

The Art of Natural Style: A  
Sociology of the Rhetorical Manual

Gibb Stuart Pritchard

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in fulfillment of the Thesis Requirement  
for the Degree of  
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in the Department of Sociology

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THE ART OF NATURAL STYLE:  
A SOCIOLOGY OF THE RHETORICAL MANUAL

BY

GIBB STUART PRITCHARD

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I study the social foundations of four monumental style manuals, and explore their qualities as social documents that are written and consulted. Specifically, I study Aristotle's *'Art' of Rhetoric*, William Strunk and E.B. White's *The Elements of Style*, Joseph Williams's *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*, and H.W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage*. In each case, I study the principles of style on their own terms, and endeavor to understand what the authors of style manuals mean when they urge us to write naturally and clearly. These manuals prove of sociological interest on two counts. First, as pedagogical documents representative of a historical tradition that attempts to establish standards of literary competence and correctness. As such, they provide us with explicit examples of 'monitory' discourse whose pedagogical and cultural implications merit attention. Second, like all cultural products, they are of sociological interest as social documents embedded in a larger set of implicit assumptions and commitments. This thesis argues that what is at stake in these projects is not merely matters of literary technique but conceptions of authority, legitimacy, manipulation, self-presentation, and civility. Put another way, the impulse to impose linguistic order cannot be separated from a vision of social order.

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## Chapter 1--Bishop Sprat's Remedy

In 1667, Bishop Thomas Sprat completed his *History of the Royal Society of London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge*. The Royal Society, of which he was a member, sought to amend prevailing experimental methods to help unravel some of Nature's persistent and compelling mysteries. Despite its best intentions, the Society soon realized that methodological innovation alone could not solve its scientific problems satisfactorily or efficiently. Instead, it would have to change other, less obvious, parts of the scientific enterprise. Sprat writes:

Thus [the Royal Society] have directed, judg'd, conjectured upon, and improved Experiments. But lastly, in these and all other businesses that have come under their care, there is one thing more, about which the Society has been most solicitous; and that is the manner of their Discourse: which, unless they had been very watchful to keep in due temper, the whole spirit and vigour of their Design would have been soon eaten out by the luxury and redundance of Speech. (111)

Sprat identifies the "Ornaments of speaking" as beguiling and insidious weapons that allow bad men to deceive the good, and

accordingly, he recognizes that the Royal Society must regulate and limit their usage:

...They make the Fancy [the imagination, whim] disgust the best things, if they come found, and unadorn'd: they are in open defiance against Reason; professing not to hold much correspondence with that, but with its Slaves, the Passions: they give the mind a motion too changeable and bewitching to consist with right practice. Who can behold, without indignation, how many mists and uncertainties these specious Tropes and Figures have brought on our Knowledge? How many rewards, which are due to more profitable, and difficult Arts, have been still snatch'd away by the easy vanity of fine Speaking?  
(112)

'Eloquence' and 'fine speaking' enable the Passions to overwhelm the intellect and mere artifice to unseat rigorous science and philosophy. But of more durable consequence, perhaps, is that writers are so enamored with eloquence that they willingly participate in its corruption of their ability to think and judge clearly:

And, in few words, I dare say that of all the Studies of men, nothing may be sooner obtain'd than this vicious abundance of Phrase, this trick of Metaphors, this volubility of Tongue, which makes so great a noise in the World. But I spend words in vain; for the evil is now so inveterate that it is hard to know whom to blame or where to begin to reform. We all value one another so much upon this beautiful deceit; and labour so long after

it, in the years of our education: that we cannot but ever after think kinder of it, than it deserves. (112-3)

But however ingrained these habits and however seductive their call, Sprat believes that the Royal Society can restore the “original usefulness” of language, as when it was “...an admirable Instrument in the hands of Wise Men...” (111-2):

They have therefore been most rigorous in putting in execution the only Remedy that can be found for this extravagance: and that has been a constant Resolution to reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style: to return back to the primitive purity and shortness [of] when men deliver'd so many things, almost in an equal number of words. [The Royal Society has] exacted from all [its] members, a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness: bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness as they can: and preferring the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that of Wits, or Scholars. (113)<sup>1</sup>

In the writing of his contemporaries, Bishop Sprat sees an insidious impulse that values surface over substance and appearance over essence. At the same time, he realizes that a scientist cannot

---

<sup>1</sup>As Kenneth Hughes observed in *Signs of Literature* (11), this decree by the Royal Society legitimized this ‘underdetermined discourse’, i.e. a plain prose style, as ‘the language of science.’ ‘Underdetermined discourse’ prefers a linear syntagmatic style, rejects metaphor, and seeks to mitigate the contamination caused by the insubstantial signifier (i.e., the ‘word’). Conversely, ‘Overdetermined discourse’ is the discourse of literature, which seeks not to restrict a text’s potential meanings, but to nurture the text’s ability to generate many different meanings.

speak in 'things', i.e., without the intrusion of the surface of language: in even the best imaginable writing, a number of 'things' can only be expressed in an 'almost' equal number of words, but not in a pure thing-for-word exchange. Words, then, are not the things themselves, but their necessary surrogates and the only vessels or medium in which science can 'deliver' them. To minimize the contamination of language, Sprat wishes that it be returned to its pure and simple origins, to some earlier age when language was more 'natural'.

Nevertheless, Sprat realizes that just as we cannot return to a bygone age, we cannot simply unlearn or forget a way of speaking that has become 'inveterate'. Knowing this, the Royal Society must actively reform the use of language if it hopes to simulate its 'primitive purity' and engender a plain and potent prose style. Sprat chooses to call this reformation of language a 'Remedy', because he believes that the 'primitive purity' of language can only be restored if writers purge it of all lavish and ornamental trappings. Thus, he initially formulates his project in negative terms, in that he emphasizes what writers should recognize and avoid as superfluous and obfuscatory. In other words, he does not intend to introduce a novel or better mode of writing, inasmuch as he wishes to 'Remedy' those excesses that deceive and distract. Specifically, he urges the Society to reject popular stylistic habits such as 'amplifications, digressions, and swellings', the 'extravagance' spawned of 'specious Tropes and Figures' and 'Ornaments of speaking'. If they reject these pernicious habits, Sprat believes that their writing can 'return back'

to the plain style indicative of language's 'primitive purity and shortness'.

### Toward a Natural Style

But Sprat praises this ideal unadorned style as being more than merely plain, clear, or concise. Besides having such technical virtues, themselves the result of his Remedy<sup>1</sup>, he likens the Society's proposed style to a 'naked, natural way of speaking,' possessed of a 'primitive purity,' and characterized by 'a native easiness'. Consequently, in promoting the Society's Remedy he asks writers to learn to write naturally, which seems, at first glance, a paradoxical and ambiguous request, insofar as we consider learning and cultivation as logically opposed to innate faculties or potencies.<sup>2</sup> And yet, there is little reason to suspect that Sprat adverts to a 'natural style' ironically or casually. Sprat must understand this 'nature' in a way that is not at odds with the learning fundamental to language acquisition, but opposes, instead, some specialized and extravagant use of language that he recognizes as 'artificial'. In this sense, Sprat might defend his programme for a 'natural style' with a similarly 'logical' appeal: to wit, the less we write extravagantly, the less we shall write artificially. Correspondingly, the less we write artificially, the more we shall write naturally.

Moreover, Sprat considers his recommended style 'natural' for another, less academic reason. Not only is it permissible to call it

---

<sup>1</sup>i.e., the rejection of extravagant writing

<sup>2</sup>By extension, because we believe in the opposition of learning and nature, we should no more be inclined to talk of a writing style derived from a 'natural way of speaking' than of a table built of a 'natural carpentry' or of a shirt sewn with 'natural tailoring'.

natural because it rejects artifice, but, as I shall explain, because it is honest, sincere, and guileless, that is to say, an admirable medium for the Society's discourse. Sprat's contemporaries exalted 'nature' as the essence of truth, a sentiment reflected in the Royal Society's quest for the methodological improvement of what they called 'Natural Knowledge' and 'Natural Philosophy'. He and his fellows believed that even if nature could be cruel, ugly, or merciless, she could never lie. Thus, if the project of science is revelatory, and not synthetic or constructive, any rigorous and properly scientific inquiry would need to emulate nature's naked honesty and avoid the crafty deceits and idle conceits of mere men<sup>1</sup>.

The search for Truth's language has led many to long for this plain, 'natural' style. Sprat, following a philosophical tradition that predates Plato, equates sincere and unaffected speech with the ideal of a 'natural' language, on the one hand, and extravagant, showy speech with deception and artifice, on the other<sup>2</sup>. One could find countless examples of this sentiment in various writers, and in what follows I have provided but two of the many to locate Sprat's request for a 'natural style' in its philosophical context. He would, for example, find a kindred spirit in Schopenhauer:

Just as the beautiful bodily form can be seen to the best advantage with the lightest clothing...so will every fine mind rich in ideas express itself always in the most

---

<sup>1</sup>Etymology reflects the historical belief that nature is guileless, in that 'nature', 'native', and 'naïve' are related etymologically.

<sup>2</sup>Derrida summarizes the traditional belief in a 'natural writing' succinctly: "There is therefore a good and a bad writing: the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and the soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body." (*Of Grammatology*, 17)



natural, candid, and simple way, concerned if it be possible to communicate its thoughts to others.... Conversely, poverty of mind, confusion and perversity of thought will clothe themselves in the most far-fetched expressions and obscure forms of speech, in order to cloak in difficult and pompous phrases small, trifling, insipid, or commonplace ideas. (*The World as Will and Representation*, I:229; emphasis mine)

Montaigne, likewise, defines his project as a personal science whose goal is clear and sincere self-revelation.<sup>1</sup> In the Preface to his *Essays*, he writes "...I want to appear in my simple, natural, and everyday dress, without strain or artifice; for it is myself that I portray" (23). Writing less than a century before Sprat, he sees his task as unfashionable, humbling, but methodologically sound:

Authors communicate with the world in some special and peculiar capacity; I am the first to do so with my whole being, as Michel de Montaigne, not as a grammarian, a poet, or a lawyer. ...

Is it reasonable either that I should present to the world, in which style and artifice receive so much credit and authority, the crude and simple products of nature, and of a weakish nature at that? ...

---

<sup>1</sup>Similarly, in *Timon of Athens*, Shakespeare suggests ironically that it is 'natural' for a hypocritical man to express himself extravagantly:

And, for thy fiction,  
Why thy verse swells with stuff so fine and smooth  
That thou art even natural in thine art. (V 1, 86-8)

To perfect [my writing] I need only bring fidelity to my task; and that is here, the purest and sincerest that is to be found anywhere.... It cannot happen here, as I often see it elsewhere, that the craftsman and his work are in contradiction. (emphasis mine, 236)<sup>1</sup>

In these instances two themes are evident. First, a reaction against some artificial contaminant that obscures writing and subverts meaning, and second, a plea for a plain and natural language. To make sense of these, we must first identify the provenance of this artificial influence. This entails looking beyond Sprat, because he does little more than identify the effects of artifice and its practitioners, without relating the two. Or recasting his 'Remedy' metaphorically, we could say that he identifies the symptoms and carriers of the linguistic 'Disease' that corrupts language, but does not attempt to diagnose the 'Disease' itself<sup>2</sup>. Thus, to understand his formulation more fully, we must study the etiology of this putative 'Disease', and at the same time, find out what makes specific writers susceptible to these pernicious and extravagant stylistic habits, i.e., the 'Ornaments of speaking', 'Tropes and Figures', and so forth.

As with any other social malady, certain individuals are more vulnerable to Sprat's linguistic Disease than others. As mentioned earlier, he identifies 'Wits and Scholars' as more likely to use ornate

---

<sup>1</sup>J.M. Cohen, trans. This translation is consistent with Montaigne's first English translation (Florio, 1613), which Bishop Sprat likely read.

<sup>2</sup>Sprat likens extravagant writing to a disease (and plain writing to a remedy) in several places: He speaks of extravagant writing's 'ill effects'; and of how it 'degenerates language', 'disgusts the best things' and is 'a thing almost utterly desperate in its cure'. (passim)

language than 'Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants,' who he believes speak plainly. By the same token, he would be as unlikely to blame all Scholars (or scholarship) for giving birth to bad writing as he would to encourage the then commonly illiterate 'Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants' to lead the Royal Society. After all, Sprat is a scholar and a writer, and he seeks to improve philosophical and scientific writing rather than eliminate it. He wishes, instead, that scholars and scientists would write as plainly as the illiterate common folk speak, by actively forgetting some insidious part of their literate formal education:

We all value one another so much upon this beautiful deceit; and labour so long after it, in the years of our education: that we cannot but ever after think kinder of it, than it deserves. And indeed, in most other parts of Learning I look on it to be a thing almost utterly desperate in its cure... (112-3)

### The Disease

What all this suggests, I would argue, is that the true enemy of Sprat's literary ideals is neither a mixed band of corrupt and deceitful writers nor a popular assortment of unruly writing habits, but a scholarly tradition. More specifically, it is an intellectual project that has relied upon literacy for its cultivation and transmission. Moreover, aesthetic considerations are central to this tradition insofar as it teaches speakers and writers to manipulate and adorn language by means of the ornamental devices that Sprat so abhors. These include the codifying and naming of such linguistic tools as the tropes, figures, metaphors, amplifications, and

digressions that seek to beautify writing.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, these practices have trained readers (like Sprat) to discern ornamental devices, and writers (like the Wits and Scholars) to use them. This tradition, so effective in eliciting Sprat's wrath, is the "Art of Rhetoric".

Still, Sprat does not criticize writers merely because they use identifiable rhetorical devices, but because they use them badly. Thus, his attack on extravagant writing is directed not at the devices themselves, which can be used effectively, but at some other quality of the 'Art of Rhetoric' that engenders bad writing. He seems reluctant to blame 'rhetoric' as a general art, and instead attributes bad writing to corrupt or deceitful individuals who abuse it. But this tacit exoneration of rhetorical pedagogy is qualified, insofar he seems to suggest that it encourages some native inclination to flamboyance<sup>2</sup>. I suspect that his ambivalence with regard to 'rhetoric' stems from a largely optimistic view of it. After all, he, like most scholars of his tradition, likely thought of 'rhetoric' in traditional terms, i.e., as the 'art of good writing,' or as Peter Dixon

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<sup>1</sup>Although most of the critical terms Sprat uses belong to rhetoric unquestionably, one might ask whether 'eloquence' and 'ornament' have any specific rhetorical import. The term 'eloquence' has a long history in rhetoric proper, drawn from the Latin *elocutio*, one of the five sub-fields of classical rhetoric. Likewise, Cicero often uses 'ornament' to describe the elegant quality of a word. In *De Partitione Oratoria*, we find "But the following five ornaments belong in common both to single words and to combinations of words: lucidity, brevity, acceptability, brilliance, charm" (325).

<sup>2</sup>Early in this discussion, when contemplating a complete eradication of rhetoric, he writes: "To this opinion I should wholly incline; if I did not find that [eloquence] is a Weapon which may be as easily procur'd by bad men as good: and that, if these should only cast it away and those retain it; the naked Innocence of virtue would be upon all occasions exposed to the armed Malice of the wicked." He believes, thus, that the naturally good man can use rhetoric effectively and appropriately, without deceit or extravagance.

puts it, as the art of persuasion, "...the art of speaking well, of using words to their best advantage" (*Rhetoric*, 3). For why would anyone teach an art of obscure and extravagant writing? Moreover, Sprat was not unaware of rhetoric's positive contributions. For example, he studied 'figures of speech' (in both Latin and English) during his Grammar school education and his later ascension to Bishop,<sup>1</sup> and used them liberally throughout his *History*. Nevertheless, his belief in rhetoric in terms of linguistic excellence prevented him from seeing it as a broader enterprise, i.e., as a general 'art of writing', equally capable of helping or harming the language he loved. To see rhetoric in this light we must take leave of Sprat for now and, in what follows, examine the notion of the 'artificial' (or 'scientific') in the logic and history of the rhetorical art.

### The 'Art' of Writing

The durability of rhetoric has always depended on its early transformation from a practice (i.e., a skill employed by its adherents only in reference to the *hic et nunc* of particular situations) to a broader art or systematic technique (i.e., a set of general principles to be applied in particular cases). This generalizing tendency enables a rhetorician to teach the virtues of good writing through a set of guiding principles that are putatively effective without considering the prospective writer's particular audience or topic.<sup>2</sup> For example,

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<sup>1</sup>"More detailed [rhetorical] studies, such as the colours or rhetoric, were likely intended to serve in the preparation of sermons for, as one writer said above, they had their place in theology." (*The Grammar Schools of Medieval England*, John N. Miner, 163)

<sup>2</sup>Aristotle states this explicitly in the *Rhetoric*: The art of rhetoric may be used "in reference to any subject whatever," and "...its rules are not applied to any particular definite class of things." (15)

the author of the following passage exemplifies the necessary vagueness of general rules, and the corresponding impossibility of specifying all of the particular 'cases' in which his rule obtains: "In certain cases conciseness...produces elevation, since some things seem to be more significant when not expressed but only hinted at. In other cases, however, triviality is the result."<sup>1</sup> Since rhetorical categories such as 'metaphor', 'alliteration', and 'zeugma' refer to different ways of patterning words, they, as general forms, can be used to generate particular examples endlessly. In other words, once writers learn the meaning and purpose of 'metaphor', they can infuse their texts with them for poetic effect. By contrast, in purely oral rhetorical discourse, such general principles would probably seem at best, trivial, and at worst, deceptive.<sup>2</sup>

Early written rhetorics emphasized this general, technical base of rhetorical ability. For instance, Aristotle titled his manual the ΤΕΧΝΗΣ ΠΡΟΤΟΠΙΚΗΣ (translated as the *'Art' of Rhetoric*)<sup>3</sup>, which likens rhetoric to all studied or cultivated techniques, such as carpentry or blacksmithing. In order to transform rhetoric from a practice into a general art it had to be written and codified. This was so because rhetoricians could only abstract general principles (or devices) from fleeting rhetorical practice through the logical and

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<sup>1</sup>Demetrius, *On Style*, 367

<sup>2</sup>To understand the essential differences between oral and literate consciousness (and discourse), the reader is directed to Ong's *Orality and Literacy*.

<sup>3</sup>Τεχνολογία, translated as 'arts', is etymologically related to 'technique' and customarily refers to manuals or handbooks treating the rules of any art or science.

epistemological distance won by literacy.<sup>1</sup> This may, in part, explain Sprat's critique which linked the literate mind (such as that of a Wit or Scholar) and the use, or abuse, of rhetoric's tools. Ong argues that although pre-literate peoples "...practiced public speaking with great skill," it was not until a certain level of literacy was achieved that rhetorical skills could be

...reduced to an 'art', that is, to a body of sequentially organized, scientific principles which explained and abetted what verbal persuasion consisted in. ...Oral cultures, as has been seen, can have no 'arts' of this scientifically organized sort. ...The 'art' of rhetoric, though concerned with oral speech, was, like other 'arts', the product of writing. (Ong, *op.cit.*, 109)

But we should also note here that the transformation of a skill into an art comes at a cost. By definition, 'general advice' can only advise in general and formulaically, whereas actual oral and written discourses can only concern particular and immediate circumstances. Thus, when rhetoricians lay down certain rules or principles, or in what amounts to the same thing, when they describe how a beautiful text owes its grace to a few well-chosen devices, they must assume that the prospective writer can decide whether their advice is appropriate in a particular case. Consequently, writers always risk misusing general recommendations. When a writer reads that a

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<sup>1</sup>"I believe...that a certain sort of question about the meaning and origin of writing precedes, or at least merges with, a certain type of question about the meaning and origin of technics. That is why the notion of technique can never simply clarify the notion of writing." (Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 8)

given device adds a touch of elegance to a text, he may be unaware of how the specific context affects the device's worthiness and efficacy. For example, faced and frustrated by arid prose, a writer may find the following advice:

...[A]ccumulation, variation, and climax, the so-called 'figures of many cases,' are, as you know, a most effective aid in giving ornament and every kind of sublime and emotional effect.<sup>1</sup>

Should a writer accept this advice uncritically, he risks filling his text with the 'swellings of style' so loathsome to Sprat.

To some extent, we can understand rhetoric's capacity to corrupt writing as borne of the disparity between general advice and particular circumstances. But more than merely allowing bad writing, the art of rhetoric may at times encourage it. With the historical development of rhetoric came a proliferation of tropes, figures, and devices. And with the increasing prevalence of written rhetoric came a heightened concern for style: "Because of the tendency of rhetoricians to restrict their study to problems of style and expression, rhetorical figures increasingly came to be regarded as mere ornaments that made...style artificial and ornate" (Perelman, *The New Rhetoric*, 167). Similarly, Walter Nash writes that "[t]he ramification of figures is the most obvious and striking development in the history of rhetoric. Aristotle and Cicero mention a mere handful; the Renaissance theorists deal in dozens" (*Rhetoric: the Wit of Persuasion*, 14). This, as Nash observes, contributed to the kind of

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<sup>1</sup>Dionysius or Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 197.



writing that the Royal Society criticized. Because of an abundance of new devices and authorities, writers in Sprat's day often found it difficult to distinguish whether or not a device was used appropriately. Similarly, by the very nature of their project, rhetorical theorists needed to emphasize the formal elements of a text, insofar as general devices can only be abstracted or gleaned by observing formal patterns and overlooking the particular words used. As a consequence, when a writer is not accustomed to seeing a device used in an actual literary context, i.e., in particular texts, a rhetorical treatise may incline him to reduce good writing to form rather than substance<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, within a competitive rhetorical market (like Elizabethan England), theorists wishing to find novel figures would need to codify literary constructions of which they may have found few examples. This meant that readers would be ever less accustomed to reading or recognizing those figures, just as writers would lack the sort of familiarity and experience to judge if they used a particular figure appropriately. And if the misuse of rhetoric were as widespread as Sprat suggests, writers could not learn effective use of these figures from their peers<sup>2</sup>. So, when rhetoric was no longer taught with an eye to persuasion, the 'art' of rhetoric eclipsed rhetoric's practice. As rhetorical principles increasingly became alienated from common usage, then susceptibility to misuse increased.

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<sup>1</sup>Mindful of the problems of rhetorical analysis, Barthes notes that "...style is a substance constantly threatened with formalization" (*Mythologies*, 146, n12).

<sup>2</sup>Nash notes "...in many cases the distinctive value of the figure might elude all but the most exacting analyst" (14).

## The Allure of Rhetoric

Whatever the risks and pitfalls, something about rhetoric must attract writers and compel them to accept its advice. Although Sprat is more concerned with bad writing than with the impulses of writers, he seems to understand that human weakness (or perhaps laziness) is partly to blame, even if he remains unsympathetic. He criticizes rhetoric as an 'easy' skill: "How many rewards, which are due to more profitable, and difficult Arts, have been still snatch'd away by the easy vanity of fine Speaking?" (112). For the young or uncelebrated writer, the 'art of rhetoric' seems to provide a quick formula for grace, an 'easy' way to learn a few proven tricks of 'fine speaking' that may disguise the unremarkable ideas of an unremarkable text that claims distinction. Indeed, Sprat adds that "nothing may be sooner obtain'd than this vicious abundance of Phrase, this trick of Metaphors...". In each case, rhetoric attempts to distract the reader with beauty and ornament, and thus conceals the banality and simplicity of a text's underlying meaning or, more aptly in Sprat's mind, its lack thereof.

But just as rhetoric may encourage bad habits, it may also provide the means to their solution. As I mentioned earlier, it is through rhetoric that Sprat identifies the elements of bad writing, and his ability to identify rhetorical devices evinces a mind accustomed to discerning subtle patterns in prose. But more significant is that his Remedy--the rejection of popular rhetorical habits--is itself a rudimentary rhetoric. His rhetoric does not attempt to beautify writing or persuade readers, but instead to

clarify a writer's ideas and encourage a writing whose beauty and felicity issue from the plainness and purity of well-crafted thought.

Even if writers accept Sprat's remedy, his platitudes do little to help those whose extravagant writing habits have become vices. Although Sprat believes strongly in the virtue of clear and plain writing, he fails to explain how writers should achieve these goals. He may expect plainness and clarity to be innate skills, or he may believe that clear writing is synonymous with clear speaking. In fact, considering that only a select few were taught to write in Sprat's day, and that they were often taught in the grand tradition of the English Grammar School, he would have been correct in assuming most writers capable of writing plainly and clearly, even if they were disinclined to do so. But Sprat's major difficulty in this connection is that he lacks a systematic and properly rhetorical understanding of clear writing. Specifically, because he is not a rhetorician, he would have to rely upon rhetorics of past and present to articulate his natural style in any detail: this presents a problem for Sprat. Most contemporary rhetorics exhorted a showy, poetic style, and older rhetorics, designed for oration, are more likely to take 'clarity' and 'plainness' for granted as necessary desiderata, and not bother teaching them. Moreover, most rhetorics of his day drew their examples from poetry and other fiction. When they attempted to do more than merely describe rhetorical devices, they too assumed that the writer knew how to write clearly, and would instead attend only

to those techniques that would beautify<sup>1</sup>. Such rhetorics exalted ‘artistic’ prose as the model to which all should aspire. Disgruntled with the consequence of such rhetorics, Sprat, as we know, sought a new<sup>2</sup> rhetoric whose model was clear, expository prose.

### A Rhetoric for Sprat

Had he lived at a time when obscure and muddled writing was not an artistic affectation but a common product of honest incompetence, Sprat would have found many rhetorics of clarity, in the form of ‘style manuals’ and ‘usage manuals’<sup>3</sup>. Although these manuals rarely refer to the rhetorical tradition and use little of its specialized terminology, they serve a rhetorical purpose insofar as they purport to teach people how to write well: that is to say, correctly, effectively, and clearly. Some manuals teach the writer further virtues, such as how to write elegantly and to express one’s character, but such virtues are usually treated as coextensive with clarity instead of as ornamental and extraneous graces that one would add to plain writing to make it more poetic. In the spirit of Sprat, the manuals stress a ‘natural way of writing,’ and believe that beauty itself requires clarity. And if we may judge the vitality of a tradition by the amount of attention people give it, rhetoric is thriving. So common are these manuals today that Robert Burchfield

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<sup>1</sup>cf. Sir Philip Sidney’s *An Apology for Poetry, or the Defense of Poesy* (1595), George Puttenham’s *The Art of English Poesy* (1589), and Henry Peacham’s suggestively titled *Garden of Eloquence* (1577).

