

Clear and Simple As the Truth

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

—Jean-Baptiste Le Brun¹

¹ “Discours préliminaire.” *Galerie des peintres flamands, hollandais et allemand.* 3 volumes (Paris: Le Brun, 1792-1796), volume one, pages i and iv.

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 coeur 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 is 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 competent 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 stance 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*.

Excerpt from *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 writing as “without music, without style, either good or bad.” He described Shaw as a nightmare sewing machine that clicked, shone, and smiled, “smiled perpetually.”²

Whether style is viewed as spiritual, fraudulent, or something in between, any concept of style that treats it as optional is inadequate

² William Butler Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), page 169.

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 problem to people outside their own profession. Writers with a need to address such readers invented classic style. It is not a routine style in our culture, and unlike most of the writing styles we acquire, it is unlikely to be picked up without deliberate effort.

Classic style was not invented by one person or even by a small group working together. It was not invented just once, nor is it specific to one culture or one language. It was used with notable skill and effect by some of the outstanding French writers of the seventeenth century, and their achievements have left an echo in French culture that has no direct English or American equivalent. The seventeenth-century French masters of classic style, for one reason or another, conceived of themselves as addressing an intelligent but non-specialist reader. They were all writers who had no doubt about the general importance of what they had to say. They shared the idea that truth about something was, in some sense, truth about everything, and they adopted the view that it is always possible to present a really significant conclusion to a general audience.

Classic style is focused and assured. Its virtues are clarity and simplicity; in a sense, so are its vices. It declines to acknowledge ambiguities, unessential qualifications, doubts, or other styles. It declines to acknowledge that it is a style. It makes its hard choices silently and out of the reader's sight. Once made, those hard choices are not acknowledged to be choices at all; they are presented as if they are inevitable, because classic style is, above all, a style of presentation with claims to transparency.

To write without a chosen and consistent style is to write without a tacit concept of what writing can do, what its limits are, who its audience is, and what the writer's goals are. In the absence of settled decisions about these things, writing can be torture. While there is no single correct view of these matters, every well-defined style must take a stand on them. Classic style is neither shy nor ambiguous about fundamentals. The style rests on the assumptions that it is possible to think disinterestedly, to know the results of disinterested thought, and to present them without fundamental 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.

Excerpt from *The Museum*

“Tufted Titmouse, including Black-crested Titmouse”

(*Parus bicolor*)

Titmice are social birds and, especially in winter, join with small mixed flocks of chickadees, nuthatches, kinglets, creepers, and the smaller woodpeckers. Although a frequent visitor at feeders, it is not as tame or confiding as the chickadees. It often clings to the bark of trees and turns upside down to pick spiders and insects from the underside of a twig or leaf. The “Black-crested Titmouse” of Texas was until recently considered a separate species.

Voice: Its commonest call, sung year-round and carrying a considerable distance, is a whistled series of four to eight notes sounding like Peter-Peter repeated over and over.

“Northern Shrike”

(*Lanius excubitor*)

Unusual among songbirds, shrikes prey on small birds and rodents, catching them with the bill and sometimes impaling them on thorns or barbed wire for storage. Like other northern birds that depend on rodent populations, the Northern Shrike’s movements are cyclical, becoming more abundant in the South when northern rodent populations are low. At times they hunt from an open perch, where they sit motionless until prey appears; at other times they hover in the air ready to pounce on anything that moves.

— John Bull and John Farrand, Jr.,

*The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds, Eastern Region*³



³ Bull and Farrand: (New York: Knopf, 1977). Tufted Titmouse, page 658–659; Northern Shrike, page 514; Hairy Woodpecker, page 644; Western Meadowlark, page 512.

A field guide, in its stand on truth, presentation, scene, cast, thought, and language, fits the classic stand on the elements of style perfectly. Its implied model is one person presenting observations to another, who is in a position to verify them by direct observation.

The reader is not in a library doing research, but in the field looking and listening. The guide, assuming this scene, cannot be written in a style that requires study or re-reading if it expects to be attended to. It strives to be brief and efficient. It seeks to present the birds it describes specifically and precisely enough for the reader to recognize them in the field.

The writing in a good field guide is certainly the product of deliberation and revision but sounds like ideal spontaneous speech, as if an accomplished companion in the field wanted to tell you something. There is a symmetry between writer and reader: although the writer knows more about the subject than the reader, the reader would know exactly what the writer knows had he seen what the writer has seen in the past. And the guide's purpose is to put the reader in a position to achieve that parity.

The writer needs nothing from the reader. The writer's purpose is purely the presentation of the truth. Neither writer nor reader has a job to do. The writer writes and the reader reads not for the sake of some external task—solving a problem, making money, winning a case, getting a rebate, selling insurance, fixing a machine—but rather for the sake of the subject—in this case, the birds—and for the sake of being united in recognizing the truth of this subject. The writer takes the pose of full knowledge, since nothing could be more irksome to someone in the field than a passage clotted with hedges about the writer's impotence.

The entries in the *Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds, Eastern Region*, come as close to classic style in its pure form, with an actual scene fitting the classic model, as anything we have found. They are particularly remarkable for their unfailing refusal to draw attention to their prose. A phrase such as “not as tame or confiding” in the presentation of the tufted titmouse or a sentence like “Unusual among songbirds, shrikes prey on small birds and rodents, catching them with the bill and sometimes impaling them on thorns or barbed wire for storage” in the presentation of the northern shrike is a masterpiece of expression, but refuses to acknowledge that it is anything other than the one inevitable way to present the subject. The prose suggests the same clarity and inevitability as the complex and wonderful but unambiguous and uncontrived presence of the species it describes. There is no more suggestion of deliberation or effort in writing about the tufted titmouse or the northern shrike than there is in seeing one.

The passages in the *Audubon Field Guide* assume without hesitation that *of course* the reader is interested in birds. All details are presented at an equal level of importance. The entire passage is in close focus. The entry for the hairy woodpecker notes that it destroys insects such as wood-boring beetles, “which it extracts from holes with its barbed tongue. Like other woodpeckers, it hammers on a dead limb as part of its courtship ceremony and to proclaim its territory.” The speaker shows not the slightest diffidence or

embarrassment about reporting that the call note of the hairy woodpecker “is a sharp, distinctive *peek*,” or that the western meadowlark and the eastern meadowlark “are so similar that it was not until 1844 that Audubon noticed the difference and named the western bird *neglecta* because it had been overlooked for so long.” The writer takes the stand that he is simply presenting truth and is being neither cute nor partisan when he reports that “The song of the Western Meadowlark is often heard on Hollywood sound tracks even when the movie setting is far from the bird’s range.” There is nothing self-conscious in his matching of language to thought, so there is no hint of fear or shyness in the way he puts his vocabulary to work in descriptions, such as the following account of the western meadowlark’s call: “rich, flute-like jumble of gurgling notes, usually descending the scale; very different from the Eastern Meadowlark’s series of simple, plaintive whistles.” The speaker never overshoots or undershoots, but always hits his mark. The tone is as it must be. There is nothing for the writer to be defensive about.