logical endpoint of a thousand years of spaces too crowded and bloody. This one is pared down, sterilized, made new every day by a Nigerian cleaning lady with an industrial Hoover and guarded through the night by Mr. De Winter, a Polish night watchman (that’s what he calls himself—his job title is Asset Security Coordinator); he can be seen protecting the space, walking the borders of the space with a Walkman playing Polish folk tunes; you can see him, you can see *it* through a huge glass front if you walk by—the acres of protected vacuity and a sign with the prices per square foot of these square feet of space of space of space longer than it is wide and tall enough to fit head-to-toe three Arches and at least half an lasagna and tonight there are (there will not be tomorrow) two huge, matching posters, slick across two sides of the room like wallpaper, and the text says MILLENNIAL SCIENCE COMMISSION in a wide variety of fonts ranging from the deliberate archaism of VIKING to the modernity of Impact in order to get a feel for a thousand years in lettering (this was the brief), and all of it in the alternate colors gray, light blue, and dark green, because these are the colors research reveals people associate with “science and technology” (purples and reds denote the arts, royal blue signifies “quality and/or approved merchandise”), because fortunately after years of corporate synesthesia (salt & vinegarblue, cheese & oniongreen) people can finally give the answers required when a space is being designed, or when something is being rebranded, a room/furniture/Britain (that was the brief: a new British room, a space for Britain, Britishness, space of Britain, British industrial space cultural space space); they know what is meant when asked how matte chrome makes them feel; and they know what is meant by national identity? symbols? paintings? maps? music? air-conditioning? smiling black children or smiling Chinese children or [check the box]? world music? shag or pile? tile or floorboards? plants? running water?

they know what they want, especially those who’ve lived this century, forced from one space to another like Mr. De Winter (né Wojciech), renamed, rebranded, the answer to every questionnaire nothing nothing space please just space nothing please nothing space

— Zadia Smith, *White Teeth*