<sup>2</sup>So writes Peter Dixon: “The Royal Society even proposed a new standard of prose style, especially suitable for scientific reports and discussions...” (66)

<sup>3</sup>Robert Burchfield, a lexicographer, identifies Joseph Priestley’s *Rudiments of English Grammar*, written in 1768, as “...one of the earliest attempts at compiling a usage manual.” (*Unlocking the English Language*, 33).

writes: "There is a public hunger for such prescriptive books that is never quite satisfied" (33).

Despite this 'public hunger' for style manuals, neither the style manual nor the rhetorical tradition have received the attention they merit from sociologists. Traditionally, scholars have viewed 'rhetoric' as either a discrete and antiquated subject or as a sub-specialty of literary study. In the former case, scholars have usually studied rhetoric historically; i.e., as a once overvalued discipline whose scholarly history exemplifies the slow death of a quaint anachronism. In the latter, literary scholars employ rhetoric as a descriptive toolbox, capable of explaining the aesthetic felicity of individual poems and texts. And within literary study, the mechanics of plain prose rhetoric, the clear and natural style that Sprat exhorts, are almost wholly neglected. In either case, scholars tend to treat rhetoric as a strictly literary phenomenon of use and interest only to the literati.<sup>1</sup>

With these general points in mind, I propose to study four classic manuals sympathetic to Sprat's project: Aristotle's *'Art' of Rhetoric*, H.W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, William Strunk and E.B. White's *The Elements of Style*, and Joseph Williams's *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*. Although I shall consider each work individually, I shall also attend carefully to the principles and methods they prescribe to convey meaning, intent, propriety, suitability, and elegance. Moreover, I shall explore these manuals

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<sup>1</sup>Dixon suggests that if we view rhetoric socially, it concerns "...nothing less than the whole complex business of communication through language, the intricate network of relationships which connects a speaker (or writer) with those he addresses" (2-3).

with an eye to their shared goals and principles, to allow us to understand their place in the tradition of plain prose rhetoric.

This project entails that I consider the manuals on their own terms, and, in so doing, that I initially make the same assumptions about certain contentious matters (such as language and the self) that their authors do, rather than challenging such assumptions on philosophical or logical grounds. For example, many manuals assert that good style originates in faithful self-revelation. This belief often presumes that the 'self' (or the 'subject') is a fixed and stable entity, naturally invested with certain qualities and dispositions. Although many influential authors (notably Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault) have criticized this belief in the sovereign self (and sought to find its historical determinants), I shall forgo such philosophical analysis in order to help us appreciate the spirit in which these manuals have customarily been written and read. Likewise, insofar as most manual equate 'clarity' with the precise representation of ideas, they presume that language is itself 'representational' rather than, say, 'significational' or 'pragmatic'. This belief, too, is a contentious one, and has been disputed by such authors as Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. But insofar as those who write style manuals believe that language is representational, so shall I.

In this discussion, then, I propose to study style manuals on their own terms, and strive to explore their qualities as social documents that are written and consulted, rather than their qualities as objects for philosophical speculation. Accordingly, I will not question the metaphysical possibility of clarity or self-revelation, but, instead, I will endeavor to understand what the authors of style

manuals mean when they urge us to write naturally and clearly. In this light, these manuals shall prove of sociological interest on two counts. First, they are representative of a historical tradition that attempts to establish standards of literary competence and correctness. As such, they provide us with explicit examples of 'monitory' discourse whose pedagogical and cultural implications merit attention. Second, like all cultural products, these manuals are embedded in a larger set of implicit assumptions and commitments. For, as I shall try to show, what is at stake in these projects is not merely matters of literary technique but conceptions of authority, legitimacy, manipulation, and civility. Put another way, the impulse to impose linguistic order cannot, as Sprat reminds us, be separated from a vision of social order.

## Chapter Two--Passion and Propriety in the *Art of Rhetoric*

And his speaking was most applauded, in whom the passions of rage and grief were most preëminent, and clothed in the most fitting language, maintaining the dignity of the character. What is it to me, O my true life, my God, that my declamation was applauded above so many of my own age and class? Is not all this smoke and wind? And was there nothing else whereon to exercise my wit and tongue? Thy praises, Lord, Thy praises might have stayed the yet tender shoot of my heart by the prop of Thy Scriptures; so had it not trailed away amid these empty trifles, a defiled prey for the fowls of the air. For in more ways than one do men sacrifice to the rebellious angels. (Augustine, *Confessions*, 19)

As a student, Aristotle distrusted sophistical rhetoric, partly because of Plato's misgivings, and partly because of the way people employed it corruptly, "...to warp the [judge's] feelings, to arouse him



to anger, jealousy, and passion..." (*Rh.* 5).<sup>1</sup> Despite these reservations, he believed that it was not an essentially pernicious art:

If it is argued that one who makes an unfair use of such faculty of speech may do a great deal of harm, this objection applies equally to all good things except virtue, and above all to those things which are most useful, such as strength, health, wealth, generalship; for as these, rightly used, may be of the greatest benefit, so, wrongly used, they may do a great deal of harm. (13)

But he was attracted to rhetoric for a further, positive reason. If rhetoric made falsehoods persuasive, truth must also be made persuasive, lest we be deceived. And even though "...that which is true and better is naturally always easier to prove," truth is only "more likely to persuade" (13) than falsehood, but not necessarily persuasive. Thus, those who would speak truly still need to learn to speak persuasively:

...Rhetoric is useful, because the true and the just are naturally superior to their opposites, so that, if decisions are improperly made, they must owe their defeat to their own advocates; which is reprehensible. (11)

In this light, rhetoric can serve a moral purpose, insofar as its judicious use can present the truth to its best advantage.<sup>2</sup> This, it

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this text, I have abbreviated the Loeb translation of the *"Art of Rhetoric"* as "*Rh*", and the Modern Library translation as "*Rh-M*."

<sup>2</sup>This seems to be what Aristotle had in mind: "Further, the orator should be able to prove opposites, as in logical arguments; not that we should do both (for one ought not to persuade people to do what is wrong), but that the real state of the case may not escape us, and that we ourselves may be able to counteract false arguments, if another makes unfair use of them" (11-13).

would follow from Aristotle's argument, is reason enough for developing a philosophical art of rhetoric.

Numerous rhetorical treatises existed before Aristotle began his studies. For example, he refers, sometimes fondly, to the manuals of Corax, Theodectes, and Protagoras. Nevertheless, Aristotle finds in them only the rudiments of a rhetorical 'art' or 'science'. He believes that if one wants to devise a true 'art of rhetoric', one must go beyond the verbal trickery and histrionics so popular among contemporary Sophists, and do more than teach clever sayings to be used as rhetorical building blocks. Instead, one must foster a way of thinking rhetorically while avoiding excesses, which entails respecting rhetoric as an intellectual "...faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever" (Aristotle, *Rh.* 15). To this end, Aristotle fashioned the first systematic rhetorical manual in the West, and thereby initiated an intellectual tradition.

Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* (or *Rhetoric*) is conventionally dated at 330 BC., during his second residence at Athens. He may have written as many as eight rhetorical works, of which only two (or three, counting the *Topics*) are extant. The *Rhetoric*, like many of his other works, is written as a treatise rather than a dialogue (which suggests that it was culled from lecture notes), and comprises three books.

The first concerns the three different types of rhetoric, e.g., political, legal, and ceremonial, and their purposes. Here, the modern reader gets a glimpse of the way people employed rhetoric in Aristotle's Athens, as a primarily oral, agonistic technique of use in

the courts and public debates. The emphases in Book I are thus on the professional uses of argument by its practitioners. Apart from its first two chapters (a general introduction) and its comments on enthymeme (a rhetorical syllogism) and example, it is mainly descriptive and practical. Most commentators discuss the enthymeme in detail, not so much because of its importance in Aristotle's understanding of the rhetorical project, but because it symbolizes an attempt to reconcile philosophy and rhetoric by illustrating how rhetorical argument depends upon logic, which probably makes his *Rhetoric* more palatable to those philosophers entrusted with preserving his work. But because it has little to say about the logic and pedagogy of rhetoric, I shall attend to it (as with the rest of Book I) only selectively.

The second book, apart from discussing specific types of arguments common at the time and which do not concern us, explores the personal, socio-emotional, and logical grounds of effective persuasion. These parts are central to our inquiry and will be considered closely. The third, and most important book for present purposes, addresses the questions of style and organization, of which we shall focus primarily on the former.

When, in Book I, Aristotle introduces rhetoric as the art of finding (or inventing) the means of persuasion, he submits that people can be convinced on three general grounds. These shall serve as our entry point into his *Rhetoric* because they define the project of persuasion as Aristotle understood it. First, the 'moral character' of the speaker can "...render him worthy of confidence; for we feel confidence in a greater degree and more readily in persons of worth

in regard to everything in general...” (17). He claims that this ground “constitutes the most effective means of proof” (17). Second, the speaker can appeal to the emotions of the audience, “...for the judgments we deliver are not the same when we are influenced by joy or sorrow, love or hate...” (17). The teaching of this type of persuasion, Aristotle notes, prevails among most contemporary rhetorics and dominates the most deceptive (chiefly forensic) oratory. Third, the speech itself can persuade, “...when we establish the true or apparently true from the means of persuasion applicable to each individual subject” (17).

The ideal rhetor, then, should exemplify moral rectitude, convey psychological empathy, and deliver a convincing speech. The first two desiderata, which he primarily develops together in Book II (and which we too shall address first), seem more like the personal attributes of an ideal rhetor than qualities of his oration. And yet, as Aristotle reminds us, rhetors need not be blessed with integrity or empathy so much as appear to have them through their speeches. On this mark, he maintains that a speaker’s credibility “...must be due to the speech itself, not to any preconceived idea of the speaker’s character” (17). Indeed, if persuasiveness originated solely in one’s integrity and innate faculty of empathy, Aristotle could not teach it in a mere manual, and in turn, this would obviate any ‘art’ of rhetoric. Thus, short of teaching us how to exhibit integrity and empathy, Aristotle describes the composition of these qualities in detail, in the second book of the *Rhetoric*. Specifically, he describes the emblems of personal integrity, such as practical wisdom (good sense), virtue, and goodwill; and the objects of empathy, i.e., the

emotions, including pity, envy, and anger. In what follows we shall explore how Aristotle attempts to teach these first two, related bases of persuasion, before turning our attention to the third.

### Emotion in Moral Integrity and Empathy

Aristotle believes that a speaker exemplifying “good sense, virtue, and goodwill” (171) will ‘produce conviction’. He assumes that all readers know what he means by the first two of these, and does not bother explaining them in any detail or attempt to teach rhetors how to exhibit them. To wit, ‘good sense’ refers simply to the ability to give “good advice” (171), which is probably demonstrated best through the rhetor’s reasonable appraisal of the matter-at-hand and apt use of examples and enthymemes. Aristotle suggests that the rhetor use enthymemes to demonstrate (or to a lesser extent, to refute) arguments. These, a type of syllogism, use general and generally accepted premises--like maxims--to lead to particular conclusions, relevant to the matter-at-hand. Aristotle provides the following example of enthymeme: “(i) There is no man who is really free...(ii) for he is the slave of either wealth or fortune” (281). This enthymeme seems designed to demonstrate a character flaw in a wealthy opponent, when garnished with details from his affairs. Unlike the dialectical syllogism, the enthymeme draws its premises from probabilities rather than certainties, bound as they are to unpredictable human actions, and accordingly, its conclusions demonstrate propensities rather than logical inevitabilities. To help the rhetor form effective enthymemes, Aristotle supplies many ‘topics’, which include both argument forms and maxims.

Aristotle defines 'Virtue' as "the faculty of providing and preserving good things," and it comprises

justice, courage, self-control, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, [and] practical and speculative wisdom. The greatest virtues are necessarily those which are most useful to others, if virtue is the faculty of conferring benefits. (91)

'Goodwill', like virtue, stems from a concern for others, but unlike virtue, it is not measured against such lofty moral standards. To show goodwill toward others we need only treat them as friends:

And those are friends who have the same ideas of good and bad, and love and hate the same persons, since they necessarily wish the same things; wherefore one who wishes for another what he wishes for himself seems to be the other's friend. (193)<sup>1</sup>

To show goodwill to the audience, then, we must appear to share their feelings and have their interests at heart, because an affinity of emotions runs deeper than a mere agreement of opinion. In other terms, we must respond to events and others with the same emotions as our audience, to avoid appearing crass, insensitive, condescending, or patronizing. If we wish to draw upon the persuasive powers of the passions or to demonstrate our good character, we must be empathetic. Thus, as we can see, the first base of persuasion--moral integrity--itself depends upon the second--

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<sup>1</sup>At the end of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates completes a prayer to Pan, and asks his friend "Is there anything more we can ask for, Phaedrus? The prayer contents me." Phaedrus replies: "Make it a prayer for me too, since friends have all things in common." (525)

empathy--because one cannot exhibit integrity without first being empathetic. Indeed, the close relation between these first two bases and the central importance of empathy is reflected in the design of the manual itself, in that they are both described in Book II, and he devotes far more attention to the latter than the former. Hence, to complete our discussion of Aristotle's treatment of personal integrity and, at the same time, to begin our discussion of empathy, we shall now move on to his study of the emotions.

To help the rhetor recognize the audience's emotions, Aristotle describes those which he considers primary to the rhetorical project: Anger, Calmness, Friendship, Enmity, Fear, Confidence, Shame, Impudence, Kindness, Unkindness, Pity, Indignation, Envy, and Emulation. He analyzes each from three perspectives (which he calls the 'three heads' of an emotion). Each chapter in this section begins with a general definition. For example, anger is a "longing, accompanied by pain, for a real or apparent slight," and all anger stems from disdain, spitefulness, insult, or some combination thereof. He then refers to opposing and accompanying emotions, e.g., anger and calmness, on the one hand, and anger and pleasure in thoughts of vengeance, on the other. Second, Aristotle lists the types of people who arouse that emotion, usually as defined by their actions (as with anger and one who disdains). Third, he discusses the circumstances in which people experience it and those who are disposed to feel it often, as with anger and one who is insulted.

Taken together, the three 'heads' form a theoretical paradigm of the emotion: the antagonist who causes or arouses it through his actions; the object of his actions; and the emotion itself (as expressed

in action) that relates the former to the latter. Aristotle provides these observations to enable us to identify (or 'classify') kinds of action<sup>1</sup> and kinds of people. Such classification, as he argues in Book I, is necessary for the art of rhetoric, which should deal not with the actions of individuals, but with those of classes. On this point, he writes, just like medicine,

...Rhetoric will not consider what seems probable in each individual case, for instance to Socrates or Hippias, but that which seems probable to this or that class of persons. It is the same with Dialectic, which does not draw conclusions from random premises--for even madmen have their fancies--but...from those which are common subjects of deliberation. (23)<sup>2</sup>

If Aristotle's *Rhetoric* concerned only particular individuals and particular actions,<sup>3</sup> it could not be thought of as an 'art' capable of giving general advice. Hence, the treatment of an emotion must explore the categories of people and actions that provoke it, to teach the rhetor how to classify particular events as representing experiences common to his audience. Once a particular event is seen in this light, the rhetor, with Aristotle's help, can predict how an audience will react. Using this theme of 'classification' as a guide for

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<sup>1</sup>i.e., 'things which rouse men to anger'

<sup>2</sup>This seems consistent with Plato's portrayal of an ideal rhetoric, which, incidentally, he thought unattainable in handbook form. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says "Since the function of oratory is in fact to influence men's souls, the intending orator must know what types of soul there are. Now these are of a determinate number, and their variety results in a variety of individuals." (517)

<sup>3</sup>e.g. A text written to advise Socrates on how to defend himself against Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon could not itself be considered as an 'art of rhetoric'.



our analysis, let us now consider how he discusses an emotion, continuing to use 'anger' as an example, and situating our discussion in the context of a forensic debate.<sup>1</sup>

### Explaining an Emotion--Anger

In developing a social psychology of anger, Aristotle lists 'reasons' for which one would become angry, and proceeds in the following formulaic way. First, he introduces each of the reasons for anger with a clause such as "men are angry when...", followed by a brief statement of the reason, such as "...they are pained, because one who is pained aims at something; if then anyone opposes him in anything...he is angry with all such persons" (179). Having done this, he elaborates and qualifies the reason, giving examples and listing possible exceptions. Aristotle thinks it necessary that a rhetor understands what makes people angry so that he can then use their ire as a weapon against his opponent.

But this is both difficult and delicate, for two main reasons. First, even if his opponent's action itself warranted anger, an audience may prefer to overlook it, believing that even good people can act carelessly. Second, given that the audience is rarely the direct object of his opponent's slight, they are often unlikely to feel any genuine anger toward him, which complicates the rhetor's task. To stimulate the audience members' anger, the rhetor must make them feel aggrieved, by casting his opponent's offense as a general affront which begs public censure. For example, if the rhetor (or his client) had been slandered, he might claim that his opponent's words

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<sup>1</sup>This was, significantly, Aristotle's choice of a rhetorical context for his discussion of the emotions.

not only hurt him, but tarnished the dignity of Athens itself, and thus warrant collective condemnation and anger. But in presenting a case of slander as a general affront, the rhetor raises the rhetorical stakes and risks distracting the audience from the particular (and relatively venial) sins of his opponent, and in so doing makes his case more difficult to prove, insofar as strong claims need strong evidence to be persuasive. If the rhetor needed to invite the audience's involvement in the first place, he is unlikely to find such evidence in the actual actions of his opponent.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, in making the venial seem cardinal, the rhetor risks reducing his argument to parody and diminishing his 'moral character'.

In both of the above cases the rhetor may find a discussion of his opponent's actions insufficient to arouse anger. Much better, Aristotle argues, that the rhetor shows how his opponent's deeds demonstrate a propensity to commit crimes, or, relatedly, that they appear as symptoms of some greater deficiency of character. For this reason, Aristotle discusses the 'third head' of anger, which characterizes those likely to arouse the anger of others.

To direct the audience's anger to a specific target, Aristotle advises the rhetor to personalize it by attributing the affront to a certain kind of person. In this regard, Aristotle again demonstrates his keen sensitivity to the Greek disposition to classify persons by their actions, especially those who anger them. As in his previous discussion of the causes of anger, he categorizes such individuals as follows:

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<sup>1</sup>i.e., if his opponent's crime were in truth an affront against society in general, he would not need to work for the audience's emotional involvement.

And men are angry with those [introductory clause] who speak ill of or despise things which they themselves consider of greatest importance [defining characteristic]; for instance, if a man speaks contemptuously of philosophy or of personal beauty in the presence of those who pride themselves upon them [example]; ...But they are far more angry if they suspect that they do not possess these qualities [qualification].... (181)

Aristotle assumes that the audience will be angry with those who act in such a way, and thus the rhetor need only direct their attention to particular evocative actions and personal tendencies, "...for the passion present in [their minds] in each case paves the way for [their] anger" (179). To this end, Aristotle catalogs no fewer than eighteen 'models' of men who are likely to anger others.

These models are listed arbitrarily, in the sense that they are exclusive and unique, and that the list makes no pretense of being exhaustive. As a consequence, they provide the rhetor with a store of stereotypes which he can draw upon to identify his opponent, fairly or not. So, when a rhetor wishes to stir his audience's emotions, Aristotle suggests that he need only find a model that best fits the pertinent characteristics of his opponent (from the hostile or disparaging emotions, like anger, enmity, or impudence) or of himself (kindness, confidence, pity). As with the discussion of the 'reasons' for emotion, the rhetor's choice of 'model' is bound to his opponent's (or his) actions. Having found an apt model, the rhetor can frame his speech to accentuate its emotional import, and demonstrate his

adequacy as an emotional arbiter. In these ways he can display both empathy and moral integrity.

### A Partial Psychology

Aristotle's theory of the emotions can be interpreted in a number of ways. First, it is formulated primarily in terms of an oral and agonistic rhetoric. Throughout, he concentrates on how the rhetor may demote an opponent or promote himself before an actual audience. He structures each of his observations (both 'reasons' and 'models') to this end, and so when he writes 'men are angry when...', we know that the 'men' in question should be those of the audience. When he writes 'we pity a man that...', we know that this 'man' should be the rhetor himself.

But as I mentioned earlier, most striking about this part of the *Rhetoric* is its lack of useful principles to guide the rhetor. After the general definition that begins the discussion of each emotion, we are left with two series of particular details, a list of evocative actions and one of evocative people.<sup>1</sup> In fact, he presents the latter series in an unsystematic and merely additive fashion. For example, every one of the eighteen 'models' is introduced with 'and' (καί...καί...καί...καί...), which encourages us to read each as if it were independent of the rest. Seldom does Aristotle refer to rhetoric in general or oration in particular, and when he explicitly links the emotions to persuasion, he does so superficially and in vague

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<sup>1</sup>And even though he formulates each 'reason' and 'model' in general terms, using indefinite subjects like 'men' and actions like 'insult', this information remains, in a way, a set of particular details.

generalities through his concluding remarks. For instance, he concludes his discussion of 'anger' in this typical manner:

It is evident then that it will be necessary for the speaker, by his eloquence, to put the hearers into the frame of mind of those who are inclined to anger, and to show that his opponents are responsible for things which rouse men to anger and are people of the kind with whom men are angry. (185)

To those looking for the systematic principles that Book I promises, this advice tells us little, because it does not specify when it is 'necessary' to rouse anger or how the rhetor's 'eloquence' can accomplish this. Even if we grant implicit understandings between Aristotle and his ideal rhetor, what are we to make of his psychology of the emotions?

Although Aristotle describes the emotions adequately, at this stage he fails to prescribe any way for the rhetor to make use of them. The reader of his *Rhetoric* is left wondering how Aristotle's observations will help him rouse the emotions, and Aristotle does little more than say that the rhetor can do so 'by his eloquence', without elaborating on how this is done.<sup>1</sup> Without clearer guidance as to how we should apply his observations, this descriptive knowledge of the emotions cannot itself persuade, because the rhetor must first know how to make use of it if he hopes to appear

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<sup>1</sup>Other equally vague advice: "So that whenever it is preferable that the audience should feel afraid..." (207); "If then the speaker puts the judges into such a frame of mind..." (237); "So that if the judges are brought into that frame of mind, and those who claim their pity or any other boon are such as we have stated, it is plain that they will not obtain pity from those with whom the decision rests" (243).

empathic or virtuous, much less sway the emotions of others. The rhetor must know how to use this knowledge to his advantage, and, at this stage, Aristotle provides little help.

It would appear that short of fabricating evidence, the rhetor's best strategy is to appeal to the emotion that best fits the facts of his case. For example, unless he were slighted, insulted, dishonored, or disdained, he could not expect to rouse his audience's anger. For this reason, the facts of the case, and not merely the rhetor's histrionic desires, limit his flexibility in stirring the passions. To the extent that this is so, it is unclear how a psychology of the emotions, in itself, contributes anything to a rhetor's skill or appearance of integrity, because it is the facts themselves that rouse emotion and not the rhetor's knowledge of them. This is not to imply that his discussion is useless. The *Art of Rhetoric*, after all, is not merely a pedestrian handbook but a serious, if imperfect, attempt to formulate what persuades and compels in speech.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, he is probably correct when he suggests that disdain evokes anger or misfortune evokes pity or that we envy those who have acquired more than us with less effort. And he is certainly correct when he suggests that these emotions influence a rhetor's success. But in itself, his psychology is insufficient. It cannot improve the way one practices rhetoric, in that the emotional involvement of the audience is always bound to the actions of people, and these do not fall within the 'art' of rhetoric.

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<sup>1</sup>Viewed this way, his rhetorical handbook can also be considered a philosophy of persuasion, which seems a fusion of practice and theory emblematic of Aristotle's disposition to learning itself.

But if we look beyond Aristotle's discussions of the first two bases of persuasion--integrity and empathy--and look to his treatment of the speech itself in Book III, we can glean a rudimentary method for appealing to the emotions. Assuming that all human conflicts can arouse emotional responses and that these can compel, we need only get the most out of the significant facts of our case (or argument) to enhance our persuasiveness. To accomplish this, we must concentrate on the way we express these facts so that they themselves persuade the intellect and sway the passions.

### Style

If the facts themselves persuade, why need we study 'style'? Aristotle begins Book III in an almost apologetic tone. He believes that "...justice should consist in fighting the case with the facts alone," but realizes that "owing to the corruption of the hearer," the rhetor must endeavor to make the truth persuasive (347). Significantly, this defense resembles his initial justification of the entire rhetorical project (as discussed previously), but here he is even less optimistic. He writes of style that "...rightly considered it is thought vulgar," and regards the teaching of style as but a "slight necessity". Moreover, style is a "mere outward show for pleasing the hearer," and obviously foreign to serious philosophical thought: "no one teaches geometry in this way" (349).

Nevertheless, for reasons that I hope to make clear, Aristotle's theory of style is pivotal to his *Rhetoric*, and even after more than two millennia, his definition of good style adumbrates and informs

modern attempts. This is a testament to his influence and, simultaneously, to the philosophical tradition that shaped him.<sup>1</sup>

He introduces style in this way:

In regard to style, one of its chief merits [ἀρετή--virtues] may be defined as perspicuity [σαφή--clear, evident]. This is shown by the fact that the speech [λόγος--an oration or language itself], if it does not make the meaning clear, will not perform its proper function; neither must it be mean, nor above the dignity of the subject, but appropriate to it; for the poetic style may not be mean, but it is not appropriate to prose. Of nouns and verbs it is the proper ones that make style perspicuous; all the others which have been spoken of in the *Poetics* elevate and make it ornate; for departure from the ordinary makes it appear more dignified. (351)

More so than any other, this passage succinctly characterizes Aristotle's perspective on style, if not on rhetoric itself. From it, we may draw several conclusions. First, he suggests that practical (rather than aesthetic) criteria distinguish good style from bad. Good style is efficient and effective, and enables language 'to perform its proper function'. Second, he states that this 'proper function' of language requires 'perspicuity' or 'clarity', which implies that language not only serves as a medium (or instrument) for communication and demonstration, but that it should do so, because it is proper. At the risk of personifying language, one could say that

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<sup>1</sup>The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* concurs: "Book III is perhaps the most interesting and influential part..." ("Rhetoric, Greek" § 2, 921)



Aristotle believes it is obliged to demonstrate and communicate. Third, and of greatest consequence, to enable language to perform this proper function, to speak clearly and with good style, the rhetor must use proper words in an appropriate way.

