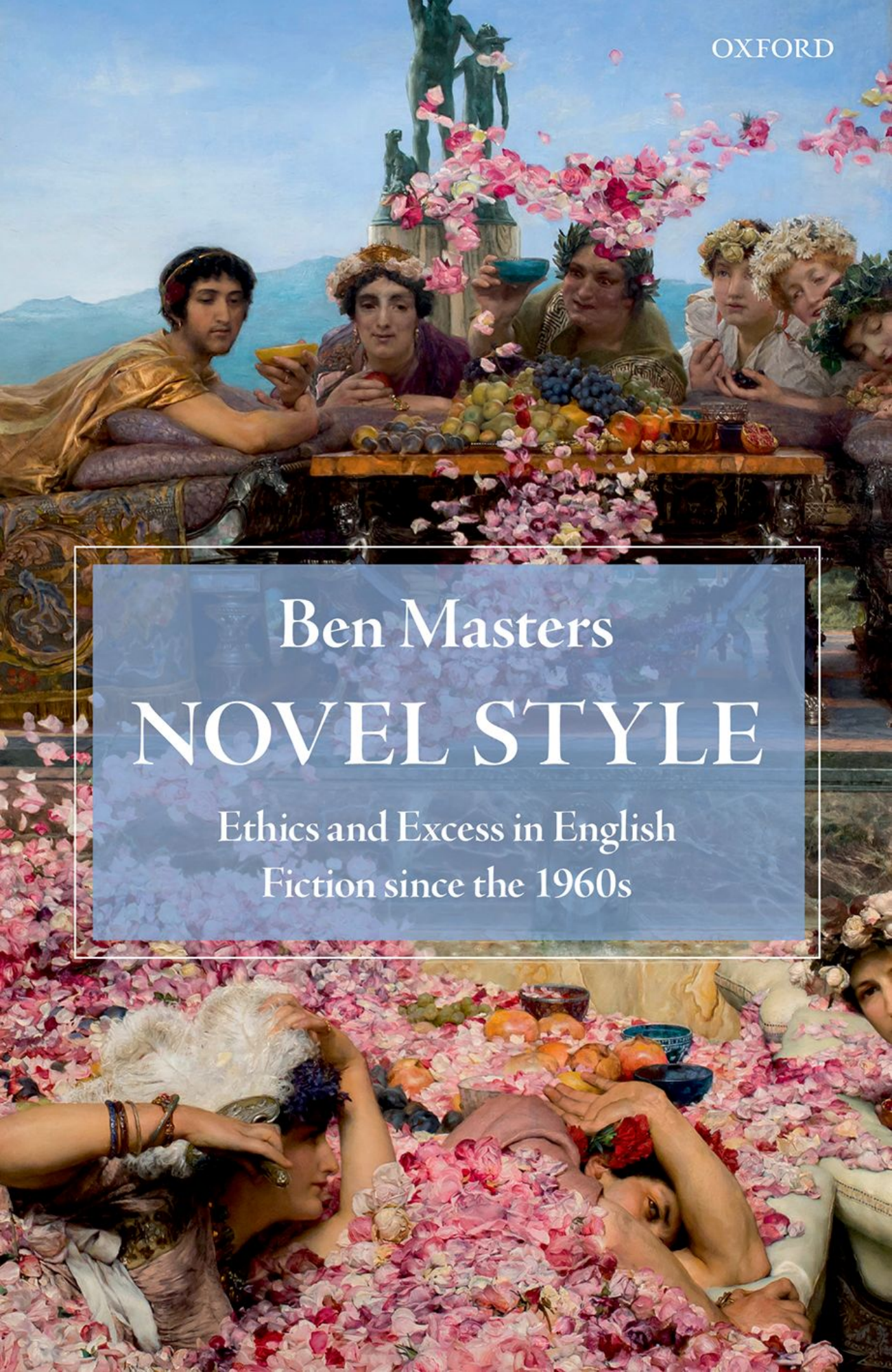
OXFORD
Ben Masters
NOVEL STYLE
Ethics and Excess in English Fiction since the 1960s

