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Introduction

The Domain of Style

FOR ALL OUR TALKING about how we write prose – and we talk about it a lot – surprisingly little descriptive analysis goes on. Basic rhetorical analysis used to be a high school subject in nineteenth-century America, and for much of Europe’s history it was an elementary subject as well. Now even graduate students can scarcely handle ordinary terms like ‘periodic sentence’ or ‘hypotaxis and parataxis.’ As a result, when we talk about prose style we often really don’t know what we are talking about. We are simply not trained to look at the words on the page.

The reasons for this failure go deep into Western attitudes toward language. We have always thought – De Tocqueville noted it with disquiet – that only ideas matter, not the words that convey them. Words linger in the air only as a temporary contrivance for transferring ideas from mind to mind. To look *at* them, rather than *through* them to the ideas beneath, is to indulge ourselves in harmless antiquarian diddling or, still worse, to treat ordinary language like poetry. Today especially, when so many larger issues, social, economic, technological, and political, surround the national – indeed world – revolution in communications, it seems almost atavistic to worry about the basic rhetorical patterns, with their overlapping circular definitions and off-putting Greek and Latin nomenclature. Since this traditional kind of analysis is both so old and so old-fashioned, it requires for a modern audience some explanation and justification. The last two chapters of the book supply both in detail. Perhaps, though, it might help to set forth those concluding arguments briefly here, to chart for the reader the boundary conditions of prose analysis.

Let’s begin by considering what we usually think prose style is all about. We may call this conception, building on its three central values of Clarity, Brevity, and Sincerity, the ‘C-B-S’ theory of prose. The C-B-S theory argues that prose ought to be maximally transparent and minimally self-conscious, never seen and never noticed. Analysis works against both these virtues. It makes us look *at* words and not *through* them. Analysis, in fact, can logically deal only with what can be seen, what is, or is made, self-conscious; such elements, in the C-B-S view, again logically, can be only mistakes. ‘Rhetoric’ in such a view very

naturally becomes a dirty word, pointing to superficial ornament on the one hand and moral duplicity on the other. It becomes, that is, everything which interferes with the natural and efficient communication of ideas. 'Rhetoric' is what we should get rid of in prose, not what we should analyze.

However can we justify rhetorical analysis, then? Well, we might begin by pointing out the problems and confusions implicit in the C-B-S theory. The three basic terms, for example, though difficult to confute in the abstract, prove marvelously unhelpful when you come to actually write something. There are so many ways of being clear! So many different audiences to be clear to! When I tell you to 'Be clear' I am simply telling you to 'Succeed,' 'Get the message across.' Again, good advice but not much real help. I have not solved your problem, I've simply restated it. 'Clarity,' in such a formulation, refers not to words on a page but to responses, yours or your reader's. And the writer has to write words on a page, not ideas in a mind.

So too with 'brevity.' How brief? Well, as brief as possible but not so brief that the message doesn't get across. But messages vary so. 'Beat it!' is short enough but very long when you reckon in the attitude that comes with it. 'Right. I'll be right there. Just give me five minutes more on this, could you?' is much longer, but not longer than its very different attitude requires. Brevity, then, depends on the message; and that home truth, as with clarity, restates the problem rather than solving it.

How about 'sincerity?' If I tell a student always to be sincere in writing a paper and that student submits a paper telling me how stupid she thinks the assignment is, I'm likely to rejoin, 'Well, not *that* sincere! I meant sincere within limits.' Of course. But what are the limits? The problem is finding the right kind of sincerity. Once again, we return to the writer's problem, not its solution.

The C-B-S theory of prose style seems not only unhelpful but a violation of our common sense. Suppose we really behaved according to these tenets, said exactly what we thought to everyone, with no sugar on top, always showed exactly what our feelings were? We would not last long in society; in fact we'd probably be locked up. 'To be social,' Robert Frost reminds us, 'is to be forgiving,' and in a rigorous application of the C-B-S theory there is precious little forgiveness. There are times in life when one must be absolutely clear, brief and sincere, but not many; the whole of civility lies in learning how few they be. 'We do not,' the actress Sarah Churchill once said, 'owe the whole truth to everybody.'

