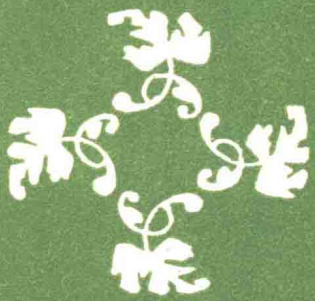
A Short Guide to

ENGLISH STYLE



ALAN WARNER

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All the fun's in how you say a thing.
ROBERT FROST

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PREFACE

THIS book offers a short guide to some of the main features of English style. Part One contains practical advice on the writing of clean and clear English. Part Two sketches in broad outline the development of English prose style since English was first used as a language. I have made no attempt to include all the important prose writers but have pointed out what seem to me to be the main trends and developments in each age. Part Three is an attempt to include in my survey some significant features of English prose today.

Scholars who write about English prose and compile anthologies of it usually divide it up neatly into kinds and categories—the essay, the novel, biography, history, religion, science—or else they classify the types of prose—narrative, descriptive, emotive, argumentative, moralistic. Throughout this book I have observed no such divisions. I have illustrated my points from very diverse sources, ranging from the 'highbrow' novel to the popular newspaper. More particularly in Parts One and Three I gathered my material from whatever came to hand at the moment of writing: my students' essays, newspaper cuttings, local magazines, and books I happened to be reading. This method has suited my purpose better than any attempt to keep various kinds of literature distinct, and to separate popular from literary prose. In the long run I think that prose, like peace, is indivisible. What we write in our diaries and private letters, and what we write for publication; what we read in the newspaper and what we read in a serious book or a light novel, all combine to form the patterns and rhythms of an age. Words from the latest sciences find their way into the newspapers and vice versa. Language knows no clear divisions.

Part Two, the historical section of the book, will perhaps be of most interest to students of English literature. The reader who feels that he is concerned only with modern English and how to improve his own style may feel tempted to skip it. I hope he will not do so, however, because his awareness of style will be much keener if he has some familiarity with the styles of the past. Our

ability to judge anything, whether it is the goodness of a cheese or the beauty of a woman, depends very largely upon our ability to compare and contrast one thing with another. A reader's perception of the loose, slangy, colloquial, shirt-sleeved quality of much modern prose will be sharpened if he has experienced the conscious elegance of eighteenth-century writers and the solemn lecture-hall pronouncements of the Victorians.

In writing this book I have tried to keep in mind the special needs and difficulties of those students for whom English is not the mother tongue. There are an increasing number of such students, who live far away from England or America, but who use English as the medium of education and culture, and find in English literature and language what the medieval student once found in Latin. Already there is much good English writing that has not been written by Englishmen or Americans, and I have no doubt that the English literature of the future will include books written by Asians and Africans.

In spite of local differences and difficulties, I believe that the problems of English style are similar the whole world over. So that I hope students in England and America will find this book helpful too. At least I trust it may provoke them to consider more closely the way they use words, and the way words are used in the world of print that nowadays surrounds us all.

There have been many previous books written on English style and good English. To all of them I am indebted. The ones I have found most helpful are listed in the short bibliography at the end.

In a general book of this kind it seemed to me that it would be unduly weighty to give detailed references to the sources of all my many quotations. Most of them are drawn from well-known texts, so I have indicated only the author and title of the book quoted, together with the name of the publisher of books still in copyright.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Leverhulme Trustees for a research award which enabled me to spend six months at Cambridge while I was engaged on this book.

ALAN WARNER

Makerere College,
Kampala.
October 1960.

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Part Three

ENGLISH STYLES TODAY

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Introduction

WHAT IS STYLE?

THE style that will be discussed in this book is a way of writing, a manner of expressing one's thoughts and feelings in words.

Suppose that a certain John Smith has just died. His son, writing a few days later to one of his friends, might say

(1) My beloved parent has joined the heavenly choir
OR
(2) My dear father has passed away
OR
(3) My father has died
OR
(4) My old man has kicked the bucket.

