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Style through Control: The Pleasures of the Beginning Writer

As a teacher of writing and an occasional writer of fiction and poetry, I would like to propose today that "style" is a term wholly out of place in a class of beginning writers. In its place I want to suggest the word "control," and I want to talk about why "control" may be a more suitable byword during the first semester or year of a writing class.

E. D. Hirsch, Jr., in *The Philosophy of Composition*,¹ supports Louis Milic's assumption that "learning the craft of prose is learning to write the same meaning in a different and more effective way," an assumption about the conscious aspects of style which Hirsch and others agree justifies the teaching of writing. While Milic's insight may be practical for advanced students of writing, one has inevitably to wonder how it can be applied, without frustration, to beginning writers. Clearly it is a call for control, yet a control too refined, one that does not take into account the beginning writer's fundamental failure to bring to his or her writing ordeal a meaning hospitable to the struggle for greater effectiveness. At the very earliest levels of learning to write, levels at which we find the majority of college freshmen today, a writer is often so intimidated by previous failures and so grossly limited in writing experience—in diction, syntax, and especially in his capacity to endure as a writer—as to obscure meaning, particularly from himself. Although he may be willing to articulate his meaning at some length verbally, more often he hastens to agree with a teacher's assessment of what his sentences are getting at. A change of form in his writing often yields a major revelation of content. It brings an idea into focus, or, more spectacularly, locates an idea scarcely hinted at in the original. If beginners say something in a way that is not "effective" it is not because they have no style, but because they have not yet had the experience of producing content of a "writable" or controllable dimension. In other words, they have not yet developed, through the practice Milic himself recognizes as necessary *if* anyone is to learn to write,² the skill and the patience to push their thinking to those more interesting boundaries available only to writers and the most remarkable of Peripatetic thinkers. Nowhere do beginners have a body *of* writing in which a drift *of* style can legitimately be detected, nor do they know the bittersweet pleasure of a writer forced to reveal himself by what Milic has called "the constant linguistic necessity."

Milic draws a distinction between stylistic options "made unconsciously while the language-generating mechanism is proceeding" (i.e., during the act of putting words on paper) and conscious rhetorical choices "made while the mechanism is at rest" (during the revision stage).³ I am suggesting that writing experience in both stages—and nonpunitive experience at that—provides the writer with the gross control of language necessary to the discovery, expression, and adjustment of meaning. Eventually, further writing experience provides data in which all the options of an experienced writer can legitimately be identified as "style."

Perhaps I can make this position plainer by testing some popular definitions of style on the writing of a student—let us call her Karen—in one of our basic writing courses.

We may take style to mean those recurrent features of a text that an author habitually uses, in the sense that a writer cannot help writing the way he or she does. Or we may take style in its ornamental view to mean deviations from a "neutral"--even a "naked"-norm. According to this definition, the writer dresses the same meaning in a different suit of clothes for different occasions. Or we may take style to mean those features that suggest what is implicit and unstated about a writer's attitude toward his subject, for example, whether a writer's concerns about freedom, injustice, and patriotism are expressed in abstract nouns or, as Camus' are, pronominally in the first person. Now I would ask that you substitute for the word writer, the name of our student Karen, a placidly inexperienced nineteen-year-old on whose earliest essay, submitted in your class of beginners, I ask you to focus your memories.

Is Karen's style of writing recognizable in those recurrent features which she can't avoid expressing? (Aren't these recurrent errors or, at best, features of monotony?)

Is Karen's style the manner in which she deviates from a neutral norm? And do her deviations suggest that she is adroit enough to change the dress of her message at will? (Aren't they really circumlocutions and syntactic traps into which she helplessly falls, hobbled as she is by a limited and insecure syntactic repertory?)

