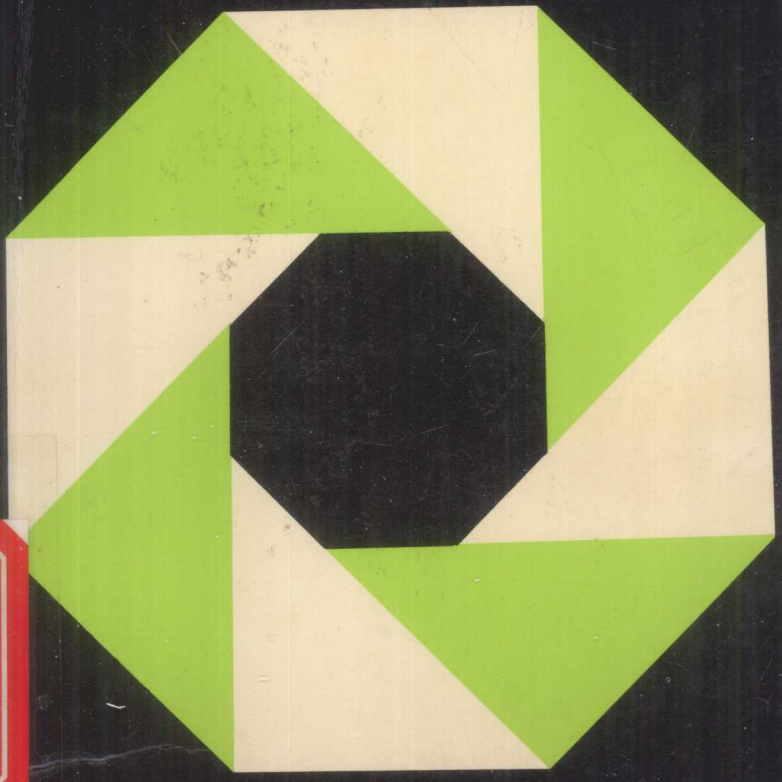
EXPOSITION AND LITERATURE

CARSON GIBB



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Preface

Part I of this book has a double purpose: to set forth the principles of exposition and to show their use in writing about literature. It includes chapters on sentences and diction and an appendix on constructing and punctuating sentences; but its heart is the first five chapters: "Theory of Exposition," "Substance (1)," "Substance (2)," "Unity," and "Order." Part II has a single purpose: to help students understand literature, especially poetry. It consists of an essay on poetry and a glossary of literary terms. The book is designed both as a text for introductory courses in literature and composition and as a handbook for any course that requires understanding and writing about literature.

It springs from five convictions. First, students need and deserve to know exactly what exposition is. A few years ago I started a course by handing out copies of two themes. Both were correct in spelling, punctuation, grammar, usage, and paragraphing, but one was much the better in diction, sentence structure, substance, and unity—especially in substance. At least half the class—and it was a bright one—preferred the worse theme, and in defending it they implied that abstractness and vagueness were merits and that concreteness and definiteness were faults. Evidently, they thought that exposition's aim was not to set forth ideas plainly but to be vaguely impressive. This experiment lead me to spend much time considering how to make students understand what good exposition is and why. When I put my conclusions into practice, the students started writing surprisingly good themes. This and subsequent experience convinced me that courses in exposition should start with the theory of exposition. This is the genesis of Chapter 1.

Second, courses in exposition should concentrate on three essential properties of the theme as a whole: substance, unity, and order. This concentration is constructive; it emphasizes what to do, not what not to do. It makes and keeps students aware that themes are made fundamentally not of words but of facts and ideas represented by words. It avoids unnecessary multiplicity and obscurity of terms. For instance,

"substance" includes, and therefore replaces, such terms as "detail," "illustration," "example," "fact," "evidence," "material," "information," "premise," "reason," "explanation," and "development"; and its verb form "substantiate" is better than such imperatives as "use details," "give the facts," and "provide illustrations." "Order" is a clearer term than "organization," which denotes the end (like a physical organ) without suggesting how to achieve it. "Order," on the other hand, both denotes the end and suggests the means; one must distinguish the parts and then decide which to put first, which second, and so on. Finally, these three properties are distinct, coherent, and comprehensive. If a composition has them, it is good as a whole, and there is nothing more to say about it.

