Refiguring Prose Style

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As a writer and composition teacher, I have always been intrigued—and nearly as often bedeviled—by style. In trying to conceptualize and explain style, I’ve often felt like Potter Stewart trying to define obscenity; I can’t quite say what style is, yet I feel confident I know it when I see it. Using present theoretical models of style, I have found myself clinging to atomized descriptions that tend to focus on the writer’s choices, on speculations about the writer’s personality, or on the marriage of form and content. Too often, I have been left with the feeling that something was missing, that present theoretical models of style fail to fully describe style’s dynamic nature or account for how it works. We need a new model.

What should a new theoretical model of style look like? In my view, it should have three characteristics. First, a new theoretical model of style should be dynamic. It should conceptualize style as a system of processes and relationships, not as a set of static properties belonging to the individual members of what I will call “the triad”—the writer, the audience, and the text. To do justice to style’s complexity, a new model should avoid privileging any one member of the triad over the other members. A new model of style should also help to demystify the ineffable sense that, in style, the whole of writing is more than the sum of its parts. Finally, by grounding the typical impressionistic terms used to describe style in a well-developed body of theory, it should better explain how style works.

In mapping what a new theoretical model of style might look like, I will draw from an interdisciplinary body of theory on processes and relationships, namely, systems theory and cybernetics. This body of theory provides both a framework and a vocabulary for describing how, through exchanges of information, members of a system interact with and affect each other dynamically. As a result, this body of theory could point the way toward the recursive and holistic conversation our discipline should be having about composition style. This essay is a first step toward
mapping the outline of a cybernetic model of style. Drawing on general systems theory, second-order cybernetics, and the three related concepts of emergent properties, reflexivity, and autopoiesis, I theorize about how a cybernetic model of style could move beyond existing models and enhance our understanding and teaching of style.

SYSTEMS THEORY AND STYLE

So what exactly is a system? Systems theorist Gerald Weinberg contends that, “as any poet knows, a system is a way of looking at the world” (1975, 51). For Weinberg, a system is a “point of view of one or several observers” (62). For Stafford Beer, founder of management cybernetics, “a system is not something presented to the observer, it is something recognized by him [or her]” (1980, 67). The constructivist epistemology underlying systems theory can help us to develop a better theoretical model of prose style because it can help us to account for the reciprocal interrelationships among writers, texts, and audiences that we describe when we talk about style. For example, as Weinberg notes, we often talk about systems “having” purposes, but “purpose” really describes sets of dynamic relationships between observers and systems, not fixed qualities that systems possess (57). That is, instead of understanding a system’s purpose as a discrete quality that the system “has,” we should instead understand purpose as a description of how the observer relates to the system (57). Weinberg offers an example to illustrate how a system’s purpose is a description of how observers relate to that system: To a motorist, the purpose of General Motors is to manufacture cars; to a scrap metal dealer, GM’s purpose is to produce scrap metal; to a stockholder, GM’s purpose is to generate profits (57).

Systems theory recognizes and accounts for the interactions between observers and what they observe; in short, it provides a rich way of looking at the world that examines the looking as much as it examines the world. Composition theorists and teachers need this rich way of looking at their world, a way that does justice to the true complexity (and, indeed, the messiness) of the writing and reading processes. Unfortunately, in examining style, we often grasp at audience expectations, speculations about the writer’s personality, textual features, or impressionistic labels. In doing so, we may treat style as a static list of properties possessed by, for example, certain writers or texts, instead of as a relationship among the members of the triad of writer, text, and audience.

By viewing systems as sets of relationships rather than as containers holding collections of fixed properties, we can avoid the pitfalls of
essentialist thought. Weinberg illustrates this point by using another concept from systems theory: emergent properties; emergent properties are what make a system as a whole greater than the sum of the system’s individual parts (1975, 60). Weinberg notes that some theorists contend that emergent properties do not exist in a system’s parts, but develop in the whole; other theorists dispute this, contending that so-called emergence is simply another label for a predictable “vital essence” that can be found within the system’s parts (60). Weinberg acknowledges that theorists on both sides of this debate can be correct, but he argues that they go awry when they speak in absolutes, “as if emergence were ‘stuff’ in the system, rather than a relationship between system and observer” (60). For this reason, Weinberg concludes that, while the simplifications of essentialist thought may “[serve] us well at certain times, on a certain scale of observation, and for certain purposes,” essentialist thought is ultimately too limited because it fails to account for “the human origins of our models, words, instruments, and techniques” (61). The concept of emergent properties—how the whole is more than the sum of its parts—is crucial to a new theoretical model of style because it helps us to move beyond the essentialisms inherent in prevailing theories of style.