Just as Aristotle considered 'clarity' to be the goal of good style, he thought 'propriety' the key to achieving it. Throughout his discourse on style, Aristotle introduces what I shall call 'relations of propriety' that determine whether a speech (utterance or phrase) is in good style and whether its meaning, logic, purpose, and moral/emotional significance are clear. A 'relation of propriety' can signify a relation between an idea and its expression, a situation and the emotion with which the rhetor presents it, a type of rhetor and the language he uses, the terms compared in a metaphor, and so forth. In each such relation, Aristotle believes that the rhetor can find an inherently appropriate way to articulate and express what he wishes, and that this appeal to propriety will secure his good style.<sup>1</sup>

We encounter these 'relations of propriety' in various forms throughout Book III, which yield a number of differing, albeit overlapping, principles of propriety to which the rhetor should aspire. For example, the proper relation between two ideas that makes a metaphor 'appropriate' differs from the proper relation between the rhetor and the language 'appropriate' for him to use.

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<sup>1</sup>At this stage, let us note that Aristotle does not explore how particular expressions become 'appropriate', but implies, instead, that propriety is an inherent quality of felicitous style. In Saussurian terms, when one considers an expression as intrinsically 'proper', one treats the relationship between the signified and its signifier as 'natural' or 'inevitable', rather than arbitrary and (merely) conventional. This has profound implications, for it overlooks the way that social power determines propriety.

Each such principle serves as a standard of rhetorical adequacy, and thus represents an aesthetic, logical, or personal ground for persuasion. Moreover, the various ways that Aristotle defines propriety represent statements about the what people find compelling, credible, and authoritative, and reveal what he considered the sources of strength in the social fabric. Before attempting any general summaries, I shall first attend to three guiding principles of propriety individually.

### 1--Use Appropriate Words

Aristotle states this principle directly: “Of nouns and verbs<sup>1</sup> it is the proper ones that make style perspicuous” (351); “Proper and appropriate words...are alone to be employed in the style of prose” (353). How, then, do we determine which words are ‘appropriate’? Although Greek has several words that connote ‘propriety’, Aristotle most frequently uses the word ‘κυριον’ (rather than, for example, ‘πρεπον’) to convey the ‘propriety’ of ‘proper’ words.<sup>2</sup> ‘Κυριον’, when used to describe a person, refers to his or her power and authority to rule. With regard to an inanimate object, it suggests authority and legitimacy. Of interest to us, though, is that ‘κυριον’ refers to an object’s real and actual--because current and ordinary--name. Notably, this sense of ‘κυριον’ entails the others, insofar as convention represents a collectively respected authority or legitimacy. An ordinary word, then, is proper insofar as people accept it as legitimate.

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<sup>1</sup>The phrase ‘nouns and verbs,’ evidently, refers generically to all parts of speech. (cf. note ‘b’, *Rh*, 350)

<sup>2</sup>cf. *Greek-English Lexicon*, ‘κυριον’.

Not only should rhetors use ordinary words, but they should also arrange them in an ordinary way. With this in mind, Aristotle identifies ‘purity of language’<sup>1</sup> (grammatical propriety) as the ‘foundation of style’. In the original, ‘purity of language’ reads as ‘ελληνιζειν’, most literally translated as ‘Hellenicness’, which implies that rhetors desiring ‘pure’ speech should speak in the best Greek, as would their countrymen. For Aristotle, this consists in using connecting particles, punctuation, and gender-signs appropriately (in their “natural order”), and using specific (not generic) language. Each of these requirements asks nothing more of rhetors than that they respect their language and its conventions; a respect, Aristotle assumes, shared by his audience.

Because propriety here denotes a regard for standard, conventional language usage, Aristotle contrasts ‘proper’ words with “...strange, compound, [and] coined words,” which should be used “...only rarely and in few places,” because they involve “...too great a departure from ordinary language” (353). Such improper words, in fact, contribute to the ‘frigidity of style’<sup>2</sup>, because they make style ‘poetical’:

...those who employ poetic language by their lack of taste make the style ridiculous and frigid, and such idle chatter produces obscurity; for when words are piled upon one who already knows, it destroys perspicuity by a cloud of verbiage. (365)

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<sup>1</sup>Or ‘correctness of language.’ (*Rh-M*, 174)

<sup>2</sup>‘Ψυχρα’ is alternately translated as ‘bad taste in language.’ (*Rh-M*, 171)

'Poetic' words are improper, precisely because they undermine the clarity of a speech and prevent it from performing its proper function. On the other hand, proper words are pellucid: "...one word is more proper [κυριωτερον] than another, more of a likeness, and better suited to putting the matter before the eyes" (359).

Moreover, "art is cleverly concealed when the speaker chooses his words from ordinary language..." (353). Using 'ordinary language', then, hides the fact that the speech is itself a calculated attempt to persuade, and, presumably, allows the audience to accept it as plain and candid truth.<sup>1</sup>

One who speaks in proper words appeals to the common, prevailing linguistic standards of grammatical and lexical propriety. The rhetor needs to know which words most people understand, and what syntactical arrangements they are best able to follow.<sup>2</sup> If he neglects the limitations of his audience, or conversely, if he attempts to dazzle them with fancy words and convoluted constructions, the audience may fail to follow his argument or dismiss it outright as pretense and deception. For rhetors to persuade the common man, they must first speak as he does (to be understood), using those words he believes proper.

## 2--Respect the Subject Matter's Dignity

The rhetor must do more than merely use language appropriate to his audience. He must also use language appropriate to the subject matter of his speech. As we read in Aristotle's

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<sup>1</sup>More on this later.

<sup>2</sup>Or as Steiner reminds us, "Rhetoric is the craft of changing with significant effect the lexical and grammatical units of utterance" (*Real Presences*, 160).

introduction to style, "...neither must [style] be mean, nor above the dignity of the subject, but appropriate to it..." (351). He elaborates on this later:

Style is proportionate to the subject matter when neither weighty matters are treated offhand, nor trifling matters with dignity, and no embellishment is attached to an ordinary word... (379)

In formulating 'propriety' in this way, Aristotle presumes that there are two scales of 'dignity', one pertaining to subjects and the other to the 'style' (i.e., as expressed through as adjectives, modifiers, 'treatments' and so forth). Needless to say, for his speech to be received as appropriate, the 'scales of dignity' that the rhetor uses should correspond with those of his audience, which presumes that he values the same subjects to the same degree as they do. To speak with style, rhetors must assess the dignity of their subjects, and then find appropriately dignified words to describe them. For this reason, we can appropriately use lofty and exalted language to praise Apollo's might, whereas we are best advised to use mundane and prosaic language to describe digging a trench.

The continual search for appropriately dignified language is most critical for rhetors when they fashion metaphors:

It is metaphor above all that gives perspicuity, [and] pleasure...; but we must make use of metaphors...that are appropriate. This will be secured by observing due proportion; otherwise there will be a lack of propriety, because it is when placed in juxtaposition that contraries are most evident. (355)

When using metaphor, rhetors not only describe a subject, but liken (or compare) two semantic domains. Accordingly, they must concern themselves with the relative dignity of both subjects, careful to avoid unwittingly depreciating or ennobling either.

And yet, appropriate style consists of more than clever word selection. The rhetor should also express the emotion appropriate to his subject matter. I quote here at length, for this passage bears directly upon our earlier discussion of empathy:

Style expresses emotion when a man speaks with anger of wanton outrage; with indignation and reserve, even in mentioning them, of things foul or impious; with admiration of things praiseworthy...and so in all other cases. Appropriate style also makes the fact appear credible; for the mind of the hearer is imposed upon under the impression that the speaker is speaking the truth, because, in such circumstances, his feelings are the same, so that he thinks (even if it is not the case as the speaker puts it) that things are as he represents them; and the hearer always sympathizes with one who speaks emotionally... (379)

To speak appropriately we must anticipate how our audience will respond emotionally to our subject, and then express this emotion, thus demonstrating our sympathy. Aristotle's psychology of the emotions can help us anticipate how our audience is likely to feel, thereby making us appear sympathetic.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Whether or not this enables us to actively rouse the passions remains to be seen.

### 3--Speak as Your Character Demands

Although Aristotle does not discuss this principle of propriety in detail, it merits our attention. The rhetor must speak in a manner appropriate to one of his 'character' if he wishes to persuade. Ordinarily, as Aristotle observed, men speak differently from women, the aged from the young, the Athenian from the Spartan, and so forth. Such stylistic differences, while acquired and cultivated, assume the significance of 'natural' differences between different 'characters' of people. Consequently, when a rhetor speaks in a manner unbecoming his 'character', he risks appearing abnormal, unnatural, and hence insincere. To avoid this, the rhetor is advised to

...use the very words which are in keeping with a particular disposition, [so that] he will produce the corresponding character; for a rustic and an educated man will not speak in the same way. (*Rh-M*, 178-9)

When a rhetor speaks in this way, i.e., as he should, his speech displays 'signs of its genuineness' (*Rh-M*, 179) that demonstrate his integrity.

If a rhetor chooses to speak above or beneath the dignity of his character, or in a manner uncommon to those like him, the audience shall doubt the truth of his words: "...if fine language were used by a slave or a very young man...it would be hardly becoming" (*Rh.* 353). This implies that some types of speaker, such as the aged or the educated, are better disposed to use fine language appropriately. When this principle of propriety is coupled with the previous one (i.e., the proper relation between ideas and their expression), we find

that certain types of speakers can more appropriately address ideas of various dignity. For instance, because sublime ideas require fine language to be expressed appropriately, only one of a character suited to using fine language can speak of the sublime appropriately. Consequently, some types of people are better suited to discuss some types of subject. This would seem to make certain discursive domains, such as philosophy and theology, the exclusive rhetorical domain of the privileged. Conversely, those of more modest character may have their own domains of appropriate excellence: Aristotle suggests that the ignorant are “more persuasive than the educated in the presence of crowds” because they “speak of what they know and of what more nearly concerns the audience” (289). In either case, this principle of propriety fuses a rhetor’s character with the range of subjects that he can discuss appropriately. This effectively links personal differences with the ability to persuade, and cautions the rhetor to discuss those subjects befitting him in a way they deserve. A rhetor who ignores what people expect of his character, whether in content or expression, risks appearing as if insincere, putting on airs, or condescending.

### Style--Summary

Why should the rhetor worry about propriety? Whenever a rhetor performs, he presents himself to his audience, not only in what he says, but also in how he says it. When auditors consider a speech (or particular expression) appropriate, they tacitly endorse the rhetor’s judgment, insofar as they value something or see things in the same way he does. This endorsement makes the rhetor appear more credible and of good character, and also testifies to the



mutual membership of rhetor and audience; such qualities, Aristotle would argue, could only augment the rhetor's persuasiveness. This is only supposition, because Aristotle rarely bothers explaining why appropriate expression persuades, except through his comments illustrating the problems of its opposite. He calls inappropriate expression 'hardly becoming' (353), claims that it gives 'an appearance of comedy' (379), and says often of an inappropriate metaphor that one of its parts "...exceeds the dignity of the subject, and so the artifice can be seen" (357).<sup>1</sup> Whenever the audience finds the rhetor's comments inappropriate, they question his taste, judgment, sincerity, sympathy, and motives. By contrast, 'appropriate style' bolsters one's credibility and establishes a consonance between the rhetor and his audience. 'Principles of Propriety', then, imply 'Principles of Self-Presentation'.

Did Aristotle believe that the rhetor need only speak properly to speak with style? He concludes with this passage:

It is superfluous to make the further distinction that style should be pleasant or magnificent. Why so, any more than temperate, liberal, or anything else that indicates moral virtue? For it is evident that, if style has been correctly defined, what we have said will suffice to make it pleasant. For why, if not to please, need it be clear, not mean, but appropriate? If it be too diffuse, or too concise, it will not be clear; but it is plain that the mean is most suitable. What we have said will make the

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<sup>1</sup>More on this later.

style pleasant, if it contains a happy mixture of proper and “foreign” words, of rhythm, and of persuasiveness resulting from propriety. (423, 425)

This illustrates the moderating impulse of ‘propriety’, the search for a common ground for rhetor and audience. Nevertheless, Aristotle seems reluctant to give commonality and propriety full credit for rhetorical excellence, in that he praises ‘foreign’<sup>1</sup> words. He knows that a wholly proper speech can become dry or flavorless, and that a dash of the ‘foreign’ can give distinction to the commonplace: “for men admire what is remote, and that which excites admiration is pleasant” (351). Although Aristotle does not explain how one may select ‘foreign’ words felicitously, he still provides some advice for their use. Specifically, ‘foreign’ words, while not proper [‘κυριον’], should only be used when appropriate, as evinced in his call for a “happy mixture of proper and ‘foreign’ words,” and in the following: “...in prose such methods are appropriate in much fewer instances, for the subject is less elevated...” (353).<sup>2</sup>

Aristotle’s reluctance to reduce good style to mere propriety, on the one hand, and his need to subject the (technically) improper ‘foreign’ words to the demands of propriety, on the other, points to a weakness inherent in the ‘art of rhetoric’ itself. Aristotle knows that the best style is more than proper and that it uses ‘foreign’ words aptly. But how, given the limitations of a style manual, can he teach the reader how to use them discriminately? Unless he cautions

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<sup>1</sup>‘Ξενοσ,’ in the Greek, connotes words exotic and distinctive.

<sup>2</sup>Here, Aristotle takes for granted that there is a clear and natural distinction between proper and foreign words, and overlooks the social origin of this distinction.

rhetors in some way, they risk misusing such words and undermining their better intentions:

Wherefore those who practice this artifice [use of “foreign words”] must conceal it and avoid the appearance of speaking artificially instead of naturally; for that which is natural persuades, but the artificial does not. (353)

If one were to use ‘foreign’ words improperly, one would not be believed or be able to persuade, for the overuse of such words is ‘artificial’ or ‘unnatural’, because nobody speaks in such a way ordinarily. On the other hand, one who speak properly appears to speak naturally, and thus can persuade. Each time Aristotle appeals to appropriate style he warns us of the problems of impropriety: specifically, that we would appear poetic or that the ‘art’ (or ‘artifice’) of our speech would be evident. In this, we hear a voice harmonious with Bishop Sprat’s, insofar as both shun extravagant language and long for a ‘natural’ style. But Aristotle has asked for more than Sprat, insofar as he has tried to teach us how to make the truth persuasive. By contrast, Sprat asks only for the truth. In so doing, Aristotle needs to try to teach us things that have nothing to do with the truth, but, instead, with the tastes, affections, and prejudices of men.

### The Art of Rhetoric

Aristotle’s project, as with any attempt at an ‘art of rhetoric’, is laden with difficulties. Perhaps as well as any other, and far better than most, Aristotle understood the subtleties of persuasion. He knew that a rhetor’s personal credibility could compel, and he knew that members of an audience often accept a passionate speech with

their hearts rather than their minds. But these skills are difficult, if not impossible, to teach in a set of systematic and general principles, bound as such faculties are to the particularities of individual rhetors, subjects, and audiences. Moreover, we usually attribute such talents to the genius of individual speakers, as when we speak of an 'authoritative voice' or a 'passionate speaker'. For that matter, we more often call such capacity a 'gift' than a 'skill'. This explains, in part, why Aristotle provided so few guiding principles on how to rouse the emotions and instead devoted so much attention to describing how the passions were likely to be aroused in certain situations.

But in his comments on style, Aristotle is eager to advise on how one 'should' speak to persuade. Nowhere in the *Rhetoric* does Aristotle seem as confident as he does when declaring the necessity of propriety in style. Part of this confidence may issue from the generality of his advice, insofar as his stylistic principles appear universally true. Regardless of who the rhetor is or what he must discuss, he must speak properly and clearly, and avoid appearing artificial or insincere. This advice applies equally in legal cases, political debates, or encomia. The generality of his advice on style and its indifference to the particularities of its use, makes it the most systematic, theoretical, and properly rhetorical<sup>1</sup> part of his treatise. Indeed, for this reason precisely, his advice transcends the bounds of time and space: today, just as in Aristotle's Athens, many deplore

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<sup>1</sup>As we recall, he thought the art of rhetoric could be used "in reference to any subject whatever," and that "...its rules are not applied to any particular definite class of things" (15)

the decline of plain, appropriate talk in private and public domains and the proliferation of obfuscatory cant. Even today, we admire and reward those who uphold standards of clarity and propriety while gracefully adding a touch of the 'foreign' to their speech. Although it may be stretching matters to claim that Aristotle affects the way we persuade (or find things persuasive) today, there can be little doubt that he has influenced the way today's rhetoricians teach us to write.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, we need not be surprised if, in the following chapters, we detect a lingering echo of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, emerging through urgent calls for clarity and ardent appeals to propriety, because such is his legacy. Nowhere is this more evident than in a small but certainly not slight work that has influenced a host of writers since it first appeared in 1919, and which I shall consider next.

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<sup>1</sup> On this note, Barthes writes "Isn't all rhetoric (if we except Plato) Aristotelian? No doubt it is: all the didactic elements which feed the classical manuals come from Aristotle" (*The Semiotic Challenge*, 21)

## Chapter Three--Strunk and White on Writing and Writers

My curiosity in the techniques of clear writing--a curiosity which led to this thesis--was first aroused about six years ago. I can almost remember the precise date when a professor I respected told me to get Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. A vague sense of embarrassment accompanied this purchase, probably originating in both pride and inexperience. After all, I had never before had trouble expressing myself, and past essays I had written seemed (to me) a model of lucidity. And yet, when faced with my most recent assignment riddled with my professor's corrections, revisions, excisions, grammatical reminders, and marginal comments, I began slowly and stubbornly to recognize points of ambiguity and of equivocation, redundancy, and outright opacity. *The Elements of Style* identified some common writing problems and their conventional remedies, but, more important, it encouraged me to approach clarity critically instead of taking it for granted. In these matters, Strunk and White enabled me (or at least invited me) to read my writing as someone unfamiliar with my intentions and

assumptions would, and thus to judge as an impartial stranger or outsider.

Although I have read several manuals since then and seldom find myself consulting Strunk and White now, I shall always look upon my introduction to their manual as an initiation into university study. My experience, doubtless, is common. Several generations of students, including my parents and many of my teachers, read *The Elements of Style* for English or Composition courses. Right from its birth, this book has been, so to speak, an academic denizen. William Strunk Jr., its original author, wrote and privately published the manual for his students at Cornell, including E.B. White, who would later edit and arrange Strunk's work as we know it.

Strunk and White wrote their manual to teach the skills of good writing as economically as possible. In his introduction, White comments that the manual was Strunk's "...attempt to cut the vast tangle of English rhetoric down to size and write its rules and principles on the head of a pin" (xi). Strunk knew that few students would bother to read the lengthy explorations of the subtleties of good writing provided by the style books of his day. Then, as much as now, students desired instrumental advice, i.e., suggestions and recommendations that they could apply to essays due the following week. To this end, he designed his manual in the form of 'elementary rules' and 'elementary principles' that could be read, if not mastered, in a single sitting.

But besides making his manual an accessible source, his desire to explicate the foundations of good writing serves a more pedagogical purpose. When students assume that good style depends

more upon their adherence to a set of essential principles than it does upon innate gifts of eloquence, they come to believe that it is something that they can accomplish through perseverance and practice. Moreover, when good style is broken down into its elementary principles, students can concentrate on axioms most applicable to their writing difficulties, and thus consult the manual selectively. All said, Strunk's decision to lay down the elementary principles of good style rather than merely muse about them made his manual compact, its lesson pointed, and its practicality conspicuous. For all of these reasons, the University of Chicago's *Manual of Style* calls it "a short classic offering excellent, practical advice on achieving a clear and graceful expository style" (518).

What, then, are the principles of 'good style'? Strunk and White present two different types, corresponding to the two common ways we think of 'good style'. First, because 'good style' can refer to correct English and clear, effective writing, the authors advise the reader on how to write clearly, concisely, and coherently. Second, because 'good style' "in its broader meaning" refers to "what is distinguished and distinguishing" (66), *The Elements of Style* attempts to teach one how to write gracefully and express one's character. Strunk and White consider these part of a cumulative and ongoing project, in that writers must first master the foundations of standard English prose before concerning themselves with making their writing elegant or awakening their unique authorial voices.

In this chapter, I shall explore these principles of 'good style', with an eye to how they advise writers to treat their subject matter and regard their anticipated reader. Nested in these principles of



good style are assumptions about readers-in-general (i.e., ‘the reader’) and what they expect of writers, what they are most likely to understand and find compelling, and how they prefer discussions to be arranged. In this light, the manual’s principles emerge not only as technical prescriptions for clear writing, but as an attempt at theorizing about communication and aesthetics, which tells us what readers--if not all of us--are disposed to find proper, lucid, and engaging. Thus, in what follows I shall first consider those rules intended to teach clarity, or in Strunk and White’s terms, correct, effective English. Later, I shall explore others, whose aim is to produce a “distinguished and distinguishing” style, through an analysis of Chapter V, “An Approach to Style.” In both cases, I shall consider not only what such principles state explicitly, but what they presuppose, and how they may be inadequate to their purported goals.

## The Principles of Effective Writing

Strunk and White devote four chapters to correct and appropriate English. Chapter 1, “Elementary Rules of Usage,” teaches correct punctuation and effective sentence structure (i.e., syntax). Chapter 2, “Elementary Principles of Composition,” concentrates on paragraph and essay organization (taxis), and includes some advice on word selection (lexis) and concision. Chapter 3, “A Few Matters of Form,” is a set of typographical tips, and Chapter 4, “Words and Expressions Commonly Misused,” a brief (and self-explanatory) usage guide. This chapter grouping reflects the traditional division of

rhetorical skills or faculties (into lexis, taxis, syntax, and so forth).<sup>1</sup> But in this chapter I am less interested in these technical divisions than in the social logic or rationale that informs individual principles. Consequently, I shall group these principles according to how they help writers make their texts (and themselves) appear to others in three ways: intelligible, considerate, and compelling.

### First Principle--Write Intelligibly

Because writers must first be understood if they hope to convince, Strunk and White begin their manual with a section on "Elementary Rules of Usage." This section comprises 'rules' about how one should structure and punctuate strings of words in order to produce sentences, i.e., complete, unambiguous thoughts. Strunk and White refer to this approach as a set of 'rules', rather than 'principles' or 'suggestions', to stress that they are based on absolute and invariable standards rather than on taste or personal discretion. They assume that writing requires such 'rules' to act as a medium of communication.<sup>2</sup> The very possibility of communication presumes that both reader and writer (or listener and speaker) share the same conventions when speaking or writing, so that a text (or utterance) can signify the same meaning for both of them. Without such conventions, a person's message may seem ambiguous (i.e.,

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<sup>1</sup>The rhetor (or writer) "...must first hit upon what to say; then manage and marshal his discoveries, not merely in orderly fashion, but with a discriminating eye for the exact weight as it were of each argument; next, go on to array them in the adornments of style; after that keep them guarded in his memory; and in the end deliver them with effect and charm..." (Cicero, *De Oratore*, 99).

<sup>2</sup>The 'communicative' model of language is but one of many, and is criticized for some of its presuppositions by Deleuze and Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

suggesting no singular meaning), if not altogether incomprehensible. Thus, both reader and writer must, at the very least, use the same alphabet and language if they hope to communicate.

Strunk and White know that one who consults their manual can already read and speak, and accordingly, they attend only to conventions specific to written communication, such as punctuation and syntax. These conventions are specific to writing and explicitly display and differentiate what we do when we speak, e.g., separate sentence elements and whole sentences from each other through pauses and changes of intonation and tempo. Such literal codification is necessary because, unlike speech, writing is fixed and the author's meaning is not, for the most part, subject to challenge or clarification.

Having taught thousands of undergraduates, Strunk was acutely aware that even articulate speakers may have only a rough sense of such writing conventions. His students, like all others, would have acquired language orally, and thus would often fail to appreciate the subtleties of punctuation, which appear foreign and artificial to speech. Mindful of their difficulties, he provided these "Elementary Rules of Usage" (and the brief chapter on typographical propriety, "A Few Matters of Form") to teach students how to convey qualities of speech that written words, presented alone, could not. To illustrate this, I shall briefly discuss some of their comments on punctuation.

Many of their 'rules of usage' pertain to punctuation, which the writer should use to separate discrete ideas in an otherwise seamless string of text. The period, for example, signals a completed and proper sentence--i.e., one having an independent clause, with both

subject and predicate--which indicates that we have presented a complete thought (p. 7). One may, of course, join two independent clauses with a comma followed by a conjunction, to illustrate that two ideas are related (5). Quotation marks set off dialogue and verbatim documentary evidence, to prevent the reader from confusing the writer's voice with those whom he quotes (36). We use the comma to distinguish the essential from the superfluous when we mark off parenthetical comments (2). According to Strunk and White, commas serve as the borders of a detail or observation that should not interfere with the main idea of a sentence. For this reason, extraneous matter must be marked explicitly, to prevent a confusion of the essential with the trivial:

If the interruption to the flow of the sentences is but slight, the writer may safely omit the commas. But whether the interruption is slight or considerable, he must never omit one comma and leave the other. (3)

Besides separating distinct thoughts, felicitous punctuation can convey something of the character of the break:

A colon tells the reader that what follows is closely related to the preceding clause. The colon has more effect than the comma, less power to separate than the semicolon, and more formality than the dash. (9)

In sum, these rules help the writer demonstrate when ideas are complete, whether they are central or incidental, and how they are related to the larger context. Presumably, we are able to convey such things without punctuation when we speak.