Third, brevity and simplicity are important. Therefore, Part I is so brief and simple that students can master its principles and then go on to practice them. This claim may sound extravagant, but the approach of Part I has succeeded with a great number and variety of students.

Fourth, the best models for themes are those written by students. Therefore, although Part I illustrates its principles with short essays on works students are likely to know, it does not include essays merely as models. It assumes—and I hope—that by making copies of one or two of every set of themes, instructors will provide better models than any book can.

Fifth, the main barriers to understanding and appreciating literature, especially poetry, are misconceptions of it and misunderstandings of the terms used to discuss it. Therefore, Chapter 8 of Part II undertakes to correct such misconceptions; and Chapter 9, the Glossary, defines and illustrates the terms.

I am grateful to Professors James Dollar and Anthony Tommasi for reading and commenting on Chapter 1; to many anonymous reviewers for commenting on the book at various stages of its growth; to Mr. D. Anthony English of Macmillan for his enthusiasm and encouragement; and to Mr. Ray Schultz of Macmillan for patiently instructing me and painstakingly overseeing production of the book. I am deeply indebted to Professor J. H. Doehler for the patience, encouragement, and care with which he has attended the book from its beginning, and to my wife, Sharon, for reading proof and bearing with the whole venture.

C. G.

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PART I
Exposition

1

Theory of Exposition

Exposition, the kind of writing this book is about, is one of three kinds of writing. It can best be defined after defining the other two, description and narration.

Description and Narration

Both description and narration are writing about things that are substantial. That is, things that stand by themselves, that are self-evident; things that are immediately observable, recognizable, and intelligible; things that do not need interpretation or explanation. The things description is about are *objects:* a pebble, a mountain, a planet, a mouse, a man, a populace, a nail, a house, a city, a government—these are all objects or collections of objects. Description may include numbers, weights, and dimensions; colors, sounds, scents, tastes, shapes, and textures. Whatever it includes, it is a record of substantial things. The things narration (or narrative) is about are *acts.* Throwing a pebble, climbing a mountain, discovering a planet, killing a mouse or a man or a populace, driving a nail, building a house or a city, founding a government—these are all acts or series of acts. Whether the acts are complicated or simple, grand or trivial, extended or limited, whether their treatment is general or particular, solemn or comic—writing about them is narration and is a record of substantial things.

Exposition

Exposition, on the other hand, is writing that is not, strictly speaking, *about* anything. For writing to be about something, that thing must have been substantial before the writing started. A person can no more write about a thing that is not substantial already than he can walk about one. Exposition is writing that sets forth, or exposes, ideas. Before they are set forth, ideas may exist privately (in people's minds); but they are not substantial, as objects and acts are. So far as the reader knows, their only substance is the substance of the exposition. In short, exposition creates its subject.

To repeat, exposition is not writing *about* ideas, but writing that *sets forth* ideas. The word "ideas" is used here in a broad sense. It is meant to include hypotheses, theories, doctrines, opinions, thoughts, convictions, prejudices, beliefs, tastes, feelings, emotions, sensations—all abstractions and most physical sensations. From the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe to the boredom of the classroom, from a belief in the doctrine of the Trinity to the pleasure of the tavern—none of these ideas is substantial until it is set forth. It may be set forth in a medium other than language. But it must be set forth in some medium before it is substantial. The reason for saying "*most* sensations" is that some sensations can be shared directly; that is, without a medium. If, for example, a person grabs the wrong end of a hot soldering iron, he can share his sensation merely by pressing another person's hand to the iron. This kind of communication is more vivid than exposition, but is not often practicable.

Exposition is as familiar as its name is unfamiliar. Indeed, its very familiarity may be an obstacle to combining it with an unfamiliar name, or in other words, an obstacle to understanding the name. Most of what people commonly say and hear, write and read, is exposition. A no-trespassing sign, a slogan for Winstons, a casual remark on this morning's headlines, a whispered comment in class, a husband's explanation of why he got home late, a sales manager's instructions to a salesman, an instructor's lecture, a company's financial statement, a newspaper column or editorial, a textbook—all these are exposition. Almost every communication of what we call "practical importance" is exposition.

