

Turning: From Verse to Prose*

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In their study of the history of prose in France, Jeffrey Kittay and Wlad Godzich trace the manner in which prose and poetry get constructed as opposites of each other in the fourteenth century.¹ They argue that “the emergence of prose” was related to a change in the structures of authority: whereas the authority of verse was invested in the person of the performer, prose, in the Middle Ages, established its authority mainly by making a claim to referential truth (153). This is also the manner in which the novel, in England, established its authority during the eighteenth century (as Ian Watt has long ago argued in his analysis of the “rise of the novel”). In both cases, the emergence of a “new” form—prose, the novel—is related to class-based struggles for epistemological authority, social power, and political legitimacy.

In this essay I will discuss two literary texts dating from the second half of the eighteenth century, in which the contest between prose and verse is in some way dramatized or thematized, in order to examine more closely what was at stake in the opposition between these two terms at that point in literary history. My discussion of Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) will focus on the formal aspect of the opposition between prose and verse: prose, *prorsus* in Latin, means straightforward, straight, direct, as opposed to verse which “turns” (*versus*).² The straightforwardness of prose connotes an ongoing movement forward, an unlimited extendability.³ In the English language, however, the straightforwardness of prose has connoted also honesty, candor, telling things as they are: “the frank prose of undis-

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sembling noon" (J. R. Lowell, *OED*, "prose" *n.* and *adj.* A.1.b.). When opposed to verse, which is sometimes linked to deception ("fraud and imposition," *OED*), prose appears as the language of truth. My reading of William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), then, will center on this association of prose with truth as full disclosure. Though both texts valorize prose, they also allow us to see why at a certain point prose had to be altered—why its ongoing forward movement as well as its commitment to truth as full disclosure needed to be limited. In my conclusion I will suggest that this limitation is one of the ways in which, to use Virginia Woolf's words in her essay on *Robinson Crusoe*, prose "accommodated itself to the demand" of a rising middle class and "had fitted itself" (*The Second Common Reader* 50) to express its values and ideology.

The Vicar of Wakefield

The Vicar of Wakefield provides us with a unique window onto the wide field of possibilities for narrative available to authors before the novel has become a distinct (and later on, hegemonic) genre with a more or less normative plot structure. The "tale," as Goldsmith called his text, exemplifies the peaceful coexistence in one cultural space of a large number of literary forms and genres—ballad, (mock) elegy, song, romance, sermon, political discourse and a fable being some of them. That Goldsmith's tale is hospitable to many forms of discourse and different types of narrative does not in the least imply that the differences among these forms or types are erased or should be considered negligible. Rather, the tale can be seen as an example of a "dialogic" text where different modes of discourse co-exist without being hierarchized so that with all their differences they are treated as equally valid options.

The first genre we encounter is the ballad. Burchell introduces the ballad as a counter-example to contemporary English poetry (Sophia's praise of Mr. Gay) as well as classical poetry (Moses's praise of Ovid), both of which he criticizes. The ballad's language, he says, is simple

rather than “luxuriant,” emphasizes “plot or connexion” over description (or images), and in it sound is less important than “carrying on the sense” (331).⁴ Since simplicity, lack of images, and emphasis on sense rather than sound are features commonly associated with *prose* (whether prose is considered “plain,” or “ordinary” or “direct”), Burchell’s comments raise the question of where the specificity of the ballad as *verse* might reside. I will argue that it resides in the dependence of the ballad’s narrative on verse/versus as “turn.”

The ballad tells the story of two lovers: Angelina—rich, proud, and coquettish—and Edwin, poor and virtuous. Dejected by her pretended scorn, Edwin disappears. Full of regrets and sure he is dead, Angelina, disguised as a man, wanders in search of the dead and of death. She happens upon the dwelling of a hermit who is none other than Edwin, alive and in love.

The importance of “turns” for the ballad (the word is repeated six times) is signaled from the very first line: “Turn, gentle hermit of the dale, / And guide my lonely way” (331). Since the poem starts abruptly, it is not clear from what the hermit needs to “turn,” and thus the request to turn appears as an absolute: the poem cannot start, the encounter between the hermit and the wanderer cannot take place, without an act of “turning.” Since the ballad starts at a point near the plot’s climax and dénouement—the meeting between the wanderer/Angelina and the hermit/Edwin—much of its story is told through the wanderer’s retrospective narrative. This turn back to the past as the cause of the present is also what brings about recognition, reversal, and closure. The ending, like the beginning, depends on a turn.

