Francis-Noël Thomas & Mark Turner

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CLEAR AND SIMPLE AS THE TRUTH

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J'ai sur-tout à cœur la clarté. . . . Mon style
ne sera point fleuri, mes expressions
seront simples comme la vérité.

—JEAN-BAPTISTE LE BRUN

THE TEACHING of writing in America is almost entirely controlled by the view that teaching writing is teaching verbal skills—from the placing of commas to the ordering of paragraphs. This has generated a tremendous industry, but the effect of this teaching is dubious. Why is American prose as bad as it is, even though we have more writing programs than ever?

Our answer is that writing is an intellectual activity, not a bundle of skills. Writing proceeds from thinking. To achieve good prose styles, writers must work through intellectual issues, not merely acquire mechanical techniques. Although it is true that an ordinary intellectual activity like writing must lead to skills, and that skills visibly mark the performance, the activity does not come from the skills, nor does it consist of using them. In this way, writing is like conversation—both are linguistic activities, and so require verbal skills, but neither can be mastered by learning verbal skills. A bad conversationalist may have a very high level of verbal skills but perform poorly because he does not conceive of conversation as distinct from monologue. No further cultivation of verbal skills will remedy his problem. Conversely, a very good conversationalist may have inferior verbal skills, but a firm grasp on concepts such as reciprocity and turn-taking that lie at the heart of the activity. Neither conversation nor writing can be learned merely by

acquiring verbal skills, and any attempt to teach writing by teaching writing skills detached from underlying conceptual issues is doomed.

But it is possible to learn to write by learning a style of writing. We think conceptual stands are the basis of writing since they define styles. To be sure, it is only through the verbal level that the conceptual level can be observed, and verbal artifacts—like plumage—help identify a style. Nevertheless, in general, a style cannot be defined, analyzed, or learned as a matter of verbal choices.

Writing is defined conceptually and leads to skills. This is true of all intellectual activities. There are skills of mathematical discovery, skills of painting, skills of learning a language, and so on. But in no case is the activity constituted by the skills. Great painters are often less skillful than mediocre painters; it is their concept of painting, not their skills, that defines their activity. Similarly, a foreigner may be less skillful than a native speaker at manipulating tenses or using subjunctives, but nonetheless be an incomparably better writer. Intellectual activities generate skills, but skills do not generate intellectual activities. The relationship is not symmetric.

A style is defined by its conceptual stand on truth, presentation, writer, reader, thought, language, and their relationships. Classic style, for example, adopts a conceptual stand on these elements that can be expressed briefly, as it was by the eighteenth-century picture merchant Jean-Baptiste Le Brun in a book attempting to instruct amateurs in how to judge pictures. "J'ai sur-tout à cœur la clarté. . . . Mon style ne sera point fleuri, mes expressions seront simples comme la vérité." 'Above all, I have clarity at heart. My style will not be at all florid; my expressions will be simple as the truth.' Classic style is in its own view clear and simple as the truth. It adopts the stance that its purpose is presentation; its motive, disinterested truth. Successful presentation consists of aligning language with truth, and the test of this alignment is clarity and simplicity. The idea that presentation is successful when language is aligned with truth implies that truth can be known; truth needs no argument but only accurate presentation; the reader is compe-

tent to recognize truth; the symmetry between writer and reader allows the presentation to follow the model of conversation; a natural language is sufficient to express truth; and the writer knows the truth before he puts it into language.

Le Brun's own writing could never be the result of any collection of verbal skills. It derives instead from the classic conception of the activity of writing, in which language can be fitted to truth and writing can be an undistorting window on its subject. Le Brun's concept of writing depends upon his stand on truth: there exist good and bad paintings; their qualities are independent of him or anyone; a lifetime of experience has refined his vision so that he can see the quality of a painting; the order of his presentation follows the order of truth, not of sensation; once he positions his reader to see what he himself has learned to see, the reader will be competent to recognize it. His concept of truth and its corollaries are intellectual stands, not technical skills. They define his performance—and their ability to do so is independent of their validity.

Le Brun's stand—that he knows something true and can position his reader to see it—allows him to claim that his writing is clear and simple as the truth. It also justifies his model scene of conversation in which one person speaks to another, unmotivated by gain or interest. This conceptual stand elevates clarity and simplicity to the position of prime virtues of classic style. It is apparent that a writer who does not adopt the stand that truth can be known or recognized could not claim that his writing is clear and simple as the truth.

It is equally apparent that any writer can simply learn the classic stand and, writing from that stand, achieve its virtues. Le Brun's stylistic stand was, for him, probably a conviction, but it offers access to the same stylistic virtues when taken as an enabling convention. Classic style comes from adopting a particular stand on intellectual issues for the specific purpose of presentation; it is not a creed. Once adopted, the classic stand offers a general style of presentation suitable to any subject whatever. It is obviously not

limited to the judgment of paintings. The feature of classic style that makes it a natural model for anyone is its great versatility. The style is defined not by a set of techniques, but rather by an attitude toward writing itself. What is most fundamental to that attitude is the stand that the writer knows something before he sets out to write, and that his purpose is to articulate what he knows to a reader. The style does not limit the writer's subject matter or efface his individuality, but the writer's individuality will be expressed principally by his knowledge of his subject.

