Mercury’s Words:  
The End of Rhetoric and  
the Beginning of Prose

The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo.  
—Shakespeare, Love’s Labour’s Lost

Emergences of Prose

The origin of modern prose style was the subject of much  
 scholarly debate in the first half of the twentieth century, but interest in the  
subject waned thereafter. Today, few scholars other than Restoration special-  
ists or historians of rhetoric are likely to recall the terms of the debate  
between Morris W. Croll and Richard Foster Jones or their successors.1 And  
yet prose style has once again become an important locus of work in literary  
study, most conspicuously in the new field of digital analysis, which has  
returned scholarship to some very old concerns of literary history. After  
decades in which literary study has been dominated by contextual herme-  
neutics, it seems possible once again to think about literary change in formal  
terms, as Franco Moretti has notably argued: “For me, formal analysis is the  
great accomplishment of literary study, and is therefore also what any new  
approach—quantitative, digital, evolutionary, whatever—must prove itself  
against.”2 I would endorse this provocation, and indeed I want to raise the  
stakes of formal analysis in this essay by taking a step back from the computa-  
tional project and from the favored object of Moretti’s project—the  
 novel—and look instead at prose itself as the perennial subject of discourse

ABSTRACT This essay offers a new interpretation of a longstanding and unresolved controversy concerning the origins of modern prose style. Setting aside causal explanations proposed for the marked changes in prose style during the later seventeenth century, I argue that what emerges in urgent polemics for the “plain style” is a recognition of prose itself as a medium of composition. This intuition about the nature of prose had the unintended effect of liberating prose from its immemorial subordination to the system of rhetoric and opening up new possibilities for its exploitation as a means of communication. REPRESENTATIONS 138. Spring 2017 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 59–86. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2017.138.3.59.
about style. The aim of my argument is to recover a crucial episode in the historical conceptualization of style and thus to restore the emergence of modern prose to its key position in our understanding of English literary history.

The unresolved inquiry begun by Croll and Jones set out from the manifest difference of modern prose from its Renaissance and medieval antecedents. As a subset of language change, the development of prose style has its own set of complex determinations. All prose, let us stipulate, is the sum of stylistic features determined by a familiar set of conceptual operators: form, genre, author, period, literary fashion, and perhaps others as yet unspecified. But prose as such is a purely conceptual entity; it functions as a kind of raw material for composition, seemingly undetermined with regard to content and yet constrained by conventions of grammar and usage. The components of style further limit prose, however difficult these elements are to specify. Croll argued that the emergence of modern English prose style in the later seventeenth century was a result of the anti-Ciceronian movement, which was correlated with a reorientation of the genre system that privileged the forms of essay and treatise over the form of oratory. Jones, by contrast, traced modern prose to a series of polemics emanating from the Royal Society on behalf of the “plain style,” which he saw as directly influencing composition in prose. Although both Croll and Jones grasped aspects of the transformation of prose, their causal hypotheses failed to demonstrate a definitive mechanism of change that would explain the syntax and diction we recognize as modern. I remain agnostic about causal arguments and propose here a different kind of historical hypothesis: New developments in the discourse of prose style betray the recognition of prose avant la lettre as a medium. This recognition was more precisely a misrecognition, in the sense that the “plain style” was understood as a new kind of prose rather than an intuition about the nature of prose itself. Nevertheless, this misrecognition had the perhaps unintended effect of dislodging prose from its immemorial subordination to the system of rhetoric and severing its link to the preeminent genre of oratory. Prose changed when this regulatory regime was lifted, though not necessarily in ways prescribed by the advocates of anti-Ciceronianism or the plain style. Further, composition in prose continued for some time to be described in rhetorical terms, because no other technical lexicon was yet available. The importance of this lexical overhang is a part of the story I mean to tell, and has consequences that extend into the present.

