

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 writing as “without music, without style, either good or bad.” He de-

scribed 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, we do not notice the style of our activity. 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 nonspecialist 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 is, 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 were 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.

■ 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 probably include the existence of an exceptionally influential line of verse writers in English—a line with no French counterpart; the profound influence of the King James translation of the Bible on English prose style; the great diversity of styles among admired English prose writers; and the fact that English prose before the eighteenth century cannot serve as a direct model for later writing. Seventeenth-century English prose seems archaic to later English readers; seventeenth-century French prose is perfectly normal even to a contemporary French reader.

Certain classic French writers—Descartes, Pascal, the duc de La Rochefoucauld, Madame de Lafayette, the Cardinal de Retz, Madame de Sévigné, and La Bruyère—have been taken as models of French prose practically from their day to ours. Indeed, for many, their French *is* French. Those who admire it rarely fail to single out for praise its clarity, suppleness, and elegance.

Propagandists, in the course of promoting the use of French as an international diplomatic language, attributed these marks of style to something inherent in the French language. Antoine Rivarol is the author of the best-known version of this primitive excursion into salesmanship as essentialist linguistics. Language, Professor Rivarol observes, is clear when it follows the order of reason, and unclear when it follows the movements and order of our experience. But, behold, French has a unique privilege among languages: its natural order *is* the order of reason. It is, therefore, necessarily clear where Greek, Latin, Italian, and English are not. In the absence of the uniquely French syntax of reason, writing in other languages is heir to all the fog and filthy air that passion and sensation impart. Rivarol won a prize for a disquisition based on these observations in the eighteenth century; today both his argument and his conclusion sound like a parody of alchemy. In the age of Derrida and Lacan, French prose has triumphantly displayed its capacity to be as incomprehensible, elephantine, and turgid as double-Dutch.

The almost transparent silliness of attributing marks of style to the inherent qualities of particular languages has not discouraged 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 from any other language as such. All we have to do is look at its history. French classic style was invented by draw-

ing 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 crystallizes 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.

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 speaking spontaneously. 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 spontaneous 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 she 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 she 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 that they consist of a short list of twenty-three definitions, such as "a line is breadthless length," five postulates, such as "all right angles are equal to one another," and five common notions, such as "if equals be added to equals, the wholes are equal." From these elements, all of Euclid's geometry follows. For a mathematical genius like Sir Isaac Newton, the book is really over once these elements are laid out, since everything else is implicit within them. *The Elements of Geometry*, the most successful textbook in history, establishes a set of expectations for other textbooks that present the structure of a field. So, when we look into a book called *The Elements of Accounting* or *The Elements of Boatbuilding* or the elements of anything—every field has at least half a dozen books with such a title—we expect what we find in Euclid: a small number of starting points at a high level of generality from which all the details of the subject follow.

In the eighteenth century, when chemistry was separated from alchemy, the field came to be structured around the concept of

chemical elements, only a handful of which were known. Chemical elements, like Euclid's elements, are the fundamental starting points of their domain; unlike Euclid's elements, they are also elemental in constituting everything more complex. The origin of this concept of chemical elements is often attributed to Antoine Lavoisier (1743–1794), whose presentation in *Traité élémentaire de chimie, présenté dans un ordre nouveau et d'après les découvertes modernes* (1789) was embraced by almost everyone who read it, partly because he wrote in classic style; other books on the subject were written in styles too complicated to be widely understood.

The concept of chemical elements is similar to Euclid's concept of elements, inasmuch as everything in the domain of chemistry can be said to be implicit in them. Even today, when there are 118 elements instead of the handful known to Lavoisier, it is possible to put them all on a chart inside the cover of a chemistry textbook or on the wall of a classroom. The concept that all matter is a combination of elements is fundamental to the science of chemistry; but some of these elements are less central as constituents than others. Oxygen, for example, is central; 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 questions concerning a set of relationships among truth, presentation, writer, reader, thought, and language. These questions are addressed to fundamental issues that must be answered deliberately or by default before we can write at all. The issues are all on the same fundamental level. None concerns a surface phenomenon—like sentence length—and however closely related they are, none derives from another.

These questions concern a series of relationships: What can be known? What can be put into words? What is the relationship between thought and language? Who is the writer addressing and why? What is the implied relationship between writer and reader? What are the implied conditions of discourse? In any given style, positions will be assigned to truth, language, the writer, and the reader. Classic style is a group of closely related decisions. It defines roles and creates a distinctive network of relationships; it takes a consistent stand on the elements of style. Other stands constitute other styles.