The C-B-S theory violates not only our common sense about human behavior but much that we have learned about behavior in a more formal way in the last century. Sincerity as a central evaluative term implies that there is a central self to be sincere to, a 'real me' halfway between the ears. Yet social psychologists since George Herbert Mead have argued that we do not inherit a central self at birth, but build one up by degrees, through incessant practice of social roles. Even the most integrated of us holds not one self but many; every day we must 'get our act together.' As my friend the film director Alex Singer

said to me recently, 'We wake up every morning and send our selves to a casting session, to see who will get the part today.' And so when we are told to 'Be sincere,' which self must we be sincere to?

'Clarity,' too, as an all-purpose touchstone, seems to be contradicted by what we now know about human perception. We perceive the world actively and recreatively; we don't just register a world already 'out there.' To perceive the world is also to compose it, to make sense of it. The mind, to use the philosopher Karl Popper's revealing terms, acts like a 'searchlight,' not a 'bucket.' The reality we are being 'clear' about dwells within us as well as 'out there.' The 'successful communication' that 'clarity' points to is finally our success in getting someone else to share our view of the world, a view we have composed by perceiving it. And if this is true of perception it must hold true for prose too. To write is to *compose* a world as well as *view* one. Prose can never be purely transparent because there is no purely self-subsisting model out there to be transparent to.

'Brevity,' also, contradicts fundamentally a basic theme in modern thought, the socially cohesive function of language. We don't communicate through simple gestures and monosyllabic grunts, because when we talk we are communicating attitudes as well as facts, redefining and reaffirming our social relationships as we go about our daily business. We make, through language, such reaffirmation part of our daily business. Brevity, in most human communication, remains a variable governed by social relationships as much as by factual baggage. One is 'brief' in all kinds of ways, and Polonius's objection, 'This is too long,' always means 'Too long for this person, place, and time.' Language always carries an enormous amount of contextual information, information about human relationships, about, as Gregory Bateson has put it, 'What kind of a message a message is.' 'Brevity,' applied in a simple-minded way, ignores this information and thus dehumanizes human communication.

Then, too, the C-B-S theory seems to contradict all that we say is good in literature and so runs an enormous rift between 'literature' on the one hand and 'ordinary prose' on the other. This gap is sometimes described as between 'prose' on the one side and 'poetry' on the other. Prose must be entirely transparent, poetry entirely opaque. Prose must be minimally self-conscious, poetry the reverse. Prose talks of facts, of the world; poetry of feelings, of ourselves. Poetry must be savored, prose speed-read out of existence. This dichotomy proves very confusing. How can the same verbal patterns and attributes be good in poetry and bad in prose? Do these two kinds of languages point to two completely different kinds of human behavior? Students especially are bewildered by this distinction. 'How can Shakespeare get away with what I get pummeled for in English 1? What gives?' One of the main strands in modern thinking about ordinary language is its essential 'poeticity,' the complex, layered series of messages that it carries in a single set of words. Our C-B-S pattern of thinking must ignore all this.

Perhaps the most drastic limitation of C-B-S thinking as a general theory of prose expression stems from its limited range. The history of prose style shows clarity, brevity and sincerity to be not only rare *attainments* but even rarer *goals*. People want to do all kinds of other things through their prose – show off, fool you, fool themselves, run through all the feints and jabs of human sociality. If we push C-B-S thinking to its logical conclusion – and we seldom do – all this complex purpose must be classified as a gigantic mistake.¹

No wonder we are confused fundamentally by how we are taught to write. We are taught the C-B-S theory for our own writing. Yet when we come to study literature, which a rigorous C-B-S theory would have to revise out of existence, we are taught an opposite theory. And neither theory is brought into consonance with the commonsense rules of ordinary social life. How much easier chemistry and physics seem. There you really have a textbook, an argument from first principles, a periodic table of the elements, basic rules for matter. In the higher reaches, these principles may bend a little but at least they exist to start with. A beginner knows where to begin. How different with the teaching of writing. An apprentice writer is given a body of theory, assumed to be a set of first principles but not taught as such; a body of theory riddled with contradictions which she is forbidden to point out; a body of thinking manifestly inadequate to all that she will learn about human behavior in every other course in the curriculum; a body of theory which, if actually carried out either in the classroom or in ordinary life, would destroy human sociality. (Imagine, just one day in which you said exactly what you thought to everyone.) No wonder students, and corporations and governments too, hunger for simplistic rules, numerical readability formulas.

