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## Out of Style

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### HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS

#### *Relevant Stylistic History and Theory*

Scholars today often construct a dualistic view of style, seeing it, on the one hand, as added on to thought (the approach most often affiliated with the Sophists) or, on the other hand, as organically connected to thought through nature, purpose, logic, arrangement, and other features (the perspective attributed to Aristotle) (Kinneavy 1971, 358). While characterizing style according to this binary may make sense historically, these respective approaches tell only part of the story: I propose a more complex view in which this dialectic connotes a push-pull influence in the history of style, one that represents a constant tension between constraint and excess, conciseness and amplification (see Laib 1990, 443) and that adumbrates a fundamental debate—ultimately a rhetorical one—about the function of language in society and culture. In this chapter, tailored to my overall argument, I reread parts of the history of style as essentially a clash between opposing forces that attempt either to expand or to restrain stylistic resources. Thus, in contrast to what has come to be called, often pejoratively, the “Sophistic view” of rhetoric, which generally defines style as “mere” ornamentation with no meaning-making features, I contend that stylistic history in reality constitutes an ongoing tension among the so-called “virtues” of style—clarity, correctness, propriety, and ornamentation—the weight accorded each one, their connection to other canons of rhetoric, and their affiliation with the so-called levels of style: plain, middle, and grand. In the focused account that follows—intended not to chronicle the history of style but to trace specific historical developments related to my argument—I analyze how rhetors conceived of style through history and deployed its resources according to

fundamental differences in beliefs about the appropriate function of language in culture.<sup>1</sup>

### THE SOPHISTS AND PLATO

The Sophists, a group of ancient Greek rhetors who established schools and generally charged students fees for their services, are often affiliated with a perspective that sees stylistic elements as ornamentation, that is, as form added on to content through the use of tropes, figures (of thought and speech), and other stylistic elements, including, for example, amplification, which Nevin Laib defines as “elaboration, emphasis, and copiousness of style” (1990, 443). While a number of early Greek rhetors share that reputation, one person to whom it is almost universally attributed is Gorgias who, in a style later critiqued by Plato, employs elevated, sometimes exaggerated features, including a playful attention to rhythm, poetry, and “rhetorical figures and flourishes” (Kennedy 1999, 32). Adopting an ornamental style reprised by many who followed him, Gorgias uses deviations from standard language, unusual syntax, and tropes such as parallelism and antithesis to evoke certain emotions on the part of the audience. In his “Encomium of Helen,” for example, in which he pays homage to Helen of Troy through epideictic rhetoric, Gorgias makes use of stylistic ornamentation to achieve his meaning, as is evident in his introduction to the work:

What is becoming to a city is manpower, to a body beauty, to a soul wisdom, to an action virtue, to a speech truth, and the opposites of these are unbecoming. Man and woman and speech and deed and city and object should be honored with praise if praiseworthy and incur blame if unworthy, for it is an equal error and mistake to blame the praisable and to praise the blamable. (1972, 50)

Within the context of what is later identified by Theophrastus, a student of Aristotle, as four stylistic virtues—clarity, correctness, propriety (or appropriateness), and ornamentation (or embellishment)—it is apparent that the resources Gorgias draws upon are intended to appeal to the audience principally

through ornamentation in the form of tropes and schemes. For example, in the first sentence, he inverts the normal word order (*anastrophe*), uses “for” at the beginning of successive clauses as a linking word known as *anaphora* (initial repetition), and deploys the trope of *ellipsis* (deliberate omission) by not repeating the verb “is.” In the second sentence, Gorgias achieves the opposite effect through the use of antithesis, and then, in the third sentence, uses *polysyndeton*, with his repetition of the conjunction “and,” thereby giving not only a climactic sense to the need for people to honor Helen but also an equality of animate and inanimate objects. Other techniques include alliteration and an ending *chiasmus* that reverses the order in a reciprocal exchange of words, all of which call attention to the stylistic elements in the work. It is clear that in his approach to style, Gorgias freely employs stylistic flourishes and celebrates the play of language through rhetorical devices related to the substance of his message. I argue that the impact is not merely ornamental—what some, for example, have deemed an overabundance of antithesis, parallelism, alliteration, and assonance. Rather, Gorgias’s style is intimately bound up with other rhetorical canons like invention and delivery.

If Gorgias initiates an expectation of praise designed to revive Helen’s reputation in Greek society, excusing her for the inability to resist the power of language, how does he achieve his goal stylistically? Gorgias uses style rather ingeniously to pose conditional situations that, with each level of apparent betrayal of Greek society, allow him to vindicate Helen for her ostensible infractions. In that light, his repetition of the conditional “if” clause—a figure of speech known as *epanaphora*—helps Gorgias examine each potential scenario and invent in each new circumstance a reason for Helen’s exoneration: “If then one must place blame on Fate and on a god, one must free Helen from disgrace”; “but if she was raped by violence and illegally assaulted and unjustly insulted”; “but if it was speech which persuaded her and deceived her heart”; for if it was love that did all these things” (Gorgias 1972, 51–52). In this sense, the very

form of Gorgianic prose helps to structure the way in which Greek thought is effectively reshaped, influencing the audience to reconsider the story from Helen's point of view and, in the process, to change cultural views about the heroine.

This combination of style and other rhetorical elements is evident in other Sophistic works as well. For instance, Lysias, one of the Ten Attic Orators and a Sophist known for his plain style, introduced the practice of *ethopoeia*, a device that James Murphy describes as "the ability to capture the ideas, words, and style of delivery suited to the person for whom the address is written" (1995). Ethopoeia is designed to discover, through a combination of invention, style, and delivery, the best method of persuading an audience, or what Murphy calls "discovering the exact lines of argument that will turn the case against the opponent." For Lysias, that venue was the courtroom in which the orator used forensic rhetoric for persuasion. To be most effective, Lysias adopted a plain style suitable to his courtroom audience. As Murphy explains, "Thus, *in style and in invention of argument*, Lysias mastered the art of forensic rhetoric as it was practiced by ordinary Athenians in the courtroom of his day" (43; emphasis added). The combination of invention, style, and, indeed, delivery practiced by Lysias is evident toward the end of his speech "On the Refusal of a Pension to the Invalid" (1967), when he adopts an ethopoeic stance through the frequent use of rhetorical questions. Lysias states:

No, no gentlemen; you must not vote that way. And why should I find you thus inclined? Because anyone has ever been brought to trial at my instance and lost his fortune? There is nobody who can prove it. Well, is it that I am a busybody, a hothead, a seeker of quarrels? That is not the sort of use I happen to make of such means of subsistence as I have. That I am grossly insolent and savage? Even he would not allege this himself, except he should wish to add one more to the series of his lies. Or that I was in power at the time of the Thirty, and oppressed a great number of citizens? (531)

Lysias's rhetorical questions anticipate those the jury itself asks and thereby invent a natural progression of substantive material the jury would arguably already have on its mind. In addition, Lysias uses *asyndeton* ("a busybody, a hothead, a seeker of quarrels?") to build dramatically, through the omission of conjunctions, to a climax and concomitantly disable the list of potentially negative appellations that could be attributed to the defendant. In this instance, of course, it is also valuable to consider the delivery of the speech, with the pause listeners hear between questions and answers signaling the way style works to produce an expectation of the substantive remarks that follow sequentially. His direct address to jury members, with his use of repetition ("no, no; that . . . that") and parallelism, are other stylistic features that add to his persuasive appeal.