In his classic essay, “Theories of Style and Their Implications for the Teaching of Composition” (1965), Louis Milic describes three prevailing theories of style. These are rhetorical dualism, which holds that ideas exist apart from words and can be ornamented in a variety of ways to suit the occasion; psychological monism or individualism, in which style is seen as the expression of the writer’s unique personality; and aesthetic monism, which is an organic theory holding that form and content are inseparable (67). While these three models can be expedient in the classroom, they can also approach essentialism. They fail to account fully for style’s relational nature because they privilege one member of the writer-text-audience triad over the others and treat style as discrete, isolable “‘stuff’ in the system,” instead of as an inescapably contextualized three-part relationship. For example, rhetorical dualism, with its emphasis on moving an audience to do or feel something, tends to privilege audience over the writer and the text, treating style as a menu of choices designed to achieve certain effects. Similarly, psychological monism neglects both text and audience in favor of the author by asking students to plumb personalities (theirs or others’) to find the wellspring of style. Finally, aesthetic monism neglects both audience and writer by focusing on the text as a closed box students can take apart to learn how it was built.
To better account for the interrelationships and connections among writer, text, and audience, style must be theorized holistically, as a system in which each member of the triad affects—and is affected by—the other members. The following metaphor, offered by David Morley, expresses how systems theory can inform a fully developed model of prose style:

To draw a carp, Chinese masters warn, it is not enough to know the animal’s morphology, study its anatomy or understand the physiological functions of its existence. They tell us that it is also necessary to consider the reed against which the carp brushes each morning while seeking its nourishment, the oblong stone behind which it conceals itself, and the rippling of water when it springs to the surface. These elements should in no way be treated as the fish’s environment, the milieu in which it evolves or the natural background against which it can be drawn. They belong to the carp itself. . . . The carp must be apprehended as a certain power to affect and be affected by the world. (1992, 183)

Like Weinberg’s poets, artists who wish to draw the carp must learn a new way of looking at the world; in other words, they must learn to see the entire system of interrelationships before they can, for the first time, really see the carp. In this sense, the carp is an emergent property within the context of the system rather than a priori “stuff.” Similarly, to understand style, composition teachers and students must also learn a new way of looking at the world, a way that acknowledges style’s dynamic, interrelational nature. Joseph M. Williams (1986) argues that what we teach about style derives from what we believe that we can substantiate and demonstrate (i.e., in texts), but judgments about what we can substantiate and demonstrate depend on the “categories, processes, and relationships in our theory” (176). Theorizing style as the dress of thought, the expression of an individual personality, or as the marriage of form and content privileges one member of the triad over the others, much like an artist trying to draw the carp without understanding all the interlocking processes that affect and are affected by the carp—indeed, that are the carp.

Much of our discipline’s talk about style reduces style to “‘stuff’ in the system.” For example Teresa Thonney (2003) emphasizes the text when she declares that “good writing has three characteristics: clarity, precision, and elegance” (xi; emphasis added). E. B. White highlights the qualities a writer brings to the relationship; for White, style is such “an expression of self” that “style is the writer” (Strunk and White 1999, 69, 84; emphasis in original). Prioritizing audience, Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert J.
Connors (1999) shifts the focus to style’s rhetorical function as a means of persuasion (338). These and similar views of style do not account fully for style’s relational and emergent nature. When we make stylistic judgments, what we judge is not the forensic status of the text as proof of a meaning already made or lost, a voice present or absent, or persuasion won or botched; rather, we judge the status of the interrelationships among the triad. Without seeing the whole system as a set of interrelationships, we confound ourselves—and our students—by using a possessory vocabulary to describe what is really a relational judgment. For example, when we describe a student’s paper as “clear,” or “persuasive,” we are not simply identifying the paper as possessing certain characteristics of clear or persuasive texts. What we are really describing are the interrelations among members of the triad and how these interrelations make and affect meaning. Unfortunately, much of our present vocabulary tends to treat style as properties held by the audience, the writer, or the text (e.g., Does the audience have certain interests or prejudices that make it more or less receptive to certain rhetorical options? Does the writer have a satiric wit? Does the text contain formal features such as Latinate diction?).