In this story, oratory is more important than narrative. The fact that we never encounter any prose that is not generically or formally marked means that prose is always somewhere behind its manifestations, of which narrative is only one. For this reason, I do not offer here a “prosaics” based on the instance of narrative, which has been the premise of most efforts to construct
a theory of prose, from Viktor Shklovsky onwards. Prose was understood in antiquity rather as the complement of verse, which long predated it as a kind of marked speech. If poetry has an obvious signal in the aural form of meter, prose has been strangely harder to define, often yielding to Monsieur Jourdain’s naive apprehension: prose is any speech or writing that is not verse. Yet prose first appeared in ancient Greece in the rarified form of an art—rhetoric—complementary to the art of poetry. The first rhetoricians called the object of their art “persuasive speech.” This speech was obviously different from poetry, but such was the oddity of it that the Greeks could only name it “bare” or “naked” speech (logos gymnos), to indicate the absence of meter. Although the sophists elaborated this bare speech into complex syntactic schemes and figurative modes of expression, it somehow still remained nominally bare speech. The Romans struggled with the same paradox in what they called prosa oratio, “straightforward speech.” Prosa, which gives us our vernacular word prose, is a contraction of pro + vertere, to turn straight forward; prose means speaking “right on,” to quote Shakespeare’s Marc Antony (who, as it happens, is speaking neither forthrightly nor in prose). Eventually the umbilicus to oratory was severed, and prose came to be associated in a special way with the kind of writing that is visually distinct from verse, or written to the margin of the page. But it is not easy to say exactly when this break with oratory was accomplished. Writing in early modernity continued to exhibit what Walter Ong calls an “oral residue” for as long as oratory occupied the highest place in the hierarchy of prose genres.

Scholars have identified several beginnings of prose even after its inception with Greek rhetoric, for example, the one advanced by Jeffrey Kittay and Wlad Godzich in their study, The Emergence of Prose, which locates an origin of prose in the transition to French vernacular writing of the later middle ages. Kittay and Godzich see in this prose an irreversible movement away from the deictic situation of the French jongleurs, who recited (or sang) their vernacular verses, thus rooting their compositions in a single time and place of performance. French narrative prose, by contrast, whether chronicle or fiction, displaced this deixis to a purely “textual space” (116), in which Kittay and Godzich see the appearance of a new “signifying practice” that is highly versatile and pulls together any number of discourses in its web—in short, “the birth of modern prose” (195). That this moment of transition, which is linked to the privileged instance of narrative, fully comprehends the possibilities of prose in modernity seems unlikely to me, although where one stands on this question depends on how one defines modernity. In any correlation of prose with modernity, these two terms will define each other. Still, we can safely say that each emergence of prose enables what follows, and this is the explanatory framework I adopt in this
essay. The emergence of prose in the seventeenth century is possibly the last of a series beginning in Greek antiquity—that is, if we are not now on the cusp of a new digital prose.

The moment of emergence in the later Renaissance initiated a number of changes in the modes of written communication. Among the practices that changed with modern prose was poetry itself. The very identity of poetry changed in such a way that later authors came to view the century after the emergence of a modern prose style as a century of prose. So Matthew Arnold declares famously in his essay “The Study of Poetry” that “Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose.” However strained, Arnold’s judgment rightly intuited a change in the position of poetry in response to a new gravitational force exerted by prose. Subsequently poetry was compelled to assert its difference from prose by more extreme measures. In our own time, poetry has been displaced from its ancient eminence in culture, an epochal break that is still poorly understood. If prose has a special relation to modernity, however, we must remember that modernity is itself a conception of the European center, an expression of its self-recognition as center. The relation between poetry and prose is different in the “periphery”—in Russia, for example, or South America, or the Islamic world—those geopolitical domains where poetry still has a high cultural place. This is a question that cannot detain us, but which confirms the significance of prose for our understanding of modernity.