Despite Lysias's inventive use of ethopoeia, scholar Gary Katula (1995) perpetuates a view of Sophistic style as mere embellishment that endures today. In his analysis of Lysias's "On the Refusal of a Pension to the Invalid," Katula, noting the absence of a significant number of tropes and figures in the speech, argues that the "use of parallel phrasing is a perfect example of style supporting substance rather than being an ornamental technique." Katula contends, in other words, that Lysias shows restraint by using "his plainest language, the speech of the marketplace" and by restricting his use of figures of speech only to parallel phrases that "dramatize the contrasts between justice and injustice, between the healthy and the infirm, between the poor and the rich" (230). Katula's point is that Lysias, with his absence of "ornamental techniques," employs a measured style appropriate for courtroom oratory. Yet, a careful analysis suggests that Katula's claim does not fully capture the inventive nature of the Lysian oration. While it is true that Lysias's style falls more toward clarity and correctness than the embellishment that Katula considers its antithesis, the overall qualities of Lysias's style—as the use of rhetorical questions indicates—go beyond mere parallelism. To cite another example, when Lysias asks his adversary about his client's

potential wrongdoing (“a busybody, a hothead, a seeker of quarrels?”) (Lysias 1967, 531), he uses the figure of speech known as *hypophora* (inquiring what an adversary might say against us), a figure of repetition that ironically serves to mitigate the impact of the defendant’s possible infractions. Thus, even within the context of the ethopoeic courtroom, stylistic ornamentation works to evaluate, and respond to, the rhetorical situation.

One other characteristic of Sophistic style is its tendency toward periodicity, a contrast with the “loose” sentences generally used in discourse today. While the periodic sentence, which works to defer the emphasis in a sentence until the end and builds a sense of anticipation, was used in varying degrees by most of the Sophists, it was arguably Isocrates’ most effective device for achieving his stylistic and rhetorical aims. Paradoxically, the periodic sentence generates stylistic and substantive tension even as it works to resolve it. As Murphy states, “Just as the repetition of similar sound patterns produces an expectancy that some break in the aural pattern will occur in order to relieve the psychological tension, the accumulation of ideas also develops an expectation that there will be a final logical resolution” (1995, 48). Hence, the idea that style presupposes a substantive emotional response on the part of the audience exists structurally within the periodic sentence. In *Against the Sophists*, for instance, Isocrates (1929) uses the periodic sentence to criticize some practices of Sophistic teachers, who claimed to teach wisdom through training in public speaking but often taught it by rote, a practice arguably motivated by profit. Isocrates attempts to make his critique of this group of Sophists more powerful by reserving his main point until the end of the sentence:

When, therefore, the layman puts all these things together and observes that the teachers of wisdom and dispensers of happiness are themselves in great want but exact only a small fee from their students, that they are on the watch for contradictions in words but are blind to inconsistencies in deeds, and that, furthermore, they

pretend to have knowledge of the future but are incapable either of saying anything pertinent or of giving any counsel regarding the present, and when he observes that those who follow their judgments are more consistent and more successful than those who profess to have exact knowledge, then he has, I think, good reason to condemn such studies and regard them as stuff and nonsense, and not as a true discipline of the soul. (167)

Clearly, this periodic sentence serves to heighten expectations and to add emphasis to Isocrates' critique of Sophistic teaching. What may not seem as apparent, however, is the way in which the periodic sentence serves to invent subject matter, its clauses leading the reader to Isocrates' conclusion about the limits of Sophistic rhetoric. At the same time, the periodic sentence appears to be a hybrid in terms of the Theophrastan virtues, falling somewhere between clarity and ornamentation or, put differently, between a plain and high style. What seems striking about Isocrates' use of the periodic sentence is that the list of Sophistic wrongs, enumerated one after the other in the first part of the sentence, works to defer, at each step, the listener from drawing his or her own conclusion. Put differently, what appears to be the individual sins of the Sophists, which readers are given the autonomy to accept or reject after each clause, accumulatively lead the audience to one ineluctable conclusion offered by the rhetor: that some of the Sophists have not acted disinterestedly in teaching rhetoric to Athenian students.

While the style of Gorgias, Lysias, Isocrates, and other Sophists seems geared more toward language's productive qualities than many might allow, it is important nonetheless to address the reservations Plato expressed about Sophistic rhetoric. In his writing, Plato often delineates his criticisms about style more broadly under his discussion of rhetoric, a move Jasper Neel explains in his book *Plato, Derrida, and Writing* (1988) when he writes, "*Phaedrus* implies that style and rhetoric are the same and that matter precedes and enables them" (63). Plato's critique of Sophistic rhetoric—and hence, style—is essentially that



it connotes flattery and deceit, primarily, he argues, because rhetoric does not have a subject matter of its own. Like cooking or cosmetics, rhetoric, in Plato's view, is merely speech about appearances. It is based too much on probability and the changing situation, or *kairos*. Thus, Plato's critique effectively reduces Sophistic rhetoric—and concomitantly, style—to an art that, while persuasive, does not achieve the absolute truth Plato considers essential for society. Given the powerful critique Plato discusses first in *Gorgias* and then softens somewhat in *Phaedrus* (though both represent a curtailing of stylistic power), how is it possible to articulate a response to Plato's reservations based on the style of the Sophists themselves?