NOVEL STYLE

Novel Style

Ethics and Excess in English Fiction since the 1960s

BEN MASTERS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

First Edition published in 2017
Impression: 1

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017942497

ISBN 978–0–19–876614–8

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

For my parents

Acknowledgements

This book has long been in the making. Naturally, given the lengthy passage of time from its inception to publication, I have incurred some hefty debts of gratitude. The first and biggest is owed to Robert Macfarlane, who has supported my work with great wit, charm, and erudition, from my time as a doctoral student to the present day. He has been a model of friendship throughout the writing of this book. Sos Eltis and Simon Palfrey were instrumental in getting me to this point. Their continued advice, encouragement, and open-mindedness has been a real boon over the years. I would like to express a hearty thanks, for all sorts of different reasons, to: Andrew Biswell, Peter Boxall, Alex Houen, Rod Mengham, and the anonymous readers at Oxford University Press for their incredibly helpful comments. Thank you also to Adam Phillips, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, Ros Barber, Adam Thirlwell, and Zachary Leader for participating in a series of events on style that I organized in 2015. Immense gratitude is due to a number of institutions: Emmanuel College, CHESS, and the English Faculty at the University of Cambridge; the English Department and Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University; the English and Creative Writing Department at the Open University; and the School of English at the University of Nottingham. Thank you to all of my colleagues at these homes from home. Some of my ideas on Anthony Burgess were first explored in an article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, in a different form—I am grateful to Alan Jenkins for his editorship of that. A warm thank you to Jacqueline Norton, Aimee Wright, Lowri Ribbons, Eleanor Collins, Denise Phillip Grant, Katharine Hellier, and everyone else at OUP, and Monica Kendall, Yvonne Dixon, and Lakshmanan Sethuraman, all of whom have helped guide this book into the world with such patience, grace, and expertise. And finally, fondest thanks to Matt, Aya, and Sumi for being a constant source of happiness, Carli for her unconditional kindnesses and understanding, and Mum and Dad for everything.

I am grateful for the following permissions:

Excerpts from *Money* (1984), *London Fields* (1989), *Time's Arrow* (1991), and *Yellow Dog* (2003) by Martin Amis, published by Jonathan Cape. Reprinted by permission of the Random House Group Ltd.

Excerpts from *The Information* by Martin Amis, published by Vintage. Reprinted by permission of the Random House Group Ltd.

Excerpts from *London Fields* by Martin Amis. Copyright © 1990 by Martin Amis. Reprinted by permission of Penguin Canada, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited.

Excerpts from *Time's Arrow* by Martin Amis. Copyright © 1991 by Martin Amis. Reprinted by permission of Penguin Canada, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited.

Excerpts from *The Information* by Martin Amis. Copyright © 1995 by Martin Amis. Reprinted by permission of Vintage Canada/Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited.

Excerpts from *Yellow Dog* by Martin Amis. Copyright © 2003 by Martin Amis. Reprinted by permission of Vintage Canada/Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited.

Darkmans by Nicola Barker. Published by Fourth Estate, 2007. Copyright © Nicola Barker. Reproduced by permission of the author c/o Rogers Coleridge & White Ltd., 20 Powis Mews, London W11 1JN.

Excerpts from *A Clockwork Orange: The Restored Edition* (2012) by Anthony Burgess, published by William Heinemann. Reprinted by permission of the Random House Group Ltd.

Excerpts from *Nothing Like the Sun*, *MF*, *Urgent Copy*, and 'Genesis and Headache' reproduced by kind permission of David Higham c/o the Estate of Anthony Burgess.

Excerpts from A CLOCKWORK ORANGE by Anthony Burgess. Copyright © 1962, 1986, renewed 1990 by Anthony Burgess. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Excerpts from NOTHING LIKE THE SUN by Anthony Burgess. Copyright © 1964 by Anthony Burgess. Copyright renewed 1992 by Anthony Burgess. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Extracts from unpublished work by Angela Carter are reproduced courtesy of the Estate of Angela Carter c/o Rogers Coleridge & White Ltd., 20 Powis Mews, London W11 1JN; and were accessed by kind permission from the International Anthony Burgess Foundation.

Nights at the Circus by Angela Carter. Published by Viking, 1985. Copyright © Angela Carter. Reproduced by permission of the author c/o Rogers Coleridge & White Ltd., 20 Powis Mews, London W11 1JN.

The Passion of New Eve by Angela Carter. Published by Gollancz, 1977. Copyright © Angela Carter. Reproduced by permission of the author c/o Rogers Coleridge & White Ltd., 20 Powis Mews, London W11 1JN.