The concept that a style follows from a set of fundamental decisions is commonplace in musicology and art history. For example, when Charles Rosen describes the origins of the classical style

in music, he begins by describing what he calls “needs” that the existing high baroque style was incapable of meeting. In Rosen’s analysis, high baroque style was invented to present static states: it rendered sentiment or a theatrical moment of crisis. Classical style was invented to present dynamic action. Handel, a master of high baroque style, juxtaposed different emotions. Mozart, a master of classical style, represents a single character passing from one emotion to another in a sequence. In Rosen’s formula, “Dramatic sentiment was replaced by dramatic action.” Classical style differs from the style of the high baroque because it has made different decisions about the object of presentation. Although it is possible to catalogue surface differences between high baroque style and classical style, the motive and character of the change cannot be understood as a replacement of one set of surface features by another. 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. Émile 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 Tura-bian’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 copy text, 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 copy text.

Joseph Williams's *Style*, by contrast, views surface features of copy text 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 axioms define different systems. In writing, different stands on the elements of style define different families of prose styles. A failure to view style as a fundamental stand on central issues entails a failure to see the possibility of other stands that constitute other styles.

The domain of style is what can be chosen. A fundamental stand is a choice open to the writer. By contrast, to know a language is to know a great range of things that are not open to choice: it is not open to every writer, for example, to decide that sentences shall begin with a period and end with a capital letter, that the word “dog” shall refer to cats, that predicates shall not agree in number and person with their subjects, or that six fine brick houses shall be called “brick fine houses six.” You can, however, decide whether to call a certain dog a “dog” or a “hound,” to say “Sally devoured the roast beef” rather than “The roast beef was devoured by Sally,” to write in sentences that are short and clipped rather than baroque and periodic, or to write “24 March 1954” rather than “March 24, 1954,” but these are surface features. Books that talk about style in writing treat these moments of choice at the surface level but typically ignore the elements of style, which is to say, the fundamental choices from which surface features derive.

We propose to describe the fundamental questions that are the elements of style in writing, and the answers to these questions that define classic style. The elements come under five topical headings: truth, presentation, scene, cast, thought and language.

■ The Classic Stand on the Elements of Style

Truth

René Descartes provides a kind of philosophic patronage for classic style in its seventeenth-century French expression. Because the fundamental problem he addresses and the solution he offers commanded attention throughout Europe, he helped to make the atti-

tudes 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 nonspecialist 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—which can include the recondite lore of erudition—or from uncritically accepting opinion and custom.

Descartes frames his *Discourse* as a personal account of what he himself did and suggests that anyone who wants to do what he did can. At least ostensibly, he is not arguing a case; he is merely trying to place the reader where he himself stood in order to make his subsequent actions intelligible. His method of expression mirrors his contention that once we clear away received opinion, custom, and prejudice, what is certainly true is immediately apparent because of its distinctness and clarity. Everyone who has cleared away the normal mental impediments is equally capable of perceiving what is certainly true and can personally stand behind his perception. What is certainly true can be personally verified by each individual—whether that individual has mastered Latin and the liberal arts or speaks only low Breton and has spent his life farming—and without the need of any outside authority.

From one point of view, classic style can be seen as a version of Descartes's approach to truth in which the domain of truth has been expanded to include, first, conventional information, and then those very opinions and customs that Descartes filtered out. For Descartes, there are very few certain truths, but everybody has a natural endowment that, once purified, gives access to them. Classic style treats all its objects as if they were equally available to every observer and as if every reader has whatever may be necessary to verify what the writer presents. What is a natural endowment in Descartes becomes a kind of cultural competence in classic style. The certain truths Descartes perceived are internal and essentially timeless. To verify them we need to return to a sort of state of nature as it was before we had acquired any local conventions. Classic style treats external objects, contingent facts, and even opinions as if they too are beyond doubt or discussion. To verify them we need to acquire local conventions so widespread within the relevant culture that the style treats them as if they were natural endowments.

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 she 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 her 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 painful, 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 normal experience. They are eternal in two senses: they are discovered, not created, and fu-

ture 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 achieve the clarity and suppleness that truth confers. But such moments are temporary accomplishments, not permanent possessions.