If verse and prose are linked in their histories, even mutually constitutive, we might wonder whether their coevolution is determined at the deeper level of language itself—that is, the living, spoken language. To some extent, language must play such a causal role; and yet a story in which speech determines writing will soon face the problem of recursion, the effect of writing on spoken language. Standardization of the vernacular, for example, shaped the spoken language in part through the medium of writing, transmitted mainly, if not exclusively, through the school system. The effects of these efforts over time were immense. For this reason, we must take seriously the deliberate attempts in the early modern period to modify features of prose style, even if the impact of this effort is difficult to specify.

Any account of the controversy over seventeenth-century prose style will necessarily have to employ the terms of stylistics, although stylistics has certain inherent liabilities for our purpose. On the one hand, stylistics can look merely impressionistic, an attempt to characterize style by means of figurative language, for example, by words such as “curt,” the term associated by Croll with the style of Seneca as well as seventeenth-century English prose. Often such descriptors fail to indicate precisely which features of diction or syntax produce stylistic effects. On the other hand, stylistics provides the terms for some of the most aggressively empirical work in literary study today, the quantitative
analysis of texts. This fusion of impressionism and computation has long characterized historical stylistics, which resorted well before the invention of the computer to the strategy of counting words in order to confirm or disconfirm intuitive hypotheses. If the formation of hypotheses depends on intuitions, stylistics perhaps inevitably combines the impressionistic and the arithmetic.12

I am concerned in this essay, however, not with quantitative analysis as such, but with the history of discourse about style, and what it tells us about the perception of prose. I begin, then, with a simple, generally accepted observation: Readers of English literature know that prose changed in the latter end of the early modern period, and that by the eighteenth century the difference between modern and premodern prose was more or less established; but how did this happen? Here is Arnold again, usefully testifying to our intuitive sense of the modern difference in the essay already quoted:

When we find Milton writing: “And long it was not after, when I was confirmed in this opinion, that he, who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem,”—we pronounce that such a prose has its own grandeur, but that it is obsolete and inconvenient. But when we find Dryden telling us: “What Virgil wrote in the vigour of his age, in plenty and at ease, I have undertaken to translate in my declining years; struggling with wants, oppressed with sickness, curbed in my genius, liable to be misconstrued in all I write,”—then we exclaim that here at last we have the true English prose, a prose such as we would all gladly use if we only knew how. Yet Dryden was Milton’s contemporary. (“Study of Poetry,” 357)

Arnold’s impressionistic observation is true enough—John Milton’s prose was a glorious anachronism even during his own life—but how can we describe precisely the difference between the two sentences Arnold quotes? Arnold does not tell us so, but the quotation from Milton is an example of what in antiquity was known as a “periodic” syntactic construction. Milton opens up a space between the subject and the verb in his sentence, into which a delaying clause is inserted. The thought is completed in a circular movement, returning in the end to the verb—hence the term “periodic.” John Dryden’s sentence, by contrast, was known as a “loose” construction, the phrases strung together with participles and adjectives (coordinating conjunctions are implicit). Both syntactic forms were well known in antiquity, and often used in the same work, but how is it that one seems modern, and the other “obsolete”?13

Morris W. Croll
and the Senecan Century

The controversy between Croll and Jones was famous in its day but failed to resolve the question of how modern prose style emerged. In the
next two sections of this essay, I give an abbreviated account of the dispute in order to bring to light the reason for its irresolution. Croll sets out from the sixteenth-century reaction against the sometimes rigid Ciceronianism of the humanist tradition. Erasmus inaugurated the oppositional movement in his *Ciceronianus*, a critique of the fetishistic imitation of Cicero; his critique was seconded by other writers, including Michel de Montaigne, Justus Lipsius, and Francis Bacon. Of the features of the Ciceronian style, the most marked were the employment of periodic syntax and copiousness of expression. These characteristics were derived ultimately from the Gorgian and Isocricatic traditions in Greek rhetoric, later versions of which became controversial and were stigmatized as “Asiatic,” a deviation from the purity of “Attic” style. Cicero’s style came to be attacked as Asiatic by his contemporaries, who contrasted the sonorous periods of his orations with Attic clarity, brevity, and “loose” syntax.