Each of these statements communicates the same fact: that John Smith has died. But the words which express the fact are different in each case. The matter is the same, but the manner has changed. In other words, each sentence is written in a different style. The style of (1) is pompous and sententious; it clearly tries to raise the matter to a high-falutin', would-be-literary, dignity. (2) is simpler, but still emotional, perhaps a little sentimental. It avoids the word 'died' and substitutes a softer, gentler, less unpleasant expression (a euphemism, see p. 19). (3) is a plain, brief statement in which the writer's feelings are not directly indicated. (4) employs a slangy, colloquial style; 'old man' for 'father' and 'kicked the bucket'[1] for 'died'. We might say that his style suggests a lack of respect for his father.

This simple example will serve to show how important style is. Although the fact is the same in each case, the total effect on the reader of what is written, the full meaning of the sentence, is

[1] This expression has been in slang use since the eighteenth century. It is apparently derived from the custom of hanging up a recently killed pig on a beam or yoke, called a 'bucket'. Presumably the pig, in his last death tremors, would 'kick the bucket'.

different. The way in which something is said inevitably affects what is said.

Some simple people think that style, or what they might call 'good style' or 'literary style', is something that can be added to plain thoughts or a plain statement of facts, as icing can be put on to a cake. A student once said to me, 'I have written my report, but I have brought it to you to put some style into it.' I could not put 'style' into it. It was already written in a certain style, though it may not have been a very good style. I could have re-written it in a different style. Then it would have been my arrangement of facts, my choice of words, my style. In trying to state his facts, shaping his ideas in words, every writer is expressing himself in a certain style, though it may not have any very marked features. In the words of Cardinal Newman: 'Matter and expression are parts of one; style is a thinking out into language.'[1]

Two more recent writers, Brooks and Warren, in an excellent book, *Fundamentals of Good Writing*, have compared style to the grain in wood. 'The style of a work is not a sort of veneer glued over the outside. On the contrary, it is like the pattern of the grain in a piece of wood. It is a pattern that goes all the way through: a manifestation of the growth and development of the structure of the tree itself.' As a man thinks and feels, so will he write. If his thoughts are muddled, his style will be muddled. If his thoughts are clear and sharp, his writing will be clear and sharp. 'A man's style', wrote Emerson, 'is his mind's voice.' And he added: 'Wooden minds, wooden voices.'[2]

Since style is something ingrained in writing and not stuck on top like a veneer, it follows that a man's way of writing will be an expression of his personality and his way of looking at life. This explains the famous and much-quoted definition of style given by Buffon, a French writer and naturalist of the eighteenth century. He wrote: 'Le style, c'est l'homme même.' (Style, it is the man himself.) Once you have become familiar with their personalities, it is not difficult to recognize the styles of many famous English writers. Let us take a few examples.

Jane Austen saw life in a clear, dry light. She was not without deep human sympathies, but she had a quick eye for vanity, selfishness and vulgarity, and she perceived the frequent incongruities between the way people talked and the realities of a

[1] *The Idea of a University.* [2] *Journals*, 1864–76.

situation. Her style is quiet and level. She never exaggerates, she never, as it were, raises her voice to shout or scream. She is neither pompous, nor sentimental, nor flippant, but always gravely polite, and her writing contains a delicate but sharp-edged irony. Below is a characteristic passage from the novel *Emma*. The village of Highbury is in an excited buzz of gossip because the clergyman, Mr Elton, has just become engaged to a certain Miss Hawkins:

> Human nature is so well disposed towards those who are in interesting situations, that a young person who either marries or dies is sure of being kindly spoken of.
>
> A week had not passed since Miss Hawkins's name was first mentioned in Highbury before she was, by some means or other, discovered to have every recommendation of person and mind,—to be handsome, elegant, highly accomplished, and perfectly amiable; and when Mr Elton himself arrived to triumph in his happy prospects, and circulate the fame of her merits, there was very little more for him to do than to tell her Christian name, and say whose music she principally played.[1]

The tone is so quiet that we get almost a shock at the sly placing together of 'marries or dies' in the first sentence. This seems very incongruous. Surely to marry and to die are very different things. But in this village, where marriages and deaths are infrequent and important events, both of them equally excite kindly gossip. The observation reveals a shrewd, detached mind.