Excerpts from *NW* by Zadie Smith, copyright © 2012 by Zadie Smith. Used by permission of Hamish Hamilton, an imprint of the Random House Group Ltd.

Excerpts from *NW* by Zadie Smith. Copyright © 2012 Zadie Smith. Reprinted by permission of Hamish Hamilton Canada, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited.

Excerpts from NW: A NOVEL by Zadie Smith, copyright © 2012 by Zadie Smith. Used by permission of Penguin Press, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited. Interested parties must apply directly to Penguin Random House LLC for permission.

Contents

Introduction

A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

We live in a time of linguistic plainness. This is the age of the tweet and the internet meme; the soundbite, the status, the slogan. Everything reduced to its most basic components. Stripped back. Pared down. Even in the world of literature, where we might hope to find some linguistic luxury, we are flirting with a recessionary mood. Big books abound, but rhetorical largesse at the level of the sentence is a shrinking economy. There is a prevailing minimalist sensibility in the twenty-first century—a century that began (in literary terms) with James Wood's influential takedown of the over-inflations of 'hysterical realism', and a New Puritan manifesto calling for 'textual simplicity' and a 'vow to avoid all devices of voice: rhetoric, authorial asides'.[1] (Wood, however, is not only one of the most compelling critics of excess, but one of its best advocates too. In his review of the New Puritan manifesto he wrote: 'On the evidence of this book, we need a New Abundance'; and decried 'a literary world already strongly infected by simplicity, presentism, blankness and a love affair with the cinematic'.)[2] Even in the literary mainstream we have seen a Booker Prize judge prioritize novels that 'zip along', while the received wisdom in the increasingly influential discipline of Creative Writing is to avoid overwriting at all costs: a writerly imperative that has become almost gospel.[3]

I want to propose a thought experiment. What might happen in a world of linguistic reduction if we were to find a gang of youths in a bar; an unusual performance artist talking to a journalist in a London theatre dressing-room; and an English adman taking a taxi into New York? (Very particular scenarios, yes, but bear with me.) The youths would be making up their minds about what to do with their evening. There are four of them, one of whom is a bit slow. They are drinking milk laced with drugs—a speciality of the Korova Milkbar. What to do? Pick a fight,

[1] Nicholas Blincoe and Matt Thorne, eds, *All Hail the New Puritans* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001), p. i. On hysterical realism see James Wood, 'Human, All Too Inhuman', *New Republic*, 24 July 2000, https://newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-all-too-inhuman; 'Tell Me How Does It Feel', *Guardian*, 6 October 2001, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/oct/06/fiction; and *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (London: Pimlico, 2005), pp. 167–83.

[2] James Wood, 'Celluloid Junkies', *Guardian*, 16 September 2000, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/16/fiction.reviews1.

[3] Sherna Noah, 'Western On "Readable" Booker List', *Independent*, 6 September 2011, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/western-on-readable-booker-list-2350069.html.

perhaps? Their pockets are already full of money, so there is no financial need to go mugging. But then money isn't the reason for everything . . . Meanwhile, over at the theatre, the performance artist is telling the journalist her life story. She is a bit of a joker. 'I was hatched out of an egg,' she says. She slaps her leg and gives the journalist the eyes. Turns on her stool and looks in the mirror; removes her eyelashes. A glass of champagne hisses on her dressing table. The room smells. Fish aroma. Grease-thickened air. The journalist has a glass too, but nowhere to put it down. He is surrounded by stuff. Tries to find a home for his drink, but only succeeds in unsettling some stockings. How is he ever meant to write? Cut to: New York. The adman's taxi is jumped by another car. The taxi lurches and he hits his head on the roof. This is the last thing he needs. He is jet-lagged. 'Oh man,' he says. The driver turns to look at him. He looks rough too. But in another way. And so the world turns.