Further turns are predicated on symmetrical oppositions and reversals. The wanderer asks the hermit to “turn” and guide him “To where yon taper cheers the vale/ With hospitable ray” (stanza 1), opposing this hospitable “yon” to a “here” which is threatening since it seems to actively prevent the wanderer from reaching his goal: “For here forlorn and lost I tread, / With fainting steps and slow; / Where wilds immeasurably spread, / Seem lengthening as I go” (stanza 2).

But the hermit recasts this “there” as a false goal, since it leads to death: “yonder [...] phantom flies / To lure thee to thy doom” (stanza 3). He opposes to it a “here,” the site of true hospitality (“Here to the houseless child of want, / My door is open still,” stanza 4), inviting the wanderer to “turn” away from the false goal and find safety in his cell: “Then turn to-night, and freely share / Whate’er my cell bestows” (stanza 5). Thus turn and counter-turn create an opposition between “here” and “there” which is also an opposition between true and false goal, true and false hospitality.

But the false goal from which the hermit asks the wanderer to turn away is not entirely false: as we find out, the wanderer was seeking both death and a lover presumed to be dead (and which the hermit’s “yonder phantom” uncannily designates). In turning away from this original goal the wanderer finds something she thought was irrevocably lost: her lover alive and loving. In the following stanzas the hermit exhorts the wanderer to “turn, thy cares forego” (stanza 8) thus inviting the wanderer to renounce all earthly attachments, to die to the world, as he presumably has done (since he asserts “All earth born cares are wrong [...] / And what is friendship but a name [...] / And love is still an emptier sound [...]”; stanzas 8, 19, 20). But as in the case of the wanderer, the hermit’s renunciation of life is the result of a false assumption, here that his beloved was indifferent to his love. In turning away from their original (and symmetrical) goals of seeking death and renouncing life, the wanderer and the hermit find what they truly desired.

The hermit’s exhortation and his discourse against love and earthly attachments bring about the first “turn” in the plot of the ballad, when the wanderer “stands confest / A maid in all her charms” (stanza 23). As she “turn’d to chide” the hermit for clasping her in his arms (stanza 36), the second “turn” in the plot occurs and the hermit reveals himself to be Edwin. Edwin then invites Angelina once more to turn: “Turn Angelina [...] / [...] turn to see/Thy own, thy long-lost Edwin here, / Restor’d to love and thee” (stanza 37). Now Angelina can again be asked to “every care resign” (stanza 38) but not, as before,

because earthly cares are “wrong” but rather because “‘Never from this hour to part/ We’ll live and love so true’” (stanza 39). The opposition between his constancy and her “fickle art” is proved to be false: Angelina’s “wandering” and “straying” (both physical and moral) have led to a “true end” which is at the same time a restoration (the lovers are “restor’d to love,” life, and to each other).

The symmetrical reversal of oppositions, the mirroring of true and false goals, the repeated irony that shows us the two lovers moving towards their true goal without fully recognizing it,⁵ all suggest the presence of some hidden force (fate, providence) that leads the plot inexorably towards a goal already present from the beginning. It is this “turn”—the recursive form of plot—that differentiates the ballad from a prose tale whose “straightforwardness” should therefore be understood as forward oriented extension not circumscribed by a final cause. Such straightforwardness, I will argue, characterizes the Vicar’s own tale, as well as some of the tales told by other characters, such as the story of the reunion of the Vicar’s son, George, with his lost love, Arabella, which the ballad is sometimes said—wrongly in my opinion—to resemble and foreshadow.⁶

After the Vicar has lost his fortune, the engagement between his oldest son, George, and Arabella Wilmot is broken, and George leaves home. Though he initially sets himself a goal—seeking his fortune in London—once he fails to make it in the market of talent, his movements and actions are determined by chance encounters: a man he meets as he “was meditating one day in a coffee-house” (388); a young gentleman of distinction he encounters “on a bench in St. James’s Park” (390); a captain of a ship he meets just after having decided to sell himself for a slave (393); an Irish student into whose company he falls (394); an old acquaintance who belongs to a company of comedians (397). Each new acquaintance steers him in a new direction, and so he keeps going. Soon, rather than seeking to make his fortune, he is trying simply to survive. The lack of a specific goal makes his travels open-ended, and this is what defines his movement—wherever it leads him—as a movement forward: “In this manner I proceeded to

Paris, with no design but just to look about me, and then to go forward" (395). He works his way back to England and intends to return to his father's house, but does not: another chance encounter changes his course. A few more chances down the road he runs into his father and Arabella.