Although these prescriptions seem obvious to those of us familiar with them, they, like all 'rules' of grammar, are more than mere matters of technique. As I shall explain, they do more than help us communicate ideas, because the manner in which they are applied (or neglected) also communicates something about the writer. Indeed, if these rules were as self-evident to literate readers as the rudiments of grammar appear, Strunk and White would not bother teaching them in a book on style, which implies mastery rather than competence. To understand how these rules involve more than communicative competence, we need first consider why Strunk and White chose the particular rules that they did. Clearly, the eleven rules they discuss are neither exhaustive, nor representative, of the body of English grammar. Nor do these rules attempt to teach us the principles of English discourse, which they presume we know. To this end, even a mastery of their "Elementary Rules of Usage" could not substitute for the continual acquisition of idioms and piecemeal grammatical skills that enable us to construct acceptable sentences. These rules, instead, address the particular grammatical problems that prevailed among Strunk's students and are no less common today--the sort of grammatical errors encountered frequently in essays and term papers, as well as other literary genres. Partly for this reason, he phrases some 'rules' in negative terms, telling writers "do not break sentences in two," and "do not join independent clauses by a comma," as if standing behind his students when they write.

Although such solecisms detract from the grace of writing and often make it more difficult to read, they rarely prevent us from

understanding what the writer is trying to convey. This is because the reader of *The Elements of Style* already has a rudimentary literacy if not a more advanced grasp of English grammar. In either case, we can assume that the writer can speak effectively and has difficulty only in adopting some conventions of written discourse. Further, because Strunk and White seek to correct common grammatical errors<sup>1</sup>, we can usually infer what a sentence means with some confidence, even if it violates a ‘rule of usage’.

Although breaking these rules usually causes ambiguity, such violations produce incomprehensibility only in extreme cases. More often, such errors are an inconvenience and, as with ‘solecisms’ in their historical sense, markers of ignorance to those who know better.<sup>2</sup> Strunk and White sometimes highlight the unsightly appearance of grammatical errors, calling them ‘blunders’ (7, 9), ‘indefensible’ (2), and their results ‘often ludicrous’ (14). Moreover, when illustrating the violation of rules, they often find examples that accent their ludicrous results: in one of their examples, “Polly loves cake more than me” (12), we recognize the ambiguity borne of faulty grammar, as we wonder whether Polly is more enamored of cake than of the writer. Hence, even when sophisticated readers can understand (or infer the meaning of) an ungrammatical sentence, they are left wondering why the writer was not more careful. More

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<sup>1</sup>That is, as opposed to fundamental linguistic slips, which would prevent communication altogether, or specialized and rare ones, such as the ‘rules’ pertaining to the subjunctive mood.

<sup>2</sup>Aristotle warns the rhetor to avoid solecisms [σολοικος] in the *Rhetoric* (ii.16.2, iii.5.7), because they make one appear ‘ill-mannered’ (259) and ‘cause obscurity’ (375).

pernicious still, habitual grammatical mutilation leads us to suspect character as much as style.

All of this suggests that their “Elementary Rules of Usage” serve two coëxtensive purposes. The first, and manifest one, seeks to inculcate several commonly neglected writing conventions, to help the writer minimize ambiguity and distinguish complete ideas. When applied appropriately, these rules minimize the extent to which the reader must infer or speculate about the writer’s intended meaning. The second, latent purpose, seeks to prevent writers from violating the conventions that distract discerning readers; when writers avoid such errors, they appear more sophisticated, intelligent, and masters of their craft. In this we glimpse the two-fold aim of *The Elements of Style*, engendering good writing, on the one hand, and cultivating the voice of the author, on the other. As we now turn our attention to less mechanical and more discretionary matters, it shall be more difficult to distinguish the cultivation of a refined authorial voice from the teaching of good writing.

### Second Principle--Assist the Reader

Not only should we write so that readers can understand us, but we should also try to make their task easier. No reader is blessed with limitless patience or infallible memory and unflagging concentration. Accordingly, we should write concisely, to avoid wasting the reader’s time, and write in an orderly manner, so that the reader can better remember what has been read and follow our arguments more easily. Strunk and White address these goals, among others, in their “Elementary Principles of Composition.” To explore their efforts in these regards, I shall discuss two principles in

detail: #17, "Omit needless words"; and #13, "Make the paragraph the unit of composition."

When advising us to write concisely, Strunk and White tell us to "omit needless words":

A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. (23)

But what do they mean by 'necessary' and 'unnecessary' words? Comparing 'words' to the 'parts' of a machine, Strunk and White suggest that words should perform a function, most likely that of communicating ideas. Thus, they imply, within any paragraph we may find two types of words: the 'necessary' ones that convey the ideas that we intend, and the 'unnecessary' ones that do not.

This distinction between 'necessary' and 'unnecessary' words reveals much about the way Strunk and White understand the project of writing and, concurrently, language itself. Whenever we attempt to write about a particular subject, we should use some words, the 'necessary', and reject the rest, the 'unnecessary'. The best writing, then, maximizes the former and minimizes the latter. This implies that some words communicate (or have meaning) while others do not, and could either be allowed to remain or be deleted without changing the overall meaning (or message) of the text. Thus, the decision to expunge 'unnecessary' words has less to do with comprehensibility than it does with courtesy. It follows, then, that either 'unnecessary words' have no meaning whatsoever, or that two different texts--one with 'unnecessary words' and one without--



convey the same message.<sup>1</sup> Strunk and White evidently accept the second of these interpretations, because they call such words ‘superfluous’ (24) rather than meaningless.

How, then, do we decide which words are superfluous? Strunk and White provide some examples of ‘unnecessary’ phrases, which include ‘the fact that’, ‘who is’, ‘which was,’ and several others that could be replaced with a single word. But this list is hardly exhaustive, which limits the scope of its application. Thus, this principle--“omit needless words”--seems easier to formulate than to execute, because apart from giving some examples of flabby phrases and likening them to superfluous parts of a machine, the authors fail to give writers any general strategy for determining what makes a particular word or phrase ‘necessary.’ In other words, even if this principle can be learned, it seems difficult to teach and, ultimately, the decision to omit words can only fall upon the writer’s taste or judgment, which cannot be learned from a mere manual.<sup>2</sup> And even if this principle is not itself helpful, they do suggest that a writer can learn to write concisely by respecting other principles, because “...a positive statement is more concise than a negative one, and the active voice more concise than the negative...” (24). Hence, to learn how to write concisely we may need to do more than ‘omit needless

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<sup>1</sup>When we assume that two different texts can convey the same meaning (and not merely a ‘similar’ one), we assume, in turn, that the text’s form (i.e., its expression) can be abstracted from its content (i.e., its meaning). This abstraction, while a common one, has further philosophical and linguistic implications, pertaining to the possibility of an apprehensible reality--ideas, objects, and so forth--independent of language.

<sup>2</sup>Another influential manual, William Zinsser’s *On Writing Well*, says this about the principle of reducing ‘clutter’ in writing: “Can such principles be taught? Maybe not. But most of them can be learned” (6).

words,' because concise writing may be more a product of the writer's treatment of his material than of a desire to winnow the 'necessary' from the 'unnecessary.'<sup>1</sup> Still, this is the only principle in which Strunk and White address concision directly, and regardless of the difficulties in teaching it, the fact remains that when we write concisely we assist and respect the reader, thereby demonstrating our courtesy and goodwill.

Besides preferring concise writing, readers need well-organized writing, so that they can follow arguments without repeatedly reviewing what they have read. For this reason, Strunk and White advise us to "make the paragraph the unit of composition" (15). Even when writers believe their arguments sound, the ideal reader requires that they be memorable and easily followed. Thus, good organization requires that we should think first of the reader:

...a subject requires division into topics, each of which should be dealt with in a paragraph. The object of treating each topic in a paragraph by itself is, of course, to aid the reader. The beginning of each paragraph is a signal to him that a new step in the development of the subject has been reached. (16)

This passage suggests that readers can best follow an argument when it is formulated in a series of steps, in which each unit is a paragraph which comprises a complete (if not independent) 'topic'. The central 'topic' of a paragraph unifies the paragraph and gives readers a

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<sup>1</sup>The first sentence of this principle suggests as much: when writing "vigorous writing is concise," they treat concision as a result rather than a cause (23).

single idea that is easier to remember and consider than a collection of details (i.e., sentences). To help the reader identify it, Strunk and White recommend that writers “...begin each paragraph...with a sentence that suggests the topic...” (17).

When deciding how we shall divide our topics, Strunk and White remind us that the length of a paragraph can affect the reader’s ability (or desire) to understand it:

Enormous blocks of print look formidable to a reader. He has a certain reluctance to tackle them; he can lose his way in them. ...But remember, too, that firing off many short paragraphs in quick succession can be distracting. There is an optimal length for paragraphs and, correspondingly, an optimal amount of elaboration for topics. An overly long paragraph signals that a topic may be complex enough to be divided (or risk appearing convoluted), in the same way that a short paragraph signals that the writer may not have developed the topic adequately (and appear aphoristic or cryptic). This suggests that readers envision an ‘appropriate’ length of paragraph, reflecting an ‘appropriate’ amount of development for a topic. Hence, Strunk and White write that “paragraphing calls for a good eye as well as a logical mind,” and “moderation and a sense of order should be the main considerations in paragraphing.”<sup>1</sup>

Rhetoricians have long recognized the need for ‘moderation’ in organizing discourse. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle adumbrates Strunk

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<sup>1</sup> Presumably, this ‘sense of order’ and ‘logical mind’ help us arrange our ‘topics’, but because Strunk and White fail to elaborate on this, we cannot pursue it further.

and White when he writes about the 'periods' of a speech, themselves akin to the paragraphs of an essay:

But neither clauses nor periods should be curtailed or too long. If too short, they often make the hearer stumble; for when he is hurrying on towards the measure of which he already has a definite idea, if he is checked by the speaker stopping, a sort of stumble is bound to occur in consequence of the sudden stop. If too long, they leave the hearer behind, as those who do not turn till past the ordinary limit leave behind those who are walking with them. (389)

Like Strunk and White, Aristotle recognizes that the length of a 'period' affects the ability to convey a definite idea, and that one must seek moderate lengths to succeed. And, like Strunk and White, Aristotle does not attempt to specify this 'moderate' length in absolute terms (e.g., a fixed number of clauses per 'period' or sentences per paragraph). I mention this not because such a standard is feasible or even desirable; indeed, few writers or rhetors could or would adhere to one. Rather, in declining to conjecture on such a standard, the authors of these manuals imply that such matters ultimately depend upon the writer's native discretion.

Thus, to fashion adequate paragraphs, the writer must hone his discretion or, as Strunk and White put it, develop a "good eye as well as a logical mind" (17). These talents, however, cannot be learned from *The Elements of Style* because writers require a familiarity with good writing in order to be able to decide whether their paragraphs of an appropriate length. Nevertheless, their advice may

be useful in another way. In telling us to rely upon our 'eye and logical mind', Strunk and White encourage us to trust our judgment rather than look for an absolute and inflexible paragraphing formula or arrangement scheme that may not do justice to our subject matter. Such formulae, if they existed, could make the organization of our writing look mechanical and contrived, or, in the estimation of Aristotle and Sprat, 'artificial'.

Having discussed Strunk and White's treatment of concision and good organization, I shall now offer some brief, general comments on their attempts to help us aid the reader. If effective communication were the only goal of good style, concision and organization would appear as indulgences rather than requirements, because we can understand verbose writing and long paragraphs, given time and effort. Thus, something other than communication is at stake. In both cases, I have tried to demonstrate how we cannot merely adhere to stylistic principles when we wish to help the reader, but instead, must rely upon our judgment when deciding which words to omit or how to divide our paragraphs. This recourse to personal discretion suggests that what we find helpful, our readers will find helpful, providing our discretion is good. But writers deficient in this discretion will take little comfort in their advice, because, as we have seen, Strunk and White do more to exhort concision and good organization as goals of good style than they do to teach them as skills. They do not, nor could they, teach us how to hone our judgment and develop the discerning eye needed to discriminate between 'necessary' and 'unnecessary' words. However pithy and germane, no set of principles could compensate for a lack

of experience and familiarity with good usage. Thus, to some extent, these principles presume that the writer already has the ability needed to accomplish what they exhort. For those having such sensibilities, these principles presume (more than bolster) a sympathetic bond between writer and reader, insofar as these principles presume that both judge things the same way. Moreover, in taking the reader into account, writers demonstrate a willingness to participate in this project. This, more than anything else, may be the writer's profit in taking pains to help the reader.

### Third Principle--Write with Authority

Even careful and obliging writers can fail to convince if they appear irresolute, timorous, or overly diffident. For this reason, Strunk and White advise us to write boldly, forcibly, and vigorously. Consequently, they furnish three related principles--“use the active voice,” “put statements in positive form,” and “use definite, specific, concrete language”--and a short usage guide, “Words and Expressions Commonly Misused.”

Why does the active voice make us appear “more direct and vigorous”, and the passive “less direct [and] less bold”? When we write in the active voice we attribute responsibility to specific actors (subjects) and, in so doing, demonstrate conviction in our judgments. On the other hand, when we write in the passive voice we either subordinate actors, by placing them after the action, or omit them completely, thereby refraining from implicating any actor. For example, the active sentence “Jack kicked Jill,” can be revised into two passive yet grammatically sound sentences. If we write “Jill was kicked by Jack,” we stress the object of action over the acting subject,

Jack. This has the effect of casting the action as a function of the object, a 'kicked' Jill, rather than as one of a purposeful actor. In a subtle way, this mitigates Jack's responsibility. Far less subtle is the grammatical sentence "Jill was kicked," in which the agent's identity becomes altogether indefinite.

For these and other reasons, Strunk and White write that "the habitual use of the active voice...makes for forcible writing" (18). When we use the active voice we necessarily place actors in the foreground, as if accusing them.<sup>1</sup> Although readers find actions ambiguous and subject to interpretation, they find actors definite, particular, and concrete. For example, in the sentence 'Jack kicked Jill' we may question whether the action was a intended to hurt, an admonishing nudge, or a playful pat, but we would know who did what to whom. Written in the active voice, a sentence makes a definite assertion, linking an actual (even if fictive or hypothetical) actor to a deed. Although readers may question the validity of the writer's assertion, they cannot help but recognize that the writer has asserted something and bears the responsibility for that claim. Thus, when we 'use the active voice' we evince confidence in our writing through the structure of our sentences. As I shall now discuss, Strunk and White believe that we can show this confidence in other, more substantive ways.

We should, whenever possible, "put statements in positive form" (19). This entails that we

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<sup>1</sup>This reminds us of the lengths to which Aristotle went when classifying types of evocative actors in his treatment of the emotions.

[m]ake definite assertions. Avoid tame, colorless, hesitating, noncommittal language. Use the word *not* as a means of denial or in antithesis, never as a means of evasion. (19)

When we write in positive terms we actively make definite statements. For example, it is more precise and definite to describe a bowl of soup as 'hot' rather than 'not cold', or a person as 'strong' rather than 'not weak.' Strunk and White write: "Consciously or unconsciously, the reader is dissatisfied with being told only what is not; he wishes to be told what is" (19-20).<sup>1</sup> Positive statements are precise and direct, negative ones flexible but indefinite: "If your every sentence admits a doubt, your writing will lack authority." Thus, precise language demonstrates the writer's willingness to make definite judgments and, implicitly, defend them.

So it is that Strunk and White further argue that we should "use definite, specific, concrete language" (21). They write: "...the surest way to arouse and hold the attention of the reader is by being specific, definite, and concrete."<sup>2</sup> This assumes, among other things, that both writer and reader share a common 'hierarchy of meaning' that ranges from the most specific to the most general words. We find an example of such a hierarchy in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*

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<sup>1</sup>Except in such cases as when we view the absence of something as good: e.g., when advertisers tell us that their product contains no salt, sugar, preservatives, etc.

<sup>2</sup>Aristotle knew this well. In the *Rhetoric* we read: "The more special [i.e., specific] qualities the expression possesses, the smarter it appears..." (413); to set things 'before the eyes' we must use "...words that signify actuality," (405); and his repeated praise of 'vivid' metaphors (403).



as a *Young Man* (11-2) when Stephen Dedalus muses about who and where he is:

*Stephen Dedalus*  
*Class of Elements*  
*Clongowes Wood College*  
*Sallins*  
*County Kildare*  
*Ireland*  
*Europe*  
*The World*  
*The Universe*

If we wish to display certainty and confidence in our writing, then, we do better to write that Stephen Dedalus lives in Clongowes rather than in Ireland or Europe. Strunk and White submit that specific and concrete writing enables the reader, through his imagination, to “project himself into the scene” (22). To help the writer find specific words, they include a list of “Words and Expressions Commonly Misused,” intended to aid in “...the replacement of vague generality by definite statement” (39).

Beyond avoiding generalities, the ability to use ‘specific’ language requires a further skill. Writers should be able to differentiate between synonyms to find the specific word that best fits the context of their sentences. For example, if I want to refer to the general concept of ‘inquiry’, I should specify whether I mean an investigation, study, exploration, inquisition, interrogation, question, or so forth. To write specifically, one must be able to discern between subtle shades of meaning, and know, in detail, the precise definition of the words they use. All told, when we use specific and concrete words we demonstrate a refined mind, willing and able to

discriminate between objects rather than settle timidly for vague generalities and approximations.

### The Principles of Effective Writing--Summary

“Effective Writing,” as we have analyzed it, depends on three principles: that we write intelligibly, that we help the reader, and that we write with authority. Each of these entails a variety of writing techniques, intended to teach us how to write clearly. But as I have tried to demonstrate, more is at stake in ‘good style’ and ‘clarity’ than the accurate and reliable transmission of ideas. Each principle of ‘good style’ informs writers about how they should appear to the ideal reader, whether careful and sophisticated, courteous, or authoritative. These qualities concern persuasion as much as, if not more than communication because they cultivate a compelling, rather than merely comprehensible, authorial voice. Here, we are reminded of Aristotle, when he writes that moral character, and not sound logic or eloquence, “constitutes the most effective means of proof” (*Rh.* 17). As with Aristotle, Strunk and White believe that the writer (or rhetor) can construct this persuasive persona by attending to the subtleties of style and appreciating the needs and desires of his audience. And these desiderata call for a discussion of ‘good style’ in what E.B. White calls its ‘broader sense’. In what follows, we shall see how *The Elements of Style* explicitly attempts to teach the writer how to nurture a singular, distinct writing style.

### The Principles of Distinguished Writing

The fifth chapter of *The Elements of Style*, “An Approach to Style,” was written by E.B. White to help the writer achieve a

‘distinguished and distinguishing’ style, and contains three sections. In the first, White describes this style, its mysteries, and its virtues. Next, he provides a list of twenty-one principles (which he terms ‘reminders’) that he believes will help writers in their efforts. He concludes the chapter with a brief note of encouragement to the fledgling author.

When White begins to describe this ‘distinguished and distinguishing’ style, he contrasts it with the style taught in the first part of the book: “Up to this point, the book has been concerned with what is correct, or acceptable, in they use of English” (66). To demonstrate how this ‘style’ transcends mere clarity, he provides four variations of ‘These are the times that try men’s souls’:

Times like these try men’s souls.  
 How trying it is to live in these times!  
 These are trying times for men’s souls.  
 Soulwise, these are trying times. (67)

He then notes:

No fault of grammar can be detected [in the variations], and in every case, the meaning is clear. Each version is correct, and each, for some reason that we can’t readily put our finger on, is marked for oblivion.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Later, after a similar exercise, he comments “The author’s meaning is still intact, but not his overpowering emotion” (68). White forgets two things here: first, that the overall ‘meaning’ of the revised sentences differ from the original sentence in terms of emphasis and rhythm; second, that much of the grace of the original sentence comes from its iambic tetrameter form. As Hughes notes in *Signs of Literature* (82), this metric form appeals to the dominant, and hence putatively legitimate, aesthetic of Western culture.

Thus, virtuous style does more than convey 'meaning' and exhibit good grammar. Because the style he advocates is more than merely 'correct or acceptable', he cannot rely upon "established English usage" to provide a model for it, and opts instead to draw advice "from a writer's experience of writing." Further, because this style is more than mechanical, he is reluctant to call its principles 'rules', and chooses to call them "mere gentle reminders [that] state what most of us know and at times forget."

Why does this style defy analysis and lack a "satisfactory explanation" (66)? White argues that such style has less to do with the mechanics of language than with the way the writer expresses his character:

Every writer, by the way he uses the language, reveals something of his spirit, his habits, his capacities, his bias...All writing is communication; creative writing is communication through revelation--it is the self escaping into the open. No writer long remains incognito. (66-7)<sup>1</sup>

Bound to private inscrutabilities like the 'spirit' and the 'habits', style would seem to be an elusive and idiosyncratic quality incapable of being described in general terms or, for that matter, taught. Nevertheless, as White argues, its source is unmistakable: to write with style we need only reveal ourselves as faithfully as possible:

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<sup>1</sup>This passage suggests that White believes that the 'self' is a stable entity that may be 'revealed' through writing. This belief, consistent with the precepts of American ego-psychology, is disputed by many literary critics and philosophers, who contend that the 'self' is an illusion created or constructed--not revealed--through writing.

Young writers often suppose that style is a garnish for the meat of prose...Style has no such separate entity; it is nondetachable, unfilterable. The beginner should approach style warily, realizing that it is himself he is approaching, no other...The approach to style is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity. (69)

Of these four qualities of personal style--‘plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity’--only ‘sincerity’ seems directly pertinent to self-revelation, whereas the others have more to do with the correct and effective style developed in the first part of the book.<sup>1</sup> Putting this aside for now, this passage reinforces the essential unity of style and character, presenting literary self-epiphany as the ‘inevitable as well as enjoyable’ (67) product of writing and as the chief merit of style.<sup>2</sup> But, as we shall see, however inevitable and desirable this revelation, White’s ‘list of Reminders’ seems to subvert the sort of writing he extols. This suggests that personal style and elegance are easier praised than taught. In what follows, I shall regroup White’s ‘reminders’ to reflect their underlying rationale, leaving us with three overlapping principles of style:

1. Restrain the Authorial Voice
2. Write Naturally
3. Respect Conventions

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<sup>1</sup>If a writer’s character lacks plainness, simplicity, and orderliness, shouldn’t these negative traits (in White’s view) be expressed in writing? Would it be sincere of him to write in this way? Conversely, if plain, simple, and orderly writing did reflect sincere expression, we might ask the why White assumes that a writer has these qualities.

<sup>2</sup>Lucas calls ‘character’ “the foundation of style” (46).

### First Principle--Restrain the Authorial Voice

Even though good style should express character, White's first reminder is to "place yourself in the background" (70). He advises us to "write in a way that draws the reader's attention to the sense and substance of the writing, rather than to the mood and temper of the author." An apparent irony, and the first of many--to reveal ourselves, we should underplay our mood and disposition, which, otherwise, would seem central to character. How, then do we reveal ourselves through writing? He continues:

If the writing is solid and good, the mood and temper will eventually be revealed.... As [the writer] becomes proficient in the use of the language, his style will emerge, because he himself will emerge, and when this happens he will find it increasingly easy to break through the barriers that separate him from other minds...which is, of course, the purpose of writing...

Because White chooses a passive construction when he writes that 'mood and temper will eventually be revealed,' he seems vague, and not without reason, about how this revelation works. Instead, this 'reminder' tells us only that our style and character 'will emerge' in the future, given adequate proficiency in the use of the language.

In much the same spirit, White warns us: "Do not inject opinion" (80). He writes:

Unless there is a good reason for its being there, do not inject opinion into a piece of writing. We all have opinions about almost everything, and the temptation to

toss them in is great. To air one's views gratuitously, however, is to imply that the demand for them is brisk... Even though a writer's opinions reflect, in some measure, his experience and character,<sup>1</sup> they should intrude gratuitously, lest he "...leave the mark of egotism on a work." It seems, then, that too much or untimely self-revelation is a bad thing, because "to air one's views at an improper time may be in bad taste." Likewise, he advises us to avoid "a breezy manner" (73). Such a style, he writes, "is often the work of an egocentric, the person who imagines that everything that pops into his head is of general interest and that uninhibited prose creates high spirits and carries the day." 'Uninhibited prose,' then, is not a sign of self-revelation, if it makes the author appear as if "...he is showing off and directing the attention of the reader to himself" (74).

Once again we find that good style requires more than unfettered self-revelation, because character, at least in literary matters, is not a self-indulgent exhibition of the writer's mood, preferences, or antipathies. Such practices are at odds with the cultivation of good style because they deflect the force of what is being said to who is saying it. For White, this amounts to a form of authorial bullying, license, and the absence of self-restraint. Rather, we must nurture a style that expresses our commitments through the text itself, through the 'sense and substance' (70) of our writing. Hence, we should write 'naturally,' i.e., in a manner that reflects our experience, knowledge, and desire to communicate with clarity and

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<sup>1</sup>As we recall, White wrote that "Every writer...reveals something of...his bias," and writes that this is both 'inevitable and enjoyable' (67).

simplicity. Let us consider this notion, so prominent in Aristotle and Sprat, more closely.

### Second Principle--Write Naturally

White advises us to “write in a way that comes easily and naturally to you, using words and phrases that come readily to hand” (70).<sup>1</sup> This entails, with some qualifications, that we ‘imitate’, i.e., that we write as we have learned to speak:

Never imitate consciously, but do not worry about being an imitator; take pains instead to admire what is good.

Then when you write in a way that comes naturally, you will echo the halloos that bear repeating.

‘Natural writing’ does not originate in the self, nor is it innate, but comes from what we have observed and admired in others. White’s understanding of ‘nature’, then, is peculiar, if not paradoxical, because he considers emulation, rather than revelation, as the initial point of departure in cultivating a distinct style. Thus, in his opinion, we should write as our betters do if we hope to reveal ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup>When urging the writer to ‘use words and phrases that come readily to hand,’ White fuses nature and art in a peculiar and philosophically problematic way. We know that the hand’s fingerprints are conventional and forensic markers of identity, a fact to which White refers explicitly (68). But we can never meet this hand in its natural purity; the hand is also the object of action, and for that reason of a contingency distanced from its organic unity. Our nature, in the context of the text, “[comes] readily to hand,” in the form of “words and phrases” from without (70). To act as hand, the hand, bearing the trace of the individual, must breach the beyond: “The hand cannot be spoken about without speaking of technics” (Derrida, “*Geschlecht II*” 169). Technics, a matter of convention and pedagogy, appears immediately opposed to the self-free spirit. Derrida reads Heidegger’s construction of the hand as a facility “...to relate itself to other modes of presence” (176) To invoke the hand, then, is to recognize and validate (a) presence of an/other. This casts a shadow on the natural birthright of the “words and phrases that come readily to hand.”