First, it is clear that Plato's view of what he considers the counterfeit nature of rhetoric is based in part on his objection to stylistic flourishes in the Sophists. In the dialogue *Gorgias* (1925), for example, Plato considers cookery a "habitude" rather than an art. He writes:

This practice, as I view it, has many branches, and one of them is cookery; which appears indeed to be an art but, by my account of it, is not an art but a habitude or knack. I call rhetoric another branch of it, as also personal adornment and sophistry—four branches of it for four kinds of affairs. (313)

He goes on to assert that "the art of flattery," in the form of rhetoric, acts by "insinuating herself into each of those branches, pretends to be that into which she has crept, and cares nothing for what is the best, but dangles what is most pleasant for the moment as a bait for folly, and deceives it into thinking she is of the highest value" (318–19). In contrast to the logical forms of rhetoric and argumentation that he considers appropriate, he deems the Sophistic approach akin to a manipulative interloper. He writes, "Thus cookery assumes the form of medicine, and pretends to know what foods are best for the body" (319). It is evident, then, that his construction of sophistry and adornment as cookery anticipates a much-maligned view of style. It is, after all, the stylistic aspect of sophistry that seems to concern those

who contrast the supposedly additive features of linguistic ornamentation with more substantive approaches.

As far as Plato is concerned, Neel argues, “There is nothing wrong with style, of course, just so long as it comes *after* and remains *subservient* to matter, which alone can be ‘true’” (1988). In the deployment of style, then, Plato seems clearly to want to rein in what he considers its deceitful excesses because like cookery, he reasons, it has no subject matter of its own; hence, like rhetoric, it is a knack rather than a virtue. As Neel points out, however, Plato’s abjuration of style is in itself a form of deceit. Neel writes, “He does not want us to notice that his maneuver depends on a style so sophisticated that it seems to be absent” (63). In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates argues about the inadequacy of the Lysian speech Phaedrus has memorized, suggesting that the arrangement is to be praised, but not the invention, which can be lauded only in speeches where the arguments “are not inevitable and are hard to discover” (Socrates 1914, 439).

In what next appears to be a critique of Lysian stylistic excess—Socrates states that Lysias has repeated the same idea two or three times throughout the speech—Socrates responds to Phaedrus’s suggestion that the diction and copiousness of Lysias’s speech are unparalleled:

What? Are you and I to praise the discourse because the author has said what he ought, and not merely because all the expressions are clear and well rounded and finely turned? For if that is expected, I must grant it for your sake, since, because of my stupidity, I did not notice it. I was attending only to the rhetorical manner. (Socrates 1914, 437)

Socrates’ critique suggests that style fails to encourage sophisticated arguments identified as not inevitable or as hard to discover. However, what Plato fails to consider is that Phaedrus’s recitation of Lysias’s speech itself provides a form of invention for Socrates to use throughout the dialogue. Thus, even those Lysian arguments that Plato labels “inevitable” lead to further invention. While Plato may consider them merely ornamental, or as part of

arrangement rather than invention, these elements clearly enable further invention, which suggests that the stylistic excess Plato so vigorously critiques has an important—and substantive—role.

#### ARISTOTLE AND DEMETRIUS

If Plato and the Sophists represent two opposing attitudes toward style, Aristotle reflects a balance of the two, an outcome not surprising given his adherence to the concept of a “mean” between ordinary speech and poetic language. “The concept of a mean between extremes,” writes George Kennedy, translator of Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric*, “is a characteristic doctrine of Aristotelian ethics that finds application to rhetoric as well” (Aristotle 1991, 91). Similarly, Theophrastus, Aristotle’s pupil, as D’Alton (1962) suggests, works to define “the ‘Mean’ in which the perfection of all good style lay” (72). Even though Aristotle, according to Kennedy, sees style as a choice of words with “a quality of distinction or unfamiliarity” (91), several factors indicate that his is a view that seeks to rein in or restrain style—essentially to find what he considered the basis of propriety. First, Aristotle associates style predominately with just three of the four “virtues” later enumerated by Theophrastus: clarity and propriety (or appropriateness), which contains the idea of correctness, but without ornamentation. Murphy explains that for Aristotle “language cannot achieve its function if it is not clear, and it will not persuade if it is not appropriate” (1995, 103). Second, for Aristotle, style is most often associated with the appropriate use of metaphor. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle states that metaphor “gives style clearness, charm, and distinction as nothing else can” (1954, 168). What is especially notable, however, is that metaphors have the power to make meaning. Aristotle discusses the invention of metaphors and suggests that “words express ideas, and therefore those words are the most agreeable that enable us to get hold of new ideas. . . . It is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh” (186).

On the one hand, then, Aristotle’s attention to metaphor suggests an inventive use of language and an expansive move

rhetorically. On the other hand, however, despite his recognition of metaphor as the productive basis of style, Aristotle discusses contrasting “faults” or “bad taste in language” that results from violating the principles of clarity and appropriateness in word choice, suggesting his effort to restrain style as a general principle. According to Aristotle, the faults consist of the misuse of compound words (e.g., “*many-visaged* heaven”); the use of “strange words” (e.g., Alcidas’s discussion of “the *witlessness* of nature”); inappropriate epithets (meaning “long, unseasonable or frequent”; e.g., Alcidas’s use of “the laws *that are monarchs of states*” instead of “laws”); and “inappropriate”—far-fetched or grand and theatrical—metaphors (e.g., Gorgias’s “events that are green and full of sap”) (Aristotle 1954, 171–73). It is clear that these “faults” indicate a way in which Aristotle essentially contains style by narrowing the notion of appropriate discourse. Aristotle’s specific examples suggest his critique of more expansive techniques employed by some of the Sophists. The very name of “bad taste in language” indicates the need to control, balance, and find a mean in a manner consistent with the constant push-pull influence of style throughout history.

Aristotle’s notion of faults, in fact, helps to explain his concept of appropriateness and his measured approach to style. For Aristotle, says Murphy, an appropriate style conveys the state of the writer’s feelings, depicts “characters,” and is proportionate to the subject matter (Murphy 1995, 102). What seems crucial at the same time, however, is that Aristotle’s view of style is highly structured, constricting rather than expanding our stylistic notions, especially when the idea of bad taste in language is considered. Despite the qualities of metaphor associated with meaning-making, however, style—in Aristotle’s view—does not seem to have the same inventional qualities of the Sophists. Instead, Aristotle’s more reserved attribution of stylistic qualities to metaphor and a choice of words that are part of current usage suggests a practical strategy without risk, a function of style closer in some ways to Plato’s, especially in Aristotle’s emphasis on style as “virtue” or “excellence.” Nonetheless, Aristotle’s contribution

is at least to some extent his theory of language that connects style with knowledge organically, despite the arguably limited sphere within which he sets the parameters of stylistic propriety. His attempt to achieve balance excludes those elements of style considered more ornamental, which he sees as excessive.

