

1 The Prose Problem and “The Books”

Your damned nonsense can I stand twice or once, but sometimes always, my God, never.

Svatislav Richter, to the second flute
at Covent Garden

PEOPLE HAVE THOUGHT prose style many things—persuasion or mere music, duty or pastime, ornament only, the man himself. It has been left for Americans to think it a problem: the National Problem, the Communications Problem. From time to time, we castigate our daily speech, but it is for written utterance—for prose—that the true jeremiads are reserved. These are hard to assess. Prophets of doom rarely confess their prejudices. And for the American prose scene the prejudices are many, and probably inevitable. As an English commentator put it: “On subjects like America and Prose one’s mind cannot be made a blank” (Geoffrey Moore, “American Prose Today,” p. 351).

It is easy enough for the language teacher to deliver himself of unarguable pronouncements, especially if these reveal his calling to be crucial, unvalued, and underpaid. Language provides the medium of conscious life, and language teachers ought often to point this out. If language becomes truly unexpressive, we indeed become a mob. With so much at stake, it should not surprise us that the epithets for current American prose (and the educational procedures that create it) are quick to damn. Jacques Barzun’s summary phrase “Black Rot” may stand as example. Yet the world has most

often been arthritic in its utterance. Whether our historical situation, our prose problem, emerges as truly more severe than that of other times or other countries, no one, with any hard evidence at least, can at present judge. This problem, like so many of ours, seems unprecedented. No other country has ever considered skill in prose composition essential to good citizenship and has tried to teach this skill to a majority of its citizens. The citizens of no other country have, so far, undergone so heavy a verbal saturation by the media. The scope and magnitude of our problems, their now-or-never fundamentality, vastly increase the pressure on the means—ultimately language—through which they are to be expressed and perhaps solved.

At the same time, our processes of education—and the theories that underlie them—have been undergoing dislocating stresses unequalled in the West since the Reformation. We do not know how much of what we loosely call “communication” is written, how much oral, or what the relationship between the two kinds is. We possess no calculus of misunderstandings. “Failure of communication,” our cant term for all occasions, often masks simple vacancy of mind. A student writes on an examination paper, “Abuses in the Church troubled Martin Luther beyond belief.” Does the fault lie with language or the mind? We have no way of measuring the efficiency of our schools in teaching good prose, for there are no agreed upon standards of good prose and no standard of teaching accomplishment to measure against.

Furthermore, the problem of prose—so large, so central—introduces fundamental questions. What exactly *is* communication and how does it take place? What do we *mean*

by clarity? How may we separate clarity from special interest, from attempts to persuade, or from correctness? Good prose takes time. Is it always worth it? Does clear writing really make for clear thinking? Are the criticisms of modern prose directed at clarity or at elegance? Does elegance, or eloquence, improve the communication of concepts? In an increasingly oral technology, will we need written communication at all? On the electronic screen, will words take second place to images? Finally, if we are in a crisis of utterance, is it *civilization* that is at stake, or only the joy and pleasure that literate people take in language?

The problem of prose, all this is to say, does not at present admit of scientific (quantitative) resolution, or even of scientific address. We do not know even the magnitude of the problem. As a Welfare Department spokesman once eloquently complained, "We're in a position where we're really not sure of what kind of a situation we're in." Humanists will hasten to add that such a problem should not—by its nature, cannot—profitably endure scientific scrutiny. You may agree, but it is hard to find the agreement reassuring. It leaves us in a shady universe of tentative hints and heuristic guesses. One would like to know at least the boundary conditions of the problem. All that we have now is a growing sense of muddled language, public and private, in which "like" appears every third word and everyone says "You know?" but nobody knows.

To so vaguely defined a problem, one can scarcely speak of a coherent national response. But there has been that kind of activity which begins to define a problem, if not to solve it. It has come through the schools and colleges. No one need

anatomize again their performance in teaching students how to write. The schools' failures have been inevitable. Teaching grammar and composition takes a great deal of time, time few teachers in America are given. Because of this massive failure, the weight has fallen on that peculiar American institution, the college course in Freshman Composition. To this course, now ten weeks long or, for real depth, a full semester, come the tired, the poor, the huddled students yearning to be freed. Their training and experience vary from weak to nonexistent. The plan is to have them emerge at the end of the course writing prose as limpid as a purling stream and as lean as a greyhound on a diet. The miracle workers who preside over these classrooms of thirty to forty aspirants are usually graduate students. They have seldom been trained to teach prose composition and may not write good prose themselves. They will teach two sections of such a course—in hard times and places, three. They are students themselves, and upon their performance as such depend their higher degree and subsequent escape from teaching Freshman Comp. Yet they are exhorted to give their whole heart to this shortcut to oblivion. But if they are observant, they will harbor little optimism about what, even at best and at full time, they might accomplish in one course.