The next paragraph reveals how the gossip about Miss Hawkins anticipates her arrival, and how the local people determine her appearance and character before they have seen her. When Mr Elton comes, there is nothing for him to contribute but one or two unimportant details, such as her Christian name and the name of her favourite composer. Jane Austen seems to write as though she agrees with the gossip. She doesn't say that the local people were mistaken, but her tone implies it. Miss Hawkins is clearly too perfect—'handsome, elegant, highly accomplished and perfectly amiable'. The phrase that tells how they discovered this—'by some means or other'—throws doubt on its reliability. Later pages will show that Miss Hawkins is very far from fulfilling the picture that is given here. The two paragraphs together perfectly reveal how people like to gossip about those 'in interesting

[1] Chapter 22.

situations', but how unreliable and unsupported by evidence such gossip may be. Anyone familiar with Jane Austen's novels will recognize the style as typical.

Here is a very different way of writing. Charles Dickens is describing Stone Lodge, the home of Mr Gradgrind, in *Hard Times*:

> To his matter-of-fact home, which was called Stone Lodge, Mr Gradgrind directed his steps. . . .
>
> A very regular feature on the face of the country, Stone Lodge was. Not the least disguise toned down or shaded off that uncompromising fact in the landscape. A great square house, with a heavy portico darkening the principal windows, as its master's heavy brows overshadowed his eyes. A calculated, cast up, balanced, and proved house. Six windows on this side of the door, six on that side; a total of twelve in this wing, a total of twelve in the other wing; four-and-twenty carried over to the back wings. A lawn and garden and an infant avenue, all ruled straight like a botanical account-book. Gas and ventilation, drainage and water-service, all of the primest quality. Iron clamps and girders, fireproof from top to bottom; mechanical lifts for the housemaids, with all their brushes and brooms; everything that heart could desire.[1]

Dickens has more than one style. He does not always write like this; but this passage illustrates one of his most characteristic styles. He works by a strong emphasis on his main point, by exaggeration of the thing he wants to call attention to. This is indicated by his names; Mr *Gradgrind* and *Stone* Lodge suggest hardness, cold fact, the absence of tenderness and grace. The description of the house reinforces this point. Notice that the regularity and strict arithmetical proportions of the house are not just mentioned once but repeated again and again. 'A calculated, cast up, balanced and proved house. Six windows on this side, six on that side; a total of twelve in this wing, a total of twelve in the other wing; four-and-twenty carried over to the back wings.' Even the lawn and garden and avenue are made to conform. Dickens's criticism of 'the Gradgrind philosophy', of the utilitarian attitude to life that took account only of facts and statistics[2] and disregarded human feelings, is direct and forceful. Detail is heaped upon detail to create a suitable house for Mr Gradgrind, a house that hardly resembles an actual house. The

[1] Chapter 3.

[2] Other titles he suggested for the novel included: Simple Arithmetic, A Matter of Calculation, A Mere Question of Figures.

same element of exaggeration is to be found in many of Dickens's characters. That was the way his imagination worked and his style reveals his way of looking at things and people. We can at once recognize the same mind and pen at work in the following description of Miss Murdstone in *David Copperfield*:

It was Miss Murdstone who was arrived, and a gloomy-looking lady she was; dark, like her brother, whom she greatly resembled in face and voice; and with very heavy eyebrows, nearly meeting over her large nose, as if, being disabled by the wrongs of her sex from wearing whiskers, she had carried them to that account. She brought with her two uncompromising hard black boxes, with her initials on the lids in hard brass nails. When she paid the coachman she took her money out of a hard steel purse, and she kept the purse in a very jail of a bag which hung upon her arm by a heavy chain, and shut up like a bite. I had never, at that time, seen such a metallic lady altogether as Miss Murdstone was.[1]

It will be clear enough by now that the style of Dickens is very different from the style of Jane Austen. Any reader who has even a little familiarity with the novels of these two writers should have no difficulty at all in distinguishing at once between a passage from Dickens and a passage from Jane Austen. Their very different personalities are revealed in very different styles.

Let us take one more example from a man who was not a novelist or a 'literary' man, but a farmer and a political agitator. William Cobbett was a plain, blunt man with strong prejudices. He hated the British Government of the early nineteenth century and he led a popular movement in favour of Reform. He began life as a plough-boy and ended up as a Member of Parliament. He was very proud of his own achievement and frequently held up his own example to others. He believed in hard work and early rising, and he loved the countryside. He hated London and the use of paper money; he despised schools and colleges, calling them 'dens of dunces'; he attacked vigorously the practice of vaccination against small-pox, and the habit of drinking tea. Here is a characteristic passage from his book *Advice to Young Men*:

