CHAPTER 11
STYLE AND REVISION

In the end a text comes down to sequences of words on a page that carry the reader on a journey. The right choices of words add depth and engagement to the journey, while not standing in the way—by distracting, calling attention to themselves, or misdirecting the readers to think about things that vitiate the journey and meaning. Effective choice of words maintains and builds trust, brings readers to the mental and emotional space that makes them most receptive to the meaning, that does not irritate them or waste attention, that forms bonds of relation. There are many kinds of places you may want to take readers to, many forms of engagement, many relations, many meanings, many journeys—each with an appropriate style. Despite guidebooks that set out unwaverable rules for style, there are many styles. Style is a set of choices in pursuit of a reader's experience, and any single set of rules for style expunges the sources of style and resources that might be useful in some situations.

Style shines off the surface of a text. It may please the eye of the reader or glare harshly when seen in one light or another. Yet the sheen may have a depth that reveals the meanings, intents, and relations that are built into the text. Each of these levels—the surface, the social world of delivery, and the depth of meaning creation—can lend insight into what we mean by style and can point to how we can work on it. And each of these levels can inform the work of the others. I will examine these levels separately in an order perhaps opposite the way we are most familiar with them. Style is often recognized through surface figures in the text and the surface is something we think to work on in revision once our contents are set. Certainly, revision gives us the opportunity to heighten and refine the emerged style of the text, but style pasted on at the last moment with little understanding of where it comes from, where it goes, and what we want it to carry, can weaken and distract from the force of a text.

Of course in certain communities and actions, there are preferred, even mandatory, styles. Violation of preferred style can in itself irritate readers and even block communication. So in contemporary business communication, stylistic preferences for a direct, action-oriented, concrete style that stays within a limited vocabulary are so pronounced they can be dictated in handbooks of business style. Such handbooks exist for many domains, whether for a newspaper, for student assignments in literary studies, or research articles in psychology. In the academic world not only will the prescriptions differ among

disciplines; they may subtly differ between those enforced on students and the practice of fully credentialed professionals.

Other kinds of more flexible resources are available on style. There have been training books throughout history giving neophytes practice in rhetorical and poetical figures (such as Puttenham's Arte of English Poesy, 1589). Other books recognize the variety of styles and techniques for modulating style to support principled choices among alternatives (for examples, Eastman, 1984; Lanham, 1978; Williams & Colomb, 2010). Additionally, functional grammars, which consider the functions of language underlying its forms, reveal general resources of language which can be deployed in varying circumstances. These can also be very useful if you put in the time to learn their specialized terminology, particularly Systemic Functional Linguistics (See Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; or Stillar, 1998 for a simpler presentation). Rather than replicating the work of presenting the resources of style already done so admirably by others, I will be providing a way of thinking about style that can be applied in a variety of circumstances and in relation to a variety of perspectives.

EMERGED MEANINGS AND RELATIONS

As texts' motives, strategies, shapes, and meanings emerge through the writers' decisions as described in the last few chapters, texts develop ways of representing materials, defining relationships between writer and reader, and providing direction for each reader's journey and experience. As part of that process, specific wording arises somewhat spontaneously to fit these dynamics, constraints, and foci. I say "somewhat spontaneously" because style may not be foregrounded in the writer's earlier thinking, but still words are chosen to bring the meaning into communicable space. Writers always must be projecting words at the point of inscription on the page. As the constraints and motives of a text become defined, the writer may pause to consider what word or phrase will fit at this moment. Yet the word choice at this point is likely to be predominantly dictated by what the writer is trying to say and how the writer is trying to move the discussion along.

Nonetheless, earlier drafts and sketches contain a number of tentative commitments about how to represent the subject matter (whether in detail or summarily, highlighting certain aspects, selecting certain data indicators to represent a phenomenon, and so on) and how these representations might vary in different parts of the text. Similarly, reasoning, logic, or connections will be framed (whether allusively and by metaphor or by logical propositions, by producing experimental evidence or synthesizing prior work.) Further, writers

in early drafts adopt certain stances and relationships with respect to the readers (whether as authority informing neophytes or inquirer making proposals to peers).