Consider what they are trying to teach. The usual Freshman Composition course takes as its subject something called (old-fashion) Rhetoric or (new-fashion) Basic Communications Skills. New or old, it is basically the medieval trivium, or first arts course, a progress of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. The medieval student spent *all* his time on these three *until he got his B.A.* Students now get ten weeks. Invari-

ably, these students know nothing of logic when they begin, practically nothing of grammar, and often literally do not know what rhetoric is. They do know that the course is unimportant to their future academic careers. No professor, if they go into science, will expect them to write comprehensible prose, or penalize—and correct—them if they do not. If they go on to study social science, they will find the lucid prose their eager teaching assistant urges upon them a positive handicap. And even should they remain in the English department, the chance of their being held to a standard of good prose grows daily smaller.

There are more lurid colors for the vignette. Add that the instructors may not know the rules of formal logic themselves, or the modern thinking that has almost transformed the traditional subject. More importantly, they will be aware that in our time there are two “grammars,” one traditional and prescriptive, one usage-centered and “transformational.” Though they try to explain the same phenomena, the two stand poles apart. Each Freshman Composition class, depending on the text used and the instructor’s knowledge and predilection, will offer a different mixture of the two. To so promising a pedagogical situation, add other influences. The Freshman Composition course is formally required of, and thus resented by, all. In an age of few requirements, and those dwindling, it allegorizes cruel and unnatural punishment. Furthermore, the brightest students are often excused from it on the basis of their high-school performance. The rest feel themselves, not without reason, the Awkward Squad.

What is likely to be learned in such a course? In recent years some faculties, answering sensibly “Nothing at all,” have

abolished it. Nothing is offered in its place. Instead, a spontaneous game of “Let’s Pretend” begins, and the students’ ineptitude is simply ignored. The problem that high schools gave up on and left to the colleges, the colleges now give up on and leave to the graduate schools and society at large. Even were the class to succeed, grounds for abolition might obtain. The amount of attention paid to changes in student writing ability over the undergraduate years is shockingly small. One excellent study, Albert R. Kitzhaber’s *Themes, Theories, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College*, would seem to constitute—though he had not the heart to press his conclusions so far—the best evidence yet for the uselessness of Freshman Composition. Kitzhaber studied Dartmouth College students—bright, carefully selected, and very energetically taught writing in the freshman year, for the most part by seasoned, degree-bearing, full-time faculty members. The students improved. But unless they majored in English, by their senior year they were back to square one. The students worked hard. The instructors worked even harder, graded ten to twenty thousand words a week of undergraduate writing, in detail, revisions submitted—the lot. Yet very little took, very little lasted. Even under optimal circumstances the course failed.

What has gone wrong? It would be comforting to think this failure only one of will and money. If Americans were willing to spend the truly vast sums needed for good schools, the schools themselves would solve the problem. If only the colleges had the money, in their hecatombs of English 1 sections they could solve it. The profession could see the problem, and bracing itself to its duty, do it. Yet even were

this battalion of blessings to descend upon us, the problem would remain. Poverties of attitude, not only of funds, create it.

“It is the thought that really matters.” This illusion runs deep in American society. When American students sit down, having—sacred thing—“expressed themselves,” and are required to revise what they have written, they feel—there is no other word for it—silly. Only a child would do this. What’s the point in spending a lot of time prettying things up? The thought is what counts. Style is for English teachers and editors. To be interested in it, especially for a man, is like being interested in furnishing his house—women’s work. So, should a student, by guess or by God, actually learn something about prose style, he will find nobody in the society he speedily joins who knows or cares what good prose is, and nothing that encourages him to write well or rewards him if he does. The stupidest and most recalcitrant students of composition usually make the most sensible comment on the course: “Why should I care how I write when nobody else does?”

They are even more right than they know. They point to the joyous world beyond the confines of school and college, but few within the ivory tower know or care either. Professor Kitzhaber puts it fairly:

The only solution is a general conviction among students that good writing and good thinking are inseparable and that both are characteristic of a liberally educated adult. But students are not likely to develop this conviction as long as their other teachers in school and college so often reveal that they themselves lack it. (pp. 119–20)

Criticizing prose style takes more than knowledge and experience. It takes time. The high-school teacher perhaps does not have the knowledge, and certainly not the time, to develop the experience. As a result, students are sent to college who simply have never thought about prose style. And these students meet a professor who takes his delight in teaching and researching a *subject*, and that subject is seldom prose style. Thus the university, after the genuflection of Freshman Composition, ignores the problem as completely as does outside society.