Measured by the third definition, is Karen's style the details by which her writing gives her away, implies her attitudes, and suggests her personality? After reading Karen's first essay would you risk delivering a verdict on her, call her aggressive, playful, daring, understated? More often her writing is precisely the evidence that misleads us into thinking she is a zero, a shallow, depersonalized individual known to her readers through her use of the passive voice, her frequent nominalizations, and a tendency to abstractions and unsupported generalizations. Is there a real Karen detectable under these bland features that every writing teacher knows have no life signs? Those of us who have been teaching for a while know better; the truth is we are no longer surprised when a dignified, interesting, if vulnerable and unsure, young woman named Karen shows up in our office for her first conference. This student, with considerable personal grace and enough presence to get through a conference with a professor, is still a long way from exhibiting style in her writing. Handicapped, she hasn't had enough experience to try out the structures that will hold her ideas and generate more of them. She not only has little to say but few structures to say it in and less confidence that she can succeed.

We don't know exactly when Karen started writing. For us Karen's life as a writer begins with her placement essay, a document singularly out of touch with the personality of its writer. Here are excerpts from two placement essays, let us say Karen's and another student's, not the best we've seen, but clearly not the worst. (I should point out that at Queens College the writers of these essays were not admitted into the freshman course but were placed in the writing course that precedes freshman composition).

(1) Anybody who doesn't read once in a while is missing an awful lot. Most people who read get a lot of knowledge of what is happening all around them. Reading can be very enjoyable if you know what you are reading. When you read a book that is interesting and a book that you like, you just think about that book, you get so absorbed in the story, that sometimes you don't want to put it down.

Some people read for a hobby or they have to read a book for class. If you like the book it will take no time to read. I know when I read a book that I enjoy, it could be mystery, drama, or comedy, I get so wrapped up in what I am reading, that I just can't put it down or think of anything else.

Occasionally, there are people who read books that are boring to some people. There are people who have no knowledge of reading. Either they don't care or are just plain lazy. People are just lucky to have eyes to see and to read because it is a wonderful thing to do in

your pastime. If people knew just how fortunate they were if they knew how to read, there would be a better world.

(2) The word laughter can be one of the best things to do these days. If not for laughter in the country everything would be one big mess. We don't have too much peace around the world today so laughter or laughing can make things around you and people much more pleasant. Laughter is when people tell jokes and laugh. Laughing is the knack to tell whether the joke was good or not. If not then you'll just have to try again. There is also a sarcastic laughter when people commit a stupid thing and laugh, it wasn't funny but just plain stupid. Telling jokes is also the best way a person gets out of a bad mood, so maybe instead of getting down or feeling sorry for yourself, laughter can be the best thing to get you out of that bad mood. It is stupid to laugh at immature things, so when somebody cracks a joke think about whether it was funny or not. Laughing at everything can be a sign of not being grown up. Sometimes laughing at everything isn't the best thing to do. Laughter is what brings some people into show business for the comedians. If not for the audience, comedians wouldn't be around too much longer. There are many high paying salaries for comedians because his job is to make the audience laugh, by telling jokes or doing some funny stunts. Making people laugh can be very entertaining and the comedian telling the jokes can be very self-satisfying for him and the audience. These are some of my thoughts on what laughter does and some of its meanings.

What kind of writing is this? I'd like to share with you some quite unexpected insights I gained into this kind of writing from the work of investigators into an analogous kind. I refer to the work on the style of suicide notes in articles, both popular and scholarly, that range in title from "Suicide Notes Are Dull"⁵ to "Some Effects of Motivation on Style of Encoding."⁶ After reading these articles, it struck me that the stress on the inexperienced writer of a placement essay and the stress on an imminent suicide may be so similar as to produce similar stylistic patterns in their writing. Edwin S. Schneidman, a specialist on the sociopsychological causes of suicide, remarks that suicide notes are "like the postcards sent home from the Grand Canyon, the catacombs or the pyramids-essentially unimaginative . . . and not at all reflecting the grandeur of the scene being described or the grandeur of the human emotions that one might expect to be engendered by the situation." He goes on to say "some notes are like last minute shopping lists . . . 'fix the spark plugs on the car,' while others get in one last lick, 'you drove me to this.'" Certainly the notes are "belabored" and yield very little drama.