This double encounter is not the result of the kind of "turns" we have seen in the ballad. Rather, it is the result of the intersection of different straight lines, chains of events that are independent of each other (George's peregrinations; the Vicar's travel back home from his futile search for his daughter, Olivia; Arabella's visit to her aunt and uncle). Though the two lovers meet again after a long separation, this meeting does not, in itself, lead to their happy reunion; before that can happen, a whole series of further chance events (detailed in eleven chapters) has to take place. The union of George and Arabella therefore does not have either the necessity or the finality of the reunion, caused by turns, of the lovers in the ballad, and George's story, dependent on chance, remains in principle open-ended, always going forward.

The story of George's adventures is not the only example of the "straightforwardness" of prose narrative. Critics have noted the uncompromisingly linear nature of the Vicar's own tale of woes, proceeding as it does with no digressions, flashbacks, or foreshadowing.⁷ The absence of strong causal relations (there is not one single overriding cause, fate or a flaw that can account for all the disasters which befall the Vicar and his family nor are the various events linked to each other in a chain of cause and effect) means that the movement of the plot is chronological rather than logical. This further highlights the tale's structure as a forward-oriented extension not circumscribed by a final cause. But whereas the emphasis on chance in George's story means that there is no compelling reason why its episodes (including, of course, that of his reunion with Arabella) should be in the order they are told (we can change much in the order of the episodes without loss of meaning), this is not the case in the tale of the Vicar where

the main events create an ordered series. This can be seen most clearly by looking at the changes to the home.⁸

At the beginning of the story the Vicar and his family live in “an elegant house, situated in a fine country, and a good neighborhood” (306). When the Vicar is forced to leave Wakefield after losing his fortune he moves to “a little neighborhood” among farmers to whom he feels socially and intellectually superior, in a house which “consisted of but one story and was covered with thatch” (318). When this “snug abode” is destroyed by fire, the family is reduced to live in one of the outhouses, made “as convenient as possible” by the contributions of his farmer neighbors (408). From there the Vicar, through the machinations of the Squire Thornhill, goes to prison where all he has in his cell is a bed made of a bundle of straw and some clothes he receives from a fellow prisoner. At this point, with the structure of downward progression firmly established and the Vicar and his family reduced to a bare minimum, the series of disasters can only either continue to the point of complete annihilation or be reversed.

And yet there is also a sense in which the reversal of the Vicar’s plot does not contradict or compromise its straightforwardness. As we have seen, the ordering of the events that constitute the Vicar’s plot is not only chronological but also one of intensification: losses (of home and family), and the affective reaction to them, become more and more intense. Though the Vicar’s forbearance of his losses is firmly grounded in his Christian faith, his salient character trait is not ascetic resignation but an unlimited capacity for affective experience. Indeed, the Vicar shows an exultation in his suffering that foregrounds affect in and of itself (rather than a particular manifestation of it—pain or joy).⁹ Suffering and enjoyment are here not the negation of each other but are both experiences of powerful affect; passing from one to the other carries an increase in intensity by virtue of “contrast,” that is, difference.

This point is made in the sermon the Vicar preaches when he reaches the nadir of his misfortune. The focus of the sermon is the

difference between the rich and the poor, and this difference is one of intensity: in heaven the poor and the wretched have “all that superiority of pleasure which arises from contrasted enjoyment” (438).¹⁰ In this sense, the Vicar’s joy at the reversal of his fortune at the end of the tale does not contradict the thesis of the sermon, as some critics claim.¹¹ Enjoyment is possible even after many losses and when everything is lost, then the loss itself guarantees a greater enjoyment when reversed. The reversal is subsumed in the movement forward since it increases the intensity of affect and it is this increase in intensity that gives the plot of the Vicar’s misfortunes its uncompromisingly linear character.

In *The Vicar of Wakefield*, then, prose narrative is “straightforward” in the sense of going on, without a predetermined goal and the closure produced by a “turn.”¹² This “on-goingness” is related to the story being that of survival as well as of affect, that is, describing a process in time that is not a progress: it is neither governed by a goal nor serves as the means to an end that exceeds and negates it.