While many of the characteristics of style established by the Greeks are later taken up by the Romans and accorded levels (generally, plain, middle, and high), one unusual—and apparently unique—stylistic aspect introduced by Demetrius in his manual *On Style* (1932) is the idea of “the forceful style.” Most early scholars attributed *On Style* to Demetrius of Phaleron, a Paripatetic philosopher and Athenian statesman, yet, as Kennedy (1999, 130) points out, some of the work’s contents make such an attribution impossible and the confusion is probably a result of both rhetors (including the unknown Demetrius) sharing the same name. In his work *In Defence of Rhetoric*, Brian Vickers (1988) explains that the forceful style, which Demetrius discusses along with three other styles—he calls these the plain, the grand, and the elegant—is characterized in part by the use of “forceful figures” of repetition like *anadiplosis* (repetition of the last word of one clause at the beginning of the following clause), anaphora (initial repetition), and climax.

According to Doreen C. Innes (1995), “the forceful style fits the expression of strong emotion, particularly anger and invective, and the main source of examples is oratory” (331). Demetrius, whose manual appears after Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and begins with references to the latter scholar, not only considers the periodic sentence forceful, but also suggests that certain word orders are better than others. For instance, he writes that “an uninterrupted series of periods . . . is favorable to force” (Demetrius 1932, 455), especially if short. Perhaps that is why Demetrius employs figures such as asyndeton, which in its omission of conjunctions lends a sense of abruptness, to achieve emotional impact. Asyndeton is a figure also important to brevity, or conciseness, an aspect of Demetrius’s forceful style that contributes to form, meaning, and emotional impact (see

Vickers 1988, 306–07). Demetrius characterizes this aspect of the style as follows: “The aim of the forcible style is to be sharp and short like the exchange of blows” (467).

#### CICERO AND QUINTILIAN

The same countervailing tension that exists between the Sophists and Plato and what I have labeled Aristotle’s attempt to restrain Sophistic style through his idea of a “mean” also exists in Roman rhetoric in its reception of “Attic” and “Asiatic” styles. It is helpful to recall that some Roman orators or philosophers identify with Atticism, a movement that espouses simplicity in writing, often associated with the Ten Attic Orators of Greece, especially Lysias. Attic orators tend to avoid the stylistic embellishment of some of the Sophistic rhetors generally affiliated with Asiatic style. The Atticists argue that eloquence exists in pure diction and simple syntax. For his part, Roman lawyer, statesman, and orator Cicero takes issue with the Atticists and argues in a polemic against Attic style in his work, *Brutus* (1939). Yet, even though his style is often associated with the eloquence of Asiatic oratory, Cicero vigorously denies any explicit identification with that movement. At the same time, however, his style is probably closer to that of the Asiatic stylists, whose aim, according to Murphy, is “to impress and secure the attention of the audience either by fluency, by florid and copious diction and imagery, or by epigrammatic conciseness” (Murphy 1995, 158). In *Brutus*, according to G. L. Hendrickson, “From a stylistic point of view Cicero’s ‘orator’ . . . has his roots in the copiousness, not to say grandiloquence, of the Asiatic rhetoric” (1939, 3). In line with copiousness, Cicero’s style, Bizzell and Herzberg suggest, is characterized predominately by amplification, which they define in Cicero’s case as “naming the same thing two or three different ways in succession, adding elaborating or qualifying clauses, and otherwise developing the periodic sentence pioneered by Isocrates” (Bizzell and Herzberg 2001, 284–85).

It goes without saying that both Attic and Asiatic styles are associated with different aspects of Sophistic rhetoric and,

hence, Cicero's discussion of both perpetuates the very push-pull force between playfulness and constraint, ornamentation and clarity/correctness that I have identified. Indeed, it is true that in *Brutus* Cicero sets up a debate in which the Attic orators write elegant but lifeless and restrained prose in contrast to what one orator, Calidius, suggests is necessary to move the listener: "a more elevated style and a more vehement delivery [that] was frenzy and delirium" (Cicero 1939, 239). On the other hand, Brutus attributes to Calvus, associated with Atticism, "a meagerness of style" (247). Yet Cicero's critique of Attic style is not without its own complications. Cicero, who was accused by some of degrading Attic style, carefully sets forth the limits of his criticism:

But if meagerness and dryness and general poverty is put down as Attic, with of course the proviso that it must have finish and urbanity and precision, that is good so far as it goes. But because there are in the category of Attic other qualities better than these, one must beware not to overlook the gradations and dissimilarities, the force and variety of Attic orators. (1939, 247)

Cicero obviously believes that the use of Attic style limits the resources available to speakers. However, he maintains a somewhat neutral position, possibly because he does not identify exclusively with either Attic or Asiatic style, but draws from both in his own style. In this regard, Richard Leo Enos, in "The Art of Rhetoric at Rhodes: An Eastern Rival to the Athenian Representation of Classical Rhetoric" (2004), which carefully documents the island's influence on Roman rhetors, including Cicero, suggests that "the more moderate alternative to the Asiatic rhetoric was the Rhodian style" (192). Enos explains that the Rhodian model—influential for Cicero, for instance, who was exposed to the rhetoric while Rhodes was under Roman rule—was known as a "moderate, balanced style of rhetoric" that stood in contrast to Asianism, which Roman Atticists, according to Enos, "considered to be excessively bombastic" (192–93). Enos suggests that this cross-cultural model, which Romans like

Cicero and Quintilian found “compatible with their open and diverse temperament,” was “ideal for the study and practice of declamation” (194), widely adopted by Cicero and Quintilian and other Roman rhetors in their schools of rhetoric in Rome.

It is useful to remember, as well, that Cicero is often credited with developing the idea of the three levels of style—plain, middle, and grand—a classification scheme that first appears in the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (1954). For Cicero, these styles are directly related to their ostensible purposes: to instruct, to delight, and to move to belief or action. In tracing the Ciceronian origins of these stylistic levels, S. Michael Halloran and Merrill D. Whitburn (1982) clarify the features of plain style, some of which overlap with middle and grand styles:

All three styles use ornamental devices whose description and cataloging make up so much of later rhetorical theory, but in the plain style the ornamentation is supposed to be less apparent. Elaborate prose rhythm is avoided altogether, and syntax is loose rather than periodic. Only those figures of speech that would not seem radically out of place in everyday discourse are used; metaphor is particularly recommended, since it occurs quite naturally in ordinary speech. (60–61)

Halloran and Whitburn thus eschew an affiliation of levels of style with distinct genres—for example, they complicate the assumption that “plain” style is “scientific” style—and propose instead that “plain, middle, and grand styles are levels of embellishment and emotional concentration rather than generically distinct modes of language” (61). Indeed, in an approach that is suggestive of an Aristotelian movement toward a mean, Halloran and Whitburn say they consider “Cicero’s view of the three styles as *symphonic*” (61; emphasis added). Thus, rather than acceding to a common tendency to make the levels distinct, they suggest that Cicero “saw these three rhetorical functions, and hence the three styles, as aspects or phases of the single process of communication by which one human intelligence influences another” (61–62).