Exposition goes under many different names—"comment," "instruction," "ad," "lecture," "editorial," "column," "article," "review," "proof," "paper," "thesis," "dissertation." The choice of name is determined by the situation and purpose, not by the nature of the writing. In college its usual names are "theme," "composition," "essay," "paper," "thesis," and "dissertation." Here again the choice is unrelated to the nature of the writing. This book will use "composition," "essay," and "paper"—not because they have any magic, but because they are convenient.

Statement and Substance

Exposition consists of two parts: statement and substance. In most other contexts "statement" means what it means here, but not in all. In some it denotes both parts of exposition. Here it denotes a statement of an idea. It may be a statement of a thesis, of a topic, or of a conclusion. "Substance" denotes the part of exposition that clarifies, defines, supports, proves, or substantiates statement. Substance, of course, includes objects and acts. When these are brought into exposition, they are called "details" and "illustrations" (or "examples" or "evidence"), or they are the matter of which analogies and other comparisons are made. Besides these, substance includes definition, division, close reasoning, self-evident truths, and authoritative opinion. Chapters 2 and 3 describe and illustrate substance abundantly.

Because statement is statement of an idea, and because an idea has no substance until it is stated, making a statement that is significant, exact, and clear is the hardest abstractly intellectual task in writing. The writer of description or narration has a model to copy: the objects or acts that he is recording, or an image of them. He can select details of his objects or acts (or images) and then find words to represent them. The writer of a statement, on the other hand, has nothing fixed to look at with either his outer or his inner eye. He knows he wants to (or must) say something, but he does not know what it is until he states it. As Graham Wallas' poetical little girl says, "How can I know what I think till I see what I say?" Like her, the writer is aware of perpetual motion in his mind—ideas of his subject and of irrelevancies, of grammar and syntax and single words; sensations from his eyes and ears, his bowels and his scalp; misgivings about what he has said and apprehensions of what he will and will not say; images of objects and acts relevant and irrelevant; notions of the very operations of his mind. The list is endless. He must momentarily stop the motion, select the relevant, and somehow coordinate it in a statement. When he sees what he says, he probably sees that it is not exactly what he meant. Or if it seems to be at first, the next sentence—even his thinking for the next sentence—may show him that it is not really. If he cares about his writing, he must try again and again. For all but the luckiest and most gifted, making a significant statement is a hard, tedious process of trial and error, writing and rewriting.

Writing substance is a somewhat less formidable intellectual labor; but it is demanding of memory and imagination, and it is as important as writing a statement. In fact, one of the crucial lessons a writer must learn is that merely to state an idea, no matter how well, is not enough. The opinion that it is enough is the result of limited experience. The bulk of most people's communication is of hazy, commonplace ideas with

people who already know and accept them. Blondes have more fun; Communism is dastardly; politicians are crooks; Republicans are reactionaries; our schools have gone to pot; Hitler was an evil man. These ideas have been stated so often that they inhabit a reader's mind before he reads a word. Therefore, he starts nodding in agreement or shaking in disagreement before the statement is finished, and nothing that follows makes any difference. Before he can write good exposition, a person must understand that this kind of communication, no matter how convenient and comfortable, is inane. Once he understands that, he is ready to undertake real exposition—exposition of ideas that are significant, fresh, and exact.

SUBSTANCE AND DEVELOPMENT

The opinion that substance, though desirable, is not essential is encouraged, unintentionally, by many books on writing. This encouragement is implied by the use of the word "develop" in phrases like "develop an idea" and "develop a paragraph." Presumably "develop" is used in the sense it has in "develop a photograph." When one develops a photograph, he renders visible exactly what was there, though invisible, to start with. By analogy, the first sentence of the paragraph is the first traces of the photograph, and the succeeding sentences are the accumulating lines, and lights and shadows, that constitute the finished product. As all the details are essential to the completeness of the photograph, so all the details are essential to the completeness of the paragraph. Unfortunately, this is not the kind of process most people associate with "develop." The processes they do associate with it are of growth and change, especially change—the development of bud into blossom, of countryside into Levittown, of dispute into riot, of skinny teenager into bosomy beauty. Consequently they think that the body of the paragraph must either add to or ornament the statement of topic. A writer who thinks it must add something usually makes it of statements related to the first and as much in need of substantiation. He often writes an abstract of a whole theme. A writer who thinks the body must ornament the statement usually keeps saying the same thing over in different words.