The classic attitude, especially in its origins, acknowledges human inadequacies: we are victims of our ambitions; fully accurate self-knowledge is unavailable; self-interest leads to self-deception; we are inconsistent, unreliable, impure. Yet the classic attitude is never despairing: these inadequacies are like an unfortunate layer of corruption over a fundamental soundness. We are not impotent, merely weak, and we can grow stronger. We recognize truth when we see it, even though the encounter with truth is brief and

difficult to sustain. In the classic view, we can not only aspire to what is fundamentally true and valuable, we can even—and at the key moments—succeed in these aspirations. In Descartes, in parts of Pascal, and in certain American traditions influenced by classic style, encouragement constitutes the principal tone. For La Rochefoucauld, the classic attitude is a consolation for our failures. For Jefferson, it is rather more like the means to success.

The Motive Is Truth

The classic writer is licensed, so to speak, by the truth of what he says, not by his social position, political power, or technical knowledge. Classic writing is animated by a common motive, regardless of its local subject or local purpose

In classic style, the reader and writer are brought together by a common recognition of truth. The writer is never merely indulging personal interests. As a result, a complementary relationship is created between writer and reader: the writer presents truth, and the reader recognizes it. Of course, the classic writer may in fact serve personal interests through his writing, but the attitude adopted in classic prose is that the writer's governing motive is to present truth. To the extent that a work of classic prose has obvious practical purposes, the classic attitude takes the position that they are merely accidental.

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 has previously perceived. Self-evident truths, Madame de Chevreuse's character, the power of well-ordered thoughts, the food of France are conceived as “things” with their proper characteristics, existing “in the world” and completely independent of their presentation. The language of classic prose serves these things and should never draw attention to itself. Naturally, when we read La Rochefoucauld's passage on Madame de Chevreuse, we are looking at words; we cannot look through them to Madame de Chevreuse herself, nor could we possibly know what La Rochefoucauld wants to tell us even if we could see her. Nevertheless, classic style operates on the premise that La Rochefoucauld's experience of Madame de Chevreuse is a “thing” that he wants to present through a medium that will, at its best, be transparent, as if the reader were looking at something through a perfectly clean and undistorting window; the

window should not draw attention to itself, and will not unless it is obviously defective in some way.

Classic writers speak with conviction. That conviction, they imply, comes from knowledge or experience of something that exists before the writing and is completely independent of it. Their prose is conceived of as a perfectly efficient instrument: it neither invents nor distorts. It is as if the language they use had no characteristics of its own and therefore could not be considered a “thing.” Classic prose does not ask the reader to observe it as if it too is a thing; it invites the reader to look through it to what it presents. It draws attention to itself only when there is something wrong with it.

Consider Jefferson’s phrase “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Jefferson is an accomplished writer, but that is taken for granted and not something he wants his readers even to notice. If someone read the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and found the writing itself to be the most memorable thing about it, there would be something wrong with it.

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 rework 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.

This same characterization might apply to a knock-out sequence in a boxing match, a lethal volley at Wimbledon, a winning stretch move in a horse race, or an ingenious screen pass in football. It is perfect, and we confront a paradox. We know that the performance is not just a rare example of everything going right, because the masters of these arts can give similar performances repeatedly. The performance therefore had to be prepared, because no performance can be routinely perfect without preparation. Yet it is difficult to imagine just what such preparation might have been. The performances are not canned. They are fresh and spontaneous even though we know that they are the result of practice and effort. The basketball player who sinks the ball amid a chaotic field of play without looking at the basket can do that because she has memorized a certain spot on the floor to the point where she no longer even needs to see the basket to hit it. But the preparation is hidden, and the performance looks like magic.

Classic style is perfect performance, with no hesitation, revision, or backtracking. Its essential fiction is that this perfection happens at the first try. Classic style does not acknowledge process

or stages of discovery, does not acknowledge revision or successive refinements. The performance suggests that to write this way, one can never hesitate, grope, or struggle, whether in thought or in language. This is part of the performance, and when it succeeds it does not seem to be a performance at all. Its corollary fiction is that the performance cannot be prepared because it has no parts that could be worked on separately or in stages. It is seamless. The writer appears simply to have been born with an ability that the rest of us lack. To someone attempting to learn classic style, these fictions can be intimidating. In learning this style, it is helpful to remember that these are fictions.

Because classic style presents fully refined thought in inevitable prose, it is final. This finality excludes two kinds of hedges, which we will call hedges of process and hedges of liability. Hedges of process are hesitations and uncertainties that arise because one is in the middle of thought. For example, one may say something, then think better of it, and then add a disclaimer or a qualifier. But in the model of classic prose, the thought is final, so hedges of process are rare.