But why do we expect grandeur of a suicide? The suicide feels like a zero and, pitifully, has no sense of the grandeur of this exquisite and horrifying human ordeal. The writer of the placement essay is put into a remarkably similar do-or-die mentality. While he is not literally suicidal, his life as a student, his self-image as a student, is on the line. Is there an observable stylistic connection between the two? Charles E. Osgood, who comes to his study on the effects of stress on encoding as a psycholinguist, hypothesizes about the relationship of stress to style as shown in suicide notes. He says that the increased stress of the moment causes greater stereotyping of choices. These limitations show up in less diversity of vocabulary, greater repetitiousness, and more terms which permit of no exception (such as *always*, *everybody*, *no one*, and *forever*).

Those of us who read placement essays will certainly recognize these stylistic constraints as the very same signals we look for in tagging a writer for a remedial course: limitations of vocabulary, broad generalizations that begin, "Everybody in the world today" and "People who read books always . . ." as well as unintegrated lists of ideas and a pervasive repetitiousness. Osgood goes on to talk about the high instance of evaluative terms and ambivalent constructions, although some of the aberrations he expected never materialized, such as the total disorganization of language skills, a general structural disturbance, and decreased length of sentences-none of which seemed characteristic of the suicide notes studied. Grammatical problems, which appear to transcend moments of stress, can be counted on to show up routinely in the writing of anyone afflicted with poor grammar.

My question is, does it make sense to talk about improving the style of writers of suicide notes? Well, we hardly need to say that the potential suicide can write about his anxieties and terror only when that anxiety has been alleviated and he is again in control. It may well be oxymoronic to talk about the "style" of suicide notes. In the same way, it seems to me outrageous to talk about the "style" of beginning writers. Beginning writers need to experience writing for a long period of time under conditions without stress, without penalty of a grade closing down on them whenever they exhibit a completed sentence. Just how reliable the placement essay can be is a subject of some dispute. Certainly it would be a contribution if we could alleviate the stress of a test situation. But, imperfect and stressful as placement essays are, they still appear to be the best instrument for testing writing that we have.

But why subject our students to the tyranny of the suicidal placement essay all semester long? I know from the number of excellent and humane books that have recently come across my desk that the wind traveling through the country's writing classrooms has been changing. But I also hope we understand that by changing the climate in which writers write, we are not talking only about the survival of good writing. Keeping the stress of the placement exam out of the classroom may mean the survival of many of our students as students because under stress they do not learn to deal with the complexities of college-level thinking.

Another way we increase the pressure on writers who possess little self-confidence is to charge them to write in their own "voice." It is as though we were addressing clients in Overeaters Anonymous who are publicly shamed when they are told, "You are what you eat." "Write in your own voice" means exactly that. ".Aha! Now we see what you are. You are what you write." Although later on I shall question Richard Lanham's thesis in *Style: An Anti-textbook*, here I must agree with his attack on the dogma of sincerity⁷ How many beginning writers have one "voice"? A nineteen-year-old who cannot decide on a major, who cannot see a job out there in his or her future, whose handwriting slants in a different direction in every paragraph, sometimes in every line? The voice of that formative personality can begin to produce writing, and thinking, in quantity. Perhaps what we mean by "voice" applies only to a given piece of writing: "Write this essay in a consistent voice, one that shows control and purpose."

It may be only through prolific writing that writers can recognize the cycle of acts" they perform every time they sit down to write. Only prolific writing will create the multitude of options in subject as well as in syntax, and, in the case of basic writers, in grammatical forms. Who but teachers can resupply the students' exhausted energy and good will as they continue daily to face those baffling options? They find out that daily writing and daily response to writing is the way they learn to choose one option over another. The expanse of work a writer produces is a great flood of evidence, as we discover when we lug home student journals and free writing—the evidence that tells us the beginner has moved past the "I have nothing to write about" stage and into experience. As he or she writes, and thinks, and writes some more, these experiences become, willy nilly, more and more complex, more and more tangled in other experiences. One piece of writing nudges another. The more complexity beginning writers face, the sooner they are themselves struck by their inability to cope. Too many decisions now demand their attention. As Karen writes, she finds out for herself that survival depends not on mastering a style, but on controlling all the ideas and impulses and words that wobble just beyond her control, competing to be organized and contained.