In keeping with a balanced view of stylistic resources, Cicero also endorses, in his *Orator* (1939), a kind of prose style that varies according to the rhetorical situation. Like Lysias and his concept of ethopoeia, Cicero suggests that the contemporary usage of Roman orators should dictate their style on various occasions (see Murphy 1995, 196). Cicero makes his comments regarding the “practical value” of style in a defense against charges that his style includes excessive rhythm, ornament, and emotional emphasis in contrast to Atticism’s emphasis on the logical use of language, which is closer to an Aristotelian perspective:

As a matter of fact, the art of delivering a beautiful oration in an effective oratorical style is nothing else, Brutus . . . than presenting the best thoughts in the choicest language. Furthermore, there is no thought which can bring credit to an orator unless it is fitly and perfectly expressed, nor is any brilliance of style revealed unless the words are carefully arranged. And both thought and diction are embellished by rhythm. (Cicero 1939, 499)

In addition to *Brutus* and *Orator*, Cicero’s *de Oratore* (1959) shows the connection that style shares with arrangement and invention. In a theoretical discussion of style in which he uses the character of Crassus to explain his views, Cicero writes, “Good speakers bring, as their peculiar possession, a style that is harmonious, graceful, and marked by a certain artistry and polish. Yet this style, if the underlying subject-matter be not comprehended and mastered by the speaker, but inevitably be of no account or even become the sport of universal derision” (1:39). He later reinforces the equal importance of style and content when he writes that the traits of ornateness and appropriateness mean that style “must be in the highest degree pleasing and calculated to find its way to the attention of the audience, and that it must have the fullest possible supply of facts” (3:73). In going on to describe what constitutes the stronger form of invention with respect to humor, Cicero states that it emerges from a combination of form (words) and content (fact): “A witty saying has its point sometimes in fact, sometimes

in words, though people are most particularly amused whenever laughter is excited by the union of the two" (2:383). Cicero acknowledges here the contrapuntal effect of both substance and style, seeing both as essential to produce humor. Thus, a natural connection in this case exists among style, invention, and arrangement. His collective writing suggests that the study of style is intricately connected to other rhetorical canons and is far from an isolated occurrence.

If Aristotle mediates the stylistic ideas of Plato and the Sophists, the Roman orator and teacher Quintilian, an adherent of Ciceronian rhetoric, may well be seen as a kind of equal counterpart, one who arguably tips the balance toward a more restrained attitude toward style. In an approach reminiscent of Aristotle, Quintilian views the most important stylistic virtue as "perspicuity," or clarity, which has been seen at various times historically as the chief virtue to emulate. A teacher whose emphasis on style cannot be seen outside his vision of the ideal orator as "the good man speaking well," Quintilian employs a stylistic pedagogy that relies heavily on imitation and on such techniques as the *progymnasmata*, a set of graded exercises taught in school. After stating that "'embellishment' (the use of 'ornaments') is what most distinguishes each individual orator's style," Quintilian adds that "amplification, sentential epigrams, and tropes such as metaphor, allegory, and irony *should all be used but sparingly*" (Bizzell and Herzberg 2001, 296; emphasis added). In other words, Quintilian seems to propose in his stylistic virtues the same moderation he seeks to impart among personal virtues embodied in his classic saying of "the good man speaking well."

For Quintilian, then, ornament in language is important, but needs to be measured. In Book VIII of the *Institutio Oratoria*, for example, Quintilian (1953) writes, "The ornate . . . consists firstly in forming a clear conception of what we wish to say, secondly in giving this adequate expression, and thirdly in lending it additional brilliance, a process which may correctly be termed embellishment" (3:245). Insofar as his identifying clarity as the most

important quality of ornamentation, Quintilian, as Bizzell and Herzberg suggest, “held up [Cicero] as a stylistic model against the elaborate ornamentation then fashionable” (Bizzell and Herzberg 2001, 39). Indeed, Quintilian himself cites Cicero for this proposition when he writes, “An acceptable style is defined by Cicero as one which is not over-elegant: not that our style does not require elegance and polish, which are essential parts of ornament, but that excess is always a vice” (3:235). Quintilian also intimates the need for balance in levels of style. He suggests that “style need not always dwell on the heights: at times it is desirable that it should sink. For there are occasions when the very meanness of the words employed adds force to what we say” (3:223). In keeping with his theory of style, Quintilian also talks about the importance of amplification without seeing it as a feature of ornamentation. He writes: “The real power of oratory lies in enhancing or attenuating the force of words. . . . The first method of amplification or attenuation is to be found in the actual word employed to describe a thing” (3:261–63). He adds that “there are four principal methods of amplification: augmentation, comparison, reasoning and accumulation” (3:265). For Quintilian, the method of amplifying material is principally through *copia*, defined as how one achieves “abundance” through the use of stylistic resources: “There can then be no doubt that he must accumulate a certain store of resources, to be employed whenever they may be required. The resources of which I speak consist in a copious supply of words and matter” (4:5).

Part of Quintilian’s complete educational program for training orators involved two aspects of style: imitation, which includes reading aloud, analysis, memorization and paraphrase of models, and transliteration, among other things; and the ancient process of *progymnasmata*, essentially a group of graded composition exercises designed to develop proficiency by presentation in order of increasing difficulty. A few examples of these exercises include retelling a fable; *chreia*, or amplification of a moral theme; commonplace, or confirmation of a thing admitted; description; thesis; and laws, or arguments

for or against a law (Murphy 1995, 183). One crucial aspect of Quintilian's use of imitation and *progymnasmata* to train Roman boys is improving both their inventive and stylistic abilities, a goal that continued through practice speeches known as declamation. It is clear from his emphasis on the entire educational process and the sequence of exercises combining invention with imitation that Quintilian generally saw style and invention as part of an organic process designed to train Roman orators beginning when they were young.