Hedges of liability are insurance against the possibility of having overlooked something or being ignorant of something that would change the writer's views or conclusions. For example, a writer may say that in her limited experience, such and such is true. This hedges the writer against contradiction by experience she has not had. But in the model of classic prose, the thought is fully refined, so hedges of liability are rare. The classic writer does not say, "As far as I know, there was never a more gallant court than that of Henri II," but rather, "There was never a more gallant court than that of Henri II."

There is a third sort of hedge that classic prose omits, which we will call hedges of worth. The classic writer spends no time justifying her project. The classic writer does not compare its worth to the worth of other projects. A classic writer will write about milk, for example, with no indication that there can be a question about the worth of writing about milk, no indication that the reader could entertain any doubt about the worth of writing about milk. A classic writer might begin an essay on milk with the claim, "In spite of

its liquid state, milk must always be considered as a food and not as a beverage.” A classic writer might begin an essay on a little-known species of bird with the observation, “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.” Classic writers do not distract readers with questions of the worth of the project. There is no hierarchy of importance of subjects in classic writing. Everything is in close focus.

Every Word Counts

It is possible to skim certain styles. Most after-dinner speeches are presented in styles that claim only part of our attention. Many textbooks and news articles are written in styles that allow us to bounce over words and phrases and still feel that we have extracted the sense accurately.

Browsing is different from skimming. In browsing, we look from thing to thing, deciding what to choose. Classic style allows browsing but not skimming. We may turn to just one paragraph, say, in an essay, or even to one sentence, and focus on just that. But once we focus on a unit in classic style, and intend to understand it, then we must pay attention to every detail. Writer and reader assume that every word counts. If the reader skips a single word or phrase or sentence, the sense of the unit may be lost. Classic style contains crucial nuances, which can be lost in skimming.

Clarity Everywhere Is Not Accuracy Everywhere

Fine, accurate distinctions and subtle nuance are among the most typical features of classic style. But classic style has a clear hierarchy of goals; what is subordinate to the main issue can never be allowed to obscure that issue or distract attention from it. When accuracy in the sense of being exhaustively correct involves complicated qualifications of no consequence to the main issue, classic writers do not hesitate to simplify. In this frame, accuracy becomes pedantry if it is indulged for its own sake. A classic writer will phrase a subordinate point precisely but without the promise that it is technically accurate. The convention between writer and

reader is that the writer is not to be challenged on these points because they are merely scaffolding.

Waverley Root begins *The Food of France*, “As far back as the records go, the people of the land now known of as France have thought of food in terms of its taste more often than in terms of its nutritive qualities.” Root wants to indicate that the culinary traditions he treats are immemorial, but the actual documentary history or demographic realities of France are not at issue. It would be silly to question whether Vercingetorix the Gaul really thought about food more often in terms of taste or nutritive qualities. The subordinate point is stated with care and precision, but without a tortured accuracy that would bury the essential distinction between nutrition and taste under a ton of scholarly documentation.

Scene

The Model Is One Person Speaking to Another

The idiom of classic style is the voice of conversation. The writer adopts the pose of a speaker of near-perfect efficiency whose sentences are the product of the voice rather than some instrument of writing. Johnson’s sentence about Shakespeare is prototypically unclassic because it could never be taken for speech. Classic style models itself on speech and can be read aloud properly the first time.

In speech, an expression is gone the moment it is spoken, and has only that one instant to enter the mind and attain its place in memory. Since classic writing pretends to be speech, it never requires the reader to look forward or backward; it never admits that the reader is in a situation to do so. Each phrase is presented as if it has only one chance—now—to do its job. Of course, a reader may in fact go over a passage of classic prose many times. But the classic writer never acknowledges that possibility either explicitly or by implication.

The ideal speech of classic style appears to be spontaneous and motivated by the need to inform a listener about something. It has just occurred to the speaker to tell someone about this, and so he has begun to do so. Or perhaps he is talking to someone else and is

overheard. What he has to say is not a set piece. He has not labored over it beforehand, systematically refining and arranging various thoughts, editing their expression, and then speaking the polished whole aloud. Something occurs to him and he says it. He takes another moment's brief but perfect thought and says the next thing. As a consequence, the rhythm of the writing is a series of movements, each one brief and crisp, with an obvious beginning and end. Of course, in retrospect, we may see that these movements are organized into a flawless global structure, but the pretense is that this global organization is the natural product of the writer's orderly mind. It comes out that way the first time without special effort. The global organization is never referred to; its existence is not even acknowledged. The classic writer thus banishes from his vocabulary phrases like "as we shall see," "three paragraphs ago," "before I move to my next point I must introduce a new term," "the third part of our four-part argument is," and all other "metadiscourse" that proclaims itself as writing rather than speech.