I am of course playing, somewhat facetiously, with the openings of three of the most iconic English literary novels of the last sixty years: Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), and Martin Amis's *Money* (1984). But I have done this in order to ask some sincere questions. I want to think about what might be lost when purposefully elaborate modes of expression are denuded. Or, to put it in more positive terms, what might be gained in a world that looks a little more like this:

> 'What's it going to be then, eh?'
>
> There was me, that is Alex, and my three droogs, that is Pete, Georgie, and Dim, Dim being really dim, and we sat in the Korova Milkbar making up our rassoodocks what to do with the evening, a flip dark chill winter bastard though dry. The Korova Milkbar was a milk-plus mesto, and you may, O my brothers, have forgotten what these mestos were like, things changing so skorry these days and everybody very quick to forget, newspapers not being much read neither. Well, what they sold there was milk plus something else. They had no licence for selling liquor, but there was no law yet against prodding some of the new veshches which they used to put in to the old moloko, so you could peet it with vellocet or synthemesc or drencrom or one or two other veshches which would give you a nice quiet horrorshow fifteen minutes admiring Bog And All His Holy Angels And Saints in your left shoe with lights bursting all over your mozg. Or you could peet milk with knives in it, as we used to say, and this would sharpen you up and make you ready for a bit of dirty twenty-to-one, and that was what we were peeting this evening I'm starting off the story with.
>
> Our pockets were full of deng, so there was no real need from the point of view of crasting any more pretty polly to tolchock some old veck in an alley and viddy him swim in his blood while we counted the takings and divided by four, nor to do the ultra-violent on some shivering starry grey-haired ptitsa in a shop and go smecking off with the till's guts. But, as they say, money isn't everything.[4]

Burgess's invented language, Nadsat, may be indigenous to *A Clockwork Orange*, but it is in fact representative of his style in general. Note the neologisms, which are often puns, and how they make the world seem simultaneously obfuscated *and*

[4] Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange: The Restored Edition*, ed. Andrew Biswell (London: William Heinemann, 2012), pp. 7–8.

particularized; and that concurrent sense of the prose generating its own decorum, its own sense of perception and behaviour. In the same way that Alex and his droogs have their peculiar moral code, Burgess's prose develops a bespoke logic and ethics. He gives us a fallen language for a fallen world, whereby the language is not merely a symptom or reflection of this fallen reality, but an intervention; a means of existing in and through moral uncertainty. And this has to do with the internal pressure between form and detail, whereby the form—or the frame—is in fact fairly conventional (a setting is clearly defined and we are introduced to the main characters one by one; Burgess even goes on to give us lengthy descriptions of their clothes), but the language is not. Language and form, the details and the frame, work hard to complicate one another; to keep each other honest. Take away the excesses and we have a narrative beholden to convention, which is precisely what Burgess's decorum seeks to agitate and challenge.

Now to meet the performance artist, Fevvers, in full technicolour and surround sound:

> 'Lor' love you, sir!' Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids. . . . The blonde guffawed uproariously, slapped the marbly thigh on which her wrap fell open and flashed a pair of vast, blue, indecorous eyes at the young reporter with his open notebook and his poised pencil, as if to dare: 'Believe it or not!' Then she spun round on her swivelling dressing-stool—it was a plush-topped, backless piano stool, lifted from the rehearsal room—and confronted herself with a grin in the mirror as she ripped six inches of false lash from her left eyelid with an incisive gesture and a small, explosive, rasping sound. . . . A hissing flute of bubbly stood beside her own elbow on the dressing-table, the still-crepitating bottle lodged negligently in the toilet jug, packed in ice that must have come from a fishmonger's for a shiny scale or two stayed trapped within the chunks. And this twice-used ice must surely be the source of the marine aroma—something fishy about the Cockney Venus—that underlay the hot, solid composite of perfume, sweat, greasepaint and raw, leaking gas that made you feel you breathed the air in Fevvers's dressing-room in lumps. . . . [Walser's] quarry had made him effectively trapped. His attempts to get rid of the damn' glass only succeeded in dislodging a noisy torrent of concealed *billets doux*, bringing with them from the mantelpiece a writhing snakes' nest of silk stockings, green, yellow, pink, scarlet, black, that introduced a powerful note of stale feet, final ingredient in the highly personal aroma, 'essence of Fevvers's, that clogged the room. . . . Perhaps the stockings had descended in order to make common cause with the other elaborately intimate garments, wormy with ribbons, carious with lace, redolent of use, that she hurled round the room apparently at random during the course of the many dressings and undressings which her profession demanded.[5]

Carter's verbs are loud. Everything is amplified and resonant. Fevvers *slaps* her thigh; *flashes* her eyes; *rips* her false lashes. This is a world of large-scale doing and being. However, like a high-wire artist, Carter treads that same thin line between precision and obfuscation as Burgess. With Carter, we get an abiding sense of being brought closer to something while simultaneously being taken further away. And this knowing sleight of hand is integral to what I will call Carter's modal

