ABSTRACT
As its etymology reminds us, style mediates communication and arises out of whatever technology of communication characterizes an era. Style presents itself as the “how” as distinct from the “what” of communicated thought, and the relationship between the two has always been marked by attempts to subordinate form to content or vice versa. In the academic disciplines, the substantive (the “what”) traditionally takes precedence over the procedural (the “how”). Academic style paradoxically deprivileges style by making it subservient to substance and, in doing so, helps construct disciplinary boundaries, which differentiate themselves both by subject matter and by mystifying their processes of communication—that is, their style. A foregrounding of style in academic dis-
course, however, lays bare its own procedures and thereby opens up its audience; for style—unlike substance—is all about audience, about being situated, directive, and intentional. By equalizing style’s footing in the style/substance binary, we achieve better awareness about the boundaries of our disciplines.

A trip to the *Oxford English Dictionary* will tell us that the word *style*, in currency in English for over 700 years, comes to us via Old French from Latin *stilus*, meaning a stylus or nib, as if we could speak of someone being entirely “without nib” or rather “nibbish.” By a synecdochal move, style comes to name the words that emerge from beneath the nib as it moves across the page and then, by another conceptual gathering, the inked words and the slant of the nib that penned them come to refer to “how they ought to be expressed”—I modify this phrase from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, which translated very literally reads: “it is not sufficient to have what (things) ought to be said but also necessary [to have] how such (things) ought to be said.”

Style is not an ineffable *je ne sais quoi* but a function of words arranged visually or aurally in certain ways, an ethical disposition effected by that arrangement.

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We are doubly reminded of style’s “word-ness” by the terms in the Greek and Latin that we translate as “style”: *lexis* and *elocutio*. The etymology of the word thus shows that style is medium: the words in which the thought emerged or the scratched page on which the words emerged. Moreover, that medium is a technology of communication. If the traction of a nib over a page, the flow of ink, and the *ductus* (flow, direction) of a hand in its movement across a page together once produced style, style today arises out of a different configuration of and different physical processes of producing and distributing words.

What sort of balance do we as scholars in humanities seek between, as Aristotle pitches it, “what we ought to say” and “how we ought to say it”? The question is thousands of years old, yet into its broad picture are etched choices we make daily. How we resolve the balance between substance and style bears decisive consequences for scholarly reputations and for audience. Their long tussle begins at least with Plato and the sophists in their respective claims for philosophy and rhetoric, and, while this is not the place for sketching their history, we may note as we go a couple of formative turns that in each case ruptures connection between the substantive and the procedural. The first asserts the claims of substance over style. In the sixteenth century, Petrus Ramus splits the five canons of rhetoric— invention, arrangement, style, memory, delivery—into two groups: he assigns invention and
arrangement to philosophy and leaves rhetoric, now shrunk to style and delivery (memory being quite sidelined), shorn of content.\(^2\) Emptied of truth-value, transformed into a neutral how, style under the Ramist logical turn seeks to fashion itself into the most effective form for content that philosophy had already ascertained to be correct. The legacy of this impoverishment of rhetoric persists in critical scholarship, where content habitually trumps form, where \textit{inventio} comes before \textit{elocutio}.

A second formative turn asserts the claims of form over content and is articulated in the mathematical logic developed in the nineteenth century and associated in the twentieth with the logical positivists. Such work operates on the assumption that ordinary language is too equivocal to denote accurately and thus aims to achieve a purer notation, emptied of content, with a truth-value abstracted from the words of the sentence. Although in reaction to the claims of mathematical logic, ordinary language has found many defenders—not least J.L. Austin, who remarks that “our ordinary words are much subtler . . . than philosophers have realized”—we retain an abiding belief in the usefulness and attractions of notation, if not of actual symbols, then at least of a special use of words, a rarefied terminology (put less politely, of jargon).\(^3\)

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\(^3\) J.L. Austin, \textit{Sense and Sensibilia} (Oxford: Oxford
academic discourse is inflected by a formalist attachment to special language, it is paradoxically and equally so drawn to a realist preference for thesis over persuasion. These compass points, from which we aim today to get our bearings as we ask how to write as we ought, indicate the breadth of the terrain. In our little, daily way, we join debates between means and end, appearance and reality, rhetoric and philosophy, form and content that have been around for as long as there has been style.