### ERASMUS AND RAMUS

Erasmus is best known for his work *On Copia*, a compilation of two books in which he tried to help writers attain abundance of words and ideas. In his attempt to develop good style, Erasmus opposed strict adherence to Ciceronian prose, which he felt resulted in an artificial style. As Bizzell and Herzberg point out, Erasmus's emphasis on the rhetorical situation led him to adopt *copia* in its classical sense of "any abundantly varied flow of speech that impresses with its energy and inventiveness and wrings assent from the audience" (Bizzell and Herzberg 2001, 583). In developing *copia*, Erasmus cites Quintilian as an example and suggests that words and ideas (style and content) are "so interconnected in reality that one cannot easily separate one from the other" (1978). He gives the following examples of the two:

Richness of expression involves synonyms, heterosis or enallage, metaphor, variation in word form, equivalence, and other similar methods of diversifying diction. Richness of subject matter involves the assembling, explaining, and amplifying of arguments by the use of examples, comparisons, similarities, dissimilarities, opposites, and other like procedures. (Erasmus 1978)

Erasmus was especially well known for his discussion of amplification and the exercises he designed to train others. As Edward P. J. Corbett (1971) explains, Erasmus "set the pattern for the English grammar-school curriculum and for rhetorical training in the schools." *De Copia*, widely used in the schools,

was “designed to assist grammar-school students in acquiring elegance and variety of expression in Latin composition” (605). For example, Erasmus wrote 150 different ways of expressing the same sentiment, “Your letter pleased me very much.” Thus, it seems that Erasmus, particularly in his emphasis on *copia* and amplification, helps expand the notion of style during the Renaissance, connecting style closely to invention through his emphasis on an abundance of words and ideas.

If Erasmus was affiliated with an expansive move on the part of rhetoric during the Renaissance, a huge change took place during the sixteenth century that affected the nature of rhetoric and style significantly and ushered in what Chaïm Perelman (1979), in *The New Rhetoric and the Humanities*, suggests is a stylistic tradition of modern rhetoric (3). In using this phrase, Perelman means the connection of rhetoric to style in a way that led to rhetoric’s disrepute. Perelman focuses on the change from classical rhetoric, which included invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery, and its reduction to the so-called “flowers of rhetoric” (1), the canons of style and delivery only, under the influence of sixteenth-century philosopher Peter Ramus. As Perelman states, “The extraordinary influence of Ramus hindered, and to a large extent actually destroyed, the tradition of ancient rhetoric that had been developed over the course of twenty centuries and with which are associated the names of such writers as Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and St. Augustine” (2). Perelman explains that Ramus separated invention and arrangement from Aristotle’s conception of rhetoric and placed them instead under his newly formulated idea of dialectic. Thus, for Ramus, rhetoric included style and delivery *only* and became defined as the “art of speaking well,” of “eloquent and ornate language,” which included the study of tropes and of figures of style and oratorical delivery—all less important than Ramus’s new philosophical dialectic. Along with this change, Perelman says, came the birth of the tradition of modern rhetoric, “better called stylistic, as the study of techniques of unusual expression” (3).

In his work *Arguments in Rhetoric against Quintilian*, Ramus (1986) sets forth his ideas of style, which Bizzell and Herzberg suggest, “seems to be a kind of applied psychology, a study of the way to frame sentences so as to force certain reactions from recalcitrant, mentally inferior audiences” (2001, 678). Under Ramistic style, tropes are reduced to metonymy, irony, metaphor, and synecdoche, but he suggested that a plain style is best. Thus, overall, it seems that his conception of style, especially in its separation from invention and arrangement and in its restricted capacity, was very much intended to restrain the nature of a stylistic rhetoric and to suggest its inferior qualities. If we accept Perelman’s analysis, this new conception of rhetoric as divorced from philosophy—and excluding invention and arrangement—might be considered the beginning of what eventually led to the disappearance of style from composition. If, as Perelman suggests, “rhetoric, on this conception, is essentially an art of expression and more especially, of literary conventionalized expression; it is an art of style” (3), then the view of rhetoric as simply ornate form runs contrary to other, more contemporary theories of style.

#### TWENTIETH-CENTURY THEORIES OF STYLE

Of the many debates that have informed the study of style in composition studies, few have drawn more notice than that of the proper relationship between form (style) and content (meaning). As Robert Connors and Cheryl Glenn remark, “Perhaps the central theoretical problem presented by the study of style is the question of whether style as an entity really exists” (1999, 232). An affirmative response to that question emerges when style is defined as “choices of verbal formulation” (Ohmann 1967), which implies a view of style in part as preverbal thought. As Richard Ohmann suggests, the idea of style as choice applies when “another writer would have said *it* another *way*” (137). The definition of style as choice is implicit in the theory of style as “ornate form,” which assumes that form is separate from content and that “ideas exist wordlessly and can

be dressed in a variety of outfits depending on the need or the occasion" (Milic 1965, 67). The theory of ornate form assumes that style can be separated from meaning. In composition, this approach has been important to the belief that stylistic practices can be broken down and taught to student writers. As Ohmann writes, "The idea of style implies that words on a page might have been different, or differently arranged, without a corresponding difference in substance" (1967, 137). This "dualistic" view has been predominant in most approaches to style from both classical rhetoric and literary stylistics.

In contrast to the dualistic view of style as choice, the position that style (or form) is inseparable from content (or meaning) is known as "Crocean aesthetic monism" (Milic 1965). According to this "organic" view of style, even the slightest change in form implies a different meaning. With no seam between form and content, then, some argue that ultimately there is no such thing as "style." Stated differently, if even a simple change in form suggests a different meaning, then the logical extension of this is that "there is no style at all, only meaning or intuition" (Milic 1965, 67). While the organic theory has been considered persuasive by some composition scholars (e.g., Winterowd 1975), it has been part of an ongoing debate for years. As Roland Barthes pointed out during a symposium on literary style, the debate between the respective role of content and form goes back to Plato:

The oldest [issue in style] is that of Content and Form. As everyone knows, this dichotomy derives from the opposition in classical rhetoric between Res and Verba: Res or the demonstrative materials of the discourse depends on Invention, or research into what one can say about a subject; on Verba depends Elocutio (or the transformation of these materials into a verbal form). This Elocutio is, roughly, our "style." (1971, 3)

Barthes goes on to explain that the relationship between form and content "is taken to be the 'appearance' or 'dress' of Content, which is the 'reality' or 'substance' of Form" (3–4).

This is what has led, says Barthes, to a situation in which “the metaphors applied to Form (style) are thus decorative: Figures, colors, nuances” (4). While ultimately most feel that form is subsumed by content, Barthes reaches the opposite conclusion in his essay, suggesting that the dichotomy, though inappropriate in the first place, should be resolved in favor of form rather than content. He writes, “We can no longer see a text as a binary structure of Content and Form; the text is not double but multiple; within it there are only forms, or more exactly, the text in its entirety is only a multiplicity of forms without a content” (6).