[5] Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), pp. 7–9.

aesthetic—a specific kind of artistic perception that can both refer to what *is*, while suggesting what could or might be. It would be easy for an elaborate prose style like Carter's to become weighed down by its own material density (the above is, after all, a passage packed with *stuff*). Yet the particular co-ordinations of Carter's style, at its most artful, work to postpone such an outcome. For all the raucousness of her verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, it is the modal qualifiers that give Carter's writing its remarkable suppleness. We see this in her constant return to qualifying figures like *perhaps*, *but*, *maybe*, *if*. This is a world of the 'what might be *if*. . . '. The shape-shifting 'perhaps' in this particular passage takes us into a sideways-on world, a pliable world, where Fevvers's stockings become 'a writhing snakes' nest of silk', and material life has its own quiddity made up of strange animations and unexpected affinities (note how the stockings 'make common cause' with all the other garments). In Carter's prose, hypotheticals become real as stylistically embodied possibilities. She is able to make us see what is actually there (or what *might* be there) in a new light. This is an idiosyncratically Carterian way of thinking and knowing, which shifts the line of observation without losing sight of what *is*. But it relies on the scale-tipping presence of all those metaphors, similes, and qualifiers to do its chameleon work. The style is essential, not supplementary.

Amis's John Self tips the scales in just about every way imaginable. He would not last long on the exclusion diet of my thought experiment, because he needs the performance-enhancing supplements of Amis's prose to get by:

> As my cab pulled off FDR Drive, somewhere in the early Hundreds, a low-slung Tomahawk full of black guys came sharking out of lane and sloped in fast right across our bows. We banked, and hit a deep welt or grapple-ridge in the road: to the sound of a rifle-shot the cab roof ducked down and smacked me on the core of my head. I really didn't need that, I tell you, with my head and face and back and heart hurting a lot all the time anyway, and still drunk and crazed and ghosted from the plane.
>
> 'Oh man,' I said.
>
> 'Yeah,' said the cabbie from behind the shattered plastic of his screen. 'Fuckin A.'
>
> My cabbie was fortyish, lean, balding. Such hair as remained scurried long and damp down his neck and shoulders. To the passenger, that's all city cabbies are—mad necks, mad rugs. This mad neck was explosively pocked and mottled, with a flicker of adolescent virulence in the crimson underhang of the ears.[6]

Excess, fittingly, is many things. Of course it has to do with quantity, which, in rhetorical terms, might be felt in the accumulation of clauses, or the proliferation of imagery and qualifying phrases. But it also has to do with exceeding the norm; with pushing beyond expectation and custom. Note the off-kilter verbs and prepositions in this Amis passage: how the cab roof 'ducked down' (expressive of a very strange kind of agency); and how the core is 'on' rather than 'in' Self's head. Things are not as we might expect. Then there are the distinctive cadences, not

[6] Martin Amis, *Money* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), p. 7.

least the patterns of three, repetitions, and lists. At first these seem inconsequential ('fortyish, lean, balding'), maybe even gratuitous or redundant ('my head and face and back and heart'—pretty much the majority of him, then). But Amis's excess, at its most affecting, moves beyond mere accumulation, so that acquisition becomes inquisition, like in the tricolon that describes how Self was 'still drunk and crazed and ghosted from the plane', where the line of thought takes on increasing gravity, as though each word carries additional freight, becoming more poetic and loaded than the last. And it's here that we get that distinctively Amisian tension between the quantitative and qualitative, whereby the prose seeks a purchase on the excesses of the things it describes not so that it merely registers them, but so that it might evaluate and reshape them too. This plays out in the alliteration and assonance of the last sentence ('This mad neck was explosively pocked and mottled'), and the effect we get of a shifting perspective in the final clause ('with a flicker of adolescent virulence in the crimson underhang of the ears'). Here we sense the complicating presence of the author enter the frame, and a tricky dynamic between narrator and implied author is established. This, as we shall see, is key to Amis's aesthetic, which seeks to enrich and challenge the reader through its own seeming too-muchness.