These misconceptions affect reading as well as writing. The student assumes that the paragraphs he reads are planned in the same way his are, and reads them accordingly. Those who think the body should add something new usually find a good concrete paragraph unintelligible, and the more abstract a paragraph, the more intelligible—and therefore the better —they think it. Those who think the body should ornament the statement usually fare better; they may not see substance for what it is, but at least they do not waste their time trying to interpret it as additional statements.

Thus, in this context the word "development" has unfortunate and extensive effects.

The Importance of Substance: An Analogy

An analogy will perhaps make the relation between statement and substance clearer and guard against the misconceptions suggested by "development." Statement is like the parts of buildings that people habitually see and use, the finished parts that are mostly above ground. They work and play in these parts, and taking the foundations for granted, ignore them. Substance is like what supports these parts—the frame, the foundation, and the ground beneath the foundation. People who merely use the building ignore these parts, and so long as the parts are sound, their ignorance is harmless. People who are really interested in buildings—who build them or buy them—are at least as interested in the foundation as in the parts it supports. Instead of taking the foundation for granted, they inquire about it and examine it. They know that if it is unsound, the useful parts of the building will soon be useless. Curious and skeptical readers are to exposition what these people are to buildings. They want to know exactly what statements are and exactly what substance they rest on. They will not buy statement until they know it rests on what Thoreau calls "solid bottom." These are the kind of people that good exposition addresses.

The kinds of substance obviously suggested by the foundation and the solid bottom are concrete details and illustrations composed of concrete details. Their strength depends primarily on accumulation of matter; they are *material substance.* But these are not the only kinds of substance. To return to the analogy, some buildings are built on sand or swamp or even over water. Their foundation must be a structure—as simple as pilings or as complicated as a structure of girders—that extends through the sand or marsh or water to solid bottom. This kind of foundation suggests other kinds of substance, kinds in which form is more important than matter. The strength of a structure of girders is not in its mass but in the carefully designed relations among its parts. Likewise, the strength of these kinds of substance is not in the mass of concrete detail but in the relations among parts which are the products of masses of details but are not themselves massive. That is, their strength is in their form; they are *formal substance.* Formal substance includes analogy, definition, division, cause and effect, and various forms of deduction.

The Importance of Substance: Its Effects

The relation between statement and substance can be demonstrated in a more prosaic way. The substance of a paragraph is essential to the exact exposition of the topic. The reasons why are three.

DEFINITENESS

First, an unsubstantiated statement (i.e., one not founded on substance) is inevitably indefinite. The reader may recognize all its words; he may even be able to define them. Still he will not know what they mean in this combination. For definitions of words are general; words have particular meanings only in context. And a statement without substance is words without context—which, to repeat, are words with only general meanings.

CONVICTION

Second, even in the unlikely event that an unfamiliar and unsubstantiated statement were definite enough to be significant, it would not be convincing. A writer should assume that his reader is reasonable; that is, that he is sympathetic but not submissive, open-minded but not gullible, agreeable but skeptical. Such a reader knows the difference between an unfounded assertion and a conclusion founded on premises, and he will not accept the former. Just as substance is the context that gives statements exact meaning, so it is the premises that support them. In other words, only a substantiated statement can convince a reasonable reader.

VIVIDNESS

Third, as was emphasized in the definition of "exposition," ideas, unlike objects and acts, are not themselves public, and can be made public only in a medium. Therefore, their public existence depends on the medium alone. If the medium is dull and lifeless, the idea, though it may be potentially brilliant and vivid, will appear dull and lifeless. No matter how live it is in its author's mind, it cannot live publicly unless the medium is alive. And the only way to vivify the medium is to bring it as close as possible to the world of immediate experience. And, of course, to do that is to make it substantial.

These three points will be illustrated throughout the book, but perhaps two illustrations are in order now. First, a simple one from an essay setting forth the idea that "our commonest words are worn-out" figures of speech: "Simile is involved in the great class of English adjectives that end in '-ly'. . . ." Most college students could define every word, and only two words ("simile" and "adjective") could puzzle any reader. Yet without substance the statement probably is a puzzle.

> Simile is involved in the great class of English adjectives that end in "-ly," which is an abraded form of "like." Thus a "manly boy" is a boy who is *like* a man in certain traits of character. So "cowardly," "ruffianly," "saintly," "homely" (like home, and so ordinary, common-