

75 PROSE PIECES

Second Edition

Robert C. Rathburn

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RHETORICAL

PRINCIPLES

MODES

FORMS

ROBERT C. RATHBURN

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PREFACE

THIS REVISED EDITION of 75 Prose Pieces is, like the first edition, intended as an aid to writing, especially expository writing, in composition and communication courses; and this intention has guided both our choice and our arrangement of the pieces.

The student may, of course, read these pieces for their ideas and their information and thus be inspired to think and write on similar topics; for the range of topics is wide: literature and language, science and technology, history and philosophy, and social and educational policy. But we chose these pieces primarily either because they state or imply what seem to us good rhetorical principles or because they illustrate some rhetorical mode or device or some rhetorical form or genre. As rhetorical illustrations, they serve the student as models for imitation. Though most of the pieces are complete, some are excerpts, and intentionally so—to illustrate some mode of paragraph organization, for instance, or of classification, or such a mode as description, usually mixed with other modes. The shorter pieces, furthermore, because more nearly the length of much student writing, often serve the student very well as models for imitation. The pieces illustrate a wide range of rhetorical purposes and occasions, from those of workaday journalism to those of scientific writing and literary criticism. All serve such practical purposes as communicating information or expressing opinion, and many have literary merit as well. Pieces by Mark Twain, Edith Wharton, and Willa Cather, by Thomas Henry Huxley and Rachel Carson, by James, Yeats, Wells, Snow, Wolfe, and Hemingway appear in the company of anonymous ones. And, finally, though some of the pieces come from earlier writers, modern pieces are the rule because of their generally greater relevance as models for imitation.

The arrangement of the pieces—by rhetorical principles, modes, and forms—is to some extent, and necessarily, arbitrary. The pieces in Part I, “Principles,” are there because they state or imply good rhetorical principles; but each has one or more modes of its own

and could appear in some section in Part II, in "Process Explanation" perhaps or in "Classification." The pieces in Part II, "Modes," are there because they illustrate modes; but a given piece may illustrate more than one mode—both process explanation and comparison, for example—and it might well have been assigned to another section of this part or, since the distinction between mode and form is not hard and fast, to a section in Part III. The pieces in Part III, "Forms," are there because they illustrate forms; but they also, and inevitably, illustrate modes as well; the book review, for example, is likely to illustrate most of the modes. Some forms, moreover, are not illustrated in Part III but in one or both of the other two parts: the news story and the philosophical essay, for example.

In this revised edition, there are both some new pieces and expanded headnotes. Our chief criterion for excluding pieces in the first edition and substituting new ones has been timeliness. We have regretfully put aside some pieces that dealt with then-current events and substituted pieces that not only deal with now-current events but are, we hope, equally useful rhetorically. The expanded headnotes describe and illustrate rhetorical principles, modes, and forms more fully and analyze illustrative pieces more fully.

In all but a few cases, we have kept spelling and punctuation of pieces as they are in the original texts. We have supplied titles for pieces originally untitled and given brief biographical sketches of authors.

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Minneapolis and St. Paul
September, 1965

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PART I

Principles

THE PRINCIPLES of good writing are not so firmly established as those of, say, thermodynamics. For one thing, they are principles of psychology, not physics; and such principles are notoriously shaky, especially when they are products of intuition and introspection, not experiment. For another thing, they depend upon writers' goals and readers' tastes, and human goals and tastes are notoriously various. Clear communication is the goal of some writers, but not of all; simplicity suits the taste of some readers, but not of all.

The principles of good writing stated or implied in the following pieces have, nevertheless, considerable stability and breadth of acceptance. The writers that humanity has long managed to think well of have generally honored these principles, as have generations of cultivated readers. Biaggini and Thompson stress the desirability of being yourself. Being yourself does not, of course, imply saying the first thing that pops into your head. It implies saying what you believe or feel, not assuming beliefs or attitudes; it implies having something to say and saying it unaffectedly and unpretentiously. Maugham, the Fowlers, Quiller-Couch, Hemingway, and Mencken wittily state or imply principles of style, especially of diction or word choice: to prefer lucidity to obscurity, the familiar word to the far-fetched, consistency to elegant variation, the concrete word to the abstract, and the forthright word to the euphemism, for example. And Clark, Cowley, and Sullivan anatomize and evaluate three famous styles of our day: Timestyle, sociological style, and the style of sports reporting. (With Clark, compare "Tycoon," in "Definition.")

These writers' styles, as well as their advice, repay careful attention. Their practice of supporting generalizations with examples, for instance, implies a sound rhetorical principle. These pieces not only state or imply sound principles; they illustrate them.

AN EXERCISE IN DISCRIMINATION

E. G. Biaggini (1889-) was born in England and educated at London and Queensland universities. For many years, he has taught English in Australia; since 1929, at the University of Adelaide. He has written several textbooks other than The Reading and Writing of English (1936) and several books about education, as well as a biography (1937) of George Sturt, whose essay "Keeping Christmas" appears later in this volume under his pseudonym, "George Bourne."