It is probably not necessary to go into all the routines and nightclubby stunts that entertain classrooms of beginning writers. But if it is control we are after, then let us consider Milic's assumption and start by getting control of meaning. Writing frequent essays and reading the writing of one's peers allow the entire class to become its own showcase for looking at the process of getting and holding on to a subject. And if frequent writing ultimately leads to control, then a writer's control of subject will

imprint his style no less than will the arrangements of his ideas, the syntactic shapes of his sentences, or his chosen lexicon. Whatever a writer chooses to write about--God, home, injustice, or Louis Armstrong--minors the writer's personality no less than do sentences computed for the number of appositives or embedded restrictive clauses. It is therefore sensible to offer our students as much chance as we can for invention, for development, for bringing the subjects they are writing about closer to their own experience. As Norman Holland pointed out, identity refers to the way individuals relate to things "out there." In this connection, I seriously question Lanham's thesis of enabling students to "find a central style by playing at and with a great many styles." This is far too advanced a game for beginning writers.

Lanham also says, "What to say should be supplied. A range of opinions ought to be furnished and surveyed along with a range of styles," and "if a student hasn't any opinions, let him be given some."¹⁰ Opinions and topics are not what students need. They have plenty of their own. What they need is the training to recognize as topics the ideas that burden them, so as to begin projecting a style through subjects that concern them. Assign a structure? Covertly, by concealing a structure within an assignment that is virtually guaranteed to elicit a certain shape (for example, a narrative or a comparison). "When we assign a topic, do we not assume a certain professionalism of beginning writers? Do we not assume, in fact, that they know how to manipulate their experience so cleverly as to have it explicate a topic unrelated and uncongenial to their lives? Commercial writers feign a passion in order to improve their chances of selling their work. Why impose that subterfuge on beginners and expect the results to bear a style? Adolescent writers, as Lanham correctly understands, have many selves. Then why give them additional ones? A beginning writing class could do little that is more profitable than spend a part of every meeting exploring the implications of ideas students already have for papers. Ideas and topics, although agreeably left to the students, need not be relegated to the weekend when the paper is privately wrestled into print. That is the everyday business of a writing class. Subjects need to be X-rayed in class. For inexperienced writers, the sifting through of subjects for ideas and attitudes may generate the kind of conscious control over material that eventually permits the unconscious elements of style to emerge. Performing such normally private work in public shows inexperienced writers how to expand the parameters of a subject. It avoids shutting off the subject prematurely. When a student hears the discussion of a subject by twenty or so other personalities in a class, he effectively avoids confining his subject in the pre-cooked shape of his own "style." At the same time, hearing a multitude of voices shows the magnitude of a subject, freeing the implications locked in a subject and extending the range of the writer whose subject it is. In this connection, I refer you to John Gardner's excellent essay "Moral Fiction" in the Winter/Spring 1976 issue of *Hudson Review* (later expanded in *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1978)).

An important responsibility of the beginning writer is to gain control of sentences, because it is a progression of sentences that forms the whole essay. We've learned a lot about sentence-combining and I want to encourage applying sentence-combining techniques to the creation and criticism of students' own writing. Sentence patterns and the conventions of grammar create expectations which beginning writers either fulfill or, in their awkwardness and inexperience, disappoint. Milic quotes Hemingway as follows:

In stating as fully as I could how things really were, it was often very *difficult* and I wrote awkwardly and the awkwardness is what they called my style. 12

It is probably fair to say that Hemingway is talking not about sentence patterns alone nor subject alone but the marriage of the two. Even for those of us who have grammar in our pockets, the excitement of writing is the marriage of heaven and hell, the unspeakably suspenseful connection between subject and syntax. How much more so

for the beginning writer who, until he achieves some sense of control, is likely to feel only the baffling pain and in no way the pleasure. He is, as Milic describes the constraints of every writer, "imprisoned by his idiolect,"³ though the impoverished idiolect of the beginner constitutes heavy chains indeed and the torment of a one-foot prison cell. I suspect that Hemingway may be showing us the kind of groping through awkwardness that in the end is the residue of our struggle we call style. A student of mine first became conscious of syntactic "style" by mastering the kind of noun clause that exists in "That my mother is an amateur psychiatrist will surprise no one who knows her." Every paper for the rest of that semester contained at least four such constructions, awkwardness notwithstanding. Teachers of writing understand that students escaping the clutches of a limited syntactic repertory for the first time become a captive audience for options out of which emerges a style.