Academic discourse generally assumes a form that consistently swallows itself by subordinating itself to content.\(^4\) Let’s call it the Scholars’ Paradox: “We are without Style. Our business is Substance.” And if the substance of the argument should posit the precedence of form over content, then only deeper runs the performative contradiction. The best scholarly sentence flexes its nouns, no flabby passives or stranded prepositions in sight, quite naked of the frills that the garment of eloquence fusses about in. Of course, it requires some training to write like that, so to be without style more accurately means to have mastered the plain style, a “non-rhetorical style” that emerges in Ramist thought from out of the classical three styles (high, middle, low), and

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University Press, 1962), 3; reconstructed from the Manuscript Notes by G.J. Warnock.
which shapes English into an apt vehicle for sound empiricist common-sense.\(^5\) Plain style aims for “clarity” of “ideas,” invoking a metaphor of vision it denies is there because, by definition, one sees straight through the medium. This critical writing aspires after such plainness that it masquerades as absence of rhetorical style. It aims for what Russian Formalist Jan Mukarovsky calls “standard language,” which measures style or poetic language as deviance against the norm, which is itself. Ultimately, standard language is the language of science, the purpose of which is to communicate “subject matter,” drawing attention to what is said rather than how it is said.\(^6\)

Problems arise, however, in measuring stylistic effect as deviation from a norm that in the final analysis is inexpressible, for where can an utterance be found that is stripped quite bare of rhetorical color?\(^7\) Not even the language of science is entirely without style. By taking more seriously the style of its own plainness, critical writing can more safely admit its “deviations.”

Critical writing’s non-rhetorical style—its

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abstraction of substance from diction—results in a different kind of reading. We read critical scholarship for content rather than form, taking a shortcut into the body of ideas through the wormholes of abstract and index.\(^8\) Leave to creative writers storytelling that obliges one to read every page to the last for the dénouement; scholars require the spoiler of a thesis statement or abstract (as above). For Bruno Latour, such shortcuts function like “black boxes,” which process information without the mechanism by which it does so being available for analysis.\(^9\) In this way, the processes by which we produce scholarly writing are mystified, and the distinction between creativity and critique is enforced. In context here, a black box denotes any of the scholarly moves that mark the boundaries of a professional discourse community: a dedicated

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\(^8\) As academics, Jane Gallop observes, “We have been trained to read a book globally: that is, to think of the book as a whole, identify its main idea, and understand all of its parts as fitting together to make up that whole”: Jane Gallop, “The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounters,” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 16 (2000): 11 [7–17]. Richard Klein speaks of the occasional need in reading to suspend “your need to know in advance where you’re going” and of a book being shaped like a mandala, frustrating any forward progress of linear reading. See Richard Klein, *Eat Fat* (New York: Pantheon, 1996), xiii–xiv.

lexicon; an ordinary word or phrase given special meaning; a glancing allusion to something the audience ought to know; an analytic method; a footnote reassuring your audience that you know more about the subject than your argument strictly needs to demonstrate.

In contrast to critical writing without style, take a lesson from Latour’s ANT, the acronym of Actor Network Theory, which, although a mouthful of jargon if ever there was, has one redeeming feature. “Alas . . . ,” remarks Latour, “a name . . . so awkward, so confusing, so meaningless that . . . I was ready to drop this label . . . until someone pointed out to me that the acronym A.N.T. was perfectly fit for a blind, myopic, workaholic, trail-sniffing, and collective traveler.” He says further, “[T]he ANT-scholar has to trudge like an ant, carrying the heavy gear in order to generate even the tiniest connection.”

The lesson of the ANT is this: no black-box shortcuts; no hitching a ride from jargon.

What are the consequences and desirability of opening up the borders—insofar as it is possible—of one’s discipline by writing with(in) style? Is it possible to develop an academic style that can hold simultaneously the interest of expert and novice? Or must one always choose between boring the specialist with a scenic route and mystifying the newcomer with a shortcut? Latour’s own sly and deceivingly easy style—fore-

shadowed by a “private fondness” for Nietzsche—suggests it might be. What Schoenburg does to musical notes with a pantonic scale that democratizes the relations between “tonic,” “dominant” and so on, Latour does to academic prose with his leveling style that flattens the contours of difference between the vocabularies of specialist and newcomer, and turns everyone into a worker ANT on the scenic route. Would we as scholarly ants be unable to say as much by not wielding terms of art as if a kind of symbolic logic? Does the scenic route mean we travel less far? Most likely yes, but the travelling companions of one’s audience are as important as the destination. In the phrase *quo vadis*, the *quo* can function adverbially to render “where are you going?” and also pronominally “with whom are you going?” If journey and arrival go by the same name then style and substance similarly equivocate.

