

# THE SENSE OF STYLE

Reading English Prose

James Thorpe

Archon Books  
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## CONTENTS

The Writer to the Reader	1
1. Signs of Structure	5
Punctuation as Guide to Performance	
2. Convention and Performance	17
The Development of Punctuation	
3. Ordering Words	37
The Patterns of the Sentence	
4. The Music of the Word	56
The Sound of the Sentence	
5. The Power of the Word	77
Choice and Context	
6. The Relation of the Writer and the Reader	89
The Oral Tradition	
7. The Relation of the Writer and the Reader	108
The Personal Written Tradition	
8. The Relation of the Writer and the Reader	135
The Impersonal Tradition	
9. Interpreting Style	157
What Else the Text Is Telling Us	
Index	183

## THE WRITER TO THE READER

Dear Reader,

I enjoyed writing this book. I hope that you get a good return from reading it. I'd like to tell you, before you get started, a little about what I'm trying to do.

Language is man's most exquisite invention. Yet, at its best, language may transmit only an incomplete understanding of any moderately complex communication. And so we are always fooling around with words to see if we can make them do more for us. Or to see whether we can get by with less effort in our dealings with words. At the same time, the needs and ambitions that animate us are constantly in a state of flux. Whatever we do, we always reflect our selves as we try to come to terms with language.

Stop right there! The paragraph you just finished reading: you did notice that the style changed, didn't you? The first two sentences were (I thought) rather formal, abstract, perhaps a little stiff. Then there was an abrupt shift to informality, like talking to a friend for two sentences, and then back to a more formal manner for the last two sentences.

You may have been puzzled by these shifts, and assumed that they were simply caused by ineptness. Or you may have been offended by the didactic tone, or doubtful about the sentiments that were being expressed with such a show of confidence. If so, we were making a start, however unpromising, in forming a relationship between you and me, in this case between the reader and the writer.

On the other hand, suppose that (honestly) you really didn't notice the shifts in style, or at least didn't pay much attention to them while waiting for something really memorable to be said. In most reading, we do move right along, alert to main points, trying to grasp the key ideas. The way we have to deal with the

great quantities of written matter set before us in newspapers, magazines, memos, appeals, ads, and so forth. In those cases, the role of language sometimes diminishes to the task of giving information or making a case or getting our attention long enough to communicate a simple message. Since we are bombarded by so much written and spoken language in our daily lives, we have to defend ourselves against the invasion of our intellectual privacy by blocking out what is more than we want to deal with.

It is mainly because of the need for self-protection against a deluge of verbal material (much of which we dismiss as trash, garbage, junk) that literate people in Western society read with less close attention to the text (I think) than they used to do. Less than fifty or a hundred years ago, and less than at any time since the ability to read began to be moderately widespread, some five hundred years ago.

Too bad, but probably necessary. The choice is skimming, summary, condensation on the one hand, or (on the other hand) the discipline of very rigorous selectivity. Mostly we have chosen the former way. Once we put up our guard against some forms of language, we never quite take it down all the way, except with a conscious effort that we are rarely willing to make. So the loss is almost everywhere.

Books of literary study are books about reading in the sense that they try to help us, in one way or another, to come to terms with (that is, read) a text or a lot of texts. One thought that keeps coming back most often in this book is the relation between reading and performance. Reading a text aloud to an audience is a performance in the obvious sense. But silent reading is performance also, with the external manifestations kept inside. So throughout this book I keep thinking of reading and performance as parallel terms. Reading and performance both lead to our understanding of texts, and they are also the signs of the way in which we do in fact understand texts. (Of course it is only reading aloud that reveals the signs to an outsider.) In this pattern, understanding is the term I use for what we are trying to achieve in dealing with texts.

This is a book about the sense of style in expository prose. Although the derivation of poetry from song was a long way

back, the family resemblance is still sometimes visible. Prose, expository prose, does not have such a grand progenitor. It is sometimes pushed into the company of poetry as a visiting cousin from the country, but its direct ancestors are really people talking to one another, asking and answering questions, explaining things, discussing their lives and their ideas and their loves, expounding their feelings and their beliefs. A lot of clean-up work had to be done when speech that was oral became prose that was written down. The family resemblance is still sometimes visible, however, even after the faces and hands have all been scrubbed.