This presumes, of course, that we can judge when another has written 'admirably', that is to say, appropriately and felicitously.

On what basis do we judge the writing of others and ourselves? White recommends that writers rely upon the natural good judgment of their 'ear'. When choosing words, he cautions us to "avoid fancy words," which, when used inappropriately, make our writing pretentious and insincere. To know when they can be used appropriately, "one's ear must be one's guide..." (77):

There is nothing wrong, really, with any word--all are good, but some are better than others. A matter of ear, a matter of reading the books that sharpen the ear.

When we read 'good' books we learn to appreciate good usage and can, with practice, reproduce it in our writing. Likewise, White advises: "Do not use dialect unless your ear is good" (78). Unless one is "a devoted student of the tongue [one hopes] to reproduce," one shall have difficulty in replicating it felicitously. Better still to speak as people usually do:

The best dialect writers, by and large, are economical of their talents, they use the minimum, not the maximum, of deviation from the norm, thus sparing the reader as well as convincing him. (79)

Echoing Bishop Sprat, White tells us that to write naturally, we should write as people commonly do. He warns us not to "overwrite," because

Rich, ornate prose is hard to digest, generally unwholesome, and sometimes nauseating. If the sickly-sweet word, the overblown phrase are a writer's natural

form of expression, as is sometimes the case, he will have to compensate for it by a show of vigor, and by writing something as meritorious as the Song of Songs, which is Solomon's. (72)

Needless to say, few writers could hope to write something like the 'Song of Songs', and such language is appropriate for few subjects and few occasions. Accordingly, most of us would be better advised to write as our temper and subject matter decrees, and develop a conventional prose style.

### Third Principle--Respect Conventions

White advises us to avoid the 'eccentricities in language' and the 'beat of new vocabularies' (81), which can overwhelm the reader:

...the young writer had best not adopt the device of mutilation in ordinary composition, whose purpose is to engage, not paralyze, the reader's senses.... To use the language well, do not begin by hacking it to bits; accept the whole body of it, cherish its classic form, its variety, and its richness. (82)

Writers should respect the 'classic form' of English, its established and conventional usage, so that they can engage the reader and communicate more effectively. Although White's appeal to convention suggests that distinguished style is nothing more than the correct and effective English style that he claims it transcends, he defends himself in this way:

The intent is to suggest that in choosing between the formal and the informal, the regular and the offbeat, the general and the special, the orthodox and the heretical,

the beginner err on the side of established usage. ...there is simply a better chance of doing well if the writer holds a steady course, enters the stream of English quietly, and does not thrash about. (84)

Moreover, “writing good standard English is no cinch, and before you have managed it you will have encountered enough rough country to satisfy even the most adventurous spirit.”

Distinguished style depends on conventional usage because without it, we cannot communicate. Thus, White warns us, ‘Be clear.’ Although obscurity can ‘serve a literary yearning,’ and although clear writing may still be tedious, without clarity the writer cannot convey any knowledge, much less reveal his character:

...since writing is communication, clarity can only be a virtue. And although there is no substitute for merit in writing, clarity comes closest to being one. Even to a writer who is being intentionally obscure or wild of tongue we can say, “Be obscure clearly! Be wild of tongue in a way we can understand!” (79)

Reading this, the writer is still left wondering how he can achieve this ‘merit’ that is the hallmark of good style, assuming that this can be specified beyond such general observations.

### The Principles of Distinguished Writing--Summary

Throughout, “An Approach to Style” appears equivocal and contradictory, insofar as White repeatedly turns the writer away from the devices and practices that would seem most apt to express uniqueness and distinctiveness. For example, the writer is told to reveal himself, while staying in the background; to distinguish his

style, but stick to good, standard English. He does this knowing that when inexperienced writers consciously attempt to write 'artistically,' they will often appear insincere, pretentious, or affected. Thus, almost all of his 'reminders' emphasize what writers should avoid, to prevent them from blindly imitating the features of distinguished writing which, when used immoderately or indiscriminately, make their style appear bloated and fulsome. These 'features' are, of course, the 'fancy' words and 'offbeat' expressions that stir us when used felicitously in some contexts, but bother us when used unsuitably in others. Here, we are reminded of Sprat's loathing of extravagant or florid language.

How, then, can the writer achieve these desiderata? Following his list of reminders, he offers this consolation:

Style takes its final shape more from attitudes of mind than from principles of composition, for, as an elderly practitioner once remarked, "Writing is an act of faith, not a trick of grammar." This moral observation would have no place in a rule book were it not that style *is* the writer, and therefore what a man is, rather than what he knows, will at last determine his style. (84)

Thus, 'Principles of Distinguished Writing', are fated to falter because good style is not merely a technical matter. Moreover, working at it and keeping good literary company are necessary but not sufficient to achieve it. This explains, in part, why White's advice could go little further than commending correct usage. Effective writing can be explained systematically because it relies upon common and traditional practices, but distinction and aesthetic concinnity, prizes

valued for their rarity and mystery, resist simple formulae and precepts. For this reason, perhaps, White's 'reminders' often lead the writer back to the principles of effective writing, because the writer must be understood and appreciated if his distinctive and distinguished voice is to emerge. White's fundamental teaching here is that the writer avoid the seductive glimmer of devices and adornments that would seem, to the willing pledge, capable of hastening that emergence.

## Conclusion

*The Elements of Style* gives us a glimpse into the relationship between the reader and the writer, one that is paradigmatic of any communicative dyad. In this light, the manual's principles tell us what others usually need, want, and expect of us whenever we speak or write. They tell us what earns the trust of others and what can make us appear insincere or affected to them. Moreover, in every case we find that principles of writing are 'Principles of Self-Presentation', and that even when they seem to pertain only to the transmission of ideas, the way in which we apply them, whether gracefully, competently, or ineptly, tells the reader about us and our capabilities.<sup>1</sup> Ideally, then, a mastery of the principles of style would encourage the writer to approach his work reflexively, to look at his writing and himself as another would. This reflexive thought, the taking-into-account of the reader and the looking-at-oneself as an other, is at the heart of rhetoric, and is manifest in the design of stylistic principles. If we lacked this awareness of the other, both

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<sup>1</sup>Likewise, the way we write tells readers about what we think of them, whether we think them shrewd, gullible, deserving of courtesy, or so forth.

communication and persuasion, if at all possible or conceivable, could be nothing more than accidental and random occurrences lacking the fundamental qualities of social behavior.

But when we consider *The Elements of Style* as an attempt to nurture this literary reflexivity, we find it wanting on several counts. In many areas, it presumes that the writer already has the skills necessary to think in this way. For example, many of its 'principles of effective writing' depend upon the writer's 'discretion' (e.g., when 'omitting needless words') or his 'conviction' in his subject matter (e.g., when 'using the active voice' or 'using specific language'). Because a writer cannot learn 'discretion' or 'conviction' from a manual, the principles that rely upon them may be better considered as objectives than as methodological strategies. Most writers would, of course, prefer to 'omit needless words' and 'use specific language' if it were so easily done. Moreover, when the authors recommend that we write specifically or concretely and with confidence (in using the 'active voice'), they presume that we already have a grasp of the language and our subject matter that is adequate to the task. Likewise, we find that much of White's advice on the 'distinguished style' also presumes that the writer already has the ability (latent or manifest) to tell what others will appreciate, and that the writer need only be reminded "of what most of us know and at times forget" (66). For instance, telling us to 'be clear' presumes that obstinacy and insincerity rather than incompetence and inexperience are the sources of obscure writing. Telling us to 'prefer the standard to the offbeat' presumes that we can distinguish between the two in the same way as our readers would. Many other principles similarly

presuppose that the reader has certain abilities and dispositions; what remains to be seen is whether such presuppositions are inherent in the rhetorical project. To this end, we shall next study a manual purporting to teach the writer how to accomplish some of the objectives that Strunk and White leave unexplained, when we turn to Joseph Williams's *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*.

## Chapter Four--On Clear and Graceful Reading

Joseph Williams begins his manual, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*, with a slighting allusion to Strunk and White:

I wish [this book] could be short and simple like some others more widely known, but I want to do more than just urge writers to “Omit Needless Words” or “Be clear.” Telling me to “Be clear” is like telling me to “Hit the ball squarely.” ...To explain how to write clearly, I have to go beyond platitudes. (1)

As we have seen, even though Strunk and White describe the objectives of good style with a discerning eye, many writers would have difficulty achieving them if they lacked the good taste, judgment, and (in the case of ‘distinguished’ writing) aesthetic ‘merit’ that these objectives presume. Because writers can only cultivate such faculties from experience and education, their advice can do little more than accentuate a writer’s prior strengths and weaknesses. Just as telling a sagacious writer that trusting his judgment may help him write confidently and avoid affected prose,



telling a novice to do so may encourage idiosyncratic forms of expression and hinder effective communication.

Like Strunk and White, Williams assumes that the prospective writer has some discretion and taste. But unlike them, Williams believes that his approach depends less on the writer's innate talents than it does on his awareness of how people read. Williams argues that this 'awareness', though undoubtedly sharpened by experience and personal gifts, can be taught and learned through his "coherent system of principles." Addressing his comments directly to those who seek help, he states that his principles of style will "help you understand how readers of modern English read" (2), and later calls them "principles of reading that we have translated into principles of writing" (81). In claiming that 'principles of writing' are derived from 'principles of reading,' Williams implies that the way writing is 'received', more so than how it is 'produced', determines whether its style is good. He knows, of course, that how something is written affects its reception. But in asking us to think first of the 'ideal reader,' Williams recognizes that even the most finely crafted and considered writing can stultify or pall, in which case the writer's efforts matter little. Thus, he argues, we must give readers the last word on our writing's merit.

Because of the way Williams privileges the reader, we read his manual not only as a rhetoric of writing, but, more important perhaps, as a psychology of reading. Except for the first chapter, which explores historical sources of bad writing (e.g., the influence of Greek, Latin, and French upon English prose) and the final one, which considers the problems in regulating good usage, he orders his

remaining eight chapters as if arranging the ideal reader's 'hierarchy of needs', in that they begin with a discussion of 'clarity', the fundamental requirement of any communication, and culminate with a discussion of 'elegance', the eminence of writing.

Insofar as Williams addresses matters of clarity before those of elegance, his organization superficially resembles Strunk and White's, but diverges from them in the following way. Williams treats each principle as necessarily preceding those that follow, whereas Strunk and White, practically speaking, formulate theirs as independent prescriptive propositions. In *Style*, by contrast, each of the eight prescriptive chapters addresses an ascendant quality of good writing. The first five--Clarity, Cohesion, Emphasis, and two chapters on Coherence--concern matters of 'clarity,' or, as we termed it in the previous chapter, 'effective writing'. The final three--Concision, Length, Elegance--assume that clarity has been achieved and that the task now is to cultivate skills that engage the reader's sensibilities and tastes. In what follows, I shall analyze these two levels of *Style* separately, as I did in the previous chapter. This, I hope, will accentuate the similarities and differences between the two modern manuals, and help us better appreciate the strengths and limits of plain prose rhetoric.

### Toward Clarity

Williams devotes five chapters to clear writing, each of which seeks to help us gain this skill in a different way. For example, chapter two, 'Clarity', prescribes techniques for elucidating the meaning of individual sentences. In 'Cohesion' and 'Emphasis' he instructs us on how to design our sentences "...to fit their context, to

reflect an consistent point of view, [and] to emphasize our most important ideas” (45). In his two chapters on ‘Coherence’, Williams advises us on how to make our paragraphs (and larger textual units) express a coherent point.

Right from the beginning of his chapter on ‘Clarity’, Williams encourages us to understand ‘clarity’ from the reader’s perspective, or in other terms, understand it as a product of reading. In so doing, Williams distances his approach from most others, insofar as they typically see clarity as an inherent property of good writing, and correspondingly speak of ‘clear writing’ as a substance. In contrast, Williams understands clarity as a quality of a relation between a text and its reader. To illustrate the difference between these perspectives, and to exemplify his conception of ‘clarity’, Williams uses two sentences, one of which, he claims, “most of us” would likely deem clear, and one we would likely not:

Clear:        Because we knew nothing about local conditions, we could not determine how effectively the committee had allocated funds to areas that most needed assistance.

Turgid:      Our lack of knowledge about local conditions precluded determination of committee action effectiveness in fund allocation to those areas in greatest need of assistance.

(17)

He then remarks:

...[W]hen we use *clear* for one and *turgid* for the other, we do not describe sentences on the page; we describe how we feel about them. Neither *awkward* nor *turgid*

are on the page. Turgid and awkward refer to a bad feeling behind my eyes. (17)

Similarly, he describes 'unclear' sentences as those that "...make us feel we have to work harder than we think we ought to (or want to)" (17), and clear writing as that which "makes the reader feel clear about what he is reading" (21). In each case, it is the reader's response to a text--and not grammatical perfection or a transcendent and absolute standard of clarity--that defines clear writing. In Williams's view, then, when writers strive to 'clarify' their writing, they seek not only to refine the accuracy of their words, but, of greater import, to persuade others to see things their way.

As a consequence, before Williams can give us any general advice us on how we should write, he has to assess how readers usually read, or, in his words, he must have some sense of the 'principles of reading'. Although he knows that readers need texts to comply with grammatical conventions to be understood, Williams neither purports to teach these, nor is he concerned with the kinds of solecisms Strunk and White decry. This suggests that he assumes a competent and sophisticated readership capable of writing understandable prose, but, perhaps, insensitive to or neglectful of some of the "ideal reader's" tacit needs and expectations. To determine such 'needs and expectations', then, Williams looks beyond mechanical matters like grammatical conventions, and toward more general strategies or principles of reading, to "what readers look for (whether they know it or not)," when they read (97).

Williams believes that readers usually need to find grammatical signposts, e.g., 'topic' sentences, in predictable positions,

such as at the beginning or the end of a paragraph. The writer's task, then, is to place his words, sentences, and paragraphs in such a way that the reader can understand what precedes and follows the central meaning: "To a significant degree, we judge a style to be clear or unclear according to how consistently a writer aligns [information and position]" (27). In what follows, I shall briefly discuss how and why the spatial metaphor, 'position', affects the way readers respond to single sentences larger textual units, and what this presupposes about language and communication.

### Clear Sentences

To write 'clearly', Williams argues, we first need to know the form of discourse that people are best disposed to understand, so that we can arrange our prose accordingly. This entails, among other things, that we treat our sentences (and larger textual units) as stories, because "Storytelling is fundamental to human behavior. No other form of prose can communicate large amounts of information so quickly and persuasively" (19-20). Storytelling, then, assumes the importance of a paradigmatic model of communication. By extension, he implies that the 'story' is a universal, or what others may call a 'natural', medium of communication. To strengthen his position, he points out that all writing, including academic and professional texts that most find "discursive and abstract," has "...the two central components of a story--characters and their actions" (20). Unlike the anthropomorphic characters of a fictional story, those of other textual 'stories' may include concepts, figurative agents (e.g., 'the White House'), groups, or competing theories, whose 'actions' include "...not only physical movement, but also mental processes, feelings,

relationships, literal or figurative” (29).<sup>1</sup> Thus, if we look upon the sentence “Love conquers all,” as a ‘story’, we would take “love” to be its ‘character’ and “conquers” to be love’s ‘action’.

To help writers fashion their sentences to read as smoothly as stories, Williams offers what he calls “The First Two Principles of Clear Writing”:

Readers are likely to feel that they are reading prose that is clear and direct when

(1) the subjects of the sentences name the cast of characters, and

(2) the verbs that go with those subjects name the crucial actions those characters are part of. (21)

He illustrates these principles in the following model (26):

FIXED	SUBJECT	VERB	COMPLEMENT
VARIABLE	CHARACTERS	ACTION	

This illustrates what Williams considers the ‘two levels’ of a sentence. The top, ‘FIXED’ level is its “predictable grammatical sequence” (27). Whenever readers confront a new sentence, they expect it to follow this order, regardless of what the writer has in mind. Accordingly, he calls the sequence ‘predictable’. By contrast, the other level is ‘variable’, because the ‘story’ is “a level of meaning whose parts have no fixed order.” To write clearly, then, we must locate our

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<sup>1</sup>He gives the following example, in which the ‘characters’ are underlined: “In contrast to *creationism*, the theory of evolution shares its intellectual foundations with *many other theories*.” (20)

'characters' and their 'actions' in the 'subject' and 'verb' positions respectively.

This advice may appear self-evident or commonsensical. After all, a grammatically correct sentence usually has both a subject and verb. What would these be if not its character and its action? To this, Williams responds that writers often treat 'actions' as nouns and conceal characters in prepositional phrases (if they do not omit them altogether). To illustrate this, let us briefly consider one of his examples.

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#### Characters and Actions--Example

Most readers would consider the following sentence 'unclear':

Our lack of knowledge about local conditions precluded determination of committee action effectiveness in fund allocation to those areas in greatest need of assistance.

(21)

Revised to match subjects to characters and verbs to actions, the sentence reads clearer:

Because we knew nothing about local conditions, we could not determine how effectively the committee had allocated funds to areas that most needed assistance.

(22)

In the original sentence, "lack of knowledge" is in the position of grammatical subject, but, according to Williams, it is not its 'character'; and "precluded" occupies its verb position but is not its 'action'. Williams identifies the primary 'character' of the first sentence as 'we', which its author concealed within the prepositional

phrase ‘our lack of knowledge’ in the modifier ‘our’.<sup>1</sup> In the original sentence, he notes, “the actions are not verbs, but rather abstract nouns: *lack, knowledge, determination, action, allocation, assistance, need.*” Williams identifies these ‘abstract nouns’ as ‘nominalizations’, that is, as nouns derived from verbs or adjectives (30); here, the verbs lack, know, determine, act, and so forth. When we revise the first sentence with an eye to what ‘we’ did, these abstract nouns and nominalizations become ‘our’ actions.

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Assuming that a sentence means the same thing whether or not its characters and actions are aligned with its subjects and verbs, there must be some quality of the properly fashioned sentence that makes readers find it clearer than the other. As mentioned earlier, Williams suggests that it reads clearly because it appeals to ‘fundamental’ and ingrained habits of mind. Short of testing this hypothesis, we may be able to discern what some of these ‘habits of mind’ would be, if we reexamine his model not as a grammatical formula but as an implicit theory of persuasion. Understanding his model in this way should shed light on what makes narrative sentences clear, that is, persuasive and compelling.

Let us look again at William’s ‘unclear’ and ‘storylike’ sentences:

Unclear: Our lack of knowledge about local conditions precluded determination of committee action effectiveness in fund

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<sup>1</sup>Williams provides several grammatical techniques to help readers identify ‘characters’ and ‘actions’, which shall not be discussed here.



allocation to those areas in greatest need of assistance.

(21)

Storylike: Because we knew nothing about local conditions, we could not determine how effectively the committee had allocated funds to areas that most needed assistance.

(22)

Comparing the primary subjects and verbs of these sentences, we can glean several qualities of Williams's idea of 'clarity'. Looking first at the 'unclear' sentence, the author places 'lack of knowledge' as the primary subject, i.e., as an agent. The flexibility of English allows us to invest agency in abstractions like 'knowledge', but such agency must itself be abstract, that is, limited to qualifying other verbs and abstractions. In this sense, we could consider abstract verbs, like 'preclude', to be meta-verbs, because they cannot themselves express motion or volition, but only modify some other action or state that it exists. For example, unless we intended a metaphor, we would not write "knowledge moved the rock." 'Knowledge' may 'enable', 'allow', 'preclude', or 'facilitate', but it cannot 'decide', 'determine', 'drop', or do anything demanding motion or volition. Thus, whenever we place an abstraction (rather than a 'character') in the subject position, we not only end up with an abstract agent, but with abstract agency.

Clear and 'storylike' writing, then, demands specific agents and agency. Correspondingly, to clarify muddy writing, we must identify specific actors (such as the 'we' in the previous example) as being responsible for specific actions. This presumes, of course, that the writer is willing and able to assign responsibility, or, in Williams's

words, to determine the 'character' of a sentence.<sup>1</sup> Hence, for Williams, clear writing is responsible writing because it places the agent (or in his 'story' terms, the 'character') and its action in the most prominent part of the sentence, in the subject-verb clause that defines the sentence itself.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in asking writers to attribute responsibility, he suggests that we can best understand the relations between agents and actions of any type when they are presented as part of a 'causal drama', that is, when we treat the subjects of our sentences as people.

Here, we are reminded of Aristotle, who urges the rhetor to identify his opponents ('characters') and their misdeeds ('actions') as clearly as possible if he wishes to stir the audience's passions. Writers, like the rhetor, must endeavor to answer the reader's pressing questions before they are posed: "Who is responsible? For doing what?" In this spirit, Williams remarks, "readers call writing clear not when it *is* clear, but when they have no reason to call it unclear" (109). The more that a writer uses abstractions as actors and actions, the greater the ambiguity of the sentence, and, by that fact, the greater the number of pressing questions left unanswered. As we shall see, when writers attend to larger textual units, like

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<sup>1</sup>Inexperienced writers often treat abstractions--such as socio-historical periods--as agents or divine imperatives that affect the lives of all. The following is an example of incompetent obscurity: "Organic Solidarity accentuates the differences between people and compels them to bond together." In this sentence, the true conceptual 'character' --perhaps, the specialization of tasks--is missing, and the product of historical and technological change is thus treated as its cause.

<sup>2</sup>Williams avoids condemning the passive voice, in which the 'character' of the sentence becomes its object (if included at all). He calls the passive voice a "natural and correct choice" when "we avoid stating who is responsible for an action because we don't know or don't care..." (38). For him, clear writing demands that we attribute responsibility as far as we can.

paragraphs and whole documents, they must be sensitive to how the reader expects them to use specific textual positions, lest clear sentences produce vague paragraphs.

### Clear Paragraphs

Although clear sentences help us achieve (what Williams calls) ‘local clarity’, if we fail to arrange them appropriately our paragraphs may seem unfocused and, hence, unclear. Williams writes: “The problem is to discover how, without sacrificing local clarity, we can shape sentences to fit their context and to reflect those larger intentions that motivate us to write in the first place” (45). He addresses these goals in Chapter 3, “Cohesion,” and Chapter 4, “Emphasis.”

To make a string of sentences read as a cohesive paragraph, he recommends that writers begin each sentence with “...a familiar context to help them move from the more familiar to the less familiar, from the known to the unknown” (48). This ‘familiar context’ that should begin each sentence is the sentence’s topic, its “psychological subject”:

Topics are crucial for a reader because they focus the reader’s attention on a particular idea toward the beginning of a clause and thereby notify the reader what a clause is “about.” Topics thereby crucially determine whether the reader will feel a passage is coherent. Cumulatively, through a series of sentences, these topicalized ideas provide thematic signposts that focus the reader’s attention on a well-defined set of connected ideas. (51)

When we begin each sentence of a paragraph with a similar or related idea, we tell readers how we intend them to interpret the paragraph as a whole. Undoubtedly, this serves a mnemonic purpose as well. Moreover, to help readers appreciate the consistency of a paragraph's topics, Williams suggests

Generally, use the beginning of your sentences to refer to what you have already mentioned or knowledge that you can assume that you and your reader readily share. (65)

We should use the opening, topic position of a sentence to focus the reader's attention on familiar material and to connect discrete sentences into a cohesive paragraph. Correspondingly, Williams advises to use the ending of a sentence to introduce and emphasize new ideas. Whenever we introduce new terms or ideas, we "...have to take care to locate [them] at that point where [our] reader is most ready to receive them--at the end of a sentence" (73). He calls this climactic end position of the sentence its stress.

He illustrates the relationship between the 'topic' and 'stress' positions of a sentence in the following diagram:

FIXED	TOPIC	STRESS
VARIABLE	FAMILIAR/ OLD INFORMATION	UNFAMILIAR/ NEW INFORMATION

As with the characters/action diagram presented earlier, this diagram explains the sentence on two levels. The 'FIXED' level refers to the habits of the reader, who generally expects the first part of a sentence (i.e., the 'topic') to establish a consistent context for the paragraph, and the latter ('stress') to accent new or important

developments of that topic. He calls this level 'FIXED' because readers have these expectations irrespective of the writer's particular designs. The 'VARIABLE' level refers the type of information that the reader expects to find at the corresponding position. As with the clarity of individual sentences, the clarity of whole paragraphs rests on how well the writer aligns these levels in taking account of the reader.

In this light, we see the writer's task as demanding more than eloquence and a good understanding of his subject matter, because the gist of an argument can be lost if the habitual way people read is ignored. Let us now consider how Williams's prescriptions apply to larger textual units.

### Clear Essays

In his two chapters on "Coherence," Williams instructs us on how we can help readers identify a coherent thesis through a series of paragraphs. He begins by reviewing and expanding on the requirements of cohesive paragraphs, the building blocks of coherent essays. Not only should the sentences of paragraphs have consistent strings of topics, but they should also have 'sets of conceptually related words', which he calls 'themes'. He writes: "Topic strings focus your reader's attention on what a passage is globally about. The thematic strings give your reader a sense that you are focusing on a core of ideas related to these topics" (85).

To help the reader identify this 'core of ideas' that is central to an argument, Williams advises us to introduce it where readers expect it:

Whether readers are conscious of it or not, they try to divide units of organized discourse--paragraphs, sections, or wholes--into two sections;

1. A short opening segment. Toward the end of this segment...readers look for the concepts the writer will discuss in the following section. Those words are often topics, but they must also include themes.

2. A longer following segment... In this segment, the writer develops--and readers look for--new ideas against a background of repeated topics and themes.

(92)

Williams terms the first, opening segment, the 'issue', and the latter, following segment, its 'discussion'.

The 'issue' of a paragraph or essay tells readers how they should make sense of what follows. As Williams puts it, "...in our opening we tell them how to frame the conceptual space that they are about to enter" (89). For this reason, he suggests that we include a synoptic sentence, which he calls a 'POINT sentence', in the issue: "By POINT we mean the specific sentence on the page that the writer would send as a telegram if asked 'what's your point?'" (99).<sup>1</sup> The POINT sentence should give the reader a strategy for making sense of what follows.