Good prose does not come from a one-time inoculation. It has to be sustained by the standards of a society, by that society's sense of style. It has to be encouraged, appreciated, rewarded. Its countervailing ugliness has to be mocked. None of this now happens in America. There may once have been enclaves in English departments that did these things. No more. Seldom do we experience good prose in our daily life or try to write it. We are never encouraged to pay attention to language.

It is precisely this act of attention to the verbal surface that American students find so awkward, so artificial, in prose-style instruction. If you ask American students to read a prose passage out loud, they sit paralyzed with fright. It is not simply that they have never in their lives read one aloud, though this is often true. It is that they must pay attention to words in a new way, and they find this acutely uncomfortable. Americans use their language, spoken as well as written, in a chronic absence of mind, like. The result, as the following pages demonstrate, is writing not so much incorrect or unclear—though it is usually both—as simply unseeing.

Our society, then, offers no positive reinforcement to good prose, no negative to bad. Still worse, it offers positive reinforcement to the bad, negative to the good. The media, as one would expect, reflect and exacerbate the American attitude toward language. Words are to use. Advertising, in supplying plastic soul to the media, literally *uses up* words for profit. It parodies divinity in turning the word into matter, into goods. Every day of his life, an American encounters the word primarily in someone's effort to sell him something. He must train himself to look through the word to the trap beneath. Enjoy the language and they've got you. Karl Shapiro called advertising the poetry of the poor. It is the poetry of us all—a poetry that travesties poetry, where the words never exist for themselves, where their dignity, shape, form is never respected, where they are perpetually for sale. Advertising is America's real composition class, its real training in prose style. Faced with advertising, the dedicated teacher of prose composition is like the saintly fireman in the cliché, charging hell with a bucket of ice water.

It is instructive to compare the English with the American tradition of thinking about prose style. The British tradition has been a strongly normative one, but unstated. Good prose, in a common phrase, is like good manners. Everyone may be expected to recognize it and use it without fuss. The rich literary tradition underlying any kind of sensitivity to prose style is likewise assumed. Thus, if you pick up one of the standard discussions of prose written in Britain (see Read, Murry, Sutherland, and Lucas in my Notes for Further Reading), you find that it draws continually on—and supposes familiarity with—the whole range of English literature, and

often Continental texts as well. Only with such a grounding can a prose style in English really be understood, be experienced.

Prose may be a “problem” for us as it has never been for the English, precisely because we lack both the literary and the social norms that give it meaning. We can assume neither a norm of gentility nor a literary tradition. Teachers of prose in America are often at a loss when asked to recommend studies of style. Such studies almost invariably talk about it in terms of texts the student has never heard of. One British theorist recommends, as a useful means for testing conciseness in English prose, quick translation into Latin or Greek. Americans, students or not, live in a different world. We are trying to learn something about prose style without the whole context that has, traditionally at least, rendered prose style comprehensible and given it meaning. We are trying to learn in a vacuum. And we may, of course, add as a footnote to the contemporary scene the much-heralded demise of the book. Americans used to read only current fiction. Now they read nothing at all. For written utterance, they have as context only journalism. How accurate such prophecies of doom really are, I suppose few would want to say. But the teacher of composition, at whatever level, will speedily be reminded that she is, more and more, trying to teach prose to people who, at least voluntarily, seldom read *anything*.

A comment by a British translator about American translations points shrewdly to our central difficulty:

In their own tongue Americans fear no obscurity, no imprecision. When it comes to rendering a foreign page into American English they are hampered, however, by a puritan distrust

for words. Normal Americans have a very small vocabulary. They feel towards words as they feel towards the parts of a car: let them function; no more is asked of them. (Alan Pryce-Jones, "Translations and the Americans")

"They feel towards words as they feel towards the parts of a car." This attitude underlies the prose problem in America. We *use* words but we don't really *like* them. Such an attitude is implicit not only in courses in composition but in the society as a whole. The assumption is Jeffersonian. The best prose style is the one that styles the least. In the best of all possible worlds, there would not be any words at all to mislead, only concepts. In a throwaway culture, words, like everything else, are to be got rid of. If, as I argue here, prose style begins in pleasure and not in clarity, the throwaway assumption defeats us before we begin.

American pragmatism insists that words are for use, not enjoyment; American Puritanism insists that expression is a duty, not a pleasure. We dislike learning foreign languages because such learning requires taking pleasure in words for themselves. Let all the world learn one language (English, lucky for us) so that we can do away with verbal misunderstandings and get down to brass tacks. We learn to speed-read our own language for the same reason. Such an attitude becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Prose written without joy can only be read in the same spirit. Given the average quality of American prose, speed-reading it out of existence is probably the best thing. So we come to hate the word, and use it still more ineffectively. "No profit goes where is no pleasure ta'en."