Writing that Thonney would judge clear and elegant, that White would judge as evidence of a unique authorial voice, or that Corbett would judge as persuasive “has” none of these qualities outside the interrelationships among members of the triad of writer, text, and audience. Richard Lanham (1974) highlights this dynamic process when discussing style’s sacred cow, clarity: “clarity is not any single verbal configuration but a relationship between writer and reader” (32). Expanding on this notion of clarity as connection, T. R. Johnson (2003) strives for a stylistic pedagogy that teaches students to be sensitive to the “latticework of interconnected moments” that “give rise to parallel experiences of connection between reader and writer”; this “intersubjective experience” is what we characterize as clarity (37). Cybernetics, a branch of systems theory, highlights the dynamics of the interrelationships among the members of the triad and can point the way to the new theory of style that composition needs.

**CYBERNETICS AND RELATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS**

What is cybernetics? Systems theorists Francis Heylighen and Cliff Joslyn (2002) define cybernetics as “the science that studies the abstract principles of organization in complex systems” (155). Cybernetics is an “inherently transdisciplinary” science whose “reasoning can be applied to understand, model and design systems of any kind: physical, technological,
biological, ecological, psychological, social, or any combination of those” (155). Indeed, cybernetics has even been used as a conceptual model to explain seemingly nonscientific, aesthetic processes; for example, philosophy professor Ervin Laszlo (1973) has applied cybernetics to the aesthetic problems inherent in studying the creation, performance, and appreciation of music.

Cybernetics theorizes about how systems interact and operate by using three types of informational loops: negative feedback loops, positive feedback loops, and feedforward loops (Porter 1969, 5–6; Heylighen and Joslyn 2002, 163). Of these three types of informational loops, the first two involve the concept of feedback. The principle of feedback has been called “one of the most fundamental in life and in many processes and systems that man has devised” (Porter 1969, 14). Feedback arises when a system uses information about the results of its processes to alter the processes themselves; stated another way, it is “the influence of output back on input” (Richardson 1991, 128). Similarly, composition research has long recognized that writing should be conceptualized as a complex, recursive process rather than a simple, linear progression. This recursive process is rooted in varieties of feedback—the writer oscillates back and forth between planning and drafting, exploration and reformulation, using the results of each to affect the other.

Negative and positive feedback loops differ in how they use the results of the system’s processes to affect the processes themselves. In a negative feedback loop, the system compares its ideal output or behavior with its actual output or behavior, and the difference is used to constrain the actual to bring it more in line with the ideal (Porter 1969, 8). An example of a negative feedback loop is the Federal Reserve’s adjustments to the interest rate to affect the behavior of the national economy (14–15). A positive feedback loop is exactly the opposite. In a positive feedback loop, the system’s output facilitates and accelerates input of the same type that produced it; examples of positive feedback loops include returns on investments, arms races, and the spread of viral epidemics (Heylighen and Joslyn 2002, 162).

Feedforward loops differ fundamentally from feedback loops because, in a feedforward loop, information is used to affect the results of the system’s processes before, not after, those processes occur. Unlike in feedback loops, where the system uses the results of what has already happened to influence the system’s future behavior, in a feedforward loop, the input is monitored, controlled, and adjusted before it enters
the system (Foster 1969, 269). For example, in a manufacturing process that requires a specified amount of moisture, the manufacturer will monitor the moisture content of the raw materials so that it can add water if necessary (269). Thus, the aim of feedforward control is, at the outset, to prevent or reduce deviation from the system’s ideal state. In composition, style has often been theorized as a form of feedforward control, namely, the writer’s choices made with the aim of preventing or reducing deviation from a defined ideal state, such as standard academic discourse, concision, or vigorous prose.