Pascal's *Lettres provinciales* are the prototype of this appearance. They are a defense of Jansenism, written in the form of letters from someone in Paris to someone in the provinces. The presentation is informal; the writer is just describing events in the capital. They do not suggest deliberate strategy. It is almost as if the writer had nothing better to do; it occurs to the writer to tell his provincial friend about something everyone in Paris is excited about. It could even be that the writer corresponds with this friend routinely, and that the controversy over Jansenism is merely this season's news. The letters give the appearance of spontaneity: the writer has not sketched out in advance how many letters there will be or what he will write about in each letter. He has not even sketched out the one letter he is writing. The letters do not suggest that they have been edited, either. In this way, classic style has something in common with dramatic performances of talk and conversation. The playwright or screenwriter has edited out everything that is dispensable, but the result is not supposed to sound edited.

The prototypical scene in classic writing is an individual speaking intimately to another individual. What the classic writer has to

say is directed entirely to that one individual. But it can be overheard. The reader is sometimes cast in the role of the individual addressed, sometimes cast in the role of eavesdropper. The role of the reader in the *Lettres provinciales*, for example, is someone who has come across these letters accidentally. These letters imply the participation of their original recipient in a conversation. There is even one short answering letter.

In fact, classic prose is meant to be overheard, because although it is directed entirely toward one individual it never needs to be bent to fit that individual. It is fine if it is overheard, because what it has to say and the way it says it are not contingent upon the audience. It is never dishonorable or problematic. The classic writer does not appear to have written things in a way she would not had she known others were listening.

Classic style is not a style for oratory—in the first place because its model scene is so different from the model scene of oratory. In oratory, the implied author is a rhetor, an actor, adopting a role to speak to an implied audience consisting of a group. The classic writer is not speaking to a group, and although she is of course also an actor, her act is to play at presenting herself. She takes the pose of authenticity. This acting, when good, makes the writer look vulnerable, in the sense that she is exposing what she cares about.

Paradoxically, classic style thus requires a strong revelation of personality even as it subordinates what is merely personal. The classic writer is not interested in mirroring the personal processes of her thought; certainly she is not interested in mirroring her personal sensations or emotions. Yet, since her only motive for speaking is the felt importance of what she has to say, she reveals herself through the topics she chooses and what she says about them.

The model scene of classic prose—an individual speaking to another individual—is not always followed literally from beginning to end. Some texts that appear ostensibly to be based on a different model turn out, on closer inspection, to have been based on the classic model. Let us take as an example the Declaration of Independence. Its beginning and end do not look classic. Its ending

is a formulaic speech act, an official declaration of independence with all the appropriate legalistic phrases:

We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by the Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown. . . .

Speech acts occur between two people informally and intimately all the time, as in “Can you open the door?,” but formal versions of speech acts, like those in the Declaration or “I hereby promise to pay you the amount owed,” are usually reserved for situations where the public audience serves as a witness that the act has been performed. There are no official witnesses to classic prose and no audience with institutional expectations, such as a theater audience, the audience at an inauguration, or the audience at the opening of a bridge.

The ending of the Declaration of Independence is unclassic in another way: its last sentence is a bit of inflated oratory:

And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

The beginning of the Declaration of Independence is not classic, either. It announces a scene explicitly removed from the model scene of classic style: it pretends that it is an announcement from a people—the citizens of the colonies—to the whole world:

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among

the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

But between the opening and the closing sections of the Declaration, its voice is the voice of one person talking, observing injuries. You can almost see the expression on the face of the speaker, and see his hand gestures as he speaks these words. The speaker wishes to present something to you: the state of things in the colonies, or more specifically in his own life, and why the colonies and he must go their own way. The language is clear and direct and memorable. It is written so as to be understood the first time it is heard. Here are a few examples:

The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. . . .

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their Public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures. . . .

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

The Declaration of Independence is not one person speaking to another, but in its body it never gets away from that model. The case is similar for sermons, technical reports, lectures, and business memos: the actual scene is not the model scene of classic style, but the writing can be formed upon the classic scene. In fact, not

even the prototypical texts of classic style are literally one individual spontaneously speaking to another.

If classic prose is ideal speech, just between us, spontaneous, it follows that its occasions are informal. On the other hand, Johnson on Shakespeare assumes an imaginary protocol between writer and audience in which the occasion is the formal presentation of the writer's labors. It is something like the Mass, whose observers know that its occasion is formal and planned. The protocol of classic prose, by contrast, is spontaneity. It just occurred to the speaker to say this. The informality of the occasion overlaps with the pose of authenticity.