SINCE the purpose of this book is to teach you to distinguish between the true and the false in what you read, and thus to develop within you the power to criticise and appreciate English literature, let us start our work with an exercise in discrimination. You should begin your attempt at evaluation by reading the following paper through in order to see what it is about; then decide provisionally which of the two contrasted passages you like the better; next try to make explicit to yourself on what grounds your decision is based; and finally examine the passages as closely as is necessary to confirm you in, or make you change, your first opinion. The exercise is quite easy and an intelligent adult reader will respond appropriately on a first reading. In fact the work should not be approached as if it were a task of difficulty; the best results will be obtained by treating the exercise as if it were something which had been encountered in your ordinary general reading.

EXERCISE I

Which of the following passages do you think the better? Give reasons for your choice.

- A. About horses I know very little and the only actual experience I have ever had with one showed that the beast knew more about me than I knew about him.

»»» From *The Reading and Writing of English*. By E. A. Biaggini, 1936. Reprinted by permission of the Hutchinson Publishing Group.

One English June, a friend and I set out on a fortnight's caravanning through the lanes of the New Forest and for the purpose had hired a horse and van from a man in Winchester. We had stipulated that the animal must be quiet and quiet it was! During fifteen whole days our united efforts could not persuade that horse to travel more than three miles an hour, and very seldom indeed did we travel more than ten miles a day. After a bit we concluded that the horse was infirm, and that it would be cruel to press it further, and accordingly one day as we had lunch by the roadside we took it out of the shafts so that it might graze on a neighbouring common. No sooner was the horse at liberty, however, than, with mane and tail flying, it set off at a good ten miles an hour in the direction of Winchester. Fortunately we had bicycles with us and before long were thoroughly enjoying an exciting chase. The animal was eventually overtaken and captured and led back in dejection to the scene of his escape, and during the rest of the trip we kept a sharp eye on him and allowed him no liberty. In spite of a certain hardening of our hearts, however, three miles an hour remained his pace and ten miles a day remained his limit.

At the end of the holiday the owner of the horse met us in Winchester from where we were to get the London train. 'Did you find him quiet?' he asked us and almost in chorus we replied yes. After settling up with the man we watched him mount the box and stir the horse into activity. To our amazement it broke into a brisk trot, and before we knew where we were the caravan was disappearing in a cloud of dust over the top of the hill which leads from the town. 'By Jove,' my friend said to me, 'that horse knows more about men than we know about horses.' I could not but agree and have felt since that had that horse the gift of speech his observations on his temporary masters would be exceedingly entertaining.

- B. The horse is a noble animal and not the least of man's dumb friends. Without such a willing servant as the horse civilization would not have developed to the present stage.

The early pioneers of this country can bear witness to what has been said. When they first came here the prospect before them was a heart-breaking one indeed. There were no roads; in many places the country was rough and well-timbered; developmental material was hard to procure; and above all tractors, bush-devils, motor-cars, and other mechanical inventions had not come to the help of man. In these circumstances then the horse was invaluable,

and without him Australia would certainly not have become the country it is. In spite of summer's heat and winter's cold; in spite of the dangers of drought, bush-fires, and flood; and in spite of the indescribable discomforts of life in a new country, man with the aid of the horse has won through and made the Australian wilderness smile.

A farmer friend of mine keeps one of his old horses in the best paddock and gives him no work whatever to do because once the faithful old creature had saved him from ruin. One night when everybody was asleep he came to the verandah of the homestead and whinnied until he woke the farmer. My friend, wondering what was wrong and how the horse had got out of the yard in which he had been locked up, hurried from his bed and immediately saw sparks and smoke going up from a post at the corner of the horse-yard. He rushed across and found that the horse had broken out and given him the alarm. The season was dry and the standing crops might easily have caught fire, but in a twinkling the farmer got the blaze under control. Naturally he was grateful to the horse and said it should work no more.

Such instances as these could be multiplied indefinitely; but enough has been said to show the goodness of this fine species. We should all be kind to animals in general and to horses in particular.

Now what has your response been, did you prefer *A* to *B* or *B* to *A*, and how strong were your feelings in the matter? To anticipate the many separate answers which may be given to this question is of course impossible, but a convenient way of beginning our discussion will be to sum up under two heads the arguments which will be advanced by those who favour *A* and *B* respectively.*

The defenders of *A* might say that the passage amused them, and that they read it with interest to the end and would like to read a whole book written in the same fashion, but that they could not stand many pages of *B*. They might add that *A* obviously tells them of an actual experience, and by implication

* The imaginary opinions now to be given are not really imaginary at all. Reference to Chapter I of my *English in Australia* (Oxford & Melbourne University Presses) will show that they are normal responses to the test.

at any rate something of the nature of the horse itself, while *B* only stimulates certain stock feelings they have had since they were small children in kindergarten classes, and really tells them nothing new and nothing real. And they might conclude that in *A* you are addressed as an equal (not as if you were still a child) in a natural unaffected manner; and that the tone of *B* is self-conscious and rather superior, and that you would not dare to read it aloud to interest your fellows in the playground, common-room, office, or shop.