Another activity we should avoid overemphasizing if we are to attend to control first and shelve style temporarily is an undue attention to audience. We want freshman writers to be able to deepen ideas and not merely tint their surfaces different colors. Implications for varied audiences can be delayed until after a writer learns control, after he permits himself the nagging discomfort of an inadequate word, or after he finds satisfaction in the tiniest revision. Perhaps writing for an audience has been granted undue attention to beginners as a way of substituting thrills for process where interest in freshman composition lags. But this kind of exercise encourages writers to see writing as ornamental. In rewriting, students should not be out for the thrills of ornamentation, but for the process of unfolding a complex idea and for the more lasting pleasure of holding the interest of their readers as they do so. Why ask beginners to write differently adorned versions of an identical text for a shifting audience, when they cannot spare time away from finding out what they mean and saying it? Shifting audiences merely increases the variables they must contend with.

A more traditional classroom procedure whose usefulness may also be strained is handing in the "final" draft. The cycle of recursive acts that writing requires—getting started, refining a thesis, unifying paragraphs, writing forward-moving sentences, getting reactions from readers—always invites rewriting and adjustment. This is not to suggest that every revision guarantees improvement, nor that every paper should be revised; however, the recursive elements in the writing process should be isolated and understood by students as constituent acts in every episode of writing. Tuning up a deficiency, such as stating a thesis, may after all be left for the next paper instead of pursued to the

death in the tired one just abandoned. At one of our staff meetings at Queens College, we heard one of our graduate fellows¹⁴ say that he pursues a thesis privately, in a conference, with each student whose essay shows the lack of one. This is, I think, critical recognition of the work required to gain control of one's subject. The thesis is the writer's personal handle on his or her subject. The thesis asserts something about the scope of a writer's material, but is also defines the writer's attitude. Once the writer's attitude is stated, phrasing, ironic diction, and other stylistic indications unconsciously fall into place. In the experience of composing, the *subject* takes the writer all the way from invention, through control of material, to style.

My personal task, when I write, is to permit the material to show me its implications. This blooming from the inside requires control, and control means shaping, the fighting back of excesses, the directing and restraining of material as it is burgeoning. Control means I find out what I have to do with my subject to support my assertion. The sentences I write and the rhetorical choices I make will also, consciously and unconsciously, show my attitude. When I think of my style I think of all my shortcomings as a writer. I think of my tendency to modify, to get ornate, my weakness for a tempting phrase even for its own sake, and a certain relentless drive toward making things more complicated than they have a right to be, probably

in the struggle to pin down exact relationships between the parts. When I think of my style I think of working hard to overcome it, of fighting against the odds of a strong and sinister drift, for some of which I ask my readers to pardon me at this very moment.

Of course, what I have at my disposal is a tremendous motivation to do the bloody thing over, strip away and come back up with something dead center. But however hard I work against the drift of my style, there is bound to be some drifting. I suppose that my willingness and my capacity to tolerate drudgery do finally land on a sentence here and there which comes close to what I discover I want to say and can control saying. Still, an irresistible analogy or other temptation gives me away.

What I feel about the potential style of my students is close to what I feel about my own, except that, as *they* begin, they must work to overcome limited resources of many kinds--unreliable inflections, merged constructions, shallowness of subject, the constraint of stress, impatience. Serious academic or business writing now requires that they write accurately, explicitly, and often; and that they practice the repertory of their language as it is available to them in published texts and through each other's and their teacher's writing. Style will emerge gradually as they acquire the control necessary to formulate an idea in writing.