These terms for style, it must be admitted, are too impressionistic to give stylistic analysis the precision it requires; prose in the Renaissance does not sort itself easily into these modes. Let us recall too that Cicero himself objected to the characterization of his style as Asiatic, protesting in his *Brutus* and *Orator* that his later writing was much more Attic than Asian. Although Croll proposed to describe the prose of the seventeenth century as dominantly Attic, the question of how conscious writers were of their Atticism is difficult to answer. There did not seem to be anything that called itself an “Attic” movement in Renaissance literary culture, as opposed to a tendency in some (not all) major authors to move away from Ciceronian imitation. The Ciceronian style continued to have strong advocates in Roger Ascham, John Lyly, Richard Hooker, and others, up to and including Milton. Here we confront a problem of some magnitude: It is by no means certain that theory effectively determines compositional practice. Prescriptive theories of style were necessarily mediated in the schools by a pedagogy of imitation, as with the Ciceronianism of the humanist pedagogues. An alternative “Attic” practice of composition would require an alternative model for imitation.

Croll’s bias toward theory is evident, but he clearly understood the necessity of buttressing theory with a practice of imitation; hence he proposed an alternative figure for this role: Seneca. Like the other terms for style, the notion of the “Senecan” works both deductively and inductively. Some authors seem deliberately to imitate Seneca, but others are described by Croll as Senecan because they exhibit some elements of Attic style. Croll’s descriptors for the countermovement in prose style—anti-Ciceronian, Attic, Senecan—shuttle back and forth between rhetorical theory and compositional practice. Along the way, Croll usefully accounts for other period concepts of style, such as the “cut” style, or the “pointed” style (from the French, *stile coupé*), giving us a lively sense of how much writers of the period...
experimented with style and struggled to conceptualize their practice. But the gathering of this experimentation under one name seems forced, even in the subtle extension of Croll’s argument undertaken by George Williamson in his study *The Senecan Amble*. In Croll’s later work on the subject, he attempts a comprehensive summation of his thesis by assimilating Senecan prose to the larger concept of the baroque, thereby ushering prose into the larger media field of the seventeenth century. Baroque prose style continues to be described by Croll as Senecan, but the qualities of Senecanism are now seen as the expression of a multimedia cultural movement. This strategy makes the Senecan hypothesis seem less arbitrary, but at the cost of simplifying the heterogeneous productions of the baroque, an extraordinarily difficult style concept to define.

Both the proliferation of stylistic descriptors and their reduction to one name are problematic, leaving many theoretical questions unresolved. If Cicero and Seneca functioned as models of imitation for many, for other writers these names more likely circulated as casual metonymic signs for different strategies in prose composition, sometimes deployed alternately in the same work. We need to remember, too, that in the grammar schools, students imitated Latin models in composing mainly Latin prose. The task of imitation was complicated when imitating Latin writers in English composition. Vernacular writers were challenged above all by the need to find correlatives for a syntax based on inflection in a language where syntax was based on word order.

In addition to classroom practice, there must surely have been other cultural or extracultural pressures moving prose in new or different directions. The question of causality troubles assessment of stylistic arguments generally. But the project of Croll and his followers would be much less interesting without explanatory hypotheses. Croll tends to see changes in prose style as the effects of causes internal to the history of writing, rather than as responses to pressures from extraliterary domains. As we shall see, it is the latter kind of hypothesis that interested Jones and his followers.