The C-B-S theory often does work, of course. We do live in an age of 'Official Style' jargons and very often you need to translate them into transparent plain English. You can even do the translating in a formulaic, rule-based way.² Living in an age conditioned by copiers and high-speed printers, we must develop speed-reading techniques. Much verbal jungle-clearing must be done; the practical purposes of the world demand it.

Yet it is in these practical purposes that the limitations of the C-B-S theory really lurk. An ideal of silent and transparent prose assumes that we are basically creatures of practical purpose, that we build houses to get out of the rain, wear clothes to keep warm, buy a new car to get to Cucamonga and back. But are we really such purposive creatures? What do we do to our houses? Live in them in quiet content or spend years of weekends fixing them up? How do we pick our clothes? Buy the first thing that fits, or spend hours pursuing something that seems really 'us'? And what about cars? The automobile industry represents surely the most practical, purposive, bottom-line part of America. The modern American economy was built on it. And yet do we cherish a C-B-S attitude

1 I have dealt with these questions at greater length in *Style: An Anti-Textbook* (Yale University Press, 1974).

2 I have done this in my *Revising Prose* textbooks.

toward the automobile, ask it only for transport? Henry Ford thought so and produced both the Model T and the Model A with the same no-frills, basic transportation, any-color-so-long-as-it's-black philosophy. He sold a lot of cars when it was a 'T' or nothing at all, but what did people do once they got the car home? They started playing around with it, souping it up, 'personalizing' it. They started making it something beyond basic transportation, and thus began the great after-market car accessories industry. Meanwhile, Alfred Sloan at General Motors went the other way. He arranged all the cars GM produced into an orderly and multicolored social hierarchy, with Cadillac at the top and Chevy at the bottom. He sold status first and transportation second. And GM nearly put Ford out of business. People took black only when that was the only color they could get. The automotive industry, the great monument to the primacy of practical purpose, turns out to be driven by other motives as well, by social competition on the one hand and pure decorative play on the other. When it comes down to a test, practicality usually proves the weakest of the three.

We all share this simplistic view of human motive. Don't we like to think of ourselves as basically commonsensical and purposive creatures? Other people, of course, spend their whole lives keeping up with the Joneses or strutting around like peacocks. Such people need satirists like Thorstein Veblen, with their incessant mocking of status games and ornamental play, to straighten them out. But not us.

It is easy to see why we like to delude ourselves in this way. To think of ourselves as essentially purposive creatures is to flatter ourselves with a self which is independent, if not of external circumstance, then at least of our fellow men. We are intensely status-conscious creatures, condemned to a lifetime of striving for position. This means that we live inevitably in other people's minds. Every statement that we make is, at some remove, a statement about human relationship, about relative standing.

We are also creatures who enter the world with a fearsome load of leftover evolutionary baggage. Things are always popping up that we just 'feel like doing,' and will do whether we have a 'reason' to do them, whether it 'makes sense' to do them, or not. When we're young we play at these things and when we're older we play them out for real. The pioneering student of animal behavior Konrad Lorenz christened this kind of behavior 'vacuum behavior' because it would happen even in a behavioral vacuum. A response wanted to happen so badly it hardly needed a stimulus; a young man is out 'looking for trouble'; a young woman 'in love with love' needs only someone to fasten it on. In verbal behavior, these play impulses manifest themselves very early on. The infant likes to babble in rhythm, the young child likes to repeat words endlessly, turning them around and around, playing with them like a new toy. And as we get older the pleasures of rhyme, pun, balance, climax come into their own, as well as the love of verbal shapes for their own sake.

When we want to deprecate these two kinds of behavior, competition and vacuum behavior, game and play, as motives for writing, or as ingredients in

verbal style, we use the same word for both – ‘rhetoric.’ ‘Rhetoric’ is everything in a message which aims not to deliver neutral information but to stimulate action. And rhetoric comprehends the whole domain of ornament, of verbal play, that impulse which always seems to move in on purposive communication like an ornamental border gradually taking over the page in a medieval manuscript.

