Return to Roots: Strunk, White, Orwell

Where did I get the idea that writing is a disciplined expression of free thought? Possibly it was Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" or Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*. Possibly both.

Both documents speak like a second conscience, warning against unclarity and dullness and enjoining you to take responsibility for your words. Though one is a manual and one isn't; though only one went through revised editions; though Orwell's thinking is political and Strunk and White's isn't, nevertheless "Politics and the English Language" and *Elements of Style* offer strikingly similar prescriptions. Your writing should be honest, direct, well-honed, particular—not insincere, pretentious, wordy, abstract. As it evolved over the middle decades of the 20th century, *Elements of Style* even incorporated Orwell's translation of a verse from Ecclesiastes into social-science drivel.[1] How is it that two works

[1] "To show what happens when strong writing is deprived of its vigor, George Orwell once took a passage from the Bible and drained it of its blood." White then reproduced the result: "Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account." The *consideration-considerable* doublet is a nice touch. Strunk died in the year "Politics and the English Language" appeared—1946.

composed on opposite sides of the Atlantic arrive independently at such similar recommendations?

First consider the parallels:

ES: "Use definite, specific, concrete language."

Orwell: "The whole tendency of modern prose is away from concreteness."

ES: "Use figures of speech sparingly."

Orwell: "Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print."

ES: "Omit needless words."

Orwell: "If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out."

ES: "Use the active voice."

Orwell: "Never use the passive where you can use the active."

ES: "Be clear."

Orwell: "Modern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer."

ES: "Write in English."

Orwell: "Never use a foreign phrase . . . if you can think of an everyday English equivalent."

ES: “The approach to style is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity.”

Orwell: “The great enemy of clear language is insincerity.”

Moreover, both texts include ironic disclaimers.

*ES: ”*There is . . . no inflexible rule by which writers may shape their course.”

Orwell: “Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.”

Enough said.

The crisis that occasioned “Politics and the English Language” was the rise of a style of argument so hostile to thought, so clouded with clichés and abstractions, that it verges on the unreadable. Such perfected dullness lends itself to the work of concealment, and the strain of argument of greatest concern to Orwell is the Marxist apology for mass murder, which must be obscure lest the reality of mass murder itself emerge. Hence the use of a crypto-language which is English in name only. “People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*.”[2] While “the jargon peculiar to Marxist writing” does feature some vivid terms such as “hangman” and “cannibal,” it is essentially alien to the English tongue, consisting largely of “phrases translated from Russian, German

[2] Note that the sentence “this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*” is cast in the passive voice. For that matter, so is the sentence “In addition, the passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active.” But so what?

or French." Many exhibits of bad writing, Marxist and otherwise, in "Politics and the English Language" seem as remote from vernacular English as if they came from some bureau in the sky.

The stunning image of an orator with blank discs for eyes appears first in "Politics and the English Language" and then *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which is set in a London that might as well be Moscow, under the gaze of a Big Brother who is Stalin. In Orwell's judgment, it seems, Britons who speak the automatic language of Marxism (as well as practitioners of the more cerebral art of apologetics, like "comfortable English professor" in "Politics and the English Language") contribute their mite to the dissolution of London as an English city and its reconstitution as an outpost of something called socialism.

In Orwell's time Marxism purported to be all at once a science, an irresistible mass movement, and a supreme Good transcending the sovereignty of nations; hence its pretense of omniscience, grandiose rhetoric, unappealable judgments, universalism. Born Eric Blair, Orwell took the name of England's patron saint as well as that of an English river, and in "Politics and the English Language" and elsewhere speaks for the local, the specific, the imperfect, the limited. A telling image in "Politics and the English Language" likens a mass of bombastic clichés to tea leaves choking a sink: telling not only because such a homely figure acts like an antidote to bombast itself, but because tea is an English institution.[3] (A literally stopped-up sink reappears in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.) By urging his fellow Britons to write good Saxon English instead of a denatured language of false

[3] See Orwell's essay, "A Nice Cup of Tea."

heroism, Orwell hoped to restore a measure of moral sanity, or at least make writing less ugly.