Before turning to the other side of the controversy, however, I must identify one other strand in Croll’s argument that will concern Jones and his followers crucially. Behind the terms characterizing the change in prose style from the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries is another rhetorical scheme that dates from antiquity, the practice of the “levels of style.” These levels wavered in their number and definition through the Hellenistic period but were fixed in the enormously influential work of late antiquity *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, thought mistakenly to be Cicero’s. The writer of the work identifies three levels of style (*genera dicendi*): a plain or low style (*genus humile*), a middle style (*genus medium*), and a high style (*genus grande*). The names of the styles suggest that they track the degree of departure from
“bare speech,” but this is only partly accurate. “Plainness of style,” Cicero says, “seems easy to imitate at first thought, but when attempted nothing is more difficult.”\textsuperscript{15} The finer points of the three levels of style were much discussed in antiquity and in the Renaissance, and the ability to write in these three styles was an aim of all rhetorical education. For Croll, the writers of the Renaissance rehearsed the debate between the Asian and Attic styles of antiquity as a conflict between the levels of the style, the Ciceronian grand style versus the Senecan plain style: “The aim of the founders of seventeenth-century prose style was to domesticate a genus humile” (“‘Attic Prose’ in the Seventeenth Century,” 79).

Croll also emphasizes the correlation in antiquity between the levels of style and the three traditional aims (or “offices”) of rhetoric. The plain style was associated with the aim of teaching or instructing (docere); the other two aims, to delight (delectare) and to move (movere) were linked to the middle and grand styles. Croll’s argument here is that the Senecan or Attic plain style signaled a shift in the hierarchy of the generic system from oratory to the form of the essay, which is associated with the instructional aim: “‘Attic prose’ in the seventeenth century denoted the genus humile, or philosophical essay style, in contrast with the Ciceronian type of oratory” (93). This observation is the most suggestive in Croll’s work, as it points to a credible generic mover of stylistic change. We will return to this question later.

Much depends in Croll’s argument on what ornament is permitted in the plain style, which in his view is not devoid of rhetorical elaboration. He identifies these licensed ornaments in the Senecan tradition as “metaphor, antithesis, paradox and ‘point’” (92), devices that can indeed look very far from plain. (Periodic construction and the techniques of copia are excluded altogether.) Hence Croll can describe a writer as stylistically complex as Thomas Browne as an exemplar of a Senecan genus humile. The identification of this style with the qualifier “plain” may still seem puzzling, but it is authorized additionally by the association of Seneca with Stoic philosophy, or with philosophy generally, transmitted in the forms of treatise and essay. Because the genus humile was equated in antiquity with the instructing function, its association with philosophy marks the style of all philosophical writing as, by definition, “plain.” By means of this link between plain style and instructional aim, Croll extends Senecan style from the earlier to the later seventeenth century and, controversially, to the prose reforms of the Restoration period: “The temporary success of Puritanism and Quietism, the rapid progress of scientific method, and the diffusion of Cartesian ideas, all in their different ways helped to create a taste for the bare and level prose style adapted merely to the exact portrayal of things as they are” (67). But in this statement Croll’s plain style seems to revert to a more minimalist form while remaining Senecan. In a review disputing Jones’s argument for the
causal role of the New Science, Croll asserts that this science “did not create a new, a rival style to the Anti-Ciceronian; it only introduced certain changes within the *cadres* of that style. . . . it did not change the form and structure of the prose of its time. . . . Seventeenth-century prose is and remains predominantly Senecan.”16 On this point Jones and his followers strongly dissented, arguing that prose style in the Restoration was a rejection not only of Ciceronianism but also of the Senecan style exemplified in Bacon, Robert Burton, and Browne. The plain style oscillates in Croll’s account between a “bare” prose and a style that entails a different set of rhetorical strategies than do the middle or grand styles, devices such as “antithesis.” Croll needs both conceptions of the plain style in order to assert a continuity of stylistic expression in the seventeenth century, but he finally cannot assimilate the plain style to the sequence of descriptors he generates: anti-Ciceronian, Attic, Senecan, baroque. The plain style emerges from Croll’s work as the knottiest historical and conceptual problem in the analysis of late Renaissance prose.