Caleb Williams

Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* is different in tone, style, and plot from Goldsmith’s tale but its main thematic concern—the relation between tyranny and freedom, between power and justice—is pertinent to Goldsmith’s tale too. Both texts show power as primarily that of a privileged class that has the ability to bend the law and its institutions in its own favor. In the first part of *Caleb Williams*, tyrannical power is primarily expressed as physical force, and it is embodied in the squire, Tyrell; when it comes to a contest of words, however, Tyrell, who can barely read or write, is no match for his antagonists. But in the rest of the novel, where the conflict is between Caleb and Falkland, the focus shifts from physical to discursive power. In this part, the novel articulates a struggle between two discursive practices—prose and verse—and the competing, indeed conflicting values and ideals they represent. The world of prose is the democratic world, the world of

social mobility due to merit; it is opposed to the old “poetic” world of privilege and social hierarchy. The novel can thus be read as an allegory dramatizing the change in authority that enabled prose to gain ground over poetry as a means of expression.¹³

The aristocratic Falkland, who has “imbibed the love of chivalry and romance” from “the heroic poets of Italy” (10) and is the author of “an Ode to the Genius of Chivalry” (25) is consistently associated with verse, which he reads, writes, analyzes and imitates. Caleb is not Falkland’s equal since his parents were peasants but he has a keen intelligence and is well-educated. His fundamentally democratic values (equal rights, justice, freedom) contradict Falkland’s aristocratic code of honor and investment in appearances (reputation rather than truth or justice). Caleb is consistently associated with prose, specifically prose of the “plain style” (characterized by the avoidance of figuration). In contrast to Falkland’s elaborate figures, Caleb’s speech is “artless and untaught [...] having an air of innocence, frankness and courage” (108); he gives “honest explanations” that are “clear, collected, and simple” (297).

Caleb’s conflict with Falkland was caused initially by the former’s curiosity, his desire to uncover the mystery in Falkland’s past (the murder of Tyrell of which he rightly thinks Falkland is guilty). But the discovery of the secret turns out to be not the end of his story but rather its beginning. From a mystery plot that culminates with the revelation of a past, hidden truth (a recursive plot), his tale becomes a narrative of persecution and pursuit, a tale of the continuously renewed task of eluding the pursuer. The endlessness of this tale is especially pronounced because Falkland decides not to kill Caleb but simply to continue the chase, rousting him from every roost. Thus, even the physical action of the novel participates in the opposition between prose and verse (Falkland, for example, repeatedly forces Caleb to turn back where he would go forward). But this action is punctuated by a series of overtly rhetorical contests, in which Caleb’s story is pitted against Falkland’s word.

Falkland's word, of course, is guaranteed by the enormous social and political power of its author. Caleb has to make his story hold in the absence of such a guarantee, independently of the social position or reputation of the teller; it has to convince readers or listeners through its own internal qualities. "Virtue rising superior to every calumny, defeating by a plain, unvarnished tale all the stratagems of vice, and throwing back upon her adversary the confusion with which he had hope to overwhelm her, was one of the favorite subjects of my youthful reveries" (160), Caleb writes.

What is on trial in the court scene that brings the novel to its end is, first, whether the "truth" of prose can compete with the "word" of verse (and the sheer social power to which it is attached); second, whether prose can succeed in establishing its own authority. In Godwin's original manuscript ending, prose loses both contests.¹⁴ In the published ending, prose achieves an ambivalent victory: Caleb defeats the "godlike" Falkland, but the victory takes place only because verse gives its word to prose: "I stand now completely detected. My name will be consecrated to infamy, while your heroism, your patience and your virtues will be for ever admired" (324), Falkland declares. Moreover, Falkland's concession is brought about by Caleb's adoption of Falkland's view of reputation as the highest good: Caleb's feeling of guilt for bringing Falkland to trial derives from his sense that he himself is a murderer since he is destroying Falkland's reputation. The result of the contest is, therefore, highly ambiguous: prose has overcome verse, declaring victory over the other principle, but its victory is overshadowed by guilt; what it has overcome is preserved as a lost, sacrificed, mourned ideal.