The return to roots which Orwell advocates—the embrace of Saxon English in preference to a kind of malignant Esperanto—is all at once an act of purification, a rejection of insincerity and pretension, and a defense of virtuous simplicity. And the very same is true of the return to roots—American roots—recommended in *Elements of Style*.

The sort of craftsmanship both practiced and preached in *Elements of Style* acquires heightened meaning at a time when ideas as well as goods are mass produced. In the year 1919 when E. B. White found himself in Strunk's classroom, subject to the self-proclaimed authority of a privately published handbook, the United States was fast becoming such a society. The founder of the public relations industry, Freud's nephew Edward Bernays, had just learned the elements of propaganda in the Great War and was about to begin his ascent to undreamed-of levels of influence.[4] The forthright, individualistic style affirmed by Strunk, then White removes us from the anonymity of the consumer society he helped create. With the popularity of higher education itself beginning around the 1950's (when White first revised the manual he encountered in 1919), the social-science style parodied in Orwell's translation of Ecclesiastes became not just influential but authoritative.

More than once in "Politics and the English Language" Orwell notes that bad habits of thought and speech spread by imitation, and the errors flagged in *Elements of Style* wouldn't be worth bothering with unless they too had gone into circulation and become

[4] Stewart Justman, "Freud and His Nephew," *Social Research* (Summer 1994): 457-76.

almost normative. In this case the driving force behind the process isn't an ideology purporting to be the engine of history but the relentless similarity of the stuff issuing from advertisers, public-relations firms, boardrooms, editorial offices—the thousand and one headquarters of the consumer society. Confronted with the enervating effect of poor examples and the fact of social contagion, Strunk and White recommend a return to roots. "The approach to style is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity." There speaks the authentic voice of American puritanism.

Puritanism implies the censure of ornament and frivolity. Strunk and White condemn "mannerisms, tricks, adornments." Purge yourself of voguish foolery and return to sense. "Avoid fancy words."

Puritanism enjoins honesty. "A careful and honest writer does not need to worry about style," says *Elements of Style*.

Those who think of puritanism as synonymous with dogmatism might recall Milton's "Areopagitica": "Yet is it not impossible that [Truth] may have more shapes than one." As a model sentence in *Elements of Style* phrases it, "The trouble with truth is its many varieties." Observes E. B. White in his Introduction to 1959 revision of *Elements of Style*, "Professor Strunk, although one of the most inflexible and choosy of men, was quick to acknowledge the fallacy of inflexibility and the danger of doctrine." According to another model sentence, "Understanding is that penetrating quality of knowledge that grows from theory, practice, conviction, assertion, error, and humiliation." No doubt many a reader has found the examples of bad writing in *Elements of Style* humiliating in themselves.

If puritanism can be understood as a discipline of purification, then there is something of puritanism is a manual of style full of warnings against one vice or another. However, Strunk and White plead not for piety but conscience. Just as Orwell's "scrupulous writer" will ask himself or herself at every moment "What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?"—so Strunk and White expect the writer to question each sentence in detail like someone submitting to an examination by conscience. People will benefit from *Elements of Style* only if they first accept the perhaps unpalatable notion that they need to check their own tendency to laxity or worse at every turn.[5]

Style for Strunk and White isn't just style but ethos, and the ethos endorsed in their handbook is one of forthrightness, plain dealing, Yankee virtue, republican simplicity, honest craft. If you have something to say, then get on your hind legs and say it. Show respect for yourself, your audience, and the language you hold in common. Reach your own conclusions. "Avoid tame, colorless, hesitating, noncommittal language," but don't strut, either. In fact, don't advertise yourself at all. If "The approach to style is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity," these aesthetic virtues emphatically rule out self-inflation, as does virtue per se. Only by not concerning yourself with style for its own sake will you achieve style. Seek not and ye shall find. As plainly, even modestly as it is

[5] After using both "Politics and the English Language" and *Elements of Style* in the classroom with poor results, I reluctantly concluded that the practice and even the concept of critical scrutiny of one's own work was foreign to my students.

written, “Politics and the English Language” itself is inimitable because it bears Orwell’s style.