GENRE, DECORUM, REGISTER, AND ACTIVITY SYSTEMS

These early choices will likely have been guided by genre choices that imply perceptions of the situation, audiences, and activity systems—along with specific perceptions about the particular situation. For those familiar with the genre, genre choice will draw forth certain voice, personal stance, and relations to the reader. The experienced writer for a newspaper takes on the voice of the journalist or editorialist or financial analyst or sportswriter, depending on the kind of story. Decorum (speaking the right way for the situation) comes in some sense with the territory, if you are familiar with the territory. Failures to adopt the appropriate style, to choose the word with the right vernacular or technical ring, will strike readers as striking a discordant note, not quite in tune with what the text ought to be doing.

Described from a linguistic perspective, the range of appropriate choices can be characterized as register, but further specific choices arise from the specific situation, role, interaction and meaning being realized. In dramatic terms, in adopting a genre, the writer falls into character, able to respond with spontaneity, creativity and appropriateness to the specific scene. Most writing is part of continuing engagement in some ongoing social group and associated activities, and even in some ongoing project that is shared. Language is already floating around in the social context, identifying objects and ideas discussed, offering already made phrasing, cementing connections between ideas, establishing available evidence, and suggesting other texts that are relevant. In response to that environment of language and meanings the writer begins to coalesce a new set of meanings and intents, drawing on the linguistic and meaning resources at hand. Even when a writer has been working in privacy on a project over time—taking notes, gathering data, sketching out ideas, reading other books—there, too, terms already are floating around in the texts consulted long before writing the first draft begins. The emergent text crystallizes new meanings selecting from the language and representations already within the intertextual space.

For an insider, then, genre, decorum, register, and specific relevant representations are already at hand to use when the writer begins drafting. Genre, decorum, register, and wording are more problematic for the outsider or novice attempting to fit in within a discussion or communicative group

they have not been previously been part of. Decorum manuals or style manuals are then typically for the novice, though some are used for regulation, to be referred to by the professional gatekeepers and decorum police, such as editors.

On the other hand, if some event radically changes the context, composition, and concerns of a group, the at-hand stabilities of genre, decorum, and wording may be disrupted, testing the inventiveness of all participants. The collapse of a long-standing governmental and ideological regime, for example, may shake up the discourses of politics and law, as well as of history, schooling, social sciences, businesses, and even family support services. Within the well-embedded, stabilized situation, however, genre, decorum, register, and wording only become major issues when the writer wants to bend, expand, or break the decorum—from the tactful inclusion of a fresh perspective to the intentional attention-grabbing transgression. The activity system with its genres and history provides tools of expression to guide behavior, even down to the level of word choice, phrasing, and use of appropriate graphic elements. With familiarity of genre, comes immersion in the language and way of representing, so expressions take on the form associated with the situation seemingly spontaneously.

REVISION FOR STYLE AND BEYOND

Viewing style as an outgrowth of genre-shaped emergent meanings provides a way of looking at revision as recognizing and heightening the expressive dimensions already taking shape in the earlier drafts. Revision, as well, can go beyond the local phrasal and sentence choices that cumulatively across the text may be said to constitute the style. Revision can look at fundamental issues of focus of the discussion, organization, selection and use of information and data, identification and presentation of intertextual contexts, or any other element that goes into the construction of the final text.

Revision is an ongoing process as we examine and reconsider what we have written. As we see what emerges, we can evaluate whether we like the direction it is taking or want to redirect it. As we commit to a direction and examine the results, we can consider how we can make the text more of the kind of thing we see it becoming—that is, how we can make the text stronger or more effective in terms of the text's emergent designs and objectives.

Sometimes this revision, a reflective look at what we are doing, comes in the course of producing the initial draft. Sometimes this revision occurs after we have a completed draft or a sketch to look at. Sometimes revision can send us

backwards to do more drafting or even to find more information. Yet, revision more often drives us forward to take the text to where its design is telling us and to shed the unnecessary weight of extraneous diversions, doubts, and hesitancies in order to give the text presence, clarity, and force, as appropriate to the situation, genre, and decorum.

Feigning certainty where there is none and suppressing complications when they are relevant are usually not in the long run effective, for trust of the readers is the writer's most important asset. Nonetheless, advancing the statement with greatest warranted clarity and force helps the reader attend to the written words so as to reconstruct and align with the writer's intended meanings. The writer should seek to take the readers as far as possible into the meaning and intent while still maintaining their trust and cooperation.