The sense of informality is truer of seventeenth-century French classic style than of its English or American versions. French classic style was at heart a style for memoirs or private reflections. Other occasions—governmental, military, religious, bureaucratic, political—already had their sophisticated protocols, which classic style could not supplant. To some extent in England and to a far greater extent in the United States in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the styles of sermons, political speeches, and other formal presentations were not so immutably established. Classic style in America consequently had the opportunity to take on a use in formal presentations—such as the Declaration of Independence—that it could not have had in its French version.

We can contrast a political text like the Declaration of Independence—whose model scene though not its actual scene is one individual talking to another—with unclassic political speeches such as the typical State of the Union address to Congress or the typical inaugural speech by a governor. There is always a jolt of passion behind the real classic writer, a little excitement because there is a personal conviction and commitment that is often completely missing from a plain statement of what politicians say when they have no intention of acting on it. In the typical State of the Union address, the president of the United States not only can but must speak pieties clearly inconsistent with his actions. Who believes what he is saying? Who thinks he means anything related to action

when he says it? In the course of reading the *Lettres provinciales*, it is possible to believe Pascal is wrong, but it is not possible to believe he is saying something he does not really believe, something he would not act on himself. The classic speaker of the Declaration of Independence is certainly going to act on what he is saying. In fact, his speech is an action, and he is putting his life and fortune at risk by that action. The classic writer is an individual, not the organ of a bureaucracy, and so he says what he believes rather than what a committee has decided it can live with. Classic writers are independent, not concerned to protect members of a bureaucracy. They are not controlled by policy, interests, or an organization, or at least they give no appearance of being controlled in such a fashion. Rid of this baggage, they have a freshness that no utterance cobbled together by committee can ever have. The typical political speech, such as a State of the Union address, cannot say much because it has so many constituencies to worry about. It cannot be written by any individual. It is always the product of a committee, so when it is said or read by the pope or the president or the secretary of lies, it does not sound like an individual speaking. It sounds like what it is: the rumble of bureaucracy.

The classic writer is an individual; his model audience is an individual. The classic writer, therefore, does not make distinctions between members of the audience, saying, for example, that some of them will be better prepared to understand what he has to say than will others, or that some will be interested in the first part and others in the second part. Of course, since he implicitly claims to be talking without having mapped out the global organization, he usually avoids any reference to parts. He also avoids raising any questions about whether the reader is interested in what he has to present, with the result that usually it does not occur to the reader to doubt his own interest.

Prose Is Efficient but Not Rushed

The efficiency of classic style is really a luxury. There are no pressures upon the classic writer. There is the absolute need to present

truth about something, but that need, however strongly felt by the classic writer, is not an imposed need. Nothing external manipulates the classic writer, whose motive is neither gain nor reputation. Neither profit nor fear spurs the classic writer's efforts. Nor is there any internal anxiety or ambition. Certainly the clock has no effect upon the classic writer.

We think of efficiency as a weapon against time or as an instrument of productivity. The efficiency expert's job is conceived of as saving money by saving time. Efficiency in these contexts is a competitive trick.

The efficiency of the classic writer is purely a matter of mind. Efficiency in thought is the companion of grace and accuracy, indeed makes them possible. The efficiency of classic prose is the natural product of the classic writer's focused and orderly mind. The classic writer has the luxury of thinking without distraction or pressure. Nothing has the power to hurry the classic writer. Classic prose is thus free of disclaimers that the writer does not have time to do a proper job, or that abbreviations must be made in the interest of time, or that he must skip over something. Indeed, the classic writer seems almost to dwell over a sentence for the slightest moment after it ends, as if to savor it or allow its full impact, before going on to the next sentence.

Classic Style Is Energetic but Not Anxious

Students of martial arts explain that a muscle tensed before performance performs badly, because the tension interferes with the impulse to move. Classic style gives the impression that all of the writer's considerable energy is communicated directly to the writing, with none lost collaterally to anxiety or apprehension. The end of a particularly classic phrase seems to leave its writer in a state of repose out of which the next absolutely efficient movement will come.

If we think of a relaxed state as one free of needless tension but nonetheless fully attentive, then we can say that classic style is relaxed even as it performs, in the way a champion racehorse or sprinter is relaxed even at greatest speed. Inefficient effort is the mark of a neophyte.