Strunk and White’s English is Yankee English, and Orwell’s is Saxon English, but no matter. In the spirit of puritanism in the most liberal sense, both documents urge the reform of bad habits by the practice of self-discipline, the exercise of responsibility. Both would have us rid ourselves of insincerity, posturing, nonsense. Judging that “In prose, the worst thing one can do with words is to surrender to them”—a statement that casts words virtually as temptations—Orwell speaks for both documents. Both seek to counteract the vitiating effects of bad examples. Both detest the argot of the social sciences. In the eyes of users of terms like “intersectionality,” both would represent an intolerable nativism.

Neither Orwell nor Strunk and White speak for an established church. It seems fitting that Orwell chose for his biblical model of good English Ecclesiastes, a book posing “a powerful dissent from the mainline Wisdom outlook.”[6] The verse quoted (9:11) comments on the perverse power of chance—not a sentiment on which orthodoxies are built. “Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style,” writes Orwell, a born dissenter himself. That *Elements of Style* holds up antithetical models of expression by Hemingway and Faulkner on the one hand, and Frost and Whitman on the other, suggests it too disdains orthodoxy. (Who would have imagined a poet as oceanic as Whitman or a novelist as pleonastic as Faulkner would appear without a distancing comment by Strunk or White, those lovers of brevity and clarity?) And whereas Orwell’s plain speech has rich literary resonance, the seemingly narrow precepts of *Elements of*

[6] Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books* (New York: Norton, 2010), p. 338.

Style allow for vivid imagery, irony, inversion, paradox, and other potent literary devices in model sentences.

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Of his rules like "Never use a long word where a short one will do," Orwell says, "One could keep all of them and still write bad English, but one could not write the kind of stuff that I quoted . . . at the beginning of this article." However, it is not only the way a statement is constructed that matters, but what sort of utterance it is in the first place. The rhetoric Orwell quotes from a Communist pamphlet, reviling "all the frantic Fascist captains" in a panic over "the rising tide of the mass revolutionary movement," is abhorrent not because of the particulars of its phrasing but because the entire rant represents a determined effort to disable thought itself.

In *Elements of Style* we find no frantic Fascist captains, if only because such invective has no place in civil discourse, to which the authors are committed. *Elements of Style* is a seminar in civility. Its wit, while sharp, is genial. Its model sentences do not harangue the reader or arraign society, and this absence is as instructive as any precept of style—perhaps as instructive as the lot of them. It happens that a few of Strunk and White's maxims do concern the whole of a statement, not the particulars of its construction. The simple admonition "Do not overstate" rules out not only the rhetoric of hysteria (as in the Communist pamphlet), but any argument that trades in exaggeration. The responsible writer rejects hyperbole in all its forms as well as code-words that attach

special meanings to lofty generalities; abuses like these offend the principle of respect for your fellow citizens. “No one can write decently who is distrustful of the reader’s intelligence.”

Earlier I noted that for Strunk and White as well as Orwell, the disciplined use of language—the conscientious pursuit of clarity—correlates with freedom of thought. We now recognize that for all three, rights and duties intertwine, so that the right to the reader’s attention entails a duty to state one’s own thoughts in well-chosen words as well as an appropriate regard for the other’s right to judge them. The principled writer does not solicit automatic responses. Hence Orwell’s comment that “Politics and the English Language” concerns “language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought.” To be scrupulous isn’t just to edit sentences for clarity and length but to shun the project of “preventing thought” as if it were an attack on the reader (which in effect it is). The mindful avoidance of that dark art is implied and exemplified by Strunk, White and Orwell’s every word.

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