Towards the ending of the novel, however, Godwin provides a glimpse of another kind of conflict, between the values of prose and those espoused by the domestic realm. For the most part, Caleb's story is that of persecution and survival, taking place on the road and in spaces typical of the Gothic (prisons, ruined castles). Each episode seems to bring the story to a climax of horror, and hence to its end, but the next episode presents Caleb and the reader with yet a more crush-

ing defeat, thus suggesting that the tale of persecution can go on forever. But at a certain point Caleb believes that he has found a resting place in “an obscure market-town in Wales [...] clean, cheerful and of great simplicity of appearance” (289-92). While living in the village, Caleb for the first time generates an income that brings him above the level of mere subsistence; he has leisure to spend in intellectual, non-remunerative pursuits (he begins an “etymological analysis of the English language”; 295); he forms well-mannered friendships with the local gentry and contemplates the possibility of marriage. This brief village interlude has all the marks of a scene of closure in a novel by, for example, Dickens. But if this had been the closing scene, we would not have the novel, since at this point Caleb feels no inclination to write it. Lasting domestic happiness would not be the ending of the novel; it would altogether prevent the novel’s creation.

In a scenario which might have been the beginning of story for a writer like Jane Austen, Caleb’s stay in the village is disrupted when the false, fictional tale of his life, a pamphlet called “The Wonderful and Surprising History of Caleb Williams,” is smuggled into the village by his tracker. Whether or not the story is true—indeed, especially because the truth of the story is open to question—this public representation of Caleb’s life, and his new ability to incite inquiry, make him a threat to the stasis of the village world.¹⁵ He is immediately avoided as a contaminant: “It seemed as if I had some contagious disease, from which every man shrunk with alarm, and left me to perish unassisted and alone” (295).

At this moment of crisis, Caleb appeals to Laura, a friend and benefactress whom he has come to regard as a mother, confident that she “will not cast [him] off unheard, nor without strictly examining a question on all sides” (298). Yet to his surprise, Laura stops him from telling his story, because it threatens to put her absolute values in flux and to introduce shades of difference into clear oppositions. ““Good God!” he exclaims, ““Can you think of condemning a man, when you have heard only one side of his story?’ ‘Indeed I can,’ replied she, with dignity: ‘True virtue refuses the drudgery of explanation and apology.

True virtue shines by its own light, and needs no art to set it off. You have the first principles of morality yet to learn'" (299).

Laura, who is the novel's chief personification and proponent of domestic values, defines "true virtue" as something that is immediate and self-evident ("shines by its own light"), that consists of actions rather than words; words become then equated with eloquence, understood as sophistry.¹⁶ Indeed, for Laura, Caleb's virtue, or lack thereof, does not depend on the truth or falsity of the tale. According to her, what is legitimate or truly virtuous will never give rise to ambiguity, never need to defend itself—it will never produce a tale. Preserving one's virtue entails remaining outside the province not only of "art" and "eloquence" but of "plain and unadorned" tales as well as of "explanation and apology": keeping the domestic realm as the site of virtue and morality means keeping it outside the whole realm of narrative and discourse.

Though Caleb is inclined to dismiss Laura's attitude as unreasonable, perhaps it is only from her conservative point of view that the radically destabilizing potential of prose can be glimpsed. Caleb's notion is that, as a tool of democratic equality, prose would be free of power differentials; bringing all to light will result in clarity, improved understanding, and accurate interpretation. When the whole story is told the truth will emerge, which will result in just and fair treatment of all parties by right-minded persons. But Laura's attitude is that "examining a question on all sides" will, on the contrary, create ambiguity; fuller knowledge will destroy moral certainty. Her determination to stop listening suggests that bringing all to light would result not in an ultimate transparency or total legibility, but rather in an overabundance of illumination that renders distinction impossible and thus abolishes clarity. For her, the threat resides in the endlessness or inconclusiveness implied by "telling all." The episode ends with Caleb's being denied a hearing and forced to leave the village; Godwin thus leaves intact an implication that prose as full disclosure would undermine a domestic realm defined as the site of stable moral values.

Expelled from the village Caleb resumes his flight and begins writing his story in the belief that “my story faithfully digested would carry in it an impression of truth [...] posterity might be induced to do me justice” (303-04). But because his story of persecution is not over yet when he begins writing, the story does not end when it catches up with Caleb’s present. Instead of casting the moment of writing as the stable point towards which the story recursively leads, the end Caleb arrives at is so unexpected that it moots his original motives for writing: “I began these memoirs with the idea of vindicating my character. I have now no character that I wish to vindicate” (326). Including the temporality of writing within the narrative thus highlights its inconclusiveness. Though Caleb steadfastly persists in his attempt to tell the whole story, so that “the world may at least not hear and repeat a half-told and mangled tale” (326), he is forced to relinquish his notion that telling all will yield anything like simplicity, stability, justice, or moral clarity. Implying that things would have been better if Falkland’s story had never been told, Caleb ends up giving support to Laura’s belief that moral certainty is best preserved by excluding the kind of honesty and full disclosure, associated with prose.