The first part of our book shows why learning to write cannot be reduced to acquiring writing skills, why learning to write is inevitably learning styles of writing, and how styles derive from conceptual stands. We coach our readers in the conceptual stand that might turn them into classic writers, and contrast the classic stand with some others: reflexive, practical, plain, contemplative, romantic, prophetic, oratorical. The second half of the book is a museum of examples with commentary, ranging from Thomas Jefferson to Junichirō Tanizaki, and including Madame de Sévigné, Descartes, Jane Austen, and Mark Twain. Since classic style can be recognized across all boundaries of language and era, the book ends with a list—meant to be suggestive—of writing in classic style from the *Apology* of Socrates to *Lulu in Hollywood*.

ONE

Principles of Classic Style

The Concept of Style

Style is a word everybody uses, but almost no one can explain what it means. It is often understood as the inessential or even disreputable member of a two-term set: style and substance. This set of terms is elastic but in all its many applications, style is the subordinate term and, in the traditional American idiom, there is a persistent suggestion that we would be better off without it. Style is, at best, a harmless if unnecessary bit of window dressing. At worst, it is a polite name for fraud. There used to be a cigar company whose motto was "All Quality. No Style."

When style is considered the opposite of substance, it seems optional and incidental, even when it is admired. In this way of framing things, substantive thought and meaning can be prior to style and completely separable from it. The identical thought or the identical meaning, it is suggested, can be expressed in many styles—or even in none at all, as when just plain integrity or the unvarnished truth is offered as an alternative to the adornments of style. Style, conceived this way, is something fancy that distracts us from what is essential; it is the varnish that makes the truth at least a little harder to see.

The notion that style is something completely separate from substance, so that substance can be offered "straight," lies behind both the motto of the cigar company and William Butler Yeats's description of Bernard Shaw's writing, but in the second case the poet puts a high value on style and views writing in no style, while possible, to be something monstrously mechanical. Yeats apparently thought of his own characteristic poetic voice as "style." It was a voice so compelling that attempts to imitate it have ruined quite a number of aspiring poets. Shaw's voice was not poetic in Yeats's sense, so Yeats considered Shaw to be a writer "without style." Because he held the view that style is optional, Yeats could simultaneously view Shaw as "the most formidable man in modern letters," able to write "with great effect," and yet view Shaw's writ-

ing as "without music, without style, either good or bad." He described Shaw as a nightmare sewing machine that clicked, shone, and smiled, "smiled perpetually."

Whether style is viewed as spiritual, fraudulent, or something in-between, any concept of style that treats it as optional is inadequate not only to writing but to any human action. Nothing we do can be done "simply" and in no style, because style is something inherent in action, not something added to it. In this respect, style is like the typeface in which a text is printed. We may overlook it, and frequently do, but it is always there. The styles we acquire unconsciously remain invisible to us as a rule, and routine actions can seem to be done in no style at all, even though their styles are obvious to experienced observers. A printer, a proofreader, or a type designer cannot fail to notice the type in which a text is printed, but for most of us, that typeface will have to be laid down beside a contrasting face before we even notice it exists. We thought we were looking at words pure and simple and did not notice that they are printed in a specific typeface.

When we do something in a default style acquired unconsciously, it is like typing on the only typewriter we have ever known: we do not notice the style of our activity any more than we notice the typeface on the machine. In such cases, we have an abstract concept of action that leaves style out of account. We can have a concept of lying without being aware—as a good investigative reporter is—that, in practice, we must have a style of lying. We can have a concept of quarreling without being aware—as a good marriage counselor is—that, in practice, we must have a style of quarreling.

Despite a lifetime of speaking, we can remain unaware of having a style of speaking. Yankees in Maine or Good Ol' Boys in Louisiana think that people from Brooklyn talk funny. WASPS in the Chicago suburbs think that Poles or Lithuanians in Chicago speak English with an accent, as if the suburban WASPS, the Yankees, and the Good Ol' Boys speak just plain American English with no accent. Coastal Californians think—just as the ancient

Greeks did—that everybody else sounds barbarous. A moment's reflection will convince anyone that it is impossible to speak without an accent. But people who feel they set the local tone do not consider their own accents to be accents. It is hard to think of a child who is just learning to speak wanting to learn a style of speaking. The style is folded into the activity as it is learned: we think that we have learned to speak a language, not that we have learned a regional dialect. Children in Maine do not think they are learning to speak English with a Yankee accent; they think they are learning to speak English.