In carrying out this thought experiment, I have made several observations that beg further thinking through and substantiating, which I will do through my own critical excesses in the chapters that follow. For now, however, I want to suggest how much power—how much ethical affect—is to be located precisely in the components of fictional prose that take us beyond a conventional economy of expression; and the flexibilities of thought and possibility that we risk losing when we suppress elaboration and flamboyance. The novel is an excessive form, and this is what enables it to exceed other art forms. It can exceed the boundary between self and other; it can be coherently incoherent (coming at things from sideways on, digressing, accumulating); and it can be playfully speculative while retaining the reader's openness to its claims. More than this, novels know things that other forms do not; which is to say they enable us to think and be in ways that are unique to the novel form.[7] They forge a special realm of possibility that is at once hypothetical and tangibly real, and that provides an unrivalled intimacy to other consciousnesses (whether authorial consciousness, characterological consciousness, or what we might want to call the text's own peculiar consciousness). This book, then, is driven by a conviction that elaborate novelistic writing opens up unique ways of knowing and being in the world; crucial and enriching ways that are endangered when expression is reduced to its leanest possible forms.

[7] On what novels could be said to know and think, see Michael Wood, *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism from 1719–1908* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); and Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), chapter eight.

THE STYLISTS OF EXCESS

In a 1969 essay titled 'Genesis and Headache', Burgess wrote:

> The beauties of the plain style are often urged on me, the duty of excising rather than adding. . . . One has to be true to one's own temperament, and mine is closer to that of the baroque writers than that of the stark toughies. To hell with cheeseparing and verbal meanness: it all reeks of Banbury puritanism.[8]

Twenty-one years later, in an interview for *The Paris Review*, Amis professed a similar 'temperament', citing Burgess as both a forebear and an ally:

> An awful lot of modern writing seems to me to be a depressed use of language. Once, I called it 'vow-of-poverty prose.' No, give me the king in his countinghouse. Give me Updike. Anthony Burgess said there are two kinds of writers, A-writers and B-writers. A-writers are storytellers, B-writers are users of language. And I tend to be grouped in the Bs. Under Nabokov's prose, under Burgess's prose, under my father's prose—his earlier rather than his later prose—the English sentence is like a poetic meter. It's a basic rhythm from which the writer is free to glance off in unexpected directions.[9]

Carter also shared Burgess's and Amis's inclination towards the elaborate. When John Haffenden suggested to her in a 1984 interview that 'I think it's true that you do embrace opportunities for overwriting', she responded in suitably hyperbolic terms:

> Embrace them? I would say that I half-suffocate them with the enthusiasm with which I wrap my arms and legs around them. . . . It's the only way I can write. I'm not sure what beautiful writing is. There's a certain kind of flat pedestrian writing which I know I don't like, but I am cursed a bit by fluency, I think.[10]

Carter is not just stating a preference for 'overwriting', but expressing a suspicion of its opposite. 'Baroque writing', or 'overwriting', for these writers, is not something pursued on a whim, but a principled rejection of the 'plain style' (Burgess), 'vow-of-poverty prose' (Amis), and 'flat pedestrian writing' (Carter). As the following chapters will argue, this rejection is based on ethical grounds as much as it is on aesthetic grounds.

'The virtues of the plain style,' Burgess wrote, referencing Ernest Hemingway and Somerset Maugham as key practitioners, 'have been presented to us too often; we've been bemused into forgetting that plain English is too often emasculated English.'[11] Amis echoed Burgess's scepticism of 'plain English' in *The Paris Review*:

> AMIS: Much modern prose is praised for its terseness, its scrupulous avoidance of curlicue, et cetera. But I don't feel the deeper rhythm there.

[8] Anthony Burgess, 'Genesis and Headache', in *Afterwords: Novelists on Their Novels*, ed. Thomas McCormack (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 29–47 (p. 46).

[9] Philip Gourevitch, ed., *The Paris Review Interviews: Vol. 3* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008), pp. 332–57 (pp. 342–3).

[10] John Haffenden, ed., *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 76–96 (p. 91).

[11] Anthony Burgess, 'Pronounced Vla-DEEM-ear Nah-BOAK-off', *New York Times Book Review*, 2 July 1967, pp. 1 and 20 (p. 20).