He illustrates the relationship between 'issue' and 'discussion' in the following scheme:

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<sup>1</sup>He also recognizes that for various reasons an author may wish to place this 'POINT' sentence at the end of a 'discussion'. We shall not pursue that possibility here.

FIXED	ISSUE	DISCUSSION
VARIABLE	POINT	

Here, as with his previous diagrams, the top part refers to “...what readers look for (whether they know it or not) when they begin a paragraph, a section of a document, or a whole document...” (97), and the bottom to what we may do to help the reader. Having discussed in general terms the three levels of clarity, in general terms, the clarity of individual sentences, paragraphs, and essays. Let us consider Williams’s approach in the light of our previous discussions on the pedagogy of clarity.

### Clarity

When Williams completes his discussion on clarity, he presents the diagrams for the three levels of clarity together, in what he calls ‘The Model Entire’ (109):

FIXED	ISSUE	DISCUSSION	
VARIABLE	POINT		
FIXED	TOPIC	STRESS	
VARIABLE	FAMILIAR/ OLD INFORMATION	UNFAMILIAR/ NEW INFORMATION	
FIXED	SUBJECT	VERB	COMPLEMENT
VARIABLE	CHARACTERS	ACTION	

If we ignore the third column ('COMPLEMENT') in the bottom model, we notice that Williams treats each level of his system as comprising two parts. This common structure, and Williams's comments on it, suggest that readers evaluate a unit of writing (be it a sentence, paragraph, or an essay) on how well its author anticipates their needs in two fundamental ways:

*Issue* is analogous to *subject* and *topic*. These three terms name introductory positions that all have the same function: to put before the reader concepts or claims that the writer intends to expand on in what follows. In the same way, the term *discussion* is analogous to *verb* and *stress*. They name the positions that follow: *subject + verb*, *topic + stress*, *issue + discussion*. And these



positions all have the same function of expanding on what precedes them. (93)

According to Williams, then, to write clearly we need to remember that readers need and expect certain types of information (such as characters, old or familiar knowledge) to precede others (actions, new or unfamiliar information). It is evident from this that Williams defines clear writing not merely as an instantaneous revelation of some objective truth, but as a progressive unfolding or fashioning of a plausible state of affairs. In other words, he believes that an essay is 'clear' when, over the course of its reading, the reader learns to accept things as the writer puts them.

We find this rationale reflected in his models, which denote, in each case, a two-fold sequential structure. The 'FIXED' level of each model depicts a chronological sequence, in that it shows us how we should begin and end our sentences, paragraphs, or larger units. This 'FIXED' level, then, represents what Williams considers the progressive or sequential way that we read. Conversely, the 'VARIABLE' level refers to a different sort of sequence, which has to do with the way information should be ordered or arranged to help us understand it. When we look at the two levels together, we can see how Williams understands the pedagogical process. He recommends that we begin our texts with the static or stable (characters) and the customary (old or familiar information), before moving to the dynamic (actions) and the novel (new or unfamiliar information). 'Clarity' is, for him, a pedagogical goal. Let us explore this further.

Williams knows that readers are best able to understand something, and hence find it 'clear', when they are able to locate it within a familiar frame of reference and integrate it within a secure body of knowledge. For this reason, 'clarity' is formulated as a stage in a process and not as a fixed, reified quality. As a consequence, writers achieve 'clarity' insofar as they bridge the gap between them and their readers, by gradually qualifying and expanding on common knowledge. As Williams puts it in his preface (xv), "We measure the quality of writing not just by what is objectively on a page, but by the way we feel as we construct new knowledge out of our experience with the words on the page." This, of course, necessarily presumes two things: specifically, that the reader and the writer share some body of 'common knowledge', and, more critical to the project of clarity, that the writer can identify what this 'common knowledge' is (with reference to his subject matter and his audience). Specifically, writers have to be able to distinguish familiar from unfamiliar information. Just as Williams cannot guarantee the former, he cannot teach the latter, nor can he teach the writer how to identify the 'character' of a sentence or the 'topic' of a paragraph. Writers can only acquire these skills of discernment through practice and experience, by finding out each time they write whether they have explained too much or too little, or whether the reader can follow their argument. No battery of formulae can replace critical reading and the experience it gives a writer.

But even if Williams's view of clarity depends upon the same sort of judgment and experience that Strunk and White's does, we can still contrast his view with theirs. As we have seen, Strunk and

White presume that what one seeks to convey is itself shared by all people as self-evident and 'clear', and that the writer need only concentrate on tinkering with the grammatical accoutrements of his text to be understood. For instance, when they state that particular terms are "definite, specific, and concrete," they suggest that the words themselves, irrespective of how they are used or arranged, shall project a singularly 'clear' meaning from the writer to the reader. There is no 'process' of understanding implied in such principles; one need only present 'concrete' terms in grammatically sound sentences to evoke clear images. Thus, while Williams treats 'clarity' as a goal that one achieves by being sensitive to the ideal reader's needs, Strunk and White treat 'clarity' as a property of the 'clear text', that is, as a quality of a writing resulting from a scrupulous adherence to the "elements of style", and, hence intrinsically stylish and clear.

We have now to discuss those matters of style beyond clarity.

### Grace

Williams devotes three chapters to the graces of good writing. In 'Concision', he advises us on how to write economically. In 'Length', he discusses various ways the writer can manage long sentences gracefully. And, finally, in 'Elegance' he describes some of the rhetorical devices that can adorn and invigorate our writing.

Unlike his earlier chapters, which weave together the "coherent system of principles" of clarity, his three chapters on graceful writing rely less on guiding principles and general rules than on techniques and examples. In fact, the only two principles that Williams presents in these chapters are introduced with a qualification strong enough

to make them resemble what he calls the ‘platitudes’ of Strunk and White:

These two principles are easier to state than to follow:

1. Usually, compress what you mean into the fewest words.

2. Don’t say what your reader can easily infer. (115)

We find this advice, which amounts to little more than telling us to ‘Omit Unnecessary Words,’ in his chapter on ‘Concision.’ On this matter, he later writes:

There are no general rules to tell you when you can compress several words into a word or two. I can only point out that you often can, and that you should be on the alert for opportunities to do so--which is to say, try. (123)<sup>1</sup>

Because concision cannot be taught through ‘general rules’ (other than through warning us avoid using redundant terms), Williams provides us with several lists of phrases that can be compressed into single words. For instance, he writes that the phrases in the left column of the following list should be deleted in favor of the word (‘when’) in the right column (124):

on the occasion of		
in a situation in which	}	when

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<sup>1</sup>Williams’s treatment of some expressions as redundant or superfluous reveals some of his assumptions about language itself. Lacan, who argues that “...the function of language is not to inform but to evoke,” observes that the notion of ‘redundant’ expression originates in the ‘communicative’ or ‘informational’ model of language: “...the more the function of language becomes neutralized as it moves closer to information, the more language is imputed to be laden with *redundancies*.” (*Écrits: a Selection*, 86)

under circumstances in which

Although helpful, these lists do little more than demonstrate that some phrases can be compressed efficiently, rather than helping us develop a strategy for writing concisely. In other words, such examples do not address the general goal of concision inasmuch as they concern particular flabby phrases that should be trimmed.

Likewise, in his chapter on 'Length'--the most mechanical, if not systematic, of his chapters on graceful writing--Williams does not to furnish general rules for managing long sentences gracefully, but provides, instead, "...a few ways to extend a sentence and still keep it clear and graceful," such as various forms of subordination and coordination (136). We find similar qualification in his chapter on 'Elegance', where he writes:

Now, I can't tell you how to be graceful and elegant in the same way I can tell you how to be clear and direct. What I *can* do is describe a few of the devices that some graceful writers use. (153)

Moreover, he likens these devices--metaphors and other syntactical forms that encourage elegant coordination, rhythm, and emphasis--to "a few ingredients of a modestly elegant style" rather than to, say, parts of a 'recipe' or 'formula', which would characterize the principles of clarity found in the first part of his manual. The difference between the ways that Williams teaches 'clarity' and 'elegance' exemplifies the more general difference between the ways that he teaches 'clear writing' and 'graceful writing'. That is to say, when teaching us to write clearly, Williams prescribes general principles, but when he attends to graceful writing, he can do more

than point to particular techniques that can help us in certain circumstances. Thus, he can offer a more concise way to express a particular phrase or a way to gracefully coordinate several short sentences into a longer sentence. But such devices cannot guide us when we write; they can only help us address particular problems that crop up along the way.

### Experience and Grace

All of this tells us that Williams knows that the graces of writing cannot be taught systematically. And yet he also knows that because such graces are not innate gifts, graceful writers must have learned or acquired them in some way. Williams, like E.B. White, believes that experience separates the graceful from the merely competent. On this matter, he notes that no battery of stylistic principles can teach concision, because:

Concise writing involves more than pruning redundancy or avoiding excessive detail, because in some situations, the writer may have no idea what counts as redundant or excessive...

We signal that we are members of a community in what we say and how we say it. But a more certain sign of our socialization is in what we don't say, in what we take for granted as part of a shared but rarely articulated body of knowledge and values. (120-1)

Hence, he advises the writer to "read widely in your field with an eye to...writers you think are clear, concise, and successful. Then do likewise" (126). Correspondingly, he writes that in most matters of concision, "...a good ear will serve you better than a flat rule" (127).

So too with 'Length' and 'Elegance.' Williams declines to specify when authors should use one device (e.g., a summative modifier) rather than another (e.g., a resumptive modifier) to extend a sentence. Although both can be used felicitously, the author alone must decide which fits his purpose better. Williams writes that his advice on 'Elegance' is

about as useful as listing the ingredients in the bouillabaisse of a great cook and then expecting anyone to make it. Knowing the ingredients and knowing how to use them is the difference between reading cookbooks and Cooking. (153)

The 'great cook' knows, from practice and experience, the subtle effects of different ingredients, and, like Williams, would be reluctant to oversimplify them. Moreover, Williams shares with Bishop Sprat a concern about the risks involved in teaching 'elegant' devices: "But if metaphor can sometimes evidence a fresh imagination, it can also betray those of us whose imaginations fall short of its demands" (166).

### Grace Acquired

If writers can only profit as much from Williams's advice as their experience permits, we must ask how it can improve one's writing. He addresses this question, albeit implicitly, in his final chapter, on "Usage", which he introduces as follows: "So far, we've been discussing choice: From among sentences that express the same

idea, how do we pick the one that expresses it best?" (169)<sup>1</sup> To a large extent, graceful style attests to the writer's ability to choose the best way to express some idea.<sup>2</sup> This entails making several decisions over the course of each sentence. For instance, one must choose whether a concise expression can substitute for an extended one, whether two shorter sentences can be combined gracefully, and whether certain ideas would benefit from an elegant or telling device. Other choices are embedded within these: should two sentences be conjoined and, if so, how should this be done? Should the writer coordinate or subordinate? Should tropes be used or should the writer try to alter the rhythm of his sentence?

Although the experienced writer will usually choose more judiciously than the novice, the latter may be able to improve his chances merely by virtue of knowing what his potential choices are. The lists of concise expressions, the different ways of extending sentences, and the elegant devices that Williams offers are potentially useful resources for the writer. Writers and rhetoricians have long relied upon stock and novel means for achieving their rhetorical ends. For example, Nash remarks that Quintillian saw his rhetoric not as the

application of rules...but rather [as] the processes of choosing, evaluating, revising and learning as a result of revision; his excellent account of what happens when we

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<sup>1</sup>We shall not discuss this chapter ('Usage'), because it chiefly examines the problems inherent in regulating usage, rather than advising the writer in any way.

<sup>2</sup>This presumes that 'ideas' can exist independently of language. This, in turn, implies that the substance of ideas is transcendent, and perhaps spiritual.



write acknowledges the fact (urged by centuries of professors upon generations of students) that the process is itself heuristic, that the knowing comes from the doing. (215)

So, even if experience is expressed in an author's sensitivity to particulars and the subtleties of 'mere' details, novice writers may improve by experimenting with different forms and learning from their successes and failures. This would seem to justify Williams's chapters on the graces of writing: they are not intended to guide readers as his principles of 'clarity' did, but provide his readers with the tools necessary to enable them to learn. And yet, even when a novice writer learns of the many resources that can benefit his writing, he cannot judge whether or not they have been used felicitously, without experience or the discerning eye of a sophisticated reader. The felicitous use of stylistic devices, even proven ones like the techniques used to extend sentences, requires taste and guidance, neither of which seems easily taught by pithy principles. Moreover, when writers use elegant devices indiscriminately, they risk appearing pretentious or florid. Thus, writers should neither use devices in mechanical or random manner, unless that is how they wish their style to be described. They must, instead, understand how particular devices fit their purposes and material each time they write; these matters resist generalization.

### Conclusion

In both sections of this manual, Williams argues that the reader's response to a text should determine whether its meaning is clear or its expression is graceful. Insofar as his efforts purport to

help us write better, they should help us anticipate how the reader we are addressing should (or is likely) to respond, so that we can compose our texts accordingly. As we have seen, Williams believes that we must first anticipate how readers need information to be arranged before we can write clearly, which is to say, before we can write in a way that most will find clear. This, of course, presumes that the writer can already anticipate his audience's mastery of his material, and that he knows what they will find familiar or unfamiliar. Moreover, Williams's model of clarity requires that the writers understand their subject matter in the same way that their readers will, and identify the same grammatical subjects as 'characters', verbs as 'actions', and so forth. In other words, Williams believes that 'clarity' depends upon an already existing congruence between reader and writer: "What counts most in comprehending a text is how much we already know about its content" (xv). At the same time, just as 'clarity' relies upon the writer's skills of anticipation, Williams knows that we cannot easily anticipate how readers prefer particular ideas to be expressed, so as to seem graceful and elegant. For this reason, he neither provides formulae nor prescribes guiding principles for grace.

Here, as with *The Elements of Style*, we can discern the differences between 'clarity' and 'grace.' The authors of both manuals treat clarity as something that can be taught through general principles. This points to one of their fundamental assumptions about clarity: if they prescribe general rules about what people find clear, it is because they presume that people generally understand things in the same general way. But grace (or

distinguished writing) remains elusive. Strunk and White tell us only that we may achieve a graceful style, given perseverance, good habits, and experience. Williams takes this a bit further, in that he tells us that graceful writing depends on the writer's ability to make good stylistic decisions and elaborates on what some of these decisions involve. Of course, he acknowledges that this faculty issues partly from practice and experience, and that his manual cannot impart such desiderata. But by treating graceful style as the result of a well negotiated discourse--i.e., one in which the writer habitually decides well--rather than as the simple revelation of spirit or 'merit', he presents grace as not a personal, but a technical virtue.

Can grace and distinction can be won through technical acumen? If they can, they may require that the writer seek a different sort of technique. In Williams's view, Strunk and White's 'principles of distinguished writing' are 'platitudinous' insofar as they advise us to wait until our distinct voices emerge while attending to our betters (and even then, there is no assurance that this will happen). Williams writes that graceful style depends on how well we negotiate particular passages, but he declines to offer any general strategy for how to do this, given that our decisions must be based on the requirements of our particular subject matter and purpose. Both manuals suggest, in different ways, that grace has less to do with principles and other generalities than it does with details and other particularities. If the search for general principles of grace and distinction is indeed bound to be fruitless, then we should attend to details and particularities that, according to these writers, cultivate,

if not guarantee concinnity. And there is perhaps no better place to begin exploring these matters than Fowler's *Modern English Usage*.

## Chapter Five--Fowler's Faith in Idiom and the English Character

Henry Watson Fowler (1858-1933) considered his plan for an 'idiom dictionary' a modest project in 1904. His life, thus far, had been marked by uncommon, if not remarkable, personal and scholarly achievements. As a young man, he served for seventeen years as schoolmaster at the spartan Sedbergh School. A moral but irreligious man, he resigned when ordered to train his students for confirmation. After Sedbergh, he and his brother Francis ('Frank') jointly translated four volumes of Lucian, wrote *The King's English*,<sup>1</sup> and compiled *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*. During the Great War, the Fowlers lied about their ages (Henry was then 56, Frank, 45) to enlist in an infantry unit, 'at great inconvenience and with pecuniary loss,' in the hopes of serving their country. Compared with such deeds, an 'idiom dictionary' seemed trifling.

And yet, Fowler knew that many of his countrymen were in need of such a dictionary, which would serve, he wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> A style manual, or 'antibarbarus', that they wanted to title "The New Solecist."

...not the foreigners, but...the half-educated Englishman of literary proclivities who wants to know ‘Can I say so-and-so?’, ‘What does this familiar phrase or word mean?’, ‘is this use English?’...the kind of Englishman who has idioms floating in his head in a jumbled state & knows it.<sup>1</sup>

Such a project, then, entailed more than a desire to collate literary trivia. As we shall see, for Fowler the teaching of correct idioms (or of ‘correct idiomatic usage’) was both a literary and a social undertaking--a sort of linguistic patriotism if not jingoism--that was intended to help the English speak and write as they should. This ‘patriotism’, emblematic of Fowler’s life, nourished his ‘idiom dictionary’, which, first published in 1926, is now in its second edition<sup>2</sup> and universally known as *Fowler’s Modern English Usage*.

How does Fowler define the ‘usage’ of English? We read in the ‘Classified Guide’ to his dictionary that ‘usage’ may, “for convenience,” be thought of as “...points of grammar, syntax, style, and the choice of words,” (xv). From this brief definition we can distinguish his approach from the other stylists or rhetoricians we have discussed. Specifically, Fowler understands ‘good usage’ as ‘points’ of style rather than ‘principles’, ‘elements’, or of some general system. On this, Burchfield notes:

Fowler observed the delicate complexities of the written language, assumed, with all due Edwardian arrogance, that the central system needed no description, but that

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<sup>1</sup>Correspondence, as cited in Burchfield’s *Unlocking the English Language*, (139).

<sup>2</sup>Revised by Sir Ernest Gowers, 1965.

educated people everywhere had need of a handbook in which every major hazard or pitfall was plainly marked with a 'Keep Off' sign. (140)

In keeping with this view, the entries in his handbook all address potentially abused 'points' of usage, or, perhaps, points of mis-usage: e.g., grammatical solecisms, awkward syntactical forms, stylistic vices, and misused or confused words.<sup>1</sup> Further, Fowler, unlike the other stylists we have discussed, does not care to distinguish those vices that cause obscurity from those that tarnish the grace of a text. Instead, he speaks only of good and bad usage, the former exemplifying clarity and grace, the latter lacking such virtues.

### Idiom

Although such faults of usage originate in several sources, Fowler believes that they share a common characteristic that makes it easy to identify them. For him, all faults are, by definition, violations of idiom (i.e., they oppose idiomatic usage). In his entry on "idiom,"<sup>2</sup> (with which, he states, his dictionary is "much concerned") he writes:

In this book, 'an idiom' is any form of expression that has established itself as the particular way preferred by Englishmen (and therefore presumably characteristic of them) over other forms in which the principles of abstract grammar, if there is such a thing, would have allowed the idea in question to be clothed.

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<sup>1</sup>His dictionary also covers matters of morphology and spelling, pronunciation, and punctuation.

<sup>2</sup>Boldfaced words and phrases refer to entries in *Modern English Usage*.

This brief definition is telling on many counts. First, when Fowler states that an idiom ‘establishes itself,’ he implies that it is not aesthetic or logical imperatives, but custom and entrenched preferences that determine whether an expression will become an idiom. In other terms, an idiom is not necessarily the most logical or intrinsically precise way to express something, but the customary and traditional way of doing so. Further, because Fowler specifies that the idiom as an expression characteristic of the English, he suggests that those traditional preferences that establish idioms themselves reflect the dispositions of the English in some way. Although we shall pursue this shortly, let us note that at the outset it is clear that Fowler does not intend on teaching Cockney or Northern English, but, perhaps, the English of some exemplary group. Second, ‘an idiom’ need not conform to the synthetic precepts of grammar to be considered legitimate. Because grammatical principles are only abstracted or derived from practice, they “sometimes agree and sometime disagree about particular specimens of [idiom],” and thus disqualify some legitimate idioms (as ‘ungrammatical’) that many Englishmen would customarily use.

Just as Fowler defines ‘an idiom’ as ‘an established form of expression,’ he uses the term ‘idiom’ in a general sense to refer to the set of all such idioms within a particular language community. This general sense of ‘idiom’ allows Fowler to reveal the thread that runs though all of the particular expressions that his dictionary addresses:

‘Idiom’ is the sum total of such forms of expression, and is consequently the same as natural or racy or unaffected



English; that is idiomatic which it is natural for a normal Englishman to say or write. (“idiom”)

To write idiomatically, then, is to write naturally. More specifically, within Fowler’s project, idiomatic writing captures the spirit of (what he calls) the English race, and reproduces the unaffected character of the ‘normal Englishman.’ Thus, when Fowler labels expressions as idiomatic, he provides us with implicit statements on what he considers the character traits of the English.<sup>1</sup> In other terms, when the normal Englishman naturally prefers certain (idiomatic) expressions over others, his preferences are based on certain, characteristically English, dispositions or attributes. It follows, then, that if an Englishman must use sound judgment to distinguish between an idiomatic expression and a borderline solecism, that sagacity is an English trait. Likewise, if Fowler judges an expression unidiomatic because affected, it is because he presumes (and he does) that the English are themselves naturally unaffected.

At the outset, Fowler explicitly identifies few of such traits or attributes, nor would we expect him to do so. We do know that he believes normal Englishmen to be unaffected, and because of the limited audience that he would expect for his book, we know he believes them to be at least half-educated (for who else would care about seemingly trivial literary details?). Both of these tell us that Fowler does not speak of the English people in general, but, perhaps of a more select group of them, whose qualities we cannot distinguish at this stage. But because he believes that idiom is the expression

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<sup>1</sup>Correspondingly, when he disqualifies an expression and calls it unidiomatic, he tells us, implicitly, about what the English character rejects or lacks.

and revelation of a national character, the selective study of particular idioms should help us discern this archetype of a national character, the 'English nature,' that comprises the otherwise discrete expressions. If each idiom is a manifestation of the English character, then, we may be able to identify particular English character traits by studying particular idioms.

From this brief look at Fowler's definition of idiom, we can see how his project of an "Idiom Dictionary" goes beyond literary minutiae. When Fowler collates and codifies English idioms, he describes the literary preferences and habits of his countrymen. Of greater consequence for our purposes, though, is that *Modern English Usage* primarily addresses points of potential mis-usage. After all, if idioms are indeed established, that is, customarily recognized as legitimate, they would not need to be taught. But in certain historical or social circumstances (such as changes in literary trends or the emergence of new disciplines), new forms of expression (such as new vocabularies and stylistic fashions) can displace or weaken the force of older, established idioms. Moreover, linguistic changes often originate in private and public discourses (oral and written) which reflect and express novel analogical connections or displacements. Fowler likens these tensions to a "secular conflict" waged between "idiom," the staid and conservative, and "analogy," which is "progressive, bent on extending liberty, demanding better reasons than use and wont for respecting the established..." ("cast-iron idiom"). This is because 'analogy' refers to a way of treating language as a form for which particular words and phrases may be freely substituted to generate new expressions from old syntactical

structures. Fowler objects to these new expressions when they have not been established by practice and custom, because they are thus contrived, abstract, and artificial. Idiom, conversely, reveres the content and substance of language, and is reproduced, practically, as such.

Whether formulated as a battle or in evolutionary terms, linguistic change is, of course, continual and not necessarily for the worse. But when expressive fashions change, writers are often left wondering whether new expressions are appropriate ('established') or transitory, and old ones archaic and obsolete. On a broader historical scale, when English provides us with two or more apparent synonyms (e.g., horrid/horrible; cultivated/cultured) that share common etymology, careful writers may find it difficult to discriminate between them. In both cases, Fowler argues that the crux is to winnow the established, and hence natural idioms from mere modish pretenders, i.e., the catchy and vogue expressions that enjoy fleeting or limited popularity.

Fowler, sensitive to the mischief and potential misunderstandings 'jumbled' idioms cause, acts as an arbiter who advises his readers on how to sort the better expressions from the worse. In so doing, he does more than describe correct idiomatic usage. In identifying one expression as better than another seemingly established one, he prescribes how one ought to speak and write. Here, we no longer speak of expressions as 'correct' and 'incorrect', but as 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate'. Further, when Fowler judges the propriety of an expression, he must consider more than strictly grammatical criteria; he cannot call it appropriate

merely because it is sonorous, syntactically sound, or etymologically faithful. He must, instead, judge if an expression is harmonious with the 'English character' (as he understands it)<sup>1</sup>, and the way a typical Englishman would speak and be understood. Within these prescriptions, then, we find a formulation of national character, predicated upon certain essential practices, such as lexical and syntactical preferences.

As we have seen, Fowler was ambivalent regarding formal literary conventions and hence reluctant to lay down authoritative rules about grammatical formulae. In fact, there are relatively few entries that deal with figures, devices, and syntax. In what follows, then, I shall briefly consider some of these in order to give the reader an idea of his approach. Having done this, I shall then turn to a matter of greater import for our purpose: his discussions of particular words, expressions, and specialized vocabularies. For it is within entries of this sort that we can best discern Fowler's teachings about how writers should express and preserve the English character in their efforts.

### Grammatical Formulae--Figures, Devices, Syntax

Clearly, Fowler presumes that all of his readers have mastered rudimentary syntax. This much we can deduce from the dictionary form of the book itself. *Modern English Usage* arranges its entries alphabetically, according to the conventional terminology that educated people use to discuss syntactical rules and deviations. For

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<sup>1</sup>As we shall see in what follows, Fowler's understanding of the 'typical' or 'normal' Englishman is distorted by his own atypical, privileged social life.

readers to make the best use of his work, then, they must be able to diagnose their deficiencies and know terms such as “absolute construction”, “fused participle”, “inversion”, “analogy”, and “split infinitive”.<sup>1</sup>

Because his readers are at least linguistically competent,<sup>2</sup> if not more sophisticated, Fowler attends most scrupulously to helping prospective writers decide how they should manage delicate or contentious grammatical matters, two of which we shall discuss shortly. By contrast, only a few entries, e.g., on rhetorical figures, are wholly descriptive:

synecdoche. The mention of a part when the whole is to be understood, as in *A fleet of fifty sail* (i.e. ships), or vice versa as in *England* (i.e. the English cricket XI) won.