In this light, *Caleb Williams* can be said to bring out one of the problems involved in prose’s attempt to legitimize itself as the discourse of truth. Being completely truthful, withholding nothing, actually implies going on, continuing forward indefinitely (as prose does). But such a continuing forward entails a risky epistemological instability, since everything must always be re-interpreted in the light of what *comes next* (rather than of what came before and to which one can “turn” for closure). As long as it adheres to the principle of full and faithful telling of the truth about the world, prose cannot achieve full legitimacy since it undermines its own foundation. And while its cumulative structure may be suited to the road and for tales of survival it is not “fitted to express” the domestic ideals towards which the novel was leaning.

In spite of their many differences, *Caleb Williams* and *The Vicar of Wakefield* have one feature in common: the association of prose with ongoing movement, continuing forward indefinitely. Both suggest also the affinity of prose thus understood with narratives of survival, that is narratives that foreground the continuous, in principle endless, creation anew (production and reproduction) of life, self, affect, sociality. Such narratives are characterized by a forward movement that is not a progress, an expenditure that does not result in gain; rather than sustaining suspense they “climax” repeatedly; limited only by the energy or lifespan of the characters or the writer, their endings often appear arbitrary.¹⁷

One can speculate (and this if of course only a speculation) that around the turn of the eighteenth century—Austen would be the important transitional figure here—the middle class has achieved enough economic, political, and cultural power so that the question of survival—which the straightforward, additive, repetitive, and endless narratives one finds in novels of sensibility as well as in picaresque and gothic tales not only represented but embodied—was no longer the issue. Survival then becomes merely the pre-condition for “higher” pursuits—a transparent means to other ends—the acquisition of knowledge as well as identity, spouses, fortunes, and homes. To be fit to represent this new outlook, prose itself needed to change: it needed to limit itself and did it by subordinating forward movement to a final cause.

Does this mean that we are back in the world of verse? Not quite. Following Michel Foucault’s argument in *The Order of Things*, one can say that poetry and prose depend on two conflicting epistemologies or competing interpretive principles.¹⁸ The old, “poetic” world of privilege and social hierarchy was sustained and made to appear natural by a belief in a universal order of correspondences where events find their meaning as elements in a larger design or as a manifestation of an overarching idea. By contrast, the new world of social mobility and rights of individuals is subtended by the modern view of a universe governed by cause and effect where events find their meaning as links

in a causal chain, whose effects are unpredictable. Within this new epistemology the “turn”—the recursive plot that imposes closure—appears as undermining the principle on which the narrative is predicated rather than supporting it. It represents a “discontent” within narrative, “a discomfort with the processes and implications of narrative itself” (Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents* x).

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NOTES

¹Part of the argument I will be making in this essay derives from an earlier essay, co-authored with Lorri Nandrea, entitled “The Prose of the World.”

²I do not intend to imply that prose and verse can be opposed to each other in an absolute way: just as prose contains pauses and breaks in which the reader rests and reflects back so verse has various forms of “linking forward” (e.g. enjambement). Nor, of course, can one argue that prose lacks turns in the sense of tropes or figures of speech; since no language can dispense with figuration the impression of “plainness” is merely the effect of a particular use of figuration. The difference between them is a matter of degree and especially of value judgment. For further discussion of this question see Ginsburg and Nandrea.

³The “unlimited” nature of prose has been part of its definition since Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (3.8) where it is associated with the lack of meter. In *Rhetoric* 3.9 Aristotle condemns an “ancient” prose style he calls “strung-on” (or “free-running”) which he characterizes as having no end in itself. He argues that this style is unsatisfying because it goes on indefinitely (is “unlimited”) and contrasts it with the “turned-down” (or “compact”) style, which is in periods. He argues that the latter is satisfying because it is the reverse of the unlimited, indefinite style. This opposition underlies eighteenth-century debates among grammarians about the difference between the cumulative and periodic sentence structure. For a discussion of this debate and its relation to the novel see Nandrea, *Misfit Forms*.