> I don't think these writers are being terse out of choice. I think they are being terse because it's the only way they can write.
>
> INTERVIEWER: Out of limitation.
>
> AMIS: Out of limitation. So if the prose isn't there, then you're reduced to what are merely secondary interests, like story, plot, characterization, psychological insight, and form.[12]

Burgess, Carter, and Amis have often been dismissed exactly for not paying sufficient attention to what Amis calls 'secondary interests'—not least plot and characterization. Such criticisms usually come attached to implicit moral judgements, whether it be that sensitive subjects are being inappropriately over-stylized, or that authorial showiness and obtrusiveness have come at the expense of so-called human interest. Peter Ackroyd, for instance, disparaged Burgess's 'rhetorical garishness' in *Napoleon Symphony* (1974), and for '[whipping] up [his] language to a frenzy for no particular reason';[13] and Carter for making 'everything . . . a size too large or a shade too garish', so that her writing 'doesn't have the substance to match its style': 'When the language is so grandiose and verbose it can only transmit fantasies and visions—and no novel can survive for long on such a meagre diet.'[14] Ackroyd implies that the writing of Burgess and Carter is all style and no substance (note how both are 'garish'), which suggests that their prose lacks some healthy necessities: what many critics would define as the human qualities of literature, as conveyed by character and plot. (Ackroyd even says: 'Mr Burgess employs a variety of styles in an excessively self-conscious way, with the result that any dialogue between recognizable human beings seems a trifle cracked.')[15] It has been a general assumption of mainstream literary criticism of the post-war period to the present day that character and plot are the chief purveyors of human interest, so that an absence of the former two aspects entails an absence of the latter. This is made explicit in Roger Lewis's criticisms of Burgess:

> There's no depth of feeling. His language, and his stylistic use of it, is a sartorial virtuosity. . . . The soul of Burgess's characters is simply in their garments and accoutrements. Remove the layers and you'll be lucky to find blood and bones, nerves and viruses.[16]

A similar attitude is apparent in the essays of James Wood, where Amis and Carter are held up as examples of dehumanized, postmodern prose,[17] and in Kingsley Amis's assessment of Burgess's work as 'too much wordage, wordplay, wordiness and not enough character, story, etc., to suit me'.[18] Throughout these and many

[12] Gourevitch, ed., *Paris Review*, p. 343.

[13] Peter Ackroyd, *The Collection: Journalism, Reviews, Essays, Short Stories, Lectures* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001), pp. 16–17.

[14] Peter Ackroyd, 'Passion Fruit', *Spectator*, 26 March 1977, pp. 23–4.

[15] Ackroyd, *The Collection*, p. 17.

[16] Roger Lewis, *Anthony Burgess* (London: Faber, 2002), p. 297.

[17] See, for instance, James Wood, 'Bewitchment', *London Review of Books*, 8 December 1994, pp. 20–1; and *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), pp. 186–99.

[18] Kingsley Amis had no qualms about lumping his son and Carter together in a letter to Philip Larkin: 'Have you actually tried to *read* Clive Sinclair and Ian MacEwen (mcewen?) and Angela Carter

similar evaluations, there is an insinuation that the writing of elaborate stylists like Burgess, Carter, and Amis deals only in surfaces (indeed style *as* surface), and that there is a corresponding lack of depth. This is something that rankled Carter and Burgess, for whom stylistic extravagance was far from a shallow practice. Carter protested that in *The Passion of New Eve* (1977)—the same novel that Ackroyd called 'grandiose and verbose' and lacking in substance—she wanted 'to say some quite specific things about the cultural production of femininity' and was 'disappointed that it should be treated as just another riotous extravaganza'.[19] Moreover, Burgess wryly confessed that:

> it hurts, of course, when one's most carefully contrived artificiality is dismissed as something unlicked and crude: one feels like a hostess who has painfully stuffed individual spaghetti strips with a complex forcemeat, only to have the dish shovelled down without comment, much less with thanks.[20]

Likewise, when Amis says, 'Much modern prose is praised for its terseness, its scrupulous avoidance of curlicue, et cetera. But I don't feel the deeper rhythm there,' we can sense an underlying frustration about prevailing literary taste and value.