Who, what man, ever performed a greater quantity of labour than I have performed? What man ever did so much? Now, in a great measure, I owe my capability to perform this labour to my disregard of dainties. Being shut up two years in Newgate, with a fine on my

[1] Chapter 4.

head of a thousand pounds to the King, for having expressed my indignation at the flogging of Englishmen under a guard of German bayonets, I ate, during the one whole year, one mutton-chop every day. . . . I am certain that, upon an average, I have not, during my life, spent more than thirty-five minutes a day at table, including all the meals of the day. I like, and I take care to have, good and clean victuals: but, if wholesome and clean, that is enough. If I find it, by chance, too coarse for my appetite, I put the food aside, or let somebody do it, and leave the appetite to gather keenness. But the great security of all is, to eat little, and to drink nothing that intoxicates. He that eats till he is full is little better than a beast; and he that drinks till he is drunk is quite a beast.[1]

The style reveals the man. It is plain, blunt, and vigorous. The egotism of his references to himself and his achievements is so frank and open that it is not offensive. You may disagree with what Cobbett says, but there is no mistaking his meaning. He calls a spade a spade, and a drunkard a beast.

These three examples will serve to show how closely a writer's style is related to his personality and his way of looking at life. In each case it is almost impossible to separate *what* is said from the *way* it is said. In discussing the style, I have inevitably been discussing the point of view and personality of the author.

But there is another common use of the word style which is much less inclusive. You may have been told at some time by a history teacher when he returned your essay 'Your facts are quite correct but your style is poor.' He probably meant by this, not that your essay did not adequately express your personality, but that your facts were not well-organized and arranged in a coherent and fluent sequence of apt and agreeable words. In this sense the word 'style' is often used to mean good, clear English. Raymond Chapman, the author of *A Short Way to Better English*, is using it in this way when he states: 'Bad writing is caused not so much by mistakes in grammar as by weakness in style.' Weakness in style here means clumsiness of expression, lack of precision and accuracy, obscurity and ambiguity, and anything that hinders the writer from conveying his meaning clearly and vividly to the reader. Chapman goes on to say that 'A good style of writing has three qualities, which may be described as *accuracy*, *ease* and *grace*.' These qualities may all be found in the passages from

[1] Letter I, 'Advice to a Youth'.

Jane Austen, Dickens, and Cobbett that have been quoted above, but these are not the main features that distinguish the characteristic styles of these different writers. Clearly this writer is approaching style from a different angle, from the practical viewpoint of a teacher, who wants his students to write better English.

Style in this sense means 'clean English'. I choose this term because it seems to me the best way of describing English that is clear and vigorous, free from verbiage and affectations, and doing its job of conveying meaning cleanly to the reader.

During this century many names have been coined to describe the kind of English that meets with disapproval—jargon, jungle English, officialese, officese, gobbledygook.[1] It has been less easy to find a name for good English. Mr A. P. Herbert spoke of Christian English, and others have spoken of straightforward English. Sir Ernest Gowers has adopted the motto of 'Plain Words'. But I prefer 'clean English' as being more comprehensive. It has nothing to do, of course, with decency or indecency.

The commonest weakness of all writers of English, whether in England or outside it, is lack of cleanness in the use of the language. Words blur thoughts instead of presenting them sharply and cleanly. Sometimes words are offered instead of thoughts; ready-made phrases roll on to the page, but they only obscure issues and darken counsel.

All writers of English, even those without the faintest trace of literary ambition, should try to keep their English as clean as they can. Words are the tools of thought. If they become rusty and dirty, and lose their sharp points and cutting edges, thinking itself becomes less keen and efficient. Man needs language for the control of his environment, and the cleaner his language the better his control. 'When . . . the application of word to thing goes rotten, i.e. becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive or bloated, the whole machinery of social and of individual thought and order goes to pot.'[2] It is our duty to civilization to keep our language as clean and sharp as we can.

[1] 'Gobbledygook was the immortal word given by a famous Texan to Government language, or Federal prose, the sort of prose which doesn't say "I'd like fifty pursuit planes and like 'em fast", but says "Personnel will take cognizance of a high priority requisition of fifty pursuit planes. Immediate implementation of this policy directive is imperative".' Alistair Cooke, *Letters from America* (Hart-Davis).

[2] Ezra Pound, 'How to Read', *Literary Essays* (Faber).

Part One

HOW TO WRITE CLEAN ENGLISH