So central is this issue of travelling companions, that being without an audience (even if only composed of oneself) leaves one without style. This is because style is less a self-standing thing than it is relationality. I am making an effort here to avoid substantivizing style, but it is virtually impossible to avoid grammatical nominalization, to “name” style as a thing in its own right. Yet in an attempt to do so, let’s return to the paraphrase of Aristotle, to speaking of style in terms of “how words ought to be expressed.” Phrasing style thus takes refuge in the subjunctive

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and casts style as mood, a grammatical function of the verb-system that orients a verb toward reality in a certain way (declarative, hypothetical, etc.).

Mood identifies the mode in which the verb “is,” in the existential sense. Mood and mode derive from the same word (from Latin modus), so we can think of grammatical mood in terms of musical mode and vice versa. Style disposes words (or notes) to be in a certain way. Metaphor or analogy is perhaps the only way of getting access to style as a general concept, for it is impossible to speak about style without style (in the archaic sense of “outside”). Style or mood and existential being are conjoint: “in every case Dasein always has some mood,” writes Heidegger, being is always in a mood—“we are never free of moods,” he says. Heidegger’s word for mood (Stimmung) is a musical term, meaning the tuning of an instrument. All communicative acts have modality. At the most fundamental level, beneath its complimentary meaning as elegance, beneath its formalist meaning as deviance from a norm, style pervasively imbues all language. By conceiving it as grammatical

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12 See Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. without, prep., 1a; also OED, s.v. outwith, prep., 1a.
14 Heidegger, Being and Time, §136 (175).
15 Heidegger, Being and Time, §134 (172 and translators’ footnotes).
mood that orients a verb’s action, or as a musical mode that tunes notes into relationships with each other, we disclose style’s situatedness and directionality. Style always has a particular situation or audience in mind.

Such directedness is a feature of all linguistic acts, quite obviously so in the case of the professional words we make public. Publishers routinely ask prospective authors in their proposal forms—“who is the book aimed at?”—as if it is about to hit someone looking in the opposite direction, yet there is a question underlying the market-speak that is hard to answer well: “for whom do we write?” We write for an idealized audience that includes ourselves, those in our discourse community, students, even loved ones, as if our words were gifts. Perhaps less consciously and more profoundly we also write for those we have read whose words have mattered to us, a ghostly audience of absent authors. To lean on Heidegger again: being in the world entails having things matter to us.16 The intentionality of style is not unidirectional, allowing only us to have designs upon our audience; it allows audience and place to so matter to us that they shape our diction. If saying so implies that discourse communities determine academic style (and they do), it also reasserts the classical adage that style is formed through habits of reading, that writing is at heart a kind of imitatio of all the word-smiths who have mattered to a writer. To

16 Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, §137 (176).
ask “how do we write as we ought?” entails asking also “whom ought we to read?” The answer to that question in part determines the boundaries of a discipline.17

The purposiveness of our style calls on our not inconsiderable analytic skills to understand it better. I have cast style as a kind of linguistic choice, the “tendency of a speaker or writer to consistently choose certain structures over others available in the language.”18 Many of these choices are made for us and are unavailable to change, yet many fall within the scope of deliberated action, perhaps being by now so habitual they go unnoticed. Style is worth talking about, for change does not come easily, as William Ian Miller attests:

Certain tics characterize my writing. . . . I start too many sentences with but and then try to vary them by changing some of them to still or yet. . . . But actually get rid of them and structure my writing so as to avoid them? . . . I

17 The question is linked to debates about the canon, especially to the choice of texts according to their complexity and artistic value. See Gerald Graff, “Why How We Read Trumps What We Read,” Profession (2009): 73 [66–74]. “[S]erious education means assigning texts that possess intrinsic richness, complexity, and value” if only to give the readers a conceptual framework sufficiently complex to critique those very texts.

just can’t find a way to do it. I also get anxious that I am using too many justs and evens. . . . I undertake global searches to see whether I can eliminate some of them. I manage to exchange a couple of them for an only or a mere, but then I fear my onlys and meres are starting to get ticlike. A tough-minded editor would strike out maybe half of these justs and evens because they often do not affect the core sense of the proposition. But I cannot get myself to cut more than one or two because they add an indescribable justness, either just enough of a hedge or just enough emphasis, to situate my level of commitment to my own statements. . . . [I]t is as if I were excising a part of me. Incredible that words that mean virtually nothing mean so much.19

More than idiosyncratic tics, such discourse markers say much about the rhetorical protocols of academic writing. There might be some merit in a calculative analysis of our scholarly scratchings, for a “distant reading,” as Franco Moretti calls it, that cares not a whit for argument but only counts the justs and evens, the not only/but alsos and the however that sit in the academic landscape as markers of our discourse communities and as bridges between “they say” and “I say.”20 To change our style—if that is what is

desired—comes at a cost, which is not to say that the cost might not be worth it.