Those who live by a hierarchy of kinds or genres may have little regard for expository prose, and think of it as something they hope students will somehow learn to handle somewhere along the line, at least to the point of intelligibility. For the rest of us, it may be the essence of our expressive lives in words, and something that we can never entirely master no matter how much we try or how long we are about it.

So I offer this series of connected studies about reading and understanding expository prose more fully. As you will see, I have been thinking about the sense of style: really the multiplicity of styles that result from different forms of the structural organization of language, and the ways in which these styles affect our understanding. How punctuation indicates structure and guides our understanding, and how historical changes in the conventions of punctuation have altered the structuring of prose and our ways of understanding it. How different arrangements of words within a sentence create different structures and different effects in our understanding. How the rhythm and the sound of words contribute to our sense of structure and to our understanding. How the power of the chosen word interacts with the context of a discourse and affects our understanding. How the relation of the writer and the reader affects our understanding of texts, both in the oral tradition and in the personal and impersonal written tradition. Finally, how we understand a deep meaning of what the text is telling us by interpreting its style.

In this book, I am addressing fellow students of English and American literature. We are all colleagues in the corporate enterprise of the study of literature. I am also addressing all others who have a serious interest in reading expository prose and

would like to see whether this book can offer them any useful perceptions about that kind of writing or the kinds of writers discussed. I hope that it can.

The book is full of examples of the work of good writers, and the orientation is literary, not linguistic or philosophical or compositional. I have chosen relatively familiar passages for discussion. The examples are given not to prove an argument but to exemplify a principle. I hope that these passages, and the works of which they are a part, will seem richer from being met in this context.

I have tried hard not to draw too many examples from any single writer or group of writers or age, and the examples run in time from Heraclitus to Samuel Beckett, whatever seemed apt. I hope that the examples are fair, in the sense that each could, in most cases, have a thousand substitutes with no change in the effect of the reasoning. In fact, it was only the exhortation of a friend that led me to leave out about a thousand other wonderful examples.

I had never fully realized, until I was writing this book, how intimately reading and writing are related. Now I see them as reciprocal activities; and in calling them "activities," I mean to stress the active function of each of them. So a study that has to do with reading naturally has also to do with writing, if you look at it from that side.

I was glad to be able to write this book in the cordial environment of the Huntington Library, among many friends. In particular, I have profited from talking with William A. Ringler, Jr., Hallett Smith, and John M. Steadman. Marjorie Perloff generously read everything in its first form and helped me improve it.

I hope that you enjoy the book.

Sincerely,



# 1.

## SIGNS OF STRUCTURE

### Punctuation as Guide to Performance

We get accustomed to convenience without much difficulty. Reading is made simpler by the use of conventional signs that indicate structure and help us to understand a text. We take them for granted and hurry along with our reading.

It has not always been so. In classical antiquity, the words were ordinarily not separated from one another. Moreover, there were essentially no marks of punctuation, no indication of what was a direct quotation, and hardly any devices to set apart sentences or paragraphs or other divisions of a discourse.

The last chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses* gives us a taste of the experience that earlier readers had when they came to deal with a text. Here is a short passage taken from near the end of that last chapter, Molly Bloom's (soliloquy). She is musing to herself, silently, about things that had happened to her years before: conversations, acts, thoughts, feelings, reflections. Her musings culminate in recollecting her response to Leopold Bloom's proposal of marriage, and she repeats the word, *yes*, as a kind of anticipatory chorus of the response that she ultimately gave:

the sun shines for you he said the day we were lying  
among the rhododendrons on Howth head in the grey  
tweed suit and his straw hat the day I got him to propose  
to me yes first I gave him the bit of seedcake out of my  
mouth and it was a leapyear like now yes 16 years ago my  
God after that long kiss I near lost my breath yes he said  
I was a flower of the mountain yes so we are flowers all a  
womans body yes that was one true thing he said in his  
life and the sun shines for you today yes that was why I  
liked him because I saw he understood or felt what a  
woman is and I knew I could always get round him

And so on. We cannot simply read these words and let it go at

that. The text is never complete. We must always bring something to the text in order to make it usable. A knowledge of the language, of course, the more detailed the better. So far as structure goes: at the least, a sense of pattern so that a structure can be helped to open up as we move along. Preferably, a sense of a multitude of possible patterns, both simple and complex, direct and subtle, and all of their combinations. As well as the experience and tact and taste to see what kind of pattern works best with this particular combination of words. While we read, a sense of structure is developing within us. For those who are inept or inexperienced, our sense of the structure may be crude or illogical or indefensible. Among those who are apt and experienced, the sense of structure may well be somewhat different for different readers, with a defensible argument possible to support each interpretation.