**Richard Foster Jones and the Triumph of the English Plain Style**

The plain style is the crux of Richard Foster Jones’s famous series of essays on the Royal Society and the development of prose style in the later seventeenth century. Jones rejected Croll’s argument for continuity of style across the duration of the century, arguing that the baroque style would have to include writers on both sides of Croll’s divide between Ciceronian and anti-Ciceronian, that is, both Milton and Browne. It is this style in all its versions that he sees the reformers of the Royal Society as rejecting. But the stakes are higher still in his argument, because Jones detects in the Royal Society reform of prose looming trouble for rhetoric itself. Jones’s argument implicitly raises the question of whether the plain style in the Restoration represents a continuation of the rhetorical system, a further specialization of the *genus humile*, or a movement away from that system. He clearly tends toward the last position, not without testimonial evidence, beginning with the statutes of the Royal Society itself: “In all Reports of Experiments to be brought into the Society, the Matter of Fact shall be barely stated, without Prefaces, Apologies, or Rhetorical flourishes, and entered so into the Register-Book, by order of the Society” (*The Seventeenth Century*, 84). Although the exclusion of “Rhetorical flourishes” applies here only to the genre of the “report,” the fact that the Royal Society attempted to carve out this exclusion is not without consequence for the rhetorical system itself. The controversy provoked by Jones’s work turned on just this point.
If Jones has a better case for a discontinuity in the development of English prose style in the seventeenth century than Croll does for continuity, his understanding of the causal factors in this break comes up against other theoretical problems. Jones writes that he wants to “make manifest what seems to me the most important influence instrumental in changing the luxuriant prose of the Commonwealth into that of a diametrically opposite nature in the Restoration” (75). This instrumentality, he asserts, is the Royal Society itself, which undertook a double reformation in its early years, of natural philosophy and of English prose. To the latter end, the society established a committee for the reform of English, though this committee never achieved the stature of its inspiration, the French Academy. The problem will be evident immediately: How can the programmatic statements of a very small, intellectual elite effect a large-scale transformation of prose writing?17 The explanatory problem might be downsized, perhaps, by demoting the Royal Society to just one manifestation of all the “forces, known and unknown, underlying literary development” to which Jones refers in opening his discussion of Restoration prose style (75). In that context, the Royal Society’s actions would be symptomatic of forces, not yet identified, emanating from beyond the social world of the literary elite. Still, the “known and unknown” forces reshaping prose style are channeled in Jones’s account largely through the agency of the Royal Society. There, the forces behind literary change are realized in a programmatic agenda, a deliberate reform of prose. Thomas Sprat confirms this reform agenda in the most famous passage of his History of the Royal Society, where he remarks on the “constant Resolution” of the members

to reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style: to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver’d so many things, almost in an equal number of words. They have exacted from their members, a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness: bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness, as they can: and preferring the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that, of Wits, or Scholars. (113)

The words are Sprat’s, but the tropes are common: primitive, naked, natural, all culminating in the notion of plainness. This word is a trope too, derived from the Latin planus, meaning “flat” or “level”—in other words, the “plane” style. We will return later to the implications of this trope, only underscoring here the way in which the Royal Society’s version of the plain style hooks onto a piece of the rhetorical system while distancing the system as such.

Notions of the plain style are the common currency of language reform during the period, perhaps best exemplified in the work of John Wilkins,
who was the major, if not the only, begetter of the Royal Society itself. Wilkins began his career on the Presbyterian side of the civil war, but moved to the conformist position. His interest in the reform of language was ambitiously expressed in his *Essay Toward a Real Character* (1668), a plan for an ideal language that aimed to deliver just what Sprat extolls in a hypothetically “primitive” language, an “equal number” of words for the things in the world. Although the *Essay* failed on many points to achieve this end, it might be understood as a vast counterrhetoric, an artificial language that by design restricts all speech and writing to the plain style. Wilkins’s investment in the notion of plainness was long-standing. In a much earlier tract of 1646, *Ecclesiastes, or a Discourse Concerning the Gift of Preaching*, he writes that preaching “must be plain and natural, not being darkned with the affectation of Scholasticall harshness, or Rhetoricall flourishes... The greatest learning is to be seen in the greatest plainnesse.”18 Jones and others have exhaustively documented the prevalence of plain style advocacy, and I will not rehearse their examples further here. My point is just that the plain style has an implicit purpose at this moment that far exceeds its role in the system of rhetoric as the name for one of the three levels of style.19