Although there are certainly a lot of English accents to be heard, even if we restrict the field to America, only a few people consciously choose theirs. Professional broadcasters, of course, do; sometimes people interested in acting careers do. Many politicians with degrees from prestigious universities have learned to speak with one accent in the capitals where they make laws and policy and quite a different one back home where they campaign for office. Senator Fulbright was a Rhodes scholar with an Oxford education. Before he went to the Senate, he had been the dean of a law school and the president of a university. His background was perfectly congruent with what he sounded like in action as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee conducting hearings on the Vietnam War, but when he campaigned in rural Arkansas, where he got his votes, there was no hint of Oxford, or even Fayetteville. On the stump, he sounded completely down home. After the election, that sound dissipated with every mile he got closer to Washington until he was sworn in for a new term and reassumed both the seat of power and the music of policy.

Senator Fulbright could maintain two dramatically distinct styles of speech in his personal repertory because he was aware of both as styles and consequently did not mistake either of them for just plain English. His awareness of his own styles allowed him to switch back and forth between them and fit them to circumstances. Everyone does this to some extent, but not everyone is aware of doing so. Speakers who are not consciously aware of their

styles run into problems when none of their habitual styles fits a particular circumstance very well. We are trapped by our unconscious styles if we cannot recognize them as styles. When all of our styles are effectively default styles, we choose without knowing we are choosing and so cannot recognize the practical possibility of alternative styles.

People who unconsciously have acquired a full complement of routine conversational styles can deliberately and consciously add a new style of conversation to their collection, a style invented for new purposes and situations, once they have an operating concept of style. A novice receptionist at the headquarters of a large corporation consciously acquires the standard impersonal business style of conversation. The receptionist already possesses an underlying competence in conversation; he consciously acquires a new style meant for a special and unusually well-defined purpose.

Because writing is an activity, it too must be done in a style. But the domain of writing, like the domain of conversation, is enormous, not limited by just a handful of occasions or purposes. Consequently, there are many styles of writing. Common wisdom to the contrary, no one can master *writing* because *writing* is too large to be encompassed. It is not one skill; it is not even a small bundle of routine skills. A single style of writing invented for particular purposes, however, can be like a receptionist's conversation, something small enough to be walked around. It is possible to see where it begins and where it ends, what its purposes and occasions are, and how it selects its themes. These styles of writing can be acquired consciously as styles. Classic style is one of them.

Although nearly anybody who can read a newspaper can write, the styles we acquired unconsciously do not always serve our needs. Most of us have no unconscious writing style available to use when, after becoming engaged in a problem, we have thought it through, reached confident conclusions, and want to make our thought accessible to a permanent but unspecified audience. Even the best educated members of our society commonly lack a routine style for presenting the result of their own engagement with a

tal distortion. In this view, thought precedes writing. All of these assumptions may be wrong, but they help to define a style whose usefulness is manifest.

The attitudes that define classic style—the attitudes that define any style—are a set of enabling conventions. Some of the originators of classic style may have believed its enabling conventions—such as that truth can be known—but writing in this style requires no commitment to a set of beliefs, only a willingness to adopt a role for a limited time and a specific purpose.

The role is severely limited because classic prose is pure, fearless, cool, and relentless. It asks no quarter and gives no quarter to anyone, including the writer. While the role can be necessary, true, and useful, as well as wonderfully thrilling, it can hardly be permanent. For better or worse, human beings are not pure, fearless, cool, or relentless, even if we may find it convenient for certain purposes to pretend that we are. The human condition does not, in general, allow the degree of autonomy and certainty that the classic writer pretends to have. It does not sustain the classic writer's claim to disinterested expression of unconditional truth. It does not allow the writer indefinitely to maintain the posture required by classic style. But classic style simply does not acknowledge the human condition. The insouciance required to ignore what everyone knows and to carry the reader along in this style cannot be maintained very long, and the masters of the style always know its limits. The classic distance is a sprint.

Recognizing Classic Style

Classic style never became the standard for English prose that it has been at various times for French. The most admired prose writers in English have never been as successful in creating any dominant style as the most admired French prose writers of the seventeenth century were in making classic style a cultural norm. The reasons are many and defy simple summary, but they proba-

the practice even among accomplished writers who ought to know better. T. S. Eliot, in observing that English writers at no time looked to a common standard, attributes this fact to what he takes to be an inherent characteristic of the language. "The English language," he pronounces, "is one which offers a wide scope for legitimate divergences of style; it seems to be such that no one age, and certainly no one writer, can establish a norm."

It seems superfluous to argue that classic style does not issue from French or any other language as such. All we have to do is look at its history. French classic style was invented by drawing together and refining attitudes and practices found in antiquity among writers of Greek and Latin, and the invaluable instrument that resulted has long been employed by classic stylists in English, although no English philosopher with the cultural standing of Descartes consistently employs it, nor was there ever such a remarkable group of classic writers in English at any one time as there was in the French *grand siècle*.