‘Rhetoric’ was not always, we should remember, a dirty word. Its bad press really comes from what we might call the ‘Newtonian Interlude’ in Western history, the period from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries when the world was clearly ‘out there’ and all of us clearly ‘in here’ and the relationship between the two was more a neutral exchange of information than an explosive family reunion. The Newtonian Interlude has now become a thing of the past everywhere except in our thinking about prose composition. Evolutionary biology, from its microfocus in the discovery of DNA to its macrofocus in the controversial hypotheses of behavioral biology, seeks to acknowledge and explain our evolutionary inheritance, to welcome game and play into the legitimate domain of human motivations. Psychology depicts an interactive perceiver, literary criticism a participatory reader who both plays with and competes with the text he reads. Historians sometimes view themselves as imaginers of history who by their very historical vision color what counts as a ‘fact’ and what not. Some sociologists and anthropologists have begun to think society a dramatic text with a recognizable repertoire of social roles.

If we are to judge by the textbooks, however, teachers of writing still cling to a ‘Newtonian’ idea of verbal behavior, to the C-B-S theory of style. Still more is this true of the columnists who write about writing in the newspapers. And this in spite of the manifest self-contradictions of C-B-S thinking and its manifest discontinuities with the other disciplines of behavioral inquiry. Partly this is so because it is partly true, as we’ve seen. But much more we persist because the practical-purpose view of behavior flatters us so, allays our ontological insecurities, our worries about the stability of the self, makes us into simpler and more straightforward creatures than we are. And also because it encourages action. Self-consciousness can be paralytic, as Hamlet found out; we fear to risk this. Thinking is hard enough as it is. To orchestrate it with other and conflicting motives can – and in the much-discussed ‘writer’s block’ often does – lead to fearful paralysis.

But if we allow the full tripartite range of human motive, play and competition as well as purpose, to enter the domain of verbal style, some extraordinary revelations occur. No longer, for a start, must we repudiate nine-tenths of what we seek to explain. The playfulness of Dada’s typographical experiments can take their place beside the legendary transparency of Dryden’s prose; Kenneth Burke’s doodling ‘Flowerishes’ can take their place within the legitimate range of stylistic motivation along with manifest attempts to persuade, like Churchill’s speeches or *Variety*’s invidious listings of movie grosses in Chicago. The whole range of prose behavior for the first time makes sense.

And so do the literature/non-literature and prose/poetry splits, both being now part of one spectrum of verbal experience which allows all three motives in an infinite variety of mixtures. Poetry and prose do differ, as we’ll see, but not in a fundamental, dichotomous way. And with the poetry/prose distinction clear in our minds, we can see that other fearsome dichotomy – style/content – a little more clearly as well. ‘Style’ usually means the game-and-play part of the message, but sometimes the competitive or the playful part of the message really is the message and so style becomes content. Nothing especially ‘decadent’ or even puzzling about this. It happens all the time.

We can begin to see the pedagogy of writing in a new light, too. First, the great problem of motivating students: the C-B-S way of thinking puts both teacher and student in a dreadful bind. School is by its nature both a competition and a playground. It is games and play that socialize all of us when we are students, teach us to create and tolerate a society. If these kinds of motive are outlawed for the teaching of writing, not much is left for the composition course, since it has by its nature no ‘content’ or ‘message’ of its own. If we think of journal-writing, for example, as a ‘sincere’ expression of self, we blind ourselves to its true function as a way to release the kinds of ‘selves’ the student is currently learning to play and hence to be. When a teacher asks for a ‘sincere’ style from students – and then gives them a good grade for it – the students find themselves in a double bind: they must try to ‘be sincere’ in the way that they think the teacher wants them to be. As the great English comedy team of Flanders and Swann recommended, ‘Always be sincere – whether you mean it or not.’

Most high school and beginning university students are adolescents and it is during adolescence that the motives of game and play predominate. Outlaw them and the whole proceeding assumes an abiding air of flattery and falseness that is always felt if seldom understood. The pedagogy suggested by a full mixture of motive is both easier to understand and more at peace with itself. Purpose enters through studying the forms of expository discourse; persuasion enters as a systematic analysis of our evolutionary baggage, of the actions that ‘want to happen’ and how written and spoken language release these and use their force.