DIFFICULTIES IN ADOPTING THE REVISION PERSPECTIVE

The trick of revision—that is, seeing a text freshly so as to be able to improve it—is to establish some perspective or criteria from which to view and evaluate components of the texts. It is not easy to get a fresh perspective or vantage point from which to read or evaluate one's text. We come out of the processes of writing having exhausted all our resources in coming up with the solution of what to put on the paper. We have done our best, and at first blush have no further ideas. Also mentally exhausted in the more usual sense of being tired, we have no desire to return into that space of hard work of meaning making to upset the fine network of solutions we have managed to piece together. That working state of mind was a transient mobilization of many cognitive resources; it is hard to reconstruct that state of mind, even if we know there are still some things to work on. Some people are so filled with anxiety about what they have written, they even have a physical aversion to rereading their drafts, let alone consider changing them. Eyes blur and minds numb when confronting the text, so one cannot even make sense of what one has written.

A focused set of concerns or criteria that directs us to ask specific questions about the text can give us positive, specific work we can reasonably accomplish and can help overcome resistance. The simplest questions to ask are those at the surface editing level. Are there any typos, spelling errors, or other transcription problems? We can examine the manuscript treating it as a spelling, grammar, and punctuation test. To do these tasks, all we need do is remember the rules we learned in the early school years and keep a dictionary at hand. Computer tools now can help us with this inspection by pointing out words or phrases

that appear not to be correct for us to consider. Many experienced writers have these rules so internalized that often errors pop out spontaneously as they scan the surface of the text, and thus they may treat editing as a task just of rereading attuned to possible false notes. But professional copy-editors and proofreaders know that they need perceptual tricks to make the surface of the text visible, such as reading the sentences aloud or in the reverse order, or thinking of the sentences as grammatical structures rather than conveyors of meaning. And they need to keep reference books at hand.

Forms of surface editing point the way toward deeper revision in that they help create a distance between us and what we have put on the page. But deeper revision requires deeper questions, deeper tasks, and a greater separation from the words we have chosen to express our meanings. It is hard to read our texts to see whether they will make sense to readers who are not ourselves. After all, they made sense to us as we wrote them, and therefore looking at the text again may only evoke the meaning we already have in our head. Having another reader to point out lapses, confusions, or ambiguities helps us examine the text freshly as an expression of a set of coherent meanings. Even reading the text aloud to someone else may give us enough consciousness of the words to make us aware if we are making sense.

Learning to listen carefully to the criticisms and suggestions of others is itself a challenge. We may view their suggestions about language as either trivial or an attack on our meaning. We may view their failure to comprehend our ideas as an intellectual failure on their part. Or we may feel that their suggested revisions take the text away from our intentions. While we need not accept everything suggested to us, we do need to take every suggestion seriously to see whether it can improve the text. We need to be able to push the language to realize our meaning impulses even as we are ready to let go any particular formulations. We have to be ready to recognize that we make errors, that our initial choices can be reconsidered and improved on, that our ideas can become transformed as we find new ways of elaborating them. Such an attitude toward our own writing is only built slowly as we learn what perspectives other readers may have on our writing and we learn to give up our passionate attachment to our initial words as though they were parts of ourselves, while still remaining passionate about our impulse to communicate. Only once we have internalized that distant position of a reader, removing us from our texts to truly treat our texts as though they were fully outside of ourselves, then perhaps we can check the coherence of meaning by our own slow reading. When we can view the criticisms from others with some dispassionate judgment, we can begin to be dispassionate in judging our own writing.

DEFINING WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN REVISION

Making the text more of what it is emerging to be is challenging. For that we need to have a reflexive idea of what discursive space (or rhetorical situation) the text claims, how it is attempting to occupy and fulfill the potential of the discursive space, and a technical understanding of how it is attempting to do this. So we need to get outside of the text we have cobbled together in the heat of struggle. We need specific things to look at and criteria to evaluate the text by, for otherwise we will either see little or we will circle around our own self-doubts, with no guarantee any change is really an improvement rather than just a digressive response to uncertainty.

It helps to define different parameters of the text that we might reconsider. At the style level we have been considering in this chapter (as well as at the other levels examined in previous chapters) we can consider the interpersonal dynamics the text is setting up and whether we are satisfied with them, whether the text projects us in roles we are comfortable with, whether we occupy too much or too little a presence, whether we are inviting and respectful enough with our readers, whether the text provides adequate roles for them and accommodates their likely varieties of views and knowledge. Similarly, we can look at whether our ideas are present cohesively and the directions of the arguments and ligaments of the text are marked well enough to provide guidance to the readers as they attempt to find the inner coherence identified by the outward markers of cohesion. Further, we can look at the specific ideas and information presented to see whether they are identified adequately, whether all relevant parts are presented, and whether reasoning processes are made visible.