Consider, as an example of classic style, the following passage from La Rochefoucauld:

> Madame de Chevreuse had sparkling intelligence, ambition, and beauty in plenty; she was flirtatious, lively, bold, enterprising; she used all her charms to push her projects to success, and she almost always brought disaster to those she encountered on her way.
>
> Mme. de Chevreuse avait beaucoup d'esprit, d'ambition et de beauté; elle était galante, vive, hardie, entreprenante; elle se servait de tous ses charmes pour réussir dans ses desseins, et elle a presque toujours porté malheur aux personnes qu'elle y a engagées.

This passage displays truth according to an order that has nothing to do with the process by which the writer came to know it. The writer takes the pose of full knowledge. This pose implies that the writer has wide and textured experience; otherwise he would not

be able to make such an observation. But none of that personal history, personal experience, or personal psychology enters into the expression. Instead the sentence crystalizes the writer's experience into a timeless and absolute sequence, as if it were a geometric proof. The sentence has a clear direction and a goal. It leads us to that goal, which coincides with its final phrase; it is constructed to telegraph its direction. We know that it will bring us to its goal, and stop cleanly when it has done so.

By contrast, consider the opening sentence of Samuel Johnson's "Preface to Shakespeare," which is a master's recital piece, but is not classic:

> That praises are without reason lavished on the dead, and that the honours due only to excellence are paid to antiquity, is a complaint likely to be always continued by those, who, being able to add nothing to truth, hope for eminence from the heresies of paradox; or those, who, being forced by disappointment upon consolatory expedients, are willing to hope from posterity what the present age refuses, and flatter themselves that the regard which is yet denied by envy, will be at last bestowed by time.

This sentence does not telegraph its structure from the opening. We must follow it through complex and unexpected paths. In La Rochefoucauld's classic sentence, the last section is the conclusion of all that has gone before it; the beginning of the sentence exists for the end, and the sentence is constructed so that we can anticipate arriving at such a conclusion. In Johnson's sentence, by contrast, the final phrase, "flatter themselves that the regard which is yet denied by envy, will be at last bestowed by time," is not a conclusion upon which the rest of the sentence depends. It might have come in the middle of the sentence. The end of the sentence might have been "be always continued by those, who, being able to add nothing to truth, hope for eminence from the heresies of paradox." This does not make the sentence inadequate in any way, but it is characteristically unclassic. The classic sentence, once written,

seems to have been inevitable. It looks as if it could have been written in no other way.

La Rochefoucauld's sentence was of course difficult to write, but it looks easy. The writer hides all the effort. Johnson's sentence was clearly difficult to write, and its writer wants to display it as if it were a trophy won through his personal effort.

La Rochefoucauld's classic sentence pretends that it could be said. It would take a true master of speech to construct such a sentence spontaneously. In fact we sense that the rhythm is too perfect to be spontaneous. Still, it sounds like ideally efficient and precise speech. If angels spoke French, it would sound like this. Johnson's sentence, by contrast, can only be writing that took effort. In its rhythms, we do not hear someone just speaking. One could memorize it and repeat it in speech, but even then it would sound like memorized writing, not like speech. In the theology behind Johnson's sentence, writing is hard and noble, because truth is the reward of effort and cannot be captured in mere human speech. In the theology behind La Rochefoucauld's sentence, writing should look easy even as it looks masterful. Truth is a grace that flees from earnest effort. The language of truth is ideally graceful speech.

La Rochefoucauld's sentence is a prototype of classic style. The conceptual and linguistic environment associated with classic style is extremely rich and complex. No classic text—not even a prototype—incorporates all of it. Any list of criteria would be misconceived: some texts lack central attributes of classic style and yet are obviously classic; other texts are faintly classic throughout; still others have isolated parts that are strongly classic; some texts incorporate only a few elements of classic style; some clearly unclassic texts contain marks of classic style; some texts have the verbal marks of classic style but none of its theology; some texts lie between classic style and another style.

Consider the gradient between plain style and classic style. "The truth is pure and simple" is plain style. "The truth is rarely pure, and never simple" is classic style. The plain version contains

many elements of classic style without being classic; the classic version contains all of the plain version without being plain.

The concept of classic style assumes that plain style already exists. The classic version introduces a refinement, a qualification, a meditation on the plain version that makes it classic. Classic style takes the attitude that it is superior to plain style because classic style presents intelligence as it should be presented: as a sparkling display, not weighed down by grinding earnestness. The classic writer wants to be distinguished from others because he assumes that truth, though potentially available to all, is not the common property of common people, and that it is not to be perceived or expressed through common means unrefined. The classic writer sees common sense as only an approximation which, left untested and unrefined, can turn out to be false. The plain writer wants to be common because he assumes that truth is the common property of common people, directly perceived and expressed through common means. For the plain writer, common sense is truth. Unlike plain style, classic style is aristocratic, which is not to say artificially restricted, since anyone can become an aristocrat by learning classic style. Anyone who wants to can attain classic style, but classic style views itself as an intellectual achievement, not a natural endowment.