Nor is this mixture of motives restricted to the years of schooling. It runs throughout life, and hence throughout the writing we do in that life. As with life, so with words. Nothing has done more to confuse business writing, for example, than the simple-minded model of motive within which it takes place. Messages are neutral packets of information which we hand over, as disinterested gifts, to one another. Alas, in human life information does not behave as simply as bits in an electronic stream. In human life, information flow is far more like an electric current running from one landmine to another. Explosions are the norm.

Now we can see why we feel prose composition so important an activity. We need to communicate information efficiently, for certain. But if this is all we try to do, we won’t do even this. If we simplify human motive into naive purpose, if we ignore game and play, they will come back to haunt us. If, like Henry Ford,

we offer any color so long as it is black, we'll find our customers fleeing to a foreseeable fuchsia with General Motors. To think of prose only within the C-B-S framework encourages a simplistic practicality which can have disastrous results in the practical world. What proves to be really practical in the practical real world is a full and shrewd conception of why people behave as they do. Whether you are trying to sell them an automobile or get them to save electricity, you'll find that appeals to plain purpose seldom do the trick. The really persuasive people have an instinctive grasp of the radical diversity of human motives, of the ever-changing mixture of purpose, game and play. It is precisely this mixture that prose style in its fullness always expresses, and that prose analysis can teach. That is why we think the teaching of writing to be so centrally important: important – though we're hard put to say why – far beyond the needs of practical purpose.

And so we can see why prose analysis is worth bothering about. Prose style models human motive. Every statement about style makes, if we know how to interpret it, a statement about behavior. Style does not provide a peripheral cosmetic accompaniment to the exposition of self-standing ideas but choreographs the whole dance of human consciousness, a dance in which practical purpose and information play but one role. The real practicality in prose analysis lies in the intuitive grasp of motive which analysis can impart to us. Analysis can teach us what *kind* of message a message is. This knowledge proves to be the most practical knowledge of all. It is what every employer looks for in general managers and long-range planners and senior executives. It is the stuff of which great politicians are made. On a less exalted level it provides the 'sense' in common sense.

'Clarity,' we found, really meant only 'success' in communication; this success almost always means a successful mixture of motives rather than a purity of purpose. When we analyze prose we are really trying to factor out the causes of this success we call 'clarity,' to see how motives have been harmoniously mixed for a particular purpose. And, when you think of it, is this not what we say a 'liberal education' as a whole ought to bestow on us? A sense of how to hold and use what we have learned, a skill for 'clarity' in the higher sense of the word? 'Wisdom,' the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said, 'is the way knowledge is held.' The difference between the C-B-S theory of style and the larger mixed-motive one I've been describing, the one which is presented in *Analyzing Prose*, is really the difference between being well informed and being wise – knowing *how* to use information, knowing *what kind of message* a message is. The study of prose style then, properly conceived, shows us what is most centrally 'humanistic' about the humanities, what is truly 'liberal' in a liberal education.

If this is true, we can perhaps begin to glimpse how instruction in writing fits into the larger curriculum of human education. It is not simply that to read and write about complex subjects you must know how to read and write. Without the judgment of motive that stylistic analysis can bestow, none of us can know how to put together the various subjects of whatever curriculum we are currently working within, whatever worlds of effort we are currently passing through.

Devising an ideal curriculum, and an ideal society based upon it, has been the great humanist pastime for two and a half millennia, but all these ideal designs have been patterns designed from the outside in, a series of disciplines, courses, laws, that must be passed through in a specific order to produce – well, to produce what? Finally, just the intuitive sense of human motive we have been discussing. It has always been difficult – and today it seems impossible – to fit students of any age into the constraints of a rigid external curricular pattern. Education, through agencies like the Internet, is becoming truly lifelong, and such continuing yet ever-changing educational patterns soon chafe under a rigid external carapace. The study of prose style provides the same kind of coherence, but *from the inside*. It provides the students with a gyroscope, a compass, a map of human motive, rather than a totally planned guided tour.