How do we, in fact, read this passage from *Ulysses*? How do we perceive its structure? We have, at best, only rather crude written signs to use in indicating structure. If we wanted to put those same words from *Ulysses* into a conventional form by the use of our ordinary written signs, they might look something like this:

“The sun shines for you,” he said, the day we were lying among the rhododendrons on Howth head, in the grey tweed suit and his straw hat. The day I got him to propose to me. (yes) First, I gave him a bit of seedcake out of my mouth. And it was leapyear, like now. (yes) (16 years ago—my God!) After that long kiss, I near lost my breath. (yes) He said I was a flower of the mountain. (yes) So we are, flowers all, a woman’s body. (yes) (That was *one* true thing he said in his life.) And “the sun shines for you today.” (yes) That was why I liked him, because I saw he understood (or felt) what a woman is. And I knew I could always get round him.

That is one way to read those lines. It is not precisely the way I read them, and probably not exactly the way anyone else reads them, either. Any reading, even a silent reading, depends on features for which we don’t have common printing signs, like the kind of intonation, the pitch, the relative emphasis given to different words, the variations in speed and loudness, whether the

words are run together or kept apart, and so forth. Not to mention (in the case of reading aloud) gesture and all the other forms of expressiveness that we can use. At least, this second, punctuated version gives some general guidance to the internal structure of the passage.

Maybe we need it and maybe we don't. It may help us to see some details that we might have missed in a quick reading. But it also gives an almost irresistible push toward one kind of understanding. With this kind of punctuation, it would be difficult to feel that the passage is a representation of a stream of consciousness, for example—recollections flowing uninhibited through the memory of a person, now swift, now eddying, now rushing into side channels. Which is, I believe, the effect that Joyce was trying to get us to achieve.

Here is another brief passage for consideration and comparison. It is the very end of that last chapter of *Ulysses*. Molly is thinking about the time, years ago,

when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask me again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.

Here is a translation of the passage into conventional form, with ordinary punctuation, of Molly's recollection of that time

when I put the rose in my hair, like the Andalusian girls used. ("Or shall I wear a red?") (yes) And how he kissed me under the Moorish wall, and I thought, "Well, as well him as another." And then I asked him with my eyes to ask again. (yes) And then he asked me would I (yes) to say "Yes." ("My mountain flower!") And first I put my arms around him (yes) and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts, all perfume. (yes) And his heart was going like mad! And (yes) I said, "Yes, I will—Yes!"

In both passages, the words are exactly the same in the two

versions of each. But the appearance and the response and the effect are different. The first version, with its bare text, gives us all of the verbal signs that we need for reading. The second version, with its guidance of structural signs, comes closer to suggesting what we always do when we read this passage. Or indeed any passage. Whether silently or aloud. . . . That is, we perform it.

Here is another example, from another well-known writer, which will perhaps open the range of the ways we think about punctuation. I present the passage with the exact punctuation that the author used:

in truth if I should have studied with myself of all points  
of false invectives which a poisonous tongue could have  
spit out against that Duke yet would it never have come  
into my head of all other things that any man would: have  
objected want of gentry unto him but this fellow doth like  
him who when he had shot off all his railing quiver called  
one a cuckold that was never married because he would  
not be in debt to any one evil word

The passage is taken from the author's manuscript, written in his own hand. It is not fiction, and not (like the passage from *Ulysses*) an endeavor of art to create an uncommon effect in the reader. It is a straightforward expository essay, part of a defense of the Earl of Leicester, set down about 1585. Only the spelling has been modernized. Notice that the one mark of punctuation that the author used—a colon, about in the middle—would now seem entirely inappropriate at that place.

The author: Sir Philip Sidney. Most modern readers would, I think, be mildly irritated at having to puzzle out the passage in order to perform it. The logic is familiar, and the gist of the meaning is moderately clear. Essentially, we dislike having to make the extra effort to convert rapid reading into expressive performance in order to understand more precisely.