There are many features of classic style besides a simple and elegant shape and the introduction of some refinement in the thought. Behind these features is a complicated, polished, and fascinating view of truth and language, writers and readers. The rest of this essay is an attempt to lay out the features of classic style and their underlying conceptual stand.

The Elements of Style

Elementary does not always mean easy. It often means fundamental. Euclid's mathematical classic is called *The Elements of Geometry*. If we ask what Euclid means by "elements," we will discover

others. Oxygen, for example, is central; the unnamed elements that are known to exist but have not been isolated experimentally are peripheral. The physical world, unlike geometry, is not invented. There are a multitude of geometries that derive from a multitude of starting points. There is only one physical world, whose starting point is not a human invention. So while the concept "elemental atom" is fundamental and distinct, the actual table of these elements has slightly fuzzy margins. New elements have been added or created within the past fifty years, but they are all exotic and have little to do with our understanding of the fundamental nature of the chemical world.

The periodic table of chemical elements is implicitly modeled on the alphabet. The chemical elements are a kind of alphabet of the physical world. The Roman alphabet, used to write English and most European languages, is itself a set of elements. With just twenty-six letters, we can write every word in these languages, even words that are obsolete, even tomorrow's words that have not yet been coined. When the letters of this alphabet are arranged on a typewriter keyboard, we can see that while they are not all equally important—we would miss the *z* if it were broken a lot less than the *e*—they exist like Euclid's axioms on the same level of generality; they are all fundamental: no one of them derives from any other. When the original typewriter keyboard became the more complex computer keyboard, it was expanded. It added exotic function keys, all of which are convenient, none of which is elementary in the sense that the letters of the alphabet are elementary. The computer keyboard, like the table of chemical elements, acknowledges in its spatial layout the marginal nature of the exotic additions.

Elements in all of these cases are definite and few and are the starting points of everything in their domain. We should expect the same limits to apply to the elements of prose style. These elements cannot be an indefinite and miscellaneous list of surface features and mechanical rules. The authors of this book think the elements of style legitimately can be expressed as a short series of

other. For Rosen, the first significant examples of the capacity of the classical style to represent dramatic sequence are to be found in the harpsichord sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti. Scarlatti made classical decisions about fundamental questions although he lacked many of the surface features of the style: "the changes of texture in his sonatas are the dramatic events, clearly set off and outlined, that were to become central to the style of the generations that came after him." "Although there is little sign in his works of the classical technique of transition from one kind of rhythm to another, there is already an attempt to make a real dramatic clash in the changes of key. . . ."

In art history as well, there is normally an awareness that style follows from fundamental decisions rather than surface features. Emile Mâle, in his analysis of the iconographic sources of religious art in Western Europe, for example, notes that theologians of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries share a conception of the world as a "vast symbol." But while this theological concept of the world as an integrated symbolic form is the source of the stylistic decisions of the thirteenth century, it has no such role in the style of religious art of the fifteenth century. In Mâle's words, "A profound symbolism had governed the arrangement of the sculptured figures on the portals of . . . thirteenth-century churches," so that "the statues of Chartres formed a perfectly coherent system of ideas."

By contrast, the fifteenth-century façade of Saint-Vulfran at Abbéville, which Mâle describes as magnificent and compares for its beauty and the richness of its decoration to the great achievements of the thirteenth century, is stylistically a world away from the thirteenth-century conception of a church as a learned encyclopedia. The style of the sculptural program of Saint-Vulfran is not informed by any such governing plan because, in common with the other great achievements in religious art of its century, it does not derive from a symbolic conception of the universe. The symbolism of the thirteenth century that was the foundation of a

style of iconography has yielded to a less learned, less literary style of iconography in the fifteenth. Sentiment and emotion have replaced symbol and encyclopedic organization.

The thesis that a style follows from a set of fundamental decisions and not from a catalogue of surface features is far less common in books about style in writing. Almost every book about writing contains the word "style" in its title or as a significant section heading, and many magazines and journals include a style sheet defining their house style. Let us consider a selection of these: *The Chicago Manual of Style*, *The MLA Style Manual*, the final section ("Style") of the *Harvest Reader*, chapter 6 ("Style") of Kate Turabian's *Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, and Joseph M. Williams's summary of his collaboration with Gregory Colomb, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*.

The word "style" does not mean the same thing to the writers of these guides, textbooks, and manuals. In *The Chicago Manual of Style*, "style" refers to those arbitrary decisions that must be made for consistency's sake in copytext, but have no consequence for intellectual content or conceptual organization. For example, with respect to intellectual content or conceptual organization, it makes no difference how a date is written—"March 24, 1954" or "24 March 1954"—but it is desirable that dates be written in a consistent manner throughout a text, and *The Chicago Manual of Style* gives a standard, arbitrary way to achieve consistency. "Style" here means necessary but arbitrary decisions about surface features of copytext.

