

Editor's Preface: On the Virtues of Writing

Writing is difficult, and good writing even more difficult. One kind of learning about writing is based on coming to know and to practice the rules of grammar, but these are rules that often apply more to writing than to our more natural medium of speaking. Those who learn to write do so in part by taking courses in elementary, junior high, high school and college that deal with basic grammar and composition. The process of learning rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling is for most a slow and tedious process. What we learn from composition courses, books and exercises is the ability to express ourselves in writing that is both lucid and meaningful to a reader. Skill at writing, however, does not often come in flashes of brilliance.

In almost all languages, the grammar of writing varies greatly from the grammar of speaking. In discourse, for example, most speakers do not use declarative sentences; in fact, we rarely talk in complete sentences, yet the meaning is conveyed and when it is not, one speaker can ask the other to clarify. Speech is essentially contextual, the meaning or meanings conveyed in many ways both overt and covert.

When compared with orality, writing has unique dimensions and characteristics. One is that in writing, there is a fundamental contrast between the author and the reader, which is marked by the one-way direction of communication. This dimension has the potential to create a relationship in which the reader is essentially passive, or even, if not passive, with no ready means to directly address or respond to the author. This potential exists whether reading fiction or non-fiction, whether reading a wide-ranging scholarly endeavor that is meant to be accessible to any interested and literate person or a piece of research meant only for the reader with particular disciplinary training. In verbal discourse, on the other hand, the contrast between one who is passive and one who is active is often not clearly marked nor fixed, for even one who is essentially listening to a communication can and does respond in overt or subtle ways.

The distance between author and reader can render us all, to a greater or lesser extent, passive. Some authors, for instance, perhaps driven by their agents and commercial presses, seem to have lost sight of their readers altogether; they seem to write only for the critics, thus widening the distance between themselves and the audience in general and the individual reader in particular. Perhaps that sense of distance accounts for the pleasure that some of us take when a particular literary critic or reviewer has “done a job on an author.” But there is much debate and little agreement over what constitutes lucid or meaningful writing, and how much of those qualities a piece of writing must possess in order for it to be considered successful at communication.

Many of these issues are political in nature, especially in the humanities and social sciences but also in some scientific writing. Writing in this sense can hardly be seen as neutral. The nature of the political struggle is continually being addressed and reassessed, as can be seen by comparing George Orwell's classic 1946 piece titled “Politics and the English Language” with James Miller's innovative and provocative essay “Is Bad Writing Necessary?” The latter tackles the fundamental question of whether “radical and subversive” thinkers can and should “write clearly, as Orwell argued,” or whether they must, in order to be subversive, “write radically and subversively—or even opaquely, as if through a glass darkly?”¹ These two pieces show that political writing can take on a range of expression, and in some cases a reader might find the communication difficult to comprehend.

Whether writing is seen as an expression of grammatical rules or as a form of political statement, however, few would dispute that “good” writing (however we might define “good”) requires writing, re-writing and re-writing yet again. Virtually every writing book and manual stresses that writing as an

1 Miller, James. “Is Bad Writing Necessary? George Orwell, Theodor Adorno, and the Politics of Language.” *Lingua Franca* 9.9 (Dec-Jan 2000): 33-44.

art form is something that is only perfected, when it is perfected, through multiple versions. At the same time, an author must make a decision on how lucid he or she desires to be, or perhaps rather *to whom* he or she wishes to appear lucid. While lucidity is seen by most as a virtue, at times a writer might feel that a complex and philosophical argument, if rendered in simplified language and sentence structure, might distract a reader from the depth of the argument. It is a call that all authors must make, all the more so in non-fiction writing.