If we were asked to punctuate the passage in something like the way we read and perform it, the passage might look something like this:

In truth, if I should have studied with myself of all points  
of false invectives which a poisonous tongue could have

spit out against that Duke, yet would it never have come into my head (of all other things) that any man would have objected want of gentry unto him. But this fellow doth like him who, when he had shot off all his railing quiver, called one a cuckold that was never married, because he would not be in debt to any one evil word.

Aside from convenience, what has been gained by this punctuating of the passage? For the deliberate, patient, painstaking scholar, probably nothing. For the rest of us, the punctuating brings the passage in from the cold and into the normal conventions that are familiar to us. Within abnormal conventions, we sometimes feel that we need to be on our guard in case something is being put over on us. The punctuation of the passage into a familiar form makes the intent and the flavor and the meaning a little bit different. Sidney's neat jest at the end, for example, may seem sharper and more lively when the punctuation helps to set it up and focus our attention on it.

Here is a sentence by another writer that we can practice on. I give it as the author wished it to appear:

Francine which is a name of a young woman who has changed very much in five years hoped to be married that is not hoped but attended to the waiting which was not intentional she was very well occupied.

This is a form that it might take in performance:

Francine (which is a name of a young woman who has changed very much in five years) hoped to be married—that is, not hoped but attended to the waiting, which was not intentional. She was very well occupied.

This performance will doubtless seem faintly unsatisfactory, as if we didn't quite understand the sentence and therefore couldn't read it adequately. And perhaps this is the case. It is from Gertrude Stein's *How To Write* (1931), in the conservation chapter called "Saving the Sentence." The problem (or our problem, at least) seems to lie in dealing with the logical relations between the several components of the sentence while trying to save this particular sentence. In "not hoped but attended to the waiting," for example, the two alternatives offered are not within our usual

pattern of dialectics. How do we deal with them? Punctuation does not tidy up an unfamiliar pattern of logic. We have a choice of thinking up a new interpretation or condemning the passage or revising our logic or discovering some other alternative that may bring us peace.

Another writer, another style. Here is a small part of a very long passage that the author chose to present in the following fashion. It is about a personal God who

loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown  
but time will tell are plunged in torment plunged in fire  
whose fire flames if that continues and who can doubt it  
will fire the firmament that is to say blast hell to heaven  
so blue still and calm so calm with a calm which even  
though intermittent is better than nothing but not so fast

Here is one way to perform this passage:

A personal God . . . loves us dearly (with some exceptions)  
for reasons unknown (but time will tell) are plunged in  
torment, plunged in fire, whose fire flames if that contin-  
ues. And who can doubt it will fire the firmament! That  
is to say, blast hell to heaven, so blue, still, and calm—so  
calm, with a calm which even though intermittent is better  
than nothing. But not so fast!

Not so fast indeed! Where are we? What are we talking about? What is going on? This example is a reminder of the limit of the function of signs. Punctuation cannot translate a non-logical form of expression into ordinary speech. The internal structure of prose has its own elastic strength that resists efforts to change its basic shape. This example is also a reminder of the importance of context and situation in reading a text. The passage comes from Lucky's speech near the end of the first act of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1954), where it has a special function in its own terms, where much is being talked about and much is going on.

These examples are all drawn from passages in which the author chose not to give the reader the guidance that punctuation can offer. Now let me turn the tables on a couple of writers by depunctuating passages from their writings. I'd like for us to see, from the reverse angle, the guidance the author actually

succeeded in giving us, or imposing on us, through the signs of punctuation, and to consider the depunctuated passage as an alternative text, or an alternative way of understanding.

Here is one passage, after I have removed all the marks of punctuation:

the first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature every day the sun and after sunset night and her stars ever the winds blow ever the grass grows every day men and women conversing beholding and beholden the scholar must needs stand wistful and admiring before this great spectacle and he must settle its value in his mind what is nature to him there is never a beginning there is never an end to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God but always circular power returning into itself

Those who do not immediately recognize the passage are probably understanding it in a way that is somewhat different from their ordinary reading of it. Without punctuation, the passage flows along almost irresistibly, pushing all before it, mingling specifics and abstractions, integrating nature and man and God into one timeless pattern.