Joseph Williams's *Style*, by contrast, views surface features of copytext as peripheral to its project, which is to explain how to revise "pointed" prose so that it can be easily parsed.

Yet all six of our selections, which stand for an indefinite number of others, characterize "style" as something external to the core decisions that define style in the sense that Rosen and Mâle have discussed it.

The MLA Style Manual is just a shorter and arbitrarily different version of *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Kate Turabian offers rules—many of them "adapted from *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 13th edition"—suitable for term papers. The final section ("Style") in *The Harvest Reader* implies that style is a decorative element that comes after all the serious work has been completed, like paint on a house.

Even Strunk and White's famous textbook, *The Elements of Style*—whose title might lead you to expect a writer's equivalent to Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*—treats style as composed of distinguishing surface marks. If you open Euclid's *Elements* to the first page, you see a few fundamental definitions and axioms. If you open Strunk and White's *Elements* to the first page, you see:

> 1. Form the possessive singular of nouns by adding 's.
>
> Follow this rule whatever the final consonant. Thus write,
>
> Charles's friend
> Burns's poems
> the witch's malice.
>
> Exceptions are the possessives of ancient proper names in *-es* and *-is*, the possessive *Jesus'*, and such forms as *for conscience' sake, for righteousness' sake.*

If you look at chapter 5, "An Approach to Style," where the authors propose to treat "style in its broader meaning," you will find a discussion not of core decisions but rather of "what is distinguished and distinguishing" about the surface of language: "When we speak of Fitzgerald's style, . . . we mean the sound his words make on paper."

In Strunk and White, all style is finally said to be a "high mystery" because it cannot be learned from a catalogue of the only elements of style that they consider, the surface elements. "Who knows why certain notes in music are capable of stirring the listener deeply, though the same notes slightly rearranged are impotent?" Charles Rosen, working from the core decisions that define

a musical style, rather than from individual notes, sees an intelligible historical process instead of high mystery.

Joseph Williams's book, *Style*, is completely free of high mystery and intelligently suspicious of rules of usage. Even his final chapter, "Usage," which treats basic rules, regards points of usage as peripheral to writing. *Style* is entirely invulnerable to any accusation that it offers a mechanical approach to *writing* since it is quite explicit that it is not a guide to writing at all but rather a guide to solving a problem in writing: if the writer has finished the intellectual work of writing and has written a draft, but finds that his text frustrates his reader's attempt to understand it, then *Style* will show the writer ways to change the structure of expression so as to accommodate the reader's routines. To this extent, Williams's approach to style is distinguished from that of everyone else on our list. His book is not meant as a guide to arbitrary conventions or matters of taste, but rather as a model of how people read what Williams calls "pointed discourse"—which includes arguments, instructions, memos, and so on. Knowing this model allows a writer to shape his discourse to fit the expectations of his readers. Williams's book is effective and helpful as a guide to higher mechanics. But it presents itself as concerned with revision—an activity independent of decisions on the fundamental questions of truth, language, reader, and writer. In this way, Williams inadvertently and inevitably presents himself as describing *style*, rather than *a style*. There is a consistent set of decisions on fundamental matters lying behind the style Williams treats, but he does not acknowledge them or acknowledge that there are alternatives.

For every item on our list that treats prose style, there is an assumption made at the beginning that is linked to a mistake that comes at the end. If you start off with the view of style as a list of surface mechanical elements at any level, then you can end up with the correct list and present it as constituting *style*, rather than *a style*.

In music and in painting, different fundamental decisions define different styles. In geometry or logic, different fundamental axi-

attitudes that define the style, as well as the style itself, widely plausible and attractive. Although classic style does not itself depend upon specifically Cartesian assumptions or conclusions, some of Descartes's characteristic attitudes and emphases are fundamental to the style. Not least among these attitudes is Descartes's conception of his audience's access to truth. In his view, the most important issues in philosophy are of general human concern and can be understood by non-specialist readers. One expression of this attitude is the very fact that Descartes's most famous book, usually called (misleadingly) in English *Discourse on Method* (1637) is written in French, not in Latin, the conventional language of advanced study and erudition at the time.

A philosophic treatise called *Discourse on Method* might lead its reader to expect an abstract discussion about method in general rather than a book about a particular method for doing one thing. Descartes was not, however, interested in discussing method in general, and his original title, while long, was not misleading: *Discourse on the Method of rightly directing one's Reason and of seeking Truth in the Sciences*. There is a remarkable and attractive freshness to this book, which in little more than fifty pages of disarming narrative offers a method for separating a few certain truths from the morass of uncertain opinions and simple prejudices that everyone manages unconsciously to acquire. He presents his subject according to the order of reason, represented—not coincidentally, for the supremely rational classic mind—as identical to the order of discovery. Assimilating intellectual experience to the order of reason is a matter of course in classic style.