Preaching and philosophy were the most important sites for plain style advocacy, but the urgency of the polemic raises the question of whether the plain style has a further reach. We can open this question by recalling that the relation between preaching and philosophy can be expressed formally as a relation between oratory (sacred oratory) and the forms of treatise and essay. Croll’s intuition about a shift in the hierarchy of the genres points us in the right direction, bringing these genres into stylistic congruity. We might also note here that some advocates of the plain style advanced this polemic in both fields, including Wilkins and Joseph Glanvill, both clerics, and both eventually elevated to bishops. The involvement of the Anglican Church in the popularization of the New Science has been the subject of much commentary in the history of science, but I would like to see this fact as just as much an event in the history of rhetoric. What drew plain style advocates in both religion and natural philosophy together around this stylistic concept?

In the case of preaching, pre-Restoration practice clearly followed the model of classical oratory, affirming the three aims of rhetoric and employing the corresponding three levels of style.20 In the context of the civil wars, however, the plain style expressed a desire for a truth that might be removed from the realm of dispute as well as from passion. The interest of the Royal Society experimenters in the transmission of religious doctrine was intense, suggesting how closely related were religion and science as projects of truth, a condition that persisted at least through Isaac Newton. The plain style cemented the relation between theology and natural philosophy. Robert Boyle, for example, celebrated the plain style in his
treatise, *Some Considerations Touching the Style of the Holy Scriptures* (1675), defending the apparent simplicity of biblical language and confirming the Bible as an ultimate authority for the language reform of the Royal Society.

The plain style, we might speculate, circulated in sermon theory and in natural philosophy as an internal critique of the rhetorical system. Yet it was rarely a frontal assault. It is often pointed out that Sprat does not reject rhetoric altogether in his *History*. If he is tempted to argue, as Plato did of the poets, “that eloquence ought to be banish’d out of all civil Societies, as a thing fatal to Peace and good Manners,” he is also forced to acknowledge that “it is a Weapon, which may be as easily procur’d by bad men, as good; and that if these should only cast it away, and those retain it; the naked Innocence of virtue, would be upon all occasions expos’d to the armed Malice of the wicked” (111). But Sprat goes beyond the strategy of mutually assured rhetorical destruction, raising doubts about rhetoric that are more thorough-going: “I dare say; that of all the Studies of men, nothing may be sooner obtain’d, than this vicious abundance of Phrase, this trick of Metaphors, this volubility of Tongue, which makes so great a noise in the World. But I spend words in vain; for the evil is now so inveterate, that it is hard to know whom to blame, or where to begin to reform” (112). What can Sprat mean here in seeming to debunk the study of rhetoric, knowing that it is so large a part of Renaissance education? Rhetoric does not emerge from this diatribe as merely a neutral instrument of discourse, capable of use or abuse, but as something closer to an inherently dangerous weapon, which has the kind of agency that guns have in the argument for gun control.