With all of its complexity, the political dimension is only one of the many issues that writing brings forth. Each individual who writes, whether as a livelihood or simply out of personal conviction, must deal with the matter of style. Grammatical rules and impeccable composition can only go so far. Like lucidity, style is another issue that invites discussion of other considerations. Style is a fundamental part of one's voice and thus it is, or should be, entirely personal. The decision on style is not simply a matter of choosing to write in the first or the third person, but of the many ingredients that will create a personal style that becomes one's signature. In reading Arnold, Thoreau, Emerson, Eliot, Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, or any other skilled author, we experience the style not just as the way the story is told, but as part of the story itself. Some styles are so unique that, in hearing or reading a sentence or short paragraph, we immediately recognize the author; other styles are difficult to comprehend or not as readily distinguishable. But each comes from some combination of the elements of style that make the writing personal.

There is a clear connection between reading good literature and writing with a sense of style. Any good writing course will stress this connection, for its value both in learning the basics of composition and in developing and maturing as a writer. We read Chekhov, Dostoevsky and Conrad not only to ponder their insights on the human dilemma and its impending tragedy, but also to hear how their style helps them create and develop the subject in its totality. But good stylists can be found not just among the famous writers of fiction but also within the halls and the pages of one's academic discipline.

The power of expository expression is perhaps most clearly evident in the genre of writing known as the essay. Some of the most notable stylists were masters of the essay or the short story—E. B. White and George Orwell come to mind. The essay has the virtue of allowing the writer to say something emphatically in order to express a point of view without necessarily having to develop all of the foundations either within empiricism or within past work in the field of human endeavor that have led to his or her particular position. Essays are often statements of one's conviction on a subject, statements that are logically developed but that also clearly convey the author's passion on the subject. Historically as a genre—as developed by Emerson and Thoreau, for example—the essay conveyed a particular thought or position on any subject that in the future might become the basis of a longer piece of writing. The virtue of the essay is that the style and personal voice of the writer is up front; it is usually not muted; its impact and implications are clear and open to debate.

In concluding these musings on writers and style, I think of two writers and issues that are in some ways in opposition. One is that there are writers whom I can read but whose style I can never fully understand or enter into because I do not possess the prior texts or share the reality that would allow me to do so. Their style and thus their reality remain something that at least partially eludes me. I am thinking in particular of the American writer Thomas Pynchon. His is a unique style that in many ways is part of a personal realism that is, for many reasons, difficult for me to enter.

On the other hand is one of the writers I cherish most for his style, creativity and literary inventiveness: Walter W. "Red" Smith (1905-1982), the American sportswriter who for decades wrote for the *New York Herald Tribune* and then after 1972 for the *New York Times*. Reading and re-reading Smith's unique combination of language, insight and style is for me always an exceptional experience in which I am ushered into new realities on baseball and on life in general. When asked about his creative style and ways

of interpreting baseball events, Smith quipped, modestly, that writing is as effortless as bleeding over a typewriter. Smith's comment never fails to evoke in me a hearty "AMEN."

The writing of the ten authors in this volume represent a spectrum of the issues addressed in the paragraphs above. In her study of the behavior of a marine gastropod Katherine Canning examines community dynamics from a new angle. Emily Smith draws on personal experience as well as interviews in exploring how and why wheelchair riders personalize their machines. Richmond Darko does a retrospective study of the effects of exercise in the rehabilitation of post-surgical cardiac patients. Shannon Davis sheds light into the role of anger in Alice (of Wonderland fame) and other such well-known heroines of children's books. Gus Wiseman explains one of the complex functions of almost-complete graphs. Melissa Bruzas traces the lineage of the Anti-Masonry movement in the United States from Revolutionary times to the present day. Hoiman Chiu analyzes the marketing tactics employed in the pharmaceutical industry and their potential effects on patient care. Cheuk Yee Loretta Ho reports on her experiments on rattlesnake venom. Maxim Belenkiy assesses the many factors contributing to the trend in American business to use outsourcing as a means of controlling costs. Finally, Grainne Grant takes us to the little-known island of Socotra, where frankincense trees produce what has long been a highly-prized commodity.

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