Descartes's little book is among the most accessible of recognized philosophic classics in the Western tradition. It is not a book by an erudite addressed to other erudites. Descartes explicitly devalues erudition. His thesis is that everybody has what is essential for identifying truth—natural reason—whether or not that person has any special educational formation. Failure to identify truth comes either from directing natural reason to the wrong objects—


image
not
available

To see how this attitude about verification applies in practice, suppose someone wants to know the color of a house two blocks away. The competence needed to check and report back is so widespread that we might think it pedantic to object to the claim that "anyone" could do it. Let us leave to the fine print all the qualifications: anyone old enough to know his colors, anyone with normal vision, anyone we can trust not to lie, anyone with a normal memory, anyone who will not just wander off after he has checked the house, and so on. If the information needed includes the street address, the pool of people competent to check it is slightly smaller, but as in the case of checking the color, it seems to be possible to ascertain the address with certainty, and again, anyone who knows a simple convention can just look at the numbers attached to the house and report back. Almost anyone whose eyes are pointed in the right direction can certainly get it right. Let us consider a few other bits of information that can be treated as routine to the point of being universally accessible and certain even though each one actually requires a slightly more specific competence based on a human convention that must be learned. Finding a bibliographic citation is like checking a special kind of address: anyone who knows how to use a library and knows the conventional form of a bibliographic entry can just look it up. Finding the citation for a painting in a museum is slightly more specialized, but like the previous examples, it is something that anyone who knows a few simple conventions can certainly look up and get straight. None of these tasks involves argument or reasoning, although they each require something more than a universally shared natural endowment. It seems plausible that the correct color, the correct address, the correct bibliographic citation, the correct catalogue number for a painting can certainly be known by just about anyone in a particular culture over the age of about ten who happens to be standing in the right place.

It is common enough to simplify matters and treat these bits of knowledge as if they were certainties equally accessible to anyone. Classic style expands the domain of truth to include anything that

might require not merely the knowledge of a convention but even the ability to make a judgment.

In classic style, opinions stated clearly and distinctly are treated as if they can be verified by simple observation. The writer does not typically attempt to persuade by argument. The writer merely puts the reader in a position to see whatever is being presented and suggests that the reader will be able to verify it because the style treats whatever conventions or even prejudices it operates from as if these were, like natural reason, shared by everyone. It is a style of disguised assertion. A. J. Liebling writes, "The prize fighter is as reluctant as the next artist to recognize his disintegration." What is at stake here includes the claim that boxing is an art. The point is not argued or even asserted. It is referred to as if it were a fact that the reader, because he shares the competence that Liebling himself has, will recognize as true once it is presented. And that competence itself, Liebling implies, is a convention. The list of the arts, as we all know, includes music, painting, ballet, boxing.

If a writer in this style wants his readers to think that a certain restaurant has a great cellar, a certain book is beautifully written, or a certain time and place attained the summits of civilization, these complex matters of judgment, open to endless qualification and debate, are presented as if they were as obvious as the Library of Congress call number for the first edition of *War and Peace* in the Maude translation, and as easy to check as that number is for somebody who happens to be in the Library of Congress. The classic writer prototypically neither argues nor asserts what is true because it is part of the definition of the style that anybody in a position to see truth can recognize it for herself.

Truth Can Be Known

There is probably nothing more fundamental to the attitude that defines classic style than the enabling convention that truth can be known. People tend to deceive themselves; they want to make exceptions for reasons of sentimentality or friendship, vanity or interest. They want to avoid knowing truth when truth is pain-

ful, to distort truth when truth is inconvenient. But there is no doubt, in the classic attitude, that truth can be known. Knowing truth is as much a part of the equipment of a classic writer as knowing how to play the violin is part of the equipment of a concert violinist. Is it possible to play the violin? Can that question occur to a concert violinist? Could there be such a thing as a concert violinist if it were not possible to play the violin? Could there be such a thing as a classic writer if it were not possible to know truth?

Truth Is Not Contingent

The concept of truth that grounds classic style does not depend on what might be called "point of view" or "angle of vision." The truth of things can be perceived by attentive people of any age or condition. Human experience reveals the same conflicts, the same needs and desires, the same weaknesses and virtues. To pay close attention to personal experience is to see through it to truths that run through all such experience.

Thucydides, writing in Greece in the fifth century B.C., assumes that anything true he says about human conflicts and human institutions in *The Peloponnesian War* will be verified by the sense of recognition he will elicit from readers who will live through other wars in other times or other places because what is thoroughly local is thoroughly universal, if properly perceived. As Thucydides himself puts it, he seeks "an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it."