Another theory of style, which Louis Milic calls “individualist” or “psychological monism,” is often summed up as “Style is the man.” Because style is regarded as the unique expression of someone’s personality, this view posits that no two writers, each having different life experiences, can express themselves in the same verbal style. As Milic states, this individualist theory (“write naturally”), which he sees as one of the predominant views of style, “has become so well established in this century that it has achieved the status of an unconscious (or unspoken) assumption and as a result is no longer stated in axiomatic form” (1975, 277). The individualist or monistic theory is in line with the definition of style as the deviation from a “norm,” which implies a standardized use of language that writers have decided purposefully to deviate from in arriving at a personal style. However, as Nils Enkvist points out, some features that are labeled stylistic are not exclusive to an individual but are shared by groups (1964). Furthermore, Enkvist suggests that an added difficulty is that “to get at style, the investigator must begin with the laborious task of setting up a corpus of reference to find the norm or norms from which a given text differs” (22), which in fact some scholars have done. Clearly, the definition of style as deviation from a norm can be problematic today because, even though there is no such thing as language use without norms, there is often no common agreement—especially in the absence of a grammar of style—of what constitutes those norms and what value we should attach to them. The “Students’ Right



to Their Own Language” resolution illustrates the importance of this concern.

One other theoretical question about style that has had widespread implications in composition and rhetoric is whether style can be extended by analogy to include the canon of arrangement. For many years, that question has been debated as scholars in different disciplines considered the application of stylistic study to larger aspects of discourse. In composition, many scholars tried to apply stylistic principles to the paragraph, which in turn led them to examine larger discourse structures. In his contribution to a symposium on style, Enkvist proposed a compromise between the sentence itself as a “style carrier” and features that link sentences together, called “discoursal intersentence phenomena”: “A large number of stylistic features are ultimately describable in terms of sentences and the comparison of sentences, but many intersentence devices may also possess stylistic relevance and should be described as such at once” (1971, 57).

While some recent writing about style in the discipline of composition has treated style as equivalent with arrangement (see Ostrom 1997), some scholars consider it useful pedagogically to maintain a distinction between the canons. This distinction corresponds to the usual way people understand style (relying on patterns of *language* use) as different from the organization (or patterns) of *ideas* in text. Thus, for example, a recent work, *Elements of Alternate Style* (Bishop 1997), attempts to extend style to the canon of arrangement, based on Winston Weathers’s decision to redefine “style” to include broader forms of discourse. In *An Alternate Style: Options in Composition*, Weathers (1980) writes, “We must identify options in all areas of vocabulary, usage, sentence forms, dictional levels, paragraph types, ways of organizing material into whole compositions: options in all that we mean by style” (5). Weathers’s work introduces a number of language features (e.g., “crots” and “grots”) which, although named in unusual ways, are similar to certain traditional stylistic tools, such as tropes and figures. The real issue with Weathers’s

approach, however, is his description of style as a feature of discourse larger than the sentence, a view that includes paragraphs and essay organization, phenomena generally included under the rhetorical canon of arrangement.

The attribution of aspects of form or arrangement to style becomes a key question in *Elements of Alternate Style* (Bishop 1997). In essays like Lad Tobin's "The Case for Double-Voiced Discourse," the authors make a case for incorporating the larger features in essays. For example, Tobin's call for essays that are "multidimensional" and "multivoiced" (47) suggests descriptions of features that may apply to style on some levels, but clearly move into broader questions of form and discourse. Similarly, in "Grammar J, As in Jazzing Around," Hans Ostrom (1997), in effect, redefines style in a section entitled "Let's say style is arrangement." In his creation of the word "plerk" to describe a neologism between play and work, Ostrom exhibits the kind of "play" Richard Lanham calls for in his work on style during the 1970s and 1980s; yet Ostrom, like the other contributors, enacts style at a broader level of discourse. In this book, I argue that by looking at expositions of alternate style, the field can examine how some of these areas do impact "style"; however, it is also important to clarify the demarcation between style and broader forms of discourse. In achieving this objective, I follow the model of Tzvetan Todorov, who insists that style is separate from larger discourse structure but inextricably linked to it. In suggesting that a feature of style is relevant when related to a larger element in the text—in this case a thematic motif—Todorov argues that "thematics and stylistics confirm each other, each being at once *signifiant* and *signifié* of the other; it is here that research into coherence finds its legitimate task" (1971, 37).

The fact that these definitions and broader theories of style continue to inform the discussion of style has several implications. The question of whether there is an important split between form and content still matters to the discipline in at least one important way. Accepting for the moment my claim

that style has diffused into other areas of the discipline, the question of whether the form of a person's dialect or home language can be separated from the content—here, interpreted as the person's identity—continues to trouble composition as a discipline. While this discussion will take place in Chapter five, for the moment it is enough to note that these definitions signal broad debates about the meaning of style that have an impact on the current state of style in composition studies. Because stylistics, whether based in literature, linguistics, or rhetoric and composition, has treated these theories as an important issue, it is crucial to examine how scholars are still asking the same question, even implicitly, in composition. Is it possible that no one has realized that some of these theories might be critiqued by other recent ideas in the field or that current areas of study in the field might provide a possible resolution? The possibilities for rethinking the problem of style appear throughout this book.

#### STYLISTIC TRADITIONS AND INFLUENCES

The following traditions of stylistic inquiry in composition will help to situate my book, and each one is important in a different way. For example, I draw on classical rhetoric and literary stylistics when I link style to invention and argue that the tacit diffusion of style into other areas of composition has prevented us from exploiting many aspects of a rich stylistic tradition. As these traditions appear in different chapters, I also draw on influences from several different contexts. These traditions are not separated by any rigid line, but rather are intricately connected to the state of style in the discipline of composition studies today.

##### **Classical Rhetoric**

The renewed interest in classical rhetoric as a force in composition studies has influenced the field's view toward style, and the central figure in that renaissance is Edward P. J. Corbett, whose writing on style nearly forty years ago still resonates

today. Yet, we cannot adequately appreciate the importance of Corbett's work without citing the classical, predominantly Aristotelian, tradition in which it is situated, even though subsequently composition scholars have turned to other strands of rhetoric as well. On the basis of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, a benchmark for Corbett, the lines are drawn to delineate style as one canon of rhetoric within a group of canons that also includes invention, arrangement, memory, and delivery. Corbett argues that the canons, despite the overlap between them, are intended to be separate, as Aristotle and Roman orators like Cicero and Quintilian made clear. Even though classical rhetoric was revived as a part of the "New Rhetoric" in the 1960s and 1970s, however, the influence of the tradition on style has had an uneven history. Many scholars like Connors and Glenn (1999) and Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee (2004) follow his application of the classical theories and pedagogies of style, though the division of the canons is often seen as more fluid in scholarship today.