From its inception in the 1940s, cybernetics sought to explore similarities between living systems and machines (Heylighen and Joslyn 2002, 156). In the early 1970s, a so-called second order of cybernetics arose (156). The impetus to this second order was a desire by cyberneticists to move away from mechanistic approaches to cybernetics and to account theoretically for the role of the observer in modeling and understanding systems (156). Second-order cybernetics recognizes that the system is “an agent in its own right, interacting with another agent, the observer” and that “the results of observations will depend on” this interaction; in short, “the observer too is a cybernetic system, trying to construct a model of another cybernetic system” (156–57). Because it foregrounds the role of the observer, second-order cybernetics emphasizes the concept of reflexivity, a concept that postmodern theorist N. Katherine Hayles describes as “the movement whereby that which has been used to generate a system is made, through a changed perspective, to become part of the system it generates” (1999, 8). As Hayles explains, “feedback can loop through the observers, drawing them in to become part of the system being observed” (9; emphasis in original). In other words, our models are a result of who we are and who we are is a result of our models. Any particular lens through which we view style (as the dress of thought, as the hallmark of a unique personality, or as inextricably tied to content) results from sets of assumptions about language and reality, which assumptions in turn affect not only what we see and what we value about style, but also what we don’t see or value.

Finally, second-order cybernetics incorporates the concept of autopoiesis, or self-production (Heylighen and Joslyn, 2002, 161). Autopoiesis arises from the self-organizing “mutually constitutive interactions between the components of a system” (Hayles 1999, 11). Autopoietic systems are “autonomous, self-referring and self-constructing” (Cohen and Wartofsky 1980, i) and are part of a “concatenation of processes”
(Maturana and Varela 1980, 80). Thus, as Hayles points out, “the autopoietic view shifts the center of interest from the cybernetics of the observed system to the cybernetics of the observer” (11). The second-order cyberneticist realizes that, as Hayles puts it, “we do not see a world ‘out there’ that exists apart from us. Rather, we see only what our systemic organization allows us to see” (11). The constructivist epistemology behind this shift carries important implications for a new theoretical model of style. Reflexivity and autopoiesis can help us to theorize style as a contextualized, mediated, relational way of seeing within a complex, dynamic network of interactions, interactions that make the whole of style more than the sum of its parts. In these interactions, each member of the triad—audience, writer, and text—occupies a position of potential flux and changing perspectives.

**TOWARD A CYBERNETIC MODEL OF PROSE STYLE**

Lanham argues that prose styles are not “neutral, dependable, preexistent objects that everyone sees the same way”; rather, every “prose style is itself not only an object seen but [also] a way of seeing, both an intermediate ‘reality’ and a dynamic one” (1974, 33). Together, reflexivity—in which the observer interacts with (and therefore is part of) the system observed—and autopoiesis—which examines systems’ self-organizing and emergent natures—provide a framework for acknowledging and attempting to map the complex, dynamic flows of information and perceptions among (and within) the triad’s members. So how could we redefine style to emphasize its reflexive, autopoietic nature?

As the following figure demonstrates, each member of the triad is itself a system with its own internal dynamics; in turn, each member affects the other members and the “metasystem” as a whole.

The writer is situated (as is his or her audience) within, and affected by, three major forces: the rhetorical situation, kairos, and embodiment.¹ Some definitions are in order here. In defining the first force, rhetorical situation, Keith Grant-Davie (1997) offers a useful modification to Lloyd Bitzer’s three-part taxonomy of exigence, audience, and constraints. To develop a more holistic system of communication and meaning making, Grant-Davie expressly adds the rhetor (in composition, the writer); indeed, Grant-Davie contends that “the further one delves into a [rhetorical] situation, the more connections between [the elements of exigence, rhetor, audience, and constraints] are likely to appear” (269–70, 277).
The second of these forces, kairos, according to Jerry Blitefield, combines both time and place; expanding on temporal concepts such as “right timing” and the “ripe moment” (the framework within which kairos is often understood), Blitefield argues that because physical places come into and out of different states of being, they are themselves kairotic; thus, “kairoi come into existence in places, as places” (2002, 72–73; emphasis in original). As a result, “kairos is not simply a matter of rhetorical perception or willing agency: it cannot be seen apart from the physical dimensions of the place providing for it” (73). In writing, the writer and audience not only consider kairos but also help to define and construct that kairos—each is affected by and affects the other, in time and space.