This gyroscope acts as an internal as well as an external guide. Learning to write is like growing up. You model a dozen styles before you find, or make up, one that suits you. Acts of analysis, of self-introspection, alternate with acts of creation. We alternately cherish our self-consciousness and rush to abandon it. This kind of oscillation hardly seems to come naturally to us, either in behavior or in its verbal analysis. We have to contrive, through religion or psychiatry or a fraternity party, both our times of introspection and our times of self-abandon. And likewise with how we write. The most difficult trick of all is to learn when to invoke the analytical powers and when to forget them, when to polish and when to write, as Terry Southern put it, 'right out of the old guts onto the goddam paper.' Writers get blocked for all kinds of reasons, but the root problem remains the same as on the larger stage of life. The selective pattern of remembering rules and forgetting them, of self-consciousness and spontaneity, does not come naturally. We have to work at it, to remind ourselves that life is neither all creation nor all revision, that it inevitably happens event by event, draft by draft.

But if this life-giving diastole and systole is to occur, both stages of the process must be in robust health. We must know how to assemble and how to take apart. These are not the same activities, though as necessary to one another as breathing out and breathing in. They probably are not even conducted by the same part of the brain. Historically, Western thinking about language and language instruction has stressed analysis far more than creation, bowed briefly to invention and then spent hundreds of pages analyzing the figures of speech. And more often than not, the rhetoricians simply assumed that what you could analyze you could create, that taking apart was the same kind of activity as putting together. We now know this is not true, and Western thinking has, since the Romantic period, steadily stressed creation instead of analysis. This stress has gone so far that in contemporary America we have almost forgotten how to analyze. We don't know what to say about a passage of prose. We lack a fundamental terminology. We can't even tell a descriptive statement from an evaluative one. *Analyzing Prose* tries to redress the balance, to bring breathing-in and breathing-out into a more equitable balance.

If we do this only in a neutrally descriptive way, however, if we offer only a descriptive terminology, we will simply recreate the persistent error of classical rhetorical theory: the assumption that description of stylistic features constitutes its own reason for being, that the connection of style with behavior can safely be left to someone else. The legitimate question that must follow any act of stylistic description is, 'So what? What difference does it make?' To ask this essential question, though, immediately moves us from description to evaluation. It asks us to supply an analogue in behavior for every stylistic judgment; to move, for example, from the noun-style/verb-style opposition to a meditation on human action versus human thought. We must always do this sooner or later. The hard question is, 'When?' I've chosen to explicate description in the first eight chapters and let the behavioral analysis enter by implication. The last two chapters reverse this order and talk directly and explicitly about the behavior to which prose style stands analogous. But in both sections I've tried to stay close to the basic question: 'So what? What difference does it make?'

I've tried, thus, to answer questions which are very old but which perplex us still. When Socrates objected to the teachings of the Greek rhetoricians, he returned again and again to a single fundamental objection. Rhetoric had no τέχνη, no central body of theory, no legitimate area of concern, no room of its own. It was at best only an external cosmetic. We've been living with this Platonic objection ever since – it forms the core, as we have just seen, of the C-B-S theory of style – but we are now in a very good position to answer it. The τέχνη of rhetoric is just the mixture of human motive we have been examining. It comprehends purpose but it is not restricted to purpose; it includes game and play as well. And about game and play especially, we are learning a great deal in all the disciplines which deal with human behavior. The whole of evolutionary biology, in fact, can be taken as a single great answer to Socrates' question: 'What is the τέχνη of rhetoric? What is the domain of style? What can it be but the whole complex motivational structure of *Homo sapiens*?' And it is that whole structure of motive which we are examining, explicitly or implicitly, when we analyze prose. No wonder it sometimes seems confusing.

Beneath the confusion, though, we can for the first time glimpse the real place of traditional rhetoric in a modern prose world. We can make this point best, perhaps, by restating the basic arguments underlying rhetorical analysis. If words do not matter, only ideas, if all prose should be wholly transparent, not seen and not heard, then rhetorical analysis can be at best an exposé of errors, at worst a dispute about trifles. If, however, the opposite is true, if words matter too, if the whole range of human motive is seen as animating prose discourse, then rhetorical analysis leads us to the essential issues and answers the essential questions about prose style. Classical rhetorical theory assumed a full range of human motive, game, play, and purpose in ever-shifting combinations. We are now discovering just how right and how relevant that mixture is, and hence how useful, here and now, classical rhetoric can be.