Some composition scholars have questioned the premises of not only Corbett but others in composition who have followed his example, like Milic and W. Ross Winterowd. For example, Lanham, also drawing from classical rhetoric, challenges the idea of a clear or transparent style as the style that everyone should seek to emulate. In particular, Lanham opposes what he calls the "Clarity-Brevity-Sincerity" or "C-B-S theory of language," which he sees as the dominant view in the field of composition. Lanham contends that the C-B-S style, in which "language remains ideally passive and transparent" (1983b, 122), has the effect of urging writers to look *through* words to an underlying reality, a contention he argues should be reversed. Lanham proposes instead that we adopt an opaque style in which we look *at* the words themselves, characterized by reordering, exaggeration, repetition, discontinuity, and a return to "play." Lanham (1983b) sets forth his ideas in *Literacy and the Survival of Humanism*, where he offers a "stylistic matrix" based on the uses of what he calls "a self-conscious rhetoric . . . which in many *particular* cases energizes the greatest, and the most

greatly disputed, Renaissance literary texts” (58). Lanham describes his philosophy as follows:

I am going to call such self-conscious rhetoric, in a generic singular, the Opaque Style. What we must first notice about the Opaque Style is that it works like a simple At/Through switch. Verbal patterns can vary in small increments, but our attention does not seem to. Either we notice an opaque style as a style, (i.e., we look at it) or we do not (i.e., we look through it to a fictive reality beyond). (1983b, 58)

While also drawing upon classical rhetoric and enumerating tropes and schemes, Lanham argues against their use to produce the kind of scientific, normative prose that he sees at the heart of composition studies. In evaluating the use of classical rhetoric to discuss style in the field, then, this book explores both the continuing usefulness of its theories and pedagogies as well as some of the ways it has served to perpetuate a certain view of style in the field.

Another important aspect of classical rhetoric’s clear division of canons is that invention was considered at the time as being about ideas, while style was seen as a function of language. This ends up being important in the division between the two today and the varied esteem with which each is held. Invention was the system or method for discovering ideas or arguments, a “systematized way of turning up or generating ideas on some subject” (Corbett 1971, 36). Style, on the other hand, was about language, as in Cardinal Newman’s definition: “Style is a thinking out into language” (Corbett 1971, 37). While each is a separate canon of rhetoric, invention and style had important, yet often unrecognized, connections during the process era of composition studies (see Chap. 3).

### **Literary Stylistics**

The tradition of literary stylistics is central to the way in which the study of style developed in composition studies. Drawing upon different traditions of grammar and the deployment of various levels of language such as morphological

(including syntax), phonological (sound and rhythm), lexical, semantic, and so forth, the discipline of literary stylistics, which attempted to categorize and analyze both the poetry and literary prose of writers from different time periods, traditions, and languages, had a profound effect on the discipline of composition. Even a cursory examination of the interests of literary stylistics reveals the depth of that interest. In two separate conferences at Indiana University, for example, the importance of style as a multidisciplinary area of study became important. Thus, in 1960, the results of the first conference, held in 1958, were published under the title *Style in Language*. In 1971, the results of the second Indiana symposium, held in 1969, were published under the title *Literary Style: A Symposium*. In 1970, Donald Freeman published an edited collection, *Linguistics and Literary Style*, that featured articles by literary scholars under headings such as “Linguistic Stylistics: Theory and Method,” “Approaches to Prose Style,” and “Approaches to Metrics.” Beyond the methods of analysis themselves, a key ingredient of this tradition, as taken up in composition, is the belief that style is not restricted to poetry or literature but falls within the range of general language variation, a finding supported in large part by Roman Jakobson (1960) and later affirmed by Mary Louise Pratt (1977) in *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*. As Todorov states succinctly, “There is no point in separating a ‘literary stylistics’ from a ‘linguistics stylistics’: one is only the application of the other” (1971, 37).

### **Ideas of Plain Style**

I contend that much of our discussion of style today stems from beliefs about “plain style” that have become part of our popular culture. Calling plain style “a contemporary form of the commonplace,” cultural historian Kenneth Cmiel writes, “The impulse for simple, declarative sentences is strong in twentieth-century culture” (1990, 260). Cmiel points out that the plain style, along with the informal “colloquial” style and the “professional” style, were designed with a large and diverse

public in mind. He contends, however, that all these styles serve to “corrode civic discussion” and that the decision to promote these ideals in culture at the beginning of the twentieth century marked a major shift. “The sanctioning of these styles in elite culture at the turn of the century is worth note, for the need to reconstruct a spirited public was a central concern of progressive social thought” (261). The way that “plain style” became accessible to all is through its notion of a transparent correctness. If style is transparent, then the only thing left to be concerned about is correctness, which everyone ostensibly can master. This idea means that the plain style is for everyone—not just the elite. Cmiel suggests, however, that certain aspects of the plain style are also problematic:

The idiom has its virtues. It is clear and informative. It treats its audience with respect. Unlike the colloquial [style], it is supposed to contribute to discussion and not evoke feeling. Yet the plain style also has drawbacks. There is an unhealthy preoccupation with like/as distinctions or avoiding split infinitives. What is “correct” is studied at the expense of what is appropriate to the setting. The plain style also creates the illusion that language can be like a glass, a medium without the infusion of a self. It pretends the facts can speak for themselves in ways that the old rhetoric never did. The very style has helped perpetuate the belief that there are technical, apolitical solutions to political problems. It is perhaps the most deceptive style of them all. (260)

According to Cmiel, then, plain style, functioning much as a conventional belief, perpetuates certain ideas that become ingrained in the popular consciousness. I contend that writing in America today has been controlled in large part by this mythology of a plain style and that it has dictated our conceptions of what constitutes “good writing.” The power that this belief exerts is one reason why it is important to question the reasoning that supports it and to determine to what extent this view has influenced the relegation of style studies to a low status in the field of composition. While the virtues of plain style seem

generally accepted in composition (see, however, Lanham, for a contradictory view of this assertion), my contention is that the idea should be reexamined in both composition and ideas about writing in popular culture, especially those espoused by public intellectuals.