The third of these forces is embodiment. Building on Elizabeth Grosz’s comment that “there is no body as such; there are only bodies,” Hayles draws a distinction between the body and embodiment (1999, 196). For Hayles, the body refers to a set of social and discursive practices, a complex of idealized, normative criteria; by contrast, embodiment refers to the actual instantiations of particular individual bodies; these instantiations necessarily vary from the idealized, normative criteria because they are “contextual, enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture” (196). Discourses of race, gender, sexuality, age, and class all contribute to these sets of specifics and must be taken into account in a fully developed theoretical model of style. In other words, because bodies matter, the matter of bodies cannot be excised—our bodies influence and are influenced by our models of style.²
These three forces (rhetorical situation, kairos, and embodiment) combine to shape the writer as a system or way of looking at the world in her own right while she participates in the “metasystem” of the triad. She engages in inescapably recursive and self-making processes by composing, editing, and revising—sometimes doing all three simultaneously. Donald Murray (1980) captures the feel of these interactions: “The writer is constantly learning from the writing what it intends to say. The writer listens for evolving meaning. . . . The writing itself helps the writer see the subject” (7). In the shifting perspectives of these processes, information loops through the writer; she is part of the overall system she observes.

In style, feedforward loops—in which input is adjusted before it enters the system—arise from such elements as diction, genre and format conventions, and, especially in academic writing, the requirements and stated or implied discourse conventions of the assignment. Feedback loops—in which output affects input—arise from intertextuality (the interactions of the writer and the text in relation to other texts, including other iterations of the same text, such as drafts), intratextuality (the ways in which the text’s parts relate to each other as perceived by the writer or audience), and audience response (e.g., peer or teacher comments during revision, an imagined or ideal audience, or the writer’s own internal process of revising while writing). Similarly, just as the text is shaped by the writer in writing and revision, it is also shaped by intertextuality and by audience response. The audience reads the text in the context of its own “internal organization”; that is, in response to other texts, and within the framework of the rhetorical situation, kairos, and embodiment.

Because second-order cybernetics emphasizes interrelationships rather than individual components, it helps to illuminate the complex dynamics of meaning at work among the triad and offers a fruitful theoretical basis for a new model of style. Like the artist who learns to see the carp as a contextualized set of relationships rather than as an isolated entity, we must learn to consider—and accord equal consideration to—all the members of the style triad holistically and dynamically. In the holistic, dynamic view, style is an ongoing emergent interaction, not a repository of isolated precepts and prescriptions. By highlighting shifting perspectives, the concatenation of processes, and the reciprocal flows of information, reflexivity and autopoiesis provide a rich theoretical framework to account for the complex, messy processes inherent in examining how and why connections or relationships are made among writers, texts, and audiences. Nonholistic models of style are limited because they privilege one member of the triad
over the others by, for example, focusing on the author’s choices, on the audience’s reception of the text, on the writer’s personality, or on the textual product itself. As a result, nonholistic models are static and fail to account for the complex interrelationships and contexts at work in style’s full arena: writing, revising, and reading. As Lanham argues, “Prose style does not work in a vacuum, except in Freshman Composition. It works in a context. The context makes it what it is” (1974, 28). A cybernetic model of style would help us understand context better.

Style has often been theorized in terms of control, specifically as a feedforward loop initiated by the writer. Under this model, style is the sum of the writer’s decisions on diction, tone, subject, and so on. For example, Sandra Schor argues that style should be conceptualized and taught as control, specifically control of meaning and of “one’s subject” through thesis development (1986, 204, 208–9). Schor advocates discarding the term “style” as “wholly out of place” in teaching beginning writers and argues that composition instructors should “attend to control first and shelve style temporarily” (204, 211). Martha Kolln, in her *Rhetorical Grammar*, stresses the notion of rhetorical choices enacted by the writer to achieve certain effects on an audience (1999, 183). In her essay “Style as Option,” Jane Walpole theorizes style as “the vast area of writer’s choice” (1980, 208). In *The Writer’s Options: Lessons in Style and Arrangement*, Max Morenberg and Jeff Sommers advocate that students learn to recognize language options to best “make their point” (2003, xv). Joseph Williams contends that “style is defined at least partly by how we can manipulate the categories of meaning through the categories of function and position” (1986, 181). As important as the writer’s control may be, it is just one part of a complex system.