The passage comes from the beginning of the first section of Emerson's "The American Scholar." Here is the way that Emerson actually presented it:

The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature. Every day, the sun; and, after sunset, night and her stars. Ever the winds blow; ever the grass grows. Every day, men and women, conversing, beholding and beholden. The scholar must needs stand wistful and admiring before this great spectacle. He must settle its value in his mind. What is nature to him? There is never a beginning, there is never an end to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself.

What is changed by depunctuating the passage? People might give different answers. I think: first of all, some inconvenience to the reader, but not much. The relation of one thought to what follows it is within the pattern of logic that we are accustomed

to dealing with, and we can adjust without too much difficulty to the unconventional presentation. The reader has to be willing to move along at about half speed through the passage, to be sure. Without punctuation, there is more of a sense of dramatic impetuosity; with punctuation, more of a sense of logical discrimination, maybe even a touch of fussiness.

Emerson's prose has been much praised (touted, perhaps) in recent years for its relation to what has come to be called "poet's prose." Here is another example which I have depunctuated:

thou shalt have the whole land for thy park and manor  
the sea for thy bath and navigation without tax and with-  
out envy the woods and the rivers thou shalt own and  
thou shalt possess that wherein others are only tenants  
and boarders thou true land-lord sea-lord air-lord wher-  
ever snow falls or water flows or birds fly wherever day  
and night meet in twilight wherever the blue heaven is  
hung by clouds or sown with stars wherever are forms  
with transparent boundaries wherever are outlets into ce-  
lestial space wherever is danger and awe and love there is  
beauty plenteous as rain shed for thee and though thou  
shouldest walk the world over thou shalt not be able to  
find a condition inopportune or ignoble

These are the concluding lines of "The Poet." Here is the way that Emerson in fact chose to present this conclusion to his peroration:

Thou shalt have the whole land for thy park and manor,  
the sea for thy bath and navigation, without tax and with-  
out envy; the woods and the rivers thou shalt own; and  
thou shalt possess that wherein others are only tenants  
and boarders. Thou true land-lörd! sea-lord! air-lord!  
Wherever snow falls, or water flows, or birds fly, wherever  
day and night meet in twilight, wherever the blue heaven  
is hung by clouds, or sown with stars, wherever are forms  
with transparent boundaries, wherever are outlets into  
celestial space, wherever is danger, and awe, and love,  
there is Beauty, plenteous as rain, shed for thee, and  
though thou shouldest walk the world over, thou shalt not  
be able to find a condition inopportune or ignoble.



It seems to me, again, that not very much logical sense was lost by depunctuation, but the meaning has been changed by the decided alteration of tone. The depunctuated passage bespeaks meditation, the original conveys enthusiasm.

Both of the two essays by Emerson from which I have quoted passages were written for delivery as addresses (or orations, even) by a man who was a notably skillful speaker. Good oratory tends to be self-interpreting through its amenability to performance, and the guidance of punctuation may be less needed. Moreover, the elevated, prophetic strain manages pretty well on its own, and may even increase in the intensity of its oracular power when loosed from the bonds of punctuation. Some variety or other of the prophetic strain is strong in a good many nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers who have sometimes minimized punctuation, like Mallarmé, Whitman, Apollinaire, William Carlos Williams, and John Ashbery. It may be that a subconscious recognition of the power of the prophetic strain encouraged them to free themselves from the conventions of punctuation.

A different kind of strain and a different kind of need is often evident in critical writings. Here is a short passage of two sentences, from an essay in literary criticism, that I have taken the liberty of depunctuating:

anything that relieves responsible prose of the duty of being while placed before us good enough interesting enough and if the question be of picture pictorial enough above all in itself does it the worst of services and may well inspire in the lover of literature certain lively questions as to the future of that institution that one should as an author reduce one's reader artistically inclined to such a state of hallucination by the images one has evoked as doesn't permit him to rest till he has noted or recorded them set up some semblance of them in his own other art nothing could better consort than that I naturally allow with the desire or the pretension to cast a literary spell

I think that this famous passage deserves careful study in its depunctuated as well as in its original form. It may not be easy to come to terms with, and might profit from a second view. It has a special interest for us because it embodies a lot of features characteristic of a main stream of critical writing of the last fifty