⁴The simplicity of the ballad, as opposed to the luxuriance of the poetry Burchell rejects, echoes Goldsmith’s own characterization of his tale in the “Advertisement,” where he doubts whether the “simplicity of [the Vicar’s] country fire-side” will please “in this age of opulence and refinement” (305).

⁵Thus the wanderer’s lines in stanza 2, “For here forlorn and lost I tread / with fainting steps and slow,” anticipate already the union of the two lovers by echoing the penultimate line of *Paradise Lost* where Adam and Eve walk hand and in hand out of Eden “with wandering steps and slow” (Milton 678, Book XII, line

643). Whether or not this echo opens up another layer of irony, as Robert Hunting suggested (it would have been better for them had they not found each other) depends on how we evaluate human love outside the paradise of ignorance.

⁶See, for example, Brown 169. It would be similarly misleading to read the ballad as foreshadowing the happy coming together of Burchell and Sophia. Though Burchell, like Edwin, is disguised, when he reveals himself it is not a long-lost lover who reappears but a new and quite formidable person: the rich Sir William Thornhill. Sophia, for her part, was never fickle or scornful (as Angelina was) but has shown herself to be exactly what Sir William was looking for: a woman who can love him for himself rather than for his riches. But instead of reclaiming her as his own (and alleviating the worry his metamorphoses has caused her) Sir William indulges in a gratuitous act of cruelty by offering her to Jenkinson, an act that could have resulted in his losing her. The very gratuity of this gesture shows us how far this story is from the one told in the ballad, where closure, brought about by symmetrical oppositions and reversals, allows no residue, no excess or lack.

⁷The narrator deviates from the straight line of the story only when members of the family who were away from home tell the Vicar what happened to them while away, or when strangers tell him their life story. None of these stories reveal important new facts or shift the course of the plot. The tale contains no flashbacks, and the narrator does not provide foreshadowing of future events or of the ending. Brown has characterized the *Vicar* as a "consecutive narration without retrospect" (167). But Brown argues that "in the second half of the novel we are no longer dealing with a linear array of plot elements" (148)—a claim with which I disagree.

⁸From this perspective the opposite of chance is not the illusory desire to impose order, to plan according to one's wishes, as Preston, for example, argues. The ordered series here is not the product of a plan and its result is not control (or its failure) but intensity of affect.

⁹This exultation in suffering is reinforced by its dramatic, indeed, theatrical quality. As Brown has pointed out, the Vicar is "essentially never alone" (155), and his most private feelings are always displayed in public.

¹⁰Most critics argue that the focus of the sermon is on providence as a mysterious but ultimately just design. See, for example, Rogers 8.

¹¹See, for example, Hopkins 217.

¹²Discussions of closure often associated the open text with both a subversive resistance to containment and the failure or inability to fix meaning. They just as often produced counter-arguments showing how closure fails to occur in "closed" texts. These discussions fail to account for narratives in which process or movement in time is not goal oriented (where "reading for the plot" cannot be equated with "reading for the ending"), where the goal is immanent to the process (so that the notion of "deferral" or even of a "middle" ceases to be meaningful), and where the notion of closure is irrelevant rather than subverted or unattainable. It is to such narratives that I give the name of "narratives of survival."

¹³For a fuller discussion of this issue see Ginsburg and Nandrea. Scheiber interprets the power struggle in the novel in terms of the challenge posed by enlightenment values of reason and empiricism to old “laws of decorum” (261). Without making distinctions between verse and prose, Jacqueline Miller uses Godwin’s own writings on language to analyze the competition for authorship in the novel.

¹⁴For a discussion of the original manuscript ending see Ginsburg and Nandrea.

¹⁵Sullivan reads this pamphlet scene in the context of “post-revolutionary print culture,” arguing that Godwin ultimately presents this culture “not as an expanding set of practices to which writers of all classes have equal or near-equal access, but as another vehicle for upper-class power” (336).

¹⁶One can read Laura as a representation of the romance idealism of unmixed character. But since she is the sole representative of the domestic realm in the text it seems more pertinent to link her to the idealization of the domestic sphere, as it will be articulated later on by Ruskin (“Of Queen’s Gardens”) and others. These two interpretations are not mutually exclusive.

¹⁷On narratives of survival see Ginsburg, “Narratives of Survival” and “Sentimentality and Survival.”

¹⁸See primarily his discussion of the “Prose of the World,” a propos of *Don Quixote* (46-50).

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