Grounded in well-developed theory about how complex systems function and interact, cybernetics provides a way for us to move beyond models of style that overemphasize the writer’s choices to the detriment of the other members of the triad. Style is more than a simple feedforward loop in which students select from a menu of options intended to cause certain rhetorical effects on the audience or to comply with received notions like “concision.” While writing certainly does involve some aspects of feedforward control to manage exchanges of information (e.g., punctuation, conscious word choices, arrangement), simple feedforward models are static, conceptualizing style as a whole that is exactly the sum of the parts assembled by the writer. Not only do feedforward models tend to reduce style to the icing on the cake, but they also ignore the writer’s and
the audience’s dynamic experiences in producing, shaping, and being shaped by the text. Lanham suggests the reciprocal interaction of writer and text: “The writer controls words. Then they, as his first draft, control him. He then again, as revisor, controls them” (1974, 39). Simple feedforward models fail to account fully for how the text and the audience participate in making meaning, and how meaning may shift, change, or build upon itself to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts in ways not explainable only by appeal to “the vast area of writer’s choice.” Simple feedforward models only allow us to see style’s emergent properties as inherent in the system’s parts; in other words, when shifts in meaning occur, we can only explain them as a sort of index to the degree of the writer’s control.

Contrary to Schor, Lanham believes that writing courses should push students toward “an acute self-consciousness about style”; indeed, Lanham contends that the way composition courses are usually taught is backwards: “Writing courses usually stress, not style, but rhetoric’s other two traditional parts, [inventing] arguments and arranging them. Yet both, implicit in a study of style, emerge naturally only from a concentration on it” (1974, 13–14). From Lanham’s perspective, focusing on control of words presupposes “a static, rather than a dynamic, model of verbal composition” in which words correlate to a fixed reality; what’s more, focusing on control ignores how “the act of composition . . . oscillates from realism to idealism, and back again” (39). Lanham’s “oscillation” provides a possible way for us to describe how style works within the dynamic interrelationships and interactions among the triad. These interrelated inputs, outputs, and processes combine in a series of feedforward and feedback loops through a “system of systems” involving the writer, text, and audience. Johnson describes a similar dynamic process as “interanimating” and strives to awaken students to “the micropolitics of the four-way relations between author, audience, text, and world” (2003, 5, 15). As figure 1 demonstrates, writing and reading are never conducted in isolation—instead, they are activities conducted by multiple interacting systems. This is precisely why present theories of style fail to account fully for how style works; worse, some present theories of style can even trivialize style as merely identifying a certain writer or subject matter (Genova 1979, 320; Sloan 1981, 502).

Not only is style more than a simple feedforward loop, style is also more than a simple feedback loop. Negative feedback loops are inherent in fixed notions of style as unity, coherence, and correctness, as well as in
the sets of static edicts that are the hallmarks of current-traditional pedagogy. Cyberneticists sometimes call feedback control “error-controlled regulation” (Heylighen and Joslyn 2002, 163), an apt description of the ideology underlying current-traditional pedagogy. Lists of edicts, coupled with comments like “awkward” or “vague” marked on students’ papers by an instructor striving to bring students’ writing into compliance with the norms of “college-level English” devalue style, equating it with a simple regulatory device, such as a thermostat.

Prescriptive advice to student writers about style, especially in textbooks, often consists of what Lanham decries as “self-canceling clichés,” “a tedious, repetitive, unoriginal body of dogma” (1974, 19) or “folk wisdom and exercises in the psychology of rumor” (1993, 128). For example, the fifth edition of the popular *St. Martin’s Handbook*, echoing Strunk and White, exhorts students to, among other things, write concisely, favor simple sentence structures, and eliminate words that do not advance a clear meaning (Lundsford 2003, 701–2). Peter Elbow wants writing to have the “good timing,” “personality,” and “resonance” of a “real self” and “real voice,” all in the name of, as the title of one of his best-known works declares, *Writing with Power* (1981, 292–93). Perhaps echoing Swift’s dictum of “proper words in proper places,” John Haynes notes that style has been commonly viewed as “a matter of the careful choice of exactly the right word or phrase, le mot juste” (1995, 3). I do not advocate simply repudiating all of the time-tested vocabulary we use to describe style; however, we must realize how judgments about whether a particular mot is juste or not, or whether a text is clear, harmonious, resonant, and powerful (or their opposites) can arise only out of the interrelationships among the triad, not to mention the cultural and historical contexts for reading and interpreting. With a holistic model of style as a system, perhaps we could blow centuries of dust off these prescriptive yet impressionistic terms and, for the first time, understand them according to their relational and emergent characteristics.