The defenders of *B*, on the other hand, might say that it was a passage which dealt with a worthy subject in a dignified manner, and that *A* was written in an off-hand and conversational way. Further, they might say that, while *B* was carefully written, *A* contained such colloquial terms as 'after a bit' and 'By Jove', that it was ill-punctuated, and that in one place the word 'and' had been used four times in three lines. In conclusion, they might argue that passage *B* showed some love for one's country and an interest in its history; while *A* showed no reverence for, or interest in, anything.

Our problem, then, is to decide: Which of these views is the more just? As we do so we shall bring to light a number of important principles which should continually be borne in mind, and which will help you in later and more advanced stages of your work.

The first thing to notice in the imaginary representative opinions given above is that the arguments *against* passage *A* and the arguments *for* passage *B* are all concerned with secondary issues, while the arguments in *support* of *A* are based on first principles. This must be made clear.

It was said in favour of *A* that it was amusing and sufficiently interesting to lead the reader on to the end without undue effort; that it told him something convincing in a way which did not irritate him. This is good argument. Against *A* it was contended that it had technical faults, including colloquial expression, the excessive use of the word 'and', and imperfect punctuation. This is not such good argument; it is fault-finding rather than criticism.

Work should, of course, be properly performed and finished, but there is not a student in the land who would base his judgments on technical points if school-masters and others did not insist on their importance, and thus lead him to think that they matter more than they really do. Mistakes in construction and in grammar are serious not in themselves but because they prevent the clear and unimpeded expression of thought, and it is because they do this that such strenuous efforts are made to prevent and correct them. But in the excitement of our war against error we must not lose sight of the object of the war itself—the production of good work so that our thought may be better expressed. Now to express thought we must have thought, and if a writer have none there is no virtue in eloquence. If, then, it is argued in effect that the writer of *A* has something to say much has been said in his favour; and if *B* is to be preferred to it the writer of *B* must also have something to say; if he has not, the claim that he has written accurately and carefully carries but little weight.

In defence of *B* it was, of course, said that it dealt with a worthy subject. But this is really neither here nor there. The dictionary is full of worthy subjects, but it is not for that reason that you read it, and you certainly would not read a book on wireless, or ships, or dogs, or anything else, if it were palpably wrong and absurd. It will then not do to justify *B* on such grounds as these.

It will be agreed that passage *A* seems to be the record of an actual occurrence, and that it does by implication at any rate tell us something true about the nature of the horse. It might be said that we have heard the same story before in different forms and that consequently it is stale, but that cannot be helped. Different people in similar circumstances will have similar experiences, and so long as they describe those experiences in a natural and personal way their work will have freshness and carry conviction. In *A* the writer, for good or ill, is himself, and he describes the horse as it is and not almost as a lesser angel temporarily doing good work on earth. The passage, that is, can stand on its own legs, and there we can leave it.

About *B* more must be said. Our analysis can well begin with a question: Was the passage written seriously at all, or was its purpose to see how the simple and uncritical reader would respond to matter containing stock and conventional moral sentiment? The horse, you will notice, is spoken of as if he had been a conscious and willing agent in the development of a new country. Is this not completely ridiculous? The normal horse, like the normal man, is mostly concerned with a decently comfortable life and has not a passion for well-doing. Since he is referred to as a dumb animal we must not suppose that he can speak, but if he could talk to himself it seems far more likely that he would say: 'I have two greenhorns driving me to-day, so I will take things easy,' than that he would say: 'Here is a country which wants developing so I will co-operate willingly with my master in an attempt to open it up to civilisation.' You should, then, be able to see that *B* is twaddle. The horse is, of course, of untold use to the pioneer, but to speak of him in the sentimental fashion of passage *B* is almost as silly as thanking the hen for laying eggs or the sheep for growing wool.

The matter does not end here for the actual incident in the passage is as unsatisfactory as are the generalisations. How could an untrained horse be expected consciously and deliberately to give a fire alarm? It is true that in the presence of fire a horse might become restive and whinny, but this is not what is said. On the contrary the horse is pictured, as it were, as saying to itself: 'The post is alight, the season is dry, the crops may catch fire, so I will go and inform my master.' This is so unreasonable that we will spend no more time considering it, but instead take our stand on the conclusion that, so far as the matter goes, *A* is the better passage. Consequently the supposed opinion in its support was based on sound argument. But we have not yet finished our examination and have now to consider the passages from another point of view. To do this effectively will necessitate a slight digression.

Besides what is actually said in speech or writing, how it is said is an important matter. If your father dies of typhoid fever