Sometimes, when describing a syntactical structure, he even questions the usefulness of such definitions. For example, in his entry on the “sentence”, Fowler provides us with ten definitions (drawn from “standard works”), including “1. A word or set of words followed by a pause and revealing an intelligible purpose,” and “9. A combination of words that contains at least one subject and one predicate.” He then remarks:

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<sup>1</sup>Although few would read its 725 pages cover to cover, without some degree of casual browsing, several of his memorable entries may be missed, owing to their unconventional (i.e., un-terminological) headings. Even the most sophisticated readers would fail to know what is covered in entries entitled “out of the frying pan,” “Siamese Twins,” “side-slip,” and “cannibalism.”

<sup>2</sup>Such competence, Bourdieu argues, has less to do with the learning of stylistic principles than with sound cultivation: “...competence, which is acquired in a social context and through practice, is inseparable from the practical mastery of a usage of language and the practical mastery of situations in which this usage of language is *socially acceptable*.” (*Language and Symbolic Power*, 82)

Grammarians are free to maintain that no sequence of words can be called a [sentence] unless it has a grammatical structure, but they must recognize that, except as a term of their art, the word has broken the bounds they have set for it.

Fowler's misgivings over defining elementary syntactical concepts (like 'sentences') are amplified when he attends to some of the grammatical rules and formulae (i.e. rhetorical devices and syntactical forms) that many believe must be obeyed in order to write with style. Consequently, he is often reluctant to furnish peremptory or categorical advice for such rules, and often, as with the 'active voice', omits them entirely. Moreover, he believes that some grammatical formulae, when taught as such, may cause more difficulties than they solve.

In so many cases, Fowler argues, when a writer shows undue deference to abstract rules, s/he is "shown how misleading their sweet simplicity is" ("superstitions"). For this reason, he couches many of his rules in negative terms, telling us what we should avoid to prevent obscurity and artificiality, rather than what we should do to write clearly and elegantly. In this way, we often find him warning us of risks (e.g. "parallel sentence dangers"), disturbances ("passive disturbances"), common mistakes ("false emphasis," "false scent"), and general obscurity ("haziness"). To illustrate the pitfalls of blind adherence to these formulae, let us consider two of them, with specific reference to what Fowler considers their corrupting effect on idiomatic or 'natural' discourse.

He begins his entry on the “split infinitive” with a suggestive typology:

split infinitive. The English-speaking world may be divided into (1) those who neither know nor care what a split infinitive is; (2) those who do not know, but care very much; (3) Those who know and condemn; (4) those who know and approve; and (5) those who know and distinguish.

Of these five categories, for reasons soon to be cited, Fowler would advocate membership in the last. But failing this, he would opt for the first, grammatically uninformed and unprincipled ‘class’:

Those who neither know nor care are the vast majority, and are a happy folk, to be envied by most of the minority classes. “To really understand” comes readier to their lips and pens than “really to understand”; they see no reason why they should not say it (small blame to them, seeing that reasons are not their critics’ strong point)...

Overlooking the mildly patronizing reference to ‘happy folk’, Fowler believes that the sincerity and genuineness of this ‘class’ compensates for ignorance of a minor, albeit contentious, grammatical point. He defends them further, by suggesting that their detractors are motivated not out of some ‘reason’--because most sentences with split infinitives are easily understood--but, perhaps, out of immoderate respect for an often self-consciously invoked rule.

Fowler is far less charitable when discussing the second 'class', who understand the rule in a mechanical and conforming manner:

These people betray by their practice that their aversion to the split infinitive springs not from instinctive good taste, but from tame acceptance of the misinterpreted opinion of others; for they will subject their sentences to the queerest distortions,<sup>1</sup> all to escape imaginary split infinitives.

Here, inexperience and stilted grammar conspire to produce 'pretentious' and 'distorted' writing. But because inexperience does not itself cause such distortions--Fowler defended the grammatically ignorant members of the first 'class'--they must be caused instead by some confusion or misapplication of a grammatical rule. In Fowler's view, then, the English character should renounce affectation more strongly than ignorance, even though the latter is also undesirable.

By contrast, he writes the following of the fifth 'class':

The attitude of those who know and distinguish is something like this: We admit that separation of *to* from its infinitive is not in itself desirable, and we shall not gratuitously say either 'to mortally wound' or 'to mortally be wounded'....We maintain, however, that a real s.i., though not desirable in itself, is preferable to either of two things, to real ambiguity, and to patent artificiality.

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<sup>1</sup>He provides the following as examples: "New principles will have boldly to be adopted if the Scottish case is to be met"; "The Headmaster of a public school possesses very great powers, which ought most carefully and considerately to be exercised."



In other words, when writers accept this grammatical rule unconditionally, they risk appearing obscure and artificial, qualities totally at odds with the natural and unaffected style that Fowler calls 'good usage'. Moreover, to apply this rule felicitously, the writer must have taste and discernment. These faculties entail knowledge of when to ignore the rule, to avoid violating natural or idiomatic usage. Such faculties, doubtless, help the writer more than does the rule alone.

Not only can grammatical formulae make writing seem artificial, but they can also tarnish its elegance. In his entry "preposition at end," Fowler discusses the once "...cherished superstition that prepositions must be kept true to their name and placed before the word they govern in spite of the incurable English instinct for putting them late..." This convention against innate 'instinct'--a word he uses repeatedly--is imported from Latin grammar, and entails baneful consequences when applied unreflectively:

Those who lay down the universal principle that final prepositions are 'inelegant' are unconsciously trying to deprive the English language of a valuable idiomatic resource, which has been used freely by all our greatest writers except those whose instinct for English idiom has been overpowered by notions of correctness derived from Latin standards.

This rule, patently un-English and idiomatically indefensible,<sup>1</sup> is a sure marker of old-school affectation and is unnatural, because it opposes ‘instinct’. It has provided us with many sentences remarkable more for their pretense than their sense, such as the following familiar (and ironic) quotation, ascribed to Sir William Churchill: “This is the sort of English up with which I will not put.”<sup>2</sup> Here, as in similar cases, the arbitrary conventions of grammar distort an established idiom--the transitive verb form “to put up with”--resulting in an awkward, stilted, and comical phrase. Similarly, this affectation often deprives writing of the quality it was intended to impart:

...in respect of elegance or inelegance, every example must be judged not by any arbitrary rule, but on its own merits, according to the impression it makes on the feeling of educated English readers.

Because writers cannot trust this ‘universal principle’, Fowler advises us to rely upon our innate judgment, and trust the example set by educated readers:

If the final preposition that has naturally presented itself sounds comfortable, keep it; if it does not sound comfortable, still keep it if it has compensating vigour, or when among awkward possibilities it is the least awkward.

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<sup>1</sup>He provides “a score or so of specimens...ranging over six centuries” (including Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Jonson, and Cowper) that illustrate the idiomatic nature of final prepositions.

<sup>2</sup>*Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* (16th edition), p. 622.

We are advised, then, to trust our idiom-nurtured ‘ear’ and seek the ‘natural’ forms of expression that we find most ‘comfortable’, that is, most harmonious with our sense of idiom. In the two preceding passages, Fowler echoes both E.B. White, who urged us to hone our judgment by ‘reading the books that sharpen the ear,’ and Williams, who told us that ‘a good ear will serve you better than a flat rule’. Needless to say, our ‘ear’ is only useful insofar as our judgment is good, and if this were always so, Fowler would not need to help us here. He does not address his comments, then, to all Englishmen equally, precisely because ‘good taste’ and a sensitive ‘ear’ do not belong to all Englishmen. Nonetheless, although not novel advice, his appeal to personal taste and judgment seems consistent with his goal of a natural, unaffected English.

Fowler’s commentaries on “split infinitive” and “preposition at end” forcefully illustrate his conviction that blind adherence to grammatical formulae can mislead us and sully our prose, because they make it appear contrived and artificial, and thus deprive it of grace. We find these sentiments throughout his dictionary: some, as he discusses under “fetishes”, are “...rules and conventions misapplied or unduly revered,” such as the blind avoidance of split infinitives or calls for “elegant variation”. Others, we read in “superstitions”, reveal “...the havoc that is wrought by unintelligent applications of an unintelligent dogma.” When writers mechanically adopt rules that the good writer ignores, or that they themselves neglect when speaking (e.g. ‘preposition at end’), their writing appears stilted and contrived. As we read in “sturdy indefensibles”, even an ungrammatical or ‘foolish’ idiom, such as

‘our mutual friend’ or ‘it is no use complaining,’ “may fairly claim admission to [the status of ‘acceptable idiom’], colloquially at least.”

Recognizing that grammatical rules imperfectly reflect the patterns of common speech and writing, and thus often lead us to artificiality and affectation, Fowler argues that a mastery of idioms defines good usage, and argues that we should shy away from such formulae. This is not to say that such formulae are inherently pernicious, but, instead, that without some degree of taste, discernment, and experience, they can distort a writer’s sense of idiom. But for those lacking such faculties, grammatical formulae constitute faulty crutches that enervate and obfuscate rather than invigorate and clarify. When writing is ruled by an abstract system and regulated by grammatical principles and rules of usage, it loses its substantive character, the matter and details that coalesce to produce sensibility, if not beauty. Fowler’s advice, here, can be summed up in a few words: Use good taste, be moderate, write conventionally.

As we have seen, Fowler finds it more profitable for the writer to master the particular, substantive expressions that prevail. It is in distinguishing the peculiarities and evaluating the merits of particular expressions that Fowler demonstrates his mastery as a stylist. And it is through these commitments that he reveals his vision of English character.

### English Idioms

The bulk of Fowler’s work, perhaps as much as four-fifths of it, is about choosing the best, most precise, and most appropriate words and expressions for specific purposes. The majority of these entries

attempt to help us differentiate between words, such as with “masterful, masterly”. Even many of those having a single word as their heading (e.g., “envisage”), imply other words from which they should be differentiated (e.g., because “envisage” is too formal, one should instead use “face, confront, contemplate, imagine, intend,” etc.).

### Differentiae

Writers have long sought help in choosing the best way to express their thoughts. We read, in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, of “*Differentiae*,” handbooks that illustrated

distinctions between words of similar form (*ora, hora*) or meaning (*metus, timor, pavor*), formulated by rhetoricians and grammarians as an aid to correct diction.

In this tradition, Fowler helps writers with both tasks. He knows that many authors inadvertently confuse similar sounding words and near synonyms. Whether this confusion stems from ignorance or carelessness, the results are the same: imprecision, distortion, or obscurity. Worse still, a writer’s confusion can infect the reader, who, when exposed to imprecise writing, is deprived of reading idiomatic expressions, that is, words used in their proper, i.e., common and prevalent, senses.

When Fowler discusses the precise meaning of words, he relies more upon their current usage than their etymologies. For example, we read in his entry on “essence and substance,” that “the meaning of the [original] Greek words was practically the same, ‘true inwardness’ being perhaps the nearest equivalent in native English,”

and that their meanings have been frequently interchanged. He then notes:

It is therefore natural that *essence* and *substance*...should on the one hand be sometimes interchangeable, and on the other hand develop, like most synonyms, on diverging lines with differentiations gradually becoming fixed.

Fowler notes that “substance has moved in the direction of material and quantity, essence in that of spirit and quality.” This suggests that he recognizes his task as identifying these ‘fixed differentiations’ rather than prescribing how words should be used, based on etymology or historical argument.<sup>1</sup> In this spirit, he offers us “examples of the words in popular contexts” that reveal idiomatic habits rather than “the strictly philosophical or metaphysical uses [that] are beyond the scope of this book...” Likewise, he notes in “*masterful, masterly*” that “some centuries ago both were used without distinction...” Both could then mean ‘imperious’, on the one hand, and ‘expert’, on the other. But because “the differentiation is now complete,” writers should use ‘*masterful*’ to express the former, and ‘*masterly*’ for the latter, or else squander clarity and risk ambiguity. Fowler, echoing Aristotle and Strunk and White, recognizes that one must use precise language to write clearly.

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<sup>1</sup>He puts this point well in his entry on “differentiation”: “Differentiations become complete not by authoritative pronouncements or dictionary fiats, but by being gradually adopted in speaking and writing; it is the business of all who care for the language to do their part toward helping serviceable ones through the dangerous incomplete stage to that in which they are of real value.”

Differentiating between words in this way rarely causes controversy, because it would seem to concern matters of correct and conventional definition--which could usually be determined by consulting an authoritative text, such as a dictionary--rather than good taste and propriety--which require a different sort of judgment, because they are determined by aesthetic considerations and decorum. And yet, if these differentiae were based solely upon universally recognized conventions, that is, if all Englishmen already appreciated the differences between words that he discusses, Fowler would be wasting his time in teaching them. But because he does bother, we recognize that Fowler's dictionary not only documents idiomatic usage (or, for that matter, universally held conventions), but prescribes a specific set of conventions that outlines how he thinks the English ought to speak and write. Thus, Fowler derives his understanding of natural English usage from a vision of what English character should be, more so than from what it actually is. Specifically, he implies that the 'normal Englishman' of his project cares, or should care, about the subtle differences between words, and, significantly, that he is able to distinguish between them in this way. We see this more clearly when we turn our attention to groups of words that are misused in a less inadvertent and, for Fowler, more vexatious manner.

### Toward Unaffected English

Thus far, we have discussed one species of distinctions: those which distinguish words similar in sense or form. When writers fail to respect such differentiation, they reveal, in Fowler's lights, ignorance or neglect rather than willful bad taste or affectation. But

as he observes, some differentiations arise not only out of a need for accuracy or precision, but also from a desire for lexical variation and stylistic embellishment. Consequently, many common expressions (both words and phrases) have less common or, conversely, overly common and thus trite synonyms that writers may prefer not for their distinction of sense (which may be slight or even irrelevant), but for effect.

In the grand tradition that this thesis hopes to elucidate, Fowler (like Aristotle, Sprat, *et. al.*) condemns affectation and pretense as inimical to good style. Over a hundred of the entries in his dictionary address some linguistic affectation, be it a “vogue word” like ‘framework’, a “formal word” like ‘adumbrate’, or a “hackneyed phrase” like ‘leave no stone unturned’. In each case, Fowler argues that writers select certain expressions not to communicate ideas more clearly but to present themselves in a certain light. In what follows, we shall look at three, overlapping types of affectation: First, at what I call “Affectations of Factitious Congeniality,” which include expressions intended to make their writer appear a ‘hail-fellow-well-met.’ Second, at “Affectations of Expertise,” which are expressions chosen to indicate professional membership. Finally, the “Affectations of Self Import” that Fowler finds most galling.

### Affectations of Factitious Congeniality

Can an expression be too common to be considered good usage? Fowler argues that some expressions can lose value when they flood the literary market. Typical of these is the “cliché”, which he describes as



...a word or phrase whose felicity in a particular context when it was first employed has won it such popularity that it is apt to be used unsuitably and indiscriminately.

All this suggests that the cliché is not itself flawed fundamentally; on the contrary, it is a word or phrase corrupted by a writer's neglect of context. As Fowler writes, "the original felicity that has made a phrase a cliché may not be beyond recapture." Thus, one may use phrases like 'parity of esteem,' 'underprivileged classes,' or 'grinding to a halt' appropriately. But when they are "used mechanically, taken off the peg as convenient reach-me-downs," they "...convict their users either of not thinking what they are saying or of having a debased taste in ornament."

The trouble with clichés, then, is their potential to be used as 'ornaments',<sup>1</sup> that is, as expressions capable of imparting grace upon a text and its writer. But unlike some ornaments, such as the fancy words that Aristotle proscribes, clichés and related affectations are used to present their author as one attuned to the voice of the masses, a brother or sister of all, a hail-fellow-well-met. One variety, "battered ornaments", seek to display a writer's good humor, and include "jocular archaisms" like 'consumedly' and 'vastly' and "such quotations, customarily said with a wink or written instead of [a wink]...." Another ornament of amusement, "worn out humour," is used out of a writer's desire to amuse an audience with well known,

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<sup>1</sup>This distinction between functional and 'ornamental' words--like those between proper and 'foreign', or 'necessary' and 'unnecessary', or plain and 'fancy' ones--suggests that Fowler believes that language is primarily communicational, yet infected with words whose purpose is not to inform, but to evoke or entice.

old chestnuts that are mistakenly assumed to delight: e.g., “such oxymorons as the *gentle art* of doing something ungentle or the *tender mercies* of a martinet.” Likewise, Fowler observes that many writers use “hackneyed phrases” to appeal to popular passions, and may select expressions like ‘damn with faint praise’ or ‘of the [adjective] persuasion,’ as “a fillip to a passage that might be humdrum without them.” Writers adopt another affectation, “stock pathos” (e.g. ‘the supreme sacrifice’ and ‘more sinned against than sinning’), to demonstrate their empathy, because “some words and phrases have become so associated with melancholy occasions that it seems hardly decent to let an occasion pass unattended by any of them.” In sum, writers embrace such expressions because they mistakenly think them capable of demonstrating their wit, judgment, taste, and empathy.

And yet, Fowler objects to such expressions precisely because they are ornaments, that is, because they can be seen as insubstantial embellishments, and in that, cheap attempts to entice the reader. So often, such affectations have an effect contrary to their purposes, because they are used so self-consciously. “Stock pathos” suggest “...if not quite insincerity, [then] a factitious sort of emotion....” Of the many examples of “worn out humour”, he writes:

with all these, we, i.e. the average adult, not only are not amused; we feel a bitterness, possibly because they remind us of the lost youth in which we could be tickled

with a straw, against the scribbler who has reckoned on our having tastes so primitive.<sup>1</sup>

Of “hackneyed phrases,” Fowler writes that they may serve the purpose of amusing “some readers--the less discerning--though with the other kind they more effectually disserve it.” Moreover, he warns the writer that

when they suggest themselves it is because what he is writing is bad stuff, or it would not need such help. Let him see to the substance of his cake instead of decorating with sugarplums.

In each case, then, what bothers Fowler about such expressions is that they presume that good style and persuasion result from a few felicitous expressions, and forget that these expressions themselves owe their felicity to their original context, that is, to the way they were first used. But beyond literary infelicity, Fowler objects to the way that some competent writers use trite and hackneyed expressions for a further reason. Specifically, some discerning but pretentious writers use them not out of ignorance, but as a form of passive condescension aimed at demonstrating that they can see the world and feel its joy and pain in the same ways that the common folk do. Not only do such writers tempt trite prose, but patent insincerity. This would disturb Fowler more if it were more prevalent; as things stand, more writers would rather flaunt airs of

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<sup>1</sup>This presumes, of course, that the reader has taste refined enough to distinguish wit from banality. Likely, the true ‘average adult’ would not be offended by pedestrian humor.

superiority, and it is to these, in two related forms, that we shall now turn.

### Affectations of Expertise

Every student knows that a professional vocabulary denotes membership, if not proficiency, in a particular community. Two of the most striking qualities of the speech or writing of some professionals are its abstraction and the density of its terminology.<sup>1</sup> For instance, in his entry on “sociologese”, Fowler observes that sociology concerns itself “not with esoteric matters outside the comprehension of the layman...but with the ordinary affairs of ordinary people.” Ironically,

This seems to engender in those who write about it a feeling that the lack of any abstruseness in their subject demands a compensatory abstruseness in their language. Fowler provides a few grotesque and often lengthy examples of this phenomenon: for example, he writes that a sociologist may describe “an informal talk” as “a relatively unstructured conversational interaction.”

Worse still, Fowler observes that some sociologists write plainly and well, and comments:

that makes it the more deplorable that [some sociological] books are often written in a jargon which one is almost tempted to believe is deliberately employed for the purpose of making what is simple appear complicated,

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<sup>1</sup>We shall only discuss a few of his entries on professional vocabularies, which also include commercialese, headline language, and popularized technicalities.

exhibiting in an extreme form the common vice...of preferring pretentious abstract words to simple concrete ones.

In suggesting that the sociologist may employ abstract words deliberately, Fowler identifies one of the tendencies that impoverishes and corrupts the young discipline. Specifically, he implies that some sociologists use technical terms--such as structural conduciveness, horizontal mobility, and anticipatory socialization--more for the professional legitimacy that they confer than for the ideas they convey. After all, if plain words can convey the same ideas as technical ones,<sup>1</sup> when writers choose the latter they do so not for the sake of communication, but for the sake of persuasion. (Of course, that which may appear as 'jargon' to the outsider may also remain a useful shorthand to the practitioner--Fowler does not condemn technical language completely.) Moreover, because Fowler considers their use of 'abstract words' as pretentious, and not merely 'abstract' or 'abstruse', we know that he sees them as doing more than reflect the complexity of their material.

Fowler shows the same critical regard for literary critics. He directs his comments more toward the 'newspaper reviewers of

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<sup>1</sup>This is a contentious issue, and one, not surprisingly, that Fowler ignores. Kenneth Hughes, for example, would expect this from Fowler: "The charge of 'jargon' comes from those who favor the 'plain prose discourse,' those who erroneously assume that discourse to be 'natural', and a style laden with critical terms to be 'unnatural'. This view is completely wrong. The plain prose style is not some natural, transparent, ideologically neutral conveyor of the TRUTH, but is currently the most ideological form of...discourse, for it claims neutrality and naturalness, when in fact it is as cultural a construction as any other form of discourse." (*Signs of Literature*, 5)

books' than academic critics, who are 'a class apart'.<sup>1</sup> In his entry on "literary critics' words," he chides those who rely upon 'lingo' like actuality, ambiance, creative, engaged, and so forth. Doubtless, he could find many, more technical examples today. In Fowler's view, "the better the critic, the fewer literary critics' words he uses." He writes:

With the inferior critic the establishment of his status is the first consideration, and he effects it by so using, let us say, *actuality, engaged, and inevitable*, that the reader shall become aware of a mysterious difference between the sense attaching to the words in ordinary life and the sense now presented to him. (emphasis mine)

Here again, Fowler believes that writers appropriate specialized terms as if to validate and legitimize their opinion, in the same way that those writing letters to a newspaper may list their credentials.

Worse, perhaps, than sociologists and literary critics are officials or bureaucrats. In his entry on "officialese", Fowler explores the causes of their peculiar, abstract style:

[it may be ascribed to] a feeling that plain words sort ill with the dignity of office, a politeness that shrinks from blunt statement, and, above all, the knowledge that for those engaged in the perilous game of politics...vagueness is safer than precision.

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<sup>1</sup>He limits his attack here because he could not have anticipated how the terminology of academic criticism would steadily permeate journalism. Had he such prescience, he might have considered extending the range of his comments.

“Officialese” couples two interrelated tendencies of all professional writing: pretense and abstraction. Not only do officials believe that abstract language befits their station,<sup>1</sup> but they recognize, perhaps mistakenly, that it is a requirement of their work. These two problems feed into each other; the more important that officials consider their work (and themselves), the more abstract their is likely to writing be. Abstract writing further evinces a mind elevated, and unconcerned with mundane and concrete matters.

Fowler believes that these two affectations, pretense and abstraction, indicate the sort of vanities that cannot be attributed solely to the demands of professional membership. He argues that those in any field who use “periphrasis”, “the putting of things in a round-about way,” do so to demonstrate the sublimity of their spirit. Many believe that terminology-rich, abstract prose...

is a proof that abstract thought has occurred; abstract thought is a mark of civilized man; and so it has come about that periphrasis and civilization are by many held to be inseparable. These good people feel that there is an almost indecent nakedness, a reversion to barbarism, in saying ‘No news is good news’ instead of *The absence of intelligence is an indication of satisfactory developments*.

If, then, we find that these symptoms of abstract professional prose point to deeper and more personal causes, it is to these we should turn, to better understand the writer’s attraction to affectation.

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<sup>1</sup>We are reminded here of Aristotle, who advised the rhetor to “...use the very words which are in keeping with a particular disposition, [so that] he will produce the corresponding character; for a rustic and an educated man will not speak in the same way.” (*Rh-M*, 178-9)

### Affectations of Self Import

Fowler calls “pride of knowledge” a “very unamiable characteristic, and the display of it should be sedulously avoided.”

On the affected use of “French words”, he writes:

Display of superior knowledge is as great a vulgarity as display of superior wealth--greater, indeed, inasmuch as knowledge should tend more definitely than wealth towards discretion and good manners.

No affectation revolts Fowler as much as a gratuitous and ostentatious show of knowledge, be it through “love of the long word”, “saxonism”, “didacticism”, “genteelism”, or the use of stylish, formal, French, or archaic words. In each such case, as we shall see, he objects to such stylistic pretensions because they are, in different ways, unnatural to the typical educated Englishman.

“Gallicisms,” according to Fowler, are “...borrowings of various kinds from French in which the borrower stops short of using French words without disguise.” A Gallicism, such as ‘veritable’ or ‘envisage’, perturbs Fowler when writers use it as an ornament to flaunt their sophistication. And yet, because English is full of useful words and phrases borrowed from the French, it is not the Gallic strain alone that makes an expression pretentious. On the contrary, expressions are made pretentious when used for stylistic affect:

What the wise man does is to recognize that the conversational usage of educated people in general, not his predilections or a literary fashion of the moment, is the naturalizing authority, and he will therefore adopt a



Gallicism only when he is of opinion that it is a Gallicism no more. (emphasis mine)

Here, an expression is ‘naturalized’ by idiom, and, once absorbed into proper English, loses its consciously Gallic character and pretension.<sup>1</sup> Thus, a Gallicism becomes proper only when writers think no more of its lineage than that of the other expressions they use--it is then only a means to express an idea rather than a means of promoting the writer’s sophistication.

But even when we look at English in isolation, some writers choose “formal words” over their plain equivalents, they ignore “the forms that the mind uses in its private debates to convey to itself what it is talking about,” and provide, instead “translations of these [plain words] into language that is held more suitable for public exhibition.” Recalling Aristotle, he observes that each ‘thing’ has a proper or dominant name [κυριον ονομα], “...for which another may be substituted to add precision or for many other reasons, but which is present to the mind even behind the substitute.” When writers ignore the proper name of a thing, and prefer the ornamental to the ordinary, they appear both insincere and affected. For this reason, Fowler deprecates “genteelism”, which he defines as

the rejecting of the ordinary natural word that first suggests itself to the mind, and the substitution of a synonym that is thought to be less soiled by the lips of

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<sup>1</sup>Conversely, Fowler objects to “Saxonism”, and writes that the “...choice or rejection of particular words should depend not on their descent but on considerations of expressiveness, intelligibility, brevity, euphony, or ease of handling....”

the common herd, less familiar, less plebeian, less vulgar...