An experience that is uniquely personal and must therefore be accepted on faith is not a suitable subject for classic style. The reader cannot verify it from his own experience and cannot even check it against earlier testimonies of experience, such as Thucydides'. In the classic view, what cannot be universally verified cannot be true.

The classic attitude is thus both foundationalist and universalist—local events, properly observed, will always disclose universal

truths as their foundations. This is an enabling convention. Just as the enabling convention "truth can be known" contradicts the view of the radical skeptic, so the enabling convention "truth is eternal" contradicts the views of the romantic, the relativist, and the ironist for whom truth is contingent. Classic style assumes that truths exist prior to an individual's experience but that knowledge of what is true is achieved through individual experience. Universal truths are eternal and will always be verified by any normal experience. They are eternal in two senses: they are discovered, not created, and future experience will always corroborate past testimony. An individual discovers hypocrisy through his experience, but hypocrisy well observed and well described in one time and place will be recognized across cultures and across centuries, since to observe well and describe well in classic style is always to transcend contingent situations. Circumstances change; truth abides.

Truth Is Pure

Truth, in the classic attitude, is a standard for measuring human virtue. As such, it demonstrates an eternal human deficiency, since human virtue exists only in particular human actions, and human actions inevitably involve complex motives, contradictory emotions, and distracting sensations. These things are murky and fluid; they induce moral vertigo in all normal people. The resulting confusion can be temporarily and unsatisfactorily stabilized by deception, irony, and pretense. It can never be escaped.

Truth, on the other hand, has no feelings, no emotions, no motives. It exists always without seeking for anything. It is complete in a way that no person ever is. People feel their inadequacies and desires; they have ambitions. Their hungers cannot be permanently satisfied, merely temporarily assuaged. Truth, eternal and immutable, always remains available to the disciplined writer as a model and a standard, but classic prose is a refinement of human experience. It is what can be known; it is not what can be lived.

Alone with a piece of paper, a writer can submit to the discipline of classic style, prune away ambition and pretense, and

One consequence of this attitude for classic prose is that the aphoristic quality of classic prose concerns observation ("No one is ever so happy or unhappy as he thinks"), not morality ("Those who live in glass houses should not throw stones"), or behavior ("Look before you leap"), although it tacitly conveys its expectations about both. The classic writer presents himself not as a guide to morals or behavior, but as an observer of truth.

Even when the classic writer's motive is persuasion, he is reluctant to admit it overtly, and even when he admits it, he does so conditionally, noting that persuasion can never take priority over the abiding motive of presenting truth. Local or practical motives are always constrained to respect this governing motive.

The classic writer presents truth, and typically takes the position that of course the reader will recognize truth. The classic writer rarely writes as if he is pressing claims and presenting arguments, but rather pretends that he is presenting subjects and conducting analyses. When, on rare occasions, the classic writer adopts the stance that the reader will not believe what is being presented, he never concedes that the reader's disposition should influence what he says. A writer who wishes to persuade is constrained from ever telling the audience something it is unwilling to believe, and this is a compromise unacceptable in the classic attitude. The classic attitude compels writers, in extreme cases, to express truth and leave the audience to its folly. In that case—as always—the writer's explicit motive is not hope of persuasion but rather respect for truth. It is the choice Socrates makes in the *Apology*.

PRESENTATION

Prose Is a Window

In the classic attitude, writing serves to present something else: its subject. The subject is conceived of as a "thing" distinct from the writing, something that exists in the world and is independent of any presentation. Clarity is the central virtue of classic prose because the classic writer's defining task is to present something he

Contrast Jefferson's style with that of Jeremy Bentham on the fallacy of begging the question:

> Having, without the form, the force of an assumption—and having for its object, and but too commonly for its effect, a like assumption on the part of the hearer or reader,—the sort of allegation in question, how ill-grounded soever, is, when thus masked, apt to be more persuasive than when expressed simply and in its own proper form: especially where, to the character of a censorial adding the quality and tendency of an impassioned allegation, it tends to propagate, as it were by contagion, the passion by which it was suggested.

Bentham is talking about a fallacy here; he has no reason to want to place his own writing in the foreground, but whatever he may be saying about begging the question, what is likely to make the strongest impression on anybody who reads him is his manner of presentation. It is as if we expect to find a window and encounter a fun-house mirror. Bentham's sentence can be puzzled out. We can determine what he means to say. We could rewrite it in classic style. But classic prose never has to be puzzled out. We never have to re-work the expression in order to see what it means to present.

Classic Prose Is Perfect Performance

When a jazz master improvises, perhaps the most impressive aspect of the performance is its appearance of impromptu perfection. Although improvised, the performance has no mistake, false step, or deficiency. It looks inevitable, as if it could have been done in no other way, as if every stage were known to the performer from the beginning.

Paradoxically, we know that if the same jazz master performed the improvisation again, it would be entirely different, but it would still appear as if it could have been done in no other way, as if it were inevitable.

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