The work of these writers leads me to ask how far style in itself can be substantive. And might not excess be a particular ingredient of that substance; a substance that can be put to meaningful ends? Such questions are crucial to an appreciation of the stylists considered in this book—stylists like Burgess, Carter, and Amis, who made claims to be moralists while being more interested in language and its affectivity (which I mean in a wider sense than just feeling, but language's ability to move the reader, both emotionally and intellectually, and to offer new ways of seeing) than in character or plot.[21] Though their careers span a considerable period (Burgess published his first novel in 1956 and Amis still publishes today), and though they by no means formed a self-conscious group or coterie, there are family resemblances in the work of Burgess, Carter, and Amis—resemblances that are also traceable in the novels of the twenty-first-century writers whom I turn to in Chapter 4.[22] These writers all demonstrate a tendency towards poetic language (their sentences are animated by alliteration, assonance, simile, and metaphor), a facility for eccentric rhythms and phrases, and a preference for the polysyllabic and hypotactical. Above all, they are what I will call *stylists of excess*—a description that carries a useful double sense, for not only do they write in supposedly excessive styles, but they also write *about* excess. They are conscious of writing out of excessive times (what Eric Hobsbawm called 'The Age of Extremes'), as is abundantly clear

and M**t** *m**? Roll on is all I can say boyo. Fucking roll on.' Kingsley Amis, *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, ed. Zachary Leader (London: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 950–1; and *Memoirs* (New York: Summit, 1991), p. 276.

[19] Haffenden, ed., *Interview*, p. 86.

[20] Burgess, 'Genesis', p. 44.

[21] Burgess even went so far as to suggest that 'language should be a character itself' (*Late Show: Face to Face,* BBC, 21 March 1989, http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12216.shtml, at 25:15).

[22] There are also extra-literary connections, including shared agents (Burgess and Carter were both represented by Deborah Rogers) and publishers (most notably Heinemann and Jonathan Cape). Amis reviewed and profiled Burgess on several occasions and Burgess reviewed Amis's *Money* in 1984 (see Chapters 1 and 3), while Carter and Burgess directly corresponded with one another (see Chapter 2).

in the themes of their work. Yet this is not to say that their prose styles merely enact the excesses of the larger culture. To read Burgess, Carter, Amis, and their protégés mimetically (a notion that I qualify in Chapter 1) is to fundamentally misunderstand them. Stylistic excess for these writers is not just a means of reflecting their times, but a way of actively engaging with them. More than this, being a stylist inevitably means being a moralist. In his autobiography, *Experience* (2000), Amis recalls an argument he had with his father, Kingsley, about the baroque style of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955):

> When I read [a] paragraph out loud to him he said, 'That's just flimflam, diversionary stuff to make you think he cares. That's just style.' Whereas I would argue that style *is* morality: morality detailed, configured, intensified. It's not in the mere narrative arrangement of good and bad that morality makes itself felt. It can be there in every sentence. To Kingsley, though, sustained euphony automatically became euphuism.[23]

But what exactly does Amis's intriguing aphorism ('style *is* morality') mean? This will form one of the central enquiries of this book. In order to fully understand its implications though, we first need to consider the historical context out of which these stylists of excess wrote.

AUSTERITY BRITAIN

Each chapter of this book will move us forward in time, beginning with Burgess in the 1960s and 1970s, Carter in the 1970s and 1980s, and Amis from the 1980s to the present century, before turning to a newer generation of writers who have adapted similar kinds of stylistic excess in the twenty-first century, but have taken them in new directions. Although I began this introduction by reflecting on our current stylistic predicament, which I will return to in Chapter 4, I now need to go back to the immediate post-war period in order to set the scene.

The 1950s and 1960s are typically thought of as decades of anti-experimentalism and sober positivism.[24] One need only point to the ambitious early novels of William Golding, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch, and B.S. Johnson to contest this perception, yet it certainly rang true to Burgess's mind, who felt at odds with post-war British literary culture. Looking back in 1983, Burgess said: 'The world knew that the cream, fresh or sour, of twentieth-century experience was to be consumed only in America,

[23] Martin Amis, *Experience* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), p. 121. For a book-length, comparative study of Kingsley Amis and Martin Amis see Gavin Keulks, *Father and Son: Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis, and the British Novel since 1950* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

[24] For this angle see: Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 56–79; Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel: 1878–2001* (London: Penguin, 2001), especially chapters five and six (pp. 253–360); Deborah Cameron, '"The Virtues of Good Prose": Verbal Hygiene and the Movement', in *The Movement Reconsidered: Essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie, and their Contemporaries*, ed. Zachary Leader (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 139–54; Blake Morrison, *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), especially chapter four (pp. 145–91); and Randall Stevenson, *The Last of England?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 165–89.