INTRODUCTION

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It happens all the time: someone will use the word style and, at least slightly, the conversation will stumble. Rather more than most words, style means different things to different people. For some, style is always individualized and works in counterpoint to the surrounding community (“I like your style!”); for others, style is just the opposite—it refers to a broad, collective system of symbolic patterns, something like a discourse, even a worldview (“That whole style is so eighties!”). For still others, especially writing teachers, style calls to mind a rather old-fashioned mandate to get students to write more “clearly” and, as such, it partners with grammar as a similar sort of fussiness about “surface” technicalities; for yet others, style refers to something else entirely, perhaps the element of language that crosses into music, the realm of rhythm and balance that opens, in turn, into a mysterious realm of ineffable, intersubjective energies, as when we’re powerfully drawn to a text but cannot explain why (“I don’t know—the style just grabs me!”). Perhaps this last definition of style—style-as-music—explains why, in most writing classrooms, the discussion of style doesn’t often get much beyond vague feelings about how this or that passage “sounds.” Style, in short, seems to mean a number of things, perhaps so many that, at last, it means nothing at all.

Or, more likely, style is the elephant in the classroom and in our scholarly field that we constantly pretend isn’t there. From the long, historical perspective, style would seem to be precisely such an elephant, for not only is style one of the five canons of classical rhetoric—the others being invention, arrangement, memory, and delivery—it can often subsume these others. Obviously, ideas about delivery and arrangement are intertwined with matters of style, and memory is, too, given how the carefully stylized language we associate with poetry originally served as an aid to memory: orators, in short, can remember their speeches more readily if the speeches are stylized according to principles of balance, rhythm, repetition, and so on (see Havelock 1982; Ong 1982).
But not only does style seem to contain arrangement, delivery, and memory, this elephant, in ways perhaps not so obvious, can also swallow up invention. Aristotle, for example, who otherwise goes to great lengths to oppose the production of knowledge (what he calls dialectics) to issues of language, describes style in Book III of *Rhetoric* in terms of “liveliness” and the value of surprising the audience so that the content seems new and spontaneously invented. And he seems close to fusing style and invention when, in his section on style, he asserts: “[W]hatever words create knowledge in us are the pleasantest” (Aristotle 1991, III.10 244). A similar tendency to link style and invention appears in Cicero’s *De Inventione*, where he roundly asserts that “wisdom without eloquence does little for the good of states . . . [and] eloquence without wisdom is generally highly disadvantageous” (Cicero 1949, 3). For another rhetorician of ancient Rome, Quintilian, the purpose of an education in rhetoric is to achieve *facilitas*, or “fullness of expression”—which is derived from a stockpile of expressive patterns and possibilities, a kind of stylistic repertoire that enables one to develop arguments on any subject. For each of these primary figures in the history of rhetoric, then, style is that part of rhetoric that threatens to take over the whole—not just the whole of rhetoric, but perhaps all of our activities of knowing.

Which perhaps is part of why rhetoricians have so often tried to restrict, even erase this elephant—and we’ve done so, most often, by idealizing so-called clarity. Quintilian, for example, in addition to his concept of *facilitas*, discussed style in terms of standards of correctness, which in turn are features of moral character (the goal of rhetoric being the “the good man speaking well”). And, as Kathryn Flannery has recently argued, this particular way of imagining style has long served to diminish—often quite drastically—style’s possibilities. In *The Emperor’s New Clothes* (1995), she argues that style is always a conveyer of larger cultural values and that there is no such thing as a naturally “good” style. Rather, the particular style sanctioned by socially powerful groups is often defined as good or proper. She notes that since the late Renaissance, the objective or “transparent” style popularized by scientists in the Royal Society has been encouraged by most Western educational institutions, especially in the United States. The upshot: most readers value plain prose because they’ve been taught and conditioned to read and trust that type of writing as clear and sincere (Flannery 1995, 21). She insists that literacy education in the United States has the institutional role of teaching the plain style to the masses, while literature, with its premium on artifice, remains privileged
discourse. To resist this either-or agenda, Flannery argues, requires a rhetorical conception of style that valorizes artifice and a range of styles for everyone.

A closely related and quite eloquent argument arises in Peter Elbow’s recent opinion piece in *College English* called “The Cultures of Literature and Composition: What Could Each Learn from the Other?” Too often, Elbow suggests, teachers of composition see imaginative, figurative language as somehow special or additional, something over and beyond the norm of straightforward, discursive language. And his response: “I’d argue that we can’t harness students’ strongest linguistic or even cognitive powers unless we see imaginative and metaphorical language as the norm—basic or primal” (Elbow 2002, 536). Elbow laments, too, the way the field of rhetoric and composition has undervalued verbal sophistication—“elegance and irony and indirection”—in its quest to serve in practical ways the ordinary, workaday needs of students. What we need, he insists, is an approach to prose that honors “playfulness, style, pleasure—even adornment and artifice” (543).

Not so long ago, teachers of composition did in fact pay considerable attention to questions of how to craft sentences, but that interest has all but vanished. As Robert Connors (2000) argues, the 1970s saw a robust enthusiasm for sentence combining, imitation, and Francis Christensen’s generative rhetoric. But, in the early 1980s, as composition moved into the major phase of its professionalization, this sort of pedagogy seemed to lack the sort of high theoretical basis then becoming fashionable and, rooted as it was in exercises, the pedagogy didn’t offer students the sort of meaningful rhetorical context that seemed indispensable to nurturing their abilities. The result, of course, is that many of today’s composition teachers aren’t teaching style much at all and, if we do, we often do so merely to enhance the “clarity” of student prose. And we certainly aren’t talking about it much in the pages of our scholarly journals and books.

Thus the need for a book such as *Refiguring Prose Style: Possibilities for Writing Pedagogy*. We want to move the field beyond the dichotomies that have impoverished its understanding of style. In fact, we follow Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly, who lament the way that “composition continues to define itself by separating its work into competing identities and categories of opposition” (1989, 1–2). They argue that while categorization is understandable in a field as complex and often contradictory as composition studies, many of these “categories tend to harden, to become exclusionary rather than revisionary” (2). A perfect example of this is the
way our field situates style: it belongs with so much current-traditional old-hat, rather than the future; empty, tedious classroom exercises rather than complex, rhetorical experimentation; a sign of pedantry rather than an exciting tool for meaning making and a focus for critical thinking. Operating from the same desire as Ronald and Roskelly to move “farther along” and cut through often-divisive categories, this collection argues that style should be refigured and, as such, become a kind of bridge by which we can lead our students—and each other—beyond counterproductive binaries, such as those between form and content, composition and literature, and between teaching writing as a service course and as tool for critical and creative thinking.

Hence, *Refiguring Prose Style: Possibilities for Writing Pedagogy*. Part I explores the recent history of composition studies, the ways it has figured and all but effaced the whole question of prose style. Part II takes to heart Elbow’s suggestion that composition and literature, particularly as conceptualized in the context of creative writing courses, have something to learn from each other. Part III sketches practical classroom procedures for heightening students’ abilities to engage style, and part IV explores new theoretical frameworks for defining this vital and much-neglected territory. We hope that the essays assembled here—focusing as they do on historical, aesthetic, practical, and theoretical issues—will awaken composition studies to the possibilities of style, and, in turn, rejuvenate a great many classrooms.