Like Lanham, I maintain that style is vital to composition pedagogy; for the same reason, Schor’s position that teaching style should be deferred until the instructor decrees that control has been learned seems less fruitful to me because it treats style as an “add-on” to language. A pedagogy limiting the development of students’ ideas in the name of control tends to reward bland, “safe” writing—what Lanham calls “neutral expository prose that filters out self” (1974, 116). Lanham wants to move away from the traditional focus on sincerity and authenticity in composition
pedagogy and argues that students should be encouraged to experiment with a wide variety of prose styles (118). However, when Lanham argues that a “range of opinions ought to be furnished and surveyed along with a range of styles,” and, if a student cannot develop his own opinions, “let him be given some,” his approach starts to become too prescriptive (118). With any luck, developing students’ awareness of the complexities of the reading and writing processes would obviate or lessen any perceived need to furnish them with styles or opinions to get them started writing. Apart from the dangers inherent in mindless, mechanistic imitation, prescribing styles tends to overemphasize details at the most local level, for example, at the level of word choice, arrangement, and “voice.” Prescribing styles fails to provide a deeper understanding of what happens within and outside the text as part of a system affected by, to use just one example, particular cultural and historical expectations of what constitutes coherent or clear prose.

In his venerable Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, Corbett, a rhetorical dualist, analyzes style in terms of grammatical competence; vocabulary; purity, propriety, and precision of diction; and sentence composition (1990, 339–59). Corbett also provides a comprehensive taxonomy of style, including kinds of diction, length of sentences, kinds of sentences, variety of sentence patterns, sentence euphony, articulation of sentences, figures of speech, and paragraphing (361–69). Corbett’s compendium is thorough and his text immerses the student in a wealth of information and examples (especially as to schemes and tropes); however, the rhetorical dualist formulation of style could cause style to be misunderstood as mere ornamentation or special effects. Indeed, Corbett appears to suspect this; just four paragraphs into his 146–page chapter on style, he defends style against the charge that it is merely “the dress of thought” (338). A more serious shortcoming of the rhetorical dualist approach is that it can lead to a tyranny of the audience. If the student is primarily concerned with moving an audience to do or feel something, his writing can slip into legalisms, bombast, or sentimentality; worse, he learns to view writing as he views a can opener—as a utilitarian product assembled for a predetermined, limited purpose.

As I have argued, one of the virtues of a cybernetic model of style is that it would provide a fuller awareness of important interrelationships and contexts than existing models provide. A cybernetic model of style would enable students to see that when style works—when the text seems clear, when the words seem exactly fitted to the occasion, when the
writer’s voice resonates, or when the audience is persuaded—such judgments describe the state of a complex system of interrelationships and interactions, as mediated and affected by the observer’s conceptual model, her way of looking at the world. This awareness could not only encourage students to take risks and to experiment with their writing, but could also make revision and editing more mindful. A cybernetic model of style would provide a more holistic view and a richer understanding of what happens when texts are made and read. This could empower students to examine the dynamic forces at play in the production and reception of texts, rather than simply exhorting them to, for example, “be clear” and “avoid the passive voice,” as if being clear and avoiding the passive voice were ends in themselves (or, indeed, even cognizable at all) outside the context of the triad.

Style is more than a writer choosing particular words for particular effects or, as Elbow, the psychological monist, would have it, striving for a particular voice. Milic, a rhetorical dualist, argues that “if style is the expression of the student’s mind and personality,” we as teachers of composition have precious little to do besides offering our students a few exhortations about writing naturally and expressing themselves (1965, 69). By rigorously and consistently foregrounding the role of the observer and by helping students develop strategies that account for all three members of the triad, a cybernetic theory of style would avoid the charges of excessive subjectivity and privileging the writer that can be leveled against psychological monism. Indeed, it is only through heightened awareness of style’s systemic nature that students can begin to understand how “style and meaning are inextricably interwoven; they reflect, express and constitute each other” (Genova 1979, 323).

By helping us to map and to understand the interrelationships and exchanges of information at work in reading and writing, a cybernetic model of style will move us beyond the shortcomings of present theoretical models. With a cybernetic model we will, for the first time, have a holistic way to theorize style’s dynamic, emergent nature. We will not only know style when we see it, but will also be able to explain what it is and how it works.