Similarly, revision provides the opportunity to consider the implications of the genre position we have taken. How consistent is the text in pursuing the aims inherent in the genre? If we adopt hybrid genres, is the combination effective and do the readers have enough clues to understand and accept what the hybridity is attempting to accomplish? How might the generic features be heightened, toned down, or played against each other to sharpen the message, emotion, or presence? How can we strengthen credibility in the projection of ethos or maintain the most appropriate stances for readers? How much passion of what sort, how much reason, how much of an associated mood, are appropriate to expand thinking, build confidence, or allow the reader's thoughts grow in appropriate directions? How much precision and univocality of meaning is needed given the nature of the genre and the task?

One way to identify issues to pursue in revision is to articulate through discussion with others or through extended written comments to ourselves a description of what we have produced and what we hope to accomplish. This

then can provide us with a series of questions by which to interrogate the draft in terms appropriate to the goals of the final text, realized at every detail of language and composition.

Although the process for adopting a systematic stance toward revision which I am presenting here seems to be ignoring the spontaneous sense that there is something wrong or not yet fully realized, I am suggesting rather that any such intimation, intuition or unease is best elaborated so that we know what is creating the concern. This then can be turned into a systematic principle or query stance that can then guide revision. Since in producing emergent phenomena we don't always know where we are going—we are just following what seems good to us—only as issues emerge can we start to articulate them. This is particularly so if we are in a flow state where we are drawing on all our resources doing complex problem solving in real time, at the limits of our working memory and drawing simultaneously on less conscious forms of calculation and emotionally signaled estimates of success, as discussed in the next chapter. It is important not to interrupt that flow state or interpose too many forms of conscious monitoring in the moment. Yet after an hour, or a day, or a month, after being able to look back on the text, then we can start to articulate what it is that has emerged. Then we can begin to sense where our lights were leading us and identify means to take us more effectively to that place.

REVISION AND THE PROFESSIONAL STANCE TOWARD WRITING

Another way to think of this revision stance is as a professional view of writing. Professionals in any domain constantly work on their craft and monitor what they do to improve performance. Musicians, though driven by a love of music, practice their technique, do exercises, listen to tapes of their performances, and play before coaches and instructors to find out where they need improvement. Then they do appropriate exercises and self-consciously monitor their performances to ensure they are incorporating the new skills and avoiding bad habits. This professional attitude does not diminish their love of the music; it only increases their expressive potential through finer control of the directions and details, and gives them even more reason to love their art.

Professional athletes, likewise, no matter how much they love their games and feel they have great talent, do exercises, get critiques from their coaches, work on particular skills, and monitor themselves with awareness of those things they are working on. They are aware that performance is different than desire or impulse, though these internal feelings may lie behind their performance. The

performance, nonetheless, must be realized through detailed, skilled, practiced behavior, responsive to informed criticism. Of course, professionals can sort out the difference between useful advice and uninformed suggestions from those who do not understand the craft, but they know the value of accepting any criticism, no matter how painful, that helps them recognize an area of weakness that could use work. This does not decrease commitment to sport, skill, and accomplishment of performance. Rather the commitment to craft only increases commitment to the game and a realistic sense of what goes into an accomplished performance.

In writing we are very attached to our words by our impulse to communicate and to the meanings that well up from inside ourselves to reach out to others. Further, the technical skills of text manipulation seem so complex at the same time as being so closely tied to meaning, that it is especially hard to view the performance as something to be worked on. We may even feel the attempt to revise as an intolerable burden that somehow interferes with our meaning and impulses. Yet revision gives us opportunity to see our text from the outside and improve it to realize our impulses more forcefully. We can look at our sketches and drafts, and keep working on them in semi-privacy before we send the final polished version to the intended audience. This allows us to become more objective in seeing the texts as symbolic objects, constructed and to be improved, rather than as direct overflows of our subjective states and excited thoughts. In the end we will have greater expressive potential, greater success in communicating our meanings and more influence on others, even if the revision process at times seems cold and technical.