Once again, Fowler describes affectation as both reactive and willful, which suggests that people deliberately write affected prose out of snobbery and conceit. Thus, when a writer chooses a genteelism, say, 'assist' rather than help, s/he betrays sound English character and good usage in a hasty attempt at cachet.

In each case, Fowler recognizes that writers use affected expressions to add grace and distinction of various types to their prose. He, like E.B. White, knows that such obvious and self-conscious attempts always testify to the inexperience of the writer, who, when faced with an elegant text, mistakenly believes that it owes its power to extraordinary and unusual elements (because these appear most striking), and overlooks the context in which they are used.

## Conclusion

In the preceding discussion, I have tried to show that selected entries from Fowler's *Modern English Usage* reveal a consistent theme, with regard to my concerns. Specifically, I have tried to illustrate that Fowler's understanding of good usage reflects and presupposes certain qualities of an English character.

Fowler believed that the English character, because unaffected, discriminating, and moderate, would foster clear and graceful expression. This belief was not unique, and was shared, in fact, by Bishop Sprat. He believed that the "constitution of the minds of the English" would ensure the everlasting life of the Royal Society. Although he was mistaken, his rationale interests us here:

If there can be a true character given of the *Universal Temper* of any Nation under Heaven, then certainly this must be ascrib'd to our Countrymen: that they have commonly an unaffected sincerity, that they love to deliver their minds with a sound simplicity...that they are more concern'd with what others will think of the strength than of the fineness of what they say; and that a universal modesty possesses them. These qualities are...conspicuous, and proper to our soil... (114)

Sprat believed that the entire project of the Royal Society depended upon this national character, and its sincerity, simplicity, and modesty.

Fowler shared Sprat's faith in the English character, and sought to nurture it by encouraging unaffected and idiomatic expression. And like Sprat, the strength of his faith may have encouraged an unduly optimistic view of human nature, and blinded him to some of its frailties. If we consider a society's natural expression to be idiomatic or established usage, as did Fowler, all established or conventional expressions--both good and bad--must be taken as revelations of this same 'social nature'. On this point, we recall his entry on "Gallicisms", in which Fowler argues that "the conversational usage of educated people in general" is "the naturalizing authority," that is, the authority by which expressions become established, idiomatic, and hence natural. Nonetheless, Fowler found fault in many well-established expressions, even though they were common enough for him to address in his dictionary as typical-but-undesirable linguistic habits. Clichés, for

instance, have proven themselves as established and, to the extent that they are conspicuous, preferred. Yet, for Fowler, clichés remain unattractive and debilitating. The persistent confusion of word pairs like ‘masterful’ and ‘masterly’ also suggests that their differentiation is neither as established as Fowler might believe, nor is it a matter of much concern for most people. Similarly, when educated professionals habitually prefer a technical term, no matter how abstract or unsightly, it becomes ‘established’ and, to them, a natural way to express themselves to their peers. So too with so many common stylistic vices: were they not common, even customary, they would have escaped Fowler’s grasp.

Fowler’s vision of ‘natural expression’, then, does not reflect the established and preferred usage of all Englishmen. It may, perhaps, reflect the usage of a select group invested with unfailing sincerity, taste, wisdom, and humility. Those of this group may have such faith in their status and abilities that they do not feel compelled to use those expressions that Fowler labeled as ‘affectations’ to prove themselves. Indeed, those of this group may be of a nature rarely achieved, because their acute sensitivity to the subtleties of language elevates them above the majority of us who seek their help. Doubtless, those of such a nature are university educated and have read widely and well enough to develop a well-tempered and refined ‘ear’. Further, they have likely acquired good usage from prolonged exposure to good texts and good speakers, rather than from grammatical manuals, stylistic handbooks, and dictionaries of usage. This genteel cultivation affords them the lofty indifference to those grammatical rules and stylistic principles that many of us revere, at

least initially, as elementary to good style, and enables them to distinguish between words that many of us had, as students, thought indistinguishable. Moreover, those raised around elegant speakers and writers are less likely to treat formal or technical words as mere ornaments, insofar as they are unaccustomed to hearing them used as such.

With this in mind, we see that Fowler's dictionary does less to reproduce established and natural usage (for most of us) than it does to fashion an ideal language, strictly differentiated and cleansed of affectation. But precisely because this ideal language is ideal, we cannot expect to be able to use it merely by acting on our natural taste and dispositions; for this reason, we cannot consider it 'natural' or 'normal', but instead, a product of refined and exalted cultivation that has been disguised as innate aptitude to obscure its origins in wealth and privilege. Whenever an author treats acquired faculties and dispositions as 'natural', he overlooks their social sources. In so doing, he speaks not of a universal, but of a partial 'human nature' that embraces an incomplete and skewed set of privileged character traits. As Bourdieu puts it in *Distinction*, his study of 'taste':

The ideology of natural taste owes its plausibility and its efficacy to the fact that, like all the ideological strategies generated in the everyday class struggle, it *naturalizes* real differences, converting differences in the acquisition of culture into differences of nature; it only recognizes as legitimate the relation to culture (or language) which least bears the visible marks of its genesis, which has nothing 'academic', 'scholastic', 'bookish', 'affected', or

studied about it, but manifests by its ease and naturalness that true culture is nature--a new mystery of immaculate conception. (68)

Owing to the bias concealed within ideas like 'natural taste', we may be well advised to rethink the virtue of 'human nature' as the basis for any rhetorical or philosophical system. Any understanding of human nature that, for instance, overlooks some of our equally ancient, yet unappealing dispositions--affectation, insincerity, sloth, ignorance, and so forth--overlooks too much of the human condition to help us understand, much less master our practices and traditions.

## Chapter Six--Conclusion

...to speak of my father as he was...he was born an orator;--θεοδιδακτος.--Persuasion hung upon his lips, and the elements of Logick and Rhetorick were so blended up in him,--&, withal, he had so shrewd a guess at the weaknesses and passions of his respondent,--that NATURE might have stood up and said,--'This man is eloquent.'...And yet, 'tis strange, he had never read *Cicero* nor *Quintillian de Oratore*, nor *Isocrates*, nor *Aristotle*, nor *Longinus* amongst the ancients...it was a matter of just wonder with my worthy tutor...that a man who knew not so much as the names of his tools should be able to work after that fashion with them. (Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 57-8)

When Bishop Sprat praised the natural style, he was not only confident that it would serve as a clear and graceful medium for scientific discourse, but that it could be achieved by those willing to express themselves with sincerity and honesty. Over the course of this study we have seen that many others shared his belief that this natural style could be cultivated. But unlike Sprat, the other

authorities that we have cited hold that personal virtues are not essentially linked to clear and felicitous expression. They argue, instead, that one can develop a natural style by technical means, that is, by attending to the mechanics of writing or speaking, through mastering the principles (or points) of style they advocate.

Nevertheless, in each of these handbooks we find that technique alone is insufficient to the task, and, correspondingly, that in a subtle but significant way, one's personal attributes, and one's ability in revealing them, influence the faculty of writing in a way that others will find clear and graceful. Let us briefly review the positions of the works we have discussed with regard to this persistent question. Having done this, we shall conclude our inquiry with some general observations about rhetorical guides and suggest further lines of inquiry.

We began with Aristotle, whose *Art of Rhetoric* was the first systematic style manual. He believed that an audience could be persuaded by a rhetor's moral integrity, empathy, and style. Although Aristotle recognized that 'moral integrity', a combination of several personal virtues, was 'the most effective means of proof,' he knew that this virtue could not be learned from a mere manual. Likewise, Aristotle was cautious in his teachings about manipulating the emotions of his audience because he recognized that each rhetorical situation demanded a different empathic strategy. He handled this crucial matter by formulating a psychology of several emotions to help the rhetor understand the persuasive force of the passions. As opposed to his reticence concerning such subjective matters, Aristotle had much to say about style.



Aristotle argued that good style was marked by clarity and appropriateness, and that propriety--that is, a concordance between the dignity of the rhetor's character, his subject matter, and his choice of words and expressions--ensured the clarity, credibility, and pleasant character of the speech. Propriety, in the above sense, was desirable because it ensured that the speech would sound 'natural' and not 'artificial'. More to the point, the 'natural' or 'artificial' appearance of a speech does more than determine its clarity or its ability to argue well; it reflects on the judgment, honor, credibility, taste, and virtue of the rhetor (or author). By the same token, the one's ability to express oneself 'appropriately' relies upon some of the same faculties and attributes that appropriate style accentuates. It is in these ways, then, that Aristotle seeks to merge rhetoric's personal and technical functions.

We looked next at Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*. Their manual provides us with principles that purport to teach us the two types of 'good style' that coalesce in the best writing. We called the first "The Principles of Effective Writing," because they refer to techniques intended to make writing clear and compelling. The second, referred to as "The Principles of Distinguished Writing," purport to help us write in a 'distinguished and distinguishing' way; i.e., gracefully and personally.

Upon closer examination, "The Principles of Effective Writing" had less to do with a grammatical formula for 'clarity' than with helping one forge a persuasive and authoritative persona. Some of these principles were concerned with avoiding solecisms that would indicate carelessness and ignorance, even if they did not subvert

understanding (e.g., subtle points of grammar and punctuation). Others had less to do with encouraging clear writing than with making the writer seem courteous, or authoritative (e.g., 'omit needless words,' 'use the active voice.'). In most cases, Strunk and White argue, the writer can only profit from such prescriptions insofar as his judgment is good, that is, insofar as he can determine which words are 'unnecessary', find and use 'specific' terms, or choose an 'appropriate' length for his paragraphs.

"The Principles of Distinguished Writing" approach graceful and distinguishing writing as a revelatory project in which the writer need only express himself naturally to awaken a personal and engaging authorial voice. When White attempts to teach this style, he repeatedly encourages the writer to seek conventional rather than idiosyncratic forms of expression, and urges one to write clearly rather than 'artistically'. Consequently, these principles implicitly advocate the "Principles of Effective Writing" rather than provide direct instruction on how to awaken a distinctive authorial voice. For in the end, White, like so many others, believed that writers could not actively pursue this style through technical mastery, but that it may 'emerge', given patience, good literary company, and personal graces.

Williams's *Style* claims to go beyond the 'platitudes' of *The Elements of Style*, insofar as it tries to formulate effective principles (of clarity and grace) based upon the way people read. He argues that whether one is writing a sentence, paragraph, or essay, readers expect old or familiar information to precede the new or unfamiliar. When the writer accurately anticipates the reader's needs, the latter

can better integrate new within secure knowledge, and comprehend the text. Although this is useful advice, Williams is not helpful in informing us how to anticipate what the reader will find familiar or unfamiliar. Nor can he guarantee that we will understand our subject matter in a way that allows us to share it with others. Likewise, although Williams provides no general strategies for writing gracefully, he does present specific techniques that will help us write more concisely, manage long sentences, and express ideas elegantly. Despite his putative critique of Strunk and White, then, Williams's model of clarity requires that the good writer is one with experience, sound judgment, and a good grasp of a subject matter--none of which, ultimately, can be taught through stylistic principles.

Finally, Fowler's *Modern English Usage* attempts to teach 'good usage' (i.e., clear and graceful style) through the instruction of 'idioms', that is, those expressions he considers 'established' because they are natural for the average English speaker. Fowler distrusts general grammatical formulations, and urges his readers to master the precise, unaffected English that comes naturally to them. But as we have seen, in assuming that his model of good usage was natural to the English, Fowler overlooked the fact that many of the expressions he considers 'unidiomatic' are, for many Englishmen, well-established and, by his logic, equally 'natural'. Fowler's model of good usage, then, represents a standard that few, save the well-educated and culture-rich, may achieve in a 'natural' way. Consequently, even if we find that the writing of one endowed with this refined usage is little clearer than that of common people, its style may still reveal the privileged cultivation of its author.

## Style and the Writer

Each handbook recognizes, in its own way, that 'good style' cannot be achieved by principles and formulae alone. Aristotle saw this most clearly, as evinced in his claim that moral integrity was 'the most effective means of proof.' Undoubtedly, his perception was sharpened by observing the performances of accomplished rhetors in the polis. In their presence, Aristotle could experience the technical ability and personal gifts that converge in the master rhetor. Consequently, he considered the techniques of style as but one of three components of persuasion. But as we have seen, even those authors concerned primarily with writing knew that the prospective writer's faculties were crucial to nurturing clear and graceful style.

We have, for instance, read often of the virtue of a good 'ear' in selecting sonorous expressions or a sharp 'eye' in finding the appropriate length of sentences or paragraphs. Likewise, we have frequently been advised to rely upon our judgment to tell us when we should respect or reject stylistic rules, or when we can use an extravagant expression felicitously. Similarly, whenever authors appeal to propriety, natural expression, or good sense, they ask us, implicitly, to value our taste and discretion over mechanical formulae or precepts. Moreover, even appeals to 'convention' or 'orthodox expression' demand not that we consult some absolute authority, but that we identify certain fashions as tasteful and proper. The rhetoricians and stylists we have studied clearly understand that technical acumen and grammatical sensitivity are necessary but insufficient ingredients for the cultivation of clarity, grace, and a distinctive style.

The unanimous judgment that personal attributes enrich style, and may in fact be necessary for any attempt at clarity, accounts for the numerous suggestions that have less to do with ensuring comprehensibility than with cultivating a compelling authorial voice. The authors of style manuals know that writers must have, among other things, good sense and judgment, but that they should be able to express (or at least simulate) these qualities through their style, if they are to appear trustworthy. For example, Aristotle knew that ‘appropriate’ style would demonstrate the rhetor’s judgment, taste, and emotional adequacy. Several of Strunk and White’s principles that purport to teach clarity serve, at the same time, to help writers demonstrate their conviction, courtesy, and prudence.<sup>1</sup> Williams saw his model of clarity as a means of establishing that both reader and writer think in the same way. Similarly, just as Fowler intended his program of ‘idiomatic usage’ to help the English express themselves precisely, it also served to help those equal to its demands express their cultivation.

In each case, clarity entails more than comprehensibility and intelligibility. To write clearly, the manuals suggest, one must develop an authorial voice capable of engaging the reader’s sensibilities, as well as eliciting trust in one’s judgment and taste. Insofar as we grant that clarity entails that the writer engage the reader in these ways, we may begin to discern the underlying harmony (but not identity) of clarity and grace.<sup>2</sup> That is to say,

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<sup>1</sup>As Deleuze and Guattari put it, “A rule of grammar is a power marker before it is a syntactical marker.” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 76)

<sup>2</sup>I write this with some qualification. First, when we equate plainness and clarity with concinnity, we neglect the aesthetic tradition of ‘excess’ that has

clarity and grace are essentially part of the same project. Several of the handbooks allude to this harmony by presenting 'clarity' as the achievable goal of style, while relegating 'grace' to a discursive domain that ultimately resists codification, technique, and principles. As Aristotle notes: "It is superfluous to make the further distinction that style should be pleasant or magnificent. Why so, any more than temperate, liberal, or anything else that indicates moral virtue? ...For why, if not to please, need it be clear, not mean, but appropriate?" (*Rh.* 423). Likewise, we found that much of White's advice on grace encouraged writers to respect conventions, a sentiment best expressed when he warned them to 'Be Clear.' Similarly, in his preface, Williams observes:

Aesthetic pleasure and clarity are by no means mutually exclusive; indeed, they are usually part of the same experience. But the object of our attention is writing whose success we measure not primarily by the pleasure we derive from it, but by how well it does a job of work. If it also gives us a tingle of pleasure, so much the better.

(x)

Fowler, perhaps, believed most strongly in the harmony of clarity and grace, in that he did not attempt to distinguish them, and claimed that both depended on good idiomatic usage.

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informed baroque art and music, on the one hand, and experimental fiction (e.g., *Finnegan's Wake*), on the other. Second, if we presume that the 'graceful' must first be 'clear', we neglect the power and beauty of 'writerly' fiction, i.e., that writing which artfully challenges the reader to derive meaning.

All of this suggests that we need to understand ‘good style’ (comprising both ‘clarity’ and ‘grace’) as more than a purely literary phenomenon. Indeed, as Williams shows us, we call writing ‘clear’ not so much because it exemplifies grammatical or literary perfection, but because it persuades us to recognize a state of affairs in the author’s terms. Moreover, when we consider ‘good style,’ which entails more than clarity alone, we find that more is at stake than accurate and precise representation. Because we evaluate a writer’s style on its ability to convey the writer’s taste, judgment, discernment, aesthetic sense, and intelligence, ‘good style’ represents a form of personal legitimacy.<sup>1</sup>

For this reason, when we read good writing, we often regard its merits as reflecting and revealing the personal virtues of the writer. Put another way, ‘good style’ attests to qualities and attributes that we assume belong not only to the text, but to its author. Because the best and most persuasive writing seems, in this light, to attest to an author’s innate gifts and faculties (e.g., sagacity, good taste, wit), we call its style ‘natural’. And insofar as the manual seeks to foster these seemingly ‘natural’ gifts, we can understand its prescriptions as attempts at naturalizing the dispositions that engender good style. Style manuals, then, comprise what we may call ‘Principles of Self-Presentation’ or ‘Principles of Legitimacy’ that exist within and beyond their putatively technical precepts. Accordingly, we have

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<sup>1</sup>Bertrand Russell observes, in *Education and the Social Order*, that much of what the university ‘education of a gentleman’ includes has little to do with his later profession, but has much to do with cultivating good style: “...there is a tendency, especially in England, to over-emphasize those elements in education which enable a man to talk with seeming intelligence” (92).

found that their particular principles outline what we find compelling and credible, and give us advice, however imperfect, on how we may achieve such ends.

### The Style Manual and Other Lines of Inquiry

Because I have formulated this investigation as a series of exploratory studies, it should not be surprising that it has raised more questions about the style manual as a literary and social document than it has answered. I shall now consider but four of the many, both to acknowledge some of the limits of this study, and to suggest other lines of inquiry for future studies.

First, because I have not attempted to compare the manuals of different historical periods, I have not been able to consider some of the subtle changes in stylistic principles that take place over time, owing to emerging social, historical, and political conditions. For instance, rhetorics of different ages have defined terms like 'propriety' to reflect the specific mores, conventions, and legal codes (e.g., 'decency laws') of the societies in which they were written and used. A study that combines the analysis of rhetorical handbooks with an examination of the social and political circumstances in which they were written would help us understand the changes in the goals and techniques of the rhetorical tradition. This study, conversely, has focused on those durable stylistic principles that allow us to speak of a plain-prose rhetorical tradition.

Second, because this study has concentrated on English style manuals (excluding, of course, Aristotle), it has neglected the strong rhetorical traditions of other Western societies, as well as those of the East. Both France and Italy, for example, have produced many



more manuals than England and North America combined. Likewise, China and (most notably) India have devised sophisticated and wide reaching rhetorics.<sup>1</sup> Their traditions, then, offer the student of rhetoric rich resources that have been neglected here. Moreover, the study of inter-cultural differences may help us find (and isolate) the 'culturally specific' from the seemingly 'universal' stylistic principles.

Third, insofar we have discerned some of the strengths and weaknesses of style manuals as pedagogical instruments, this study raises questions about the properties of the manual or *vade macum* as a type of cultural artefact. Because I have concentrated on examining the internal architecture of the manual--that is, the logic, methods, and goals of plain-prose rhetoric--I have, to some extent, neglected to look at it externally. To do so, one would need to study the authors and audiences of the style manual, and their reasons for wanting to teach or learn good style; moreover, one would need to understand why this literary genre has served as the medium for their pedagogy. I wish only to mention in general terms what such a study would entail, looking first at the 'manual' as a literary genre, and then, more specifically, at the modern 'style handbook' itself.

As we know, a manual of any kind is a purposeful product whose import is necessarily inscribed within a specific field of social practice. Thus, the purpose or intentionality of the manual distinguishes it from other types of text. Specifically, whereas we conventionally understand a novel or poem as principally expressive and sublime, or a newspaper as informative, the manual serves a

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<sup>1</sup>In China there are even ancient rhetorics that teach specific rhetorical skills, like proper letter writing. (cf. the *T'ung Shu*, an almanac, of sorts.)

more instrumental, didactic, and mundane order. As a consequence, a manual's purpose delimits its potential audience: only those who have an interest (in the sense of investment) in a given manual's field of practice are likely to purchase or use it. Those who write manuals design them with such a purpose, insofar as they seek to codify and reflect an already existing practice.<sup>1</sup>

As an exemplar of this literary genre, the modern 'style manual' is embedded in particular vocational fields--academic and professional work--that largely define who is likely to write or read one. For the most part, though, style manuals are written for students, because even if people could indirectly profit from the ability to write clearly in daily life, there are few fields that demand that one master the art of clear writing. Professionals that require 'clear writing' have generally taken instruction in writing at some stage in their education, or at least have had to write essays to gain their credentials. Undoubtedly, many people (if not the majority) grow old comfortably without needing to write an essay or formal text other than a last will and testament (if that). (This does not discourage publishers from promoting a manual as a resource with widespread and relatively unrestricted appeal, as if to say 'this is not the technical instrument of a specialist, but the common companion of the reasonable and literate citizen.' But this is another issue.)

Although some non-academics have published such works (e.g., William Safire, Theodore M. Bernstein, Robert Graves and Alan

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<sup>1</sup>As Bourdieu puts it in "The Production and Reproduction of Legitimate Language," the rules of grammar (and by extension, the prescriptions of the style handbook) are "...derived *ex post facto* from expressed discourse and set up as imperative norms for discourse yet to be expressed." (61)

Hodge), most have been written by teachers for their students. Despite the monetary rewards of a successful writing manual,<sup>1</sup> we find that in almost every case the manuals were written for pedagogical reasons and a concomitant desire to satisfy a common student inadequacy. These manifest motives, among others, have directed and informed each stage of their design.<sup>2</sup>

This abbreviated overview suggests that a study of those who write and those who consult style manuals, with an eye to their reasons and interests, could help us understand the social import of the principles of style and points of usage that this genre seeks to preserve. Accordingly, such a study would also help us appreciate the role of the manual in the academic tradition, and could only complement and enrich our discussion of its internal logic. In the broader picture, though, a study of this genre could help us understand the ways that this pedagogical instrument has, for nearly two millennia, helped societies codify and reproduce crucial values and practices.

Finally, over the course of our discussion I have frequently shied away from questions pertaining to the moral implications of 'good style' and, by extension, the style manual itself; I wish now to

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<sup>1</sup>Williams's manual, in its second edition, is called a "best-selling textbook" on its dust-cover. Over the course of years, publishers often release several editions of a particular style handbook.

<sup>2</sup>One of my grandfather's books, *Modern Blacksmithing: Rational Horseshoeing and Wagon Making* has the following preface: "What prompted the author to prepare this book was the oft-repeated question...: 'Is there a book treating on this or that?'...If, therefore, there has ever been such a thing as 'filling a long-felt want,' this must certainly be a case of that kind. ...This little book is fresh from the anvil, the author taking notes during the day while at work, compiling the same into articles at night." (John G. Holstrom, 6-7)

address my reluctance to discuss such matters earlier, and offer these considerations to the reader as my concluding remarks. This reluctance comes, in part, from an aversion to speculate on such matters, considering the hasty optimism that so often convinces writers of the moral virtue of their chosen subject matter. Partly, too, it comes from a desire to reproduce the sentiments of the rhetoricians that I have studied, who, by and large, treat good style as a virtue in its own right. But to a large extent, it comes from a certain ambivalence on my part, fed, on the one hand, by well-founded concerns about the affinity of 'good style' and social privilege. We have found instances of this affinity throughout the handbooks we have discussed: specifically, in Aristotle, who knows that those of more dignified nature can address a broader range of subjects (including the most sublime ones) felicitously, and in Fowler, who modeled his plan of idiom upon the usage of the cultivated. We also find such concerns expressed by those who write on rhetoric:

Rhetoric is that privileged technique...that permits the ruling classes to gain *ownership of speech*. Language being a power, selective rules of access to this power have been decreed, constituting it as...closed to 'those who do not know how to speak,' and requiring an expensive initiation... (Barthes, *The Semiotic Challenge*, 14)

But on the other hand, my ambivalence toward the virtue of rhetoric is fed by concerns about the dangers inherent in obfuscatory prose, when used to conceal or abate political injustices. This is a point which, in fairness, Fowler knew well:

In the present century euphemism has been employed less in finding discreet terms for what is indelicate than as a protective device for governments...Its value is notorious in totalitarian countries, where assassination and aggression can be made to look respectable by calling them *liquidation* and *liberation*. (euphemism)

George Orwell considered the pursuit of clarity as a means of overcoming blind conformity in political matters:

...one ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end. If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. ("Politics and the English Language," 366)

Both perspectives, doubtless, hold partial truths, and, as moral hypotheses, cannot be tested conclusively. Nevertheless, what remains after consideration of them is an awareness that both clarity and obscurity may be used for moral or immoral ends. This, as we recall, was observed by Aristotle when he questioned the morality of rhetoric. And yet, Aristotle knew that even if rhetoric was corruptible, its virtuous use would preserve its better purpose:

If it is argued that one who makes an unfair use of such faculty of speech may do a great deal of harm, this objection applies equally to all good things except virtue, and above all to those things which are most useful, such as strength, health, wealth, generalship; for as these,

rightly used, may be of the greatest benefit, so, wrongly used, they may do a great deal of harm. (*Rh.* 13)

For this reason, I would choose to defer judgment on the morality of rhetoric, not out of irresolution or contempt for the question, but out of an understanding that the practical consequences of rhetorical pedagogy will ultimately earn rhetoric's praise or censure. In this spirit, I hope that this discussion will be taken as a provisional attempt at understanding the techniques and motives that inform the pursuit of 'good style', an attempt that has sought not to judge its worth, but, instead, to determine its social and pedagogical stakes, as well as its methods of reproduction.

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