And with that observation, we are thrust into the center of the debate intermittently waged over the last century about the status of rhetoric in the Restoration period. As I have noted, this debate was never resolved; it only faded away. Both Croll and Jones tried to give a causal account of why prose changed. Both scholars failed in this project, because they mistook what writers said about prose for a description of how prose was actually changing. Yet prose was not actually being reduced to the plain style, which stigmatized mainly figurative language and periphrastic diction. It is only too obvious in retrospect that the critique of figurative language entrapped the plain style advocates in a performative contradiction: Even in passages seemingly denouncing rhetoric, one finds ample recourse to rhetorical devices such as metaphor. In a late contribution to the debate, Brian Vickers mounts an impressive forensic argument to the effect that the circle of the Royal Society has been misread as rejecting rhetoric; he suggests that these writers were really just condemning the language of their opponents, the nonconformists whose theological heresies were supposed to have led to the civil war. Conformists such as Sprat and Wilkins did indeed see Puritan and sectarian theology as vitiated by fantastic, metaphoric language, notions
such as grace, private inspiration, or inner light. Often, however, the con-
formists seemed to extend (or overextend) their critique to rhetoric itself,
not only to its abuse.\textsuperscript{22} As performative contradiction, this kind of self-
cancelling figuration raises problems for rhetoric that are not easily con-
tained. Even if the plain style did not rid prose of trope or periphrastic
diction, it indirectly inflicted damage on the reputation of rhetoric as a sys-
tem of education and as a philosophy of language.

If Vickers is right that the context for Restoration statements about
rhetoric was sectarian conflict, he is wrong to think that this has no con-
sequences for the cultural standing of rhetoric. The instruments of polemic
are beginning to tell their own story here, and in that context, the invoca-
tion of the plain style is particularly revelatory. In an argument that seems at
first to confirm Vickers’s rebuttal of Jones, N. H. Keeble has shown convinc-
ingly that the nonconformists too claimed the plain style for their own,
accusing the conformists of the same abuses and rhetorical flourishes
decried by Sprat, Wilkins, and others (\textit{Literary Culture of Nonconformity},
246–47). But the double edge of the plain style as a weapon of polemic is
just the problem. The plain style is not \textit{only} a tool of religious polemic; it is
an event in its own right. Its importance is confirmed by the very fact that it
moved to the center of discourse about language from across the ideological
spectrum. The concentrated expression of these conflicting forces in the
trope of plainness is the very event we would like to explain.

My argument here is not, however, an endorsement of Jones against
Vickers. My sense is that Jones succumbed to another version of theoretici-
sm in crediting the Royal Society’s \textit{idea} of reform with effecting an actual
transformation of prose. I make another kind of historical claim: that the
plain style functioned as a critique of rhetoric internal to the rhetorical
system. Indeed, versions of the plain style were activated for this purpose
even in antiquity. Rhetoric always had enemies, from Plato onwards, but its
development into a vastly complex and dominant art or \textit{techné} is just what
opened a space for internal critique, a weakness in the system that arose
from the fact that the \textit{genus humile} could be deployed as an antirhetorical
principle within rhetoric itself. In the Christian era, the plain style critique
gained particular force in the work of Augustine, who seized upon it as the
basis for a Christian counterrhetoric, the history of which has been usefully
recounted by Peter Auksi in his study \textit{Christian Plain Style}. Although August-
ine insisted in \textit{De doctrina christiana} that preaching should make use of the
middle and grand styles also, he had to justify these two styles against the
possible sufficiency of what he called the “subdued style” (\textit{sermo tenuis}),
consisting of nothing more than the transmission of Christian doctrine:
“And perhaps when the necessary things are learned, they [the hearers] may be so moved by a knowledge of them that it is not necessary to move
them further by greater powers of eloquence.”23 The plain style was thus asymmetrically related to its stylistic complements, an internal critic of the rhetorical system (like Augustine himself, the apostate rhetorician). The plain style drew its authority, as we have seen, from the language of scripture. Long after Augustine, versions of the plain style continued to harbor a challenge to classical rhetoric, despite the many accommodations with that system, culminating in the full-scale revival of Ciceronian rhetoric by the humanists.24

Looking back on this history, we might see the period of humanist hegemony in the educational system as anomalous in the development of English prose style itself, a period during which a language constrained by the infrastructure of word order bent itself to the mimesis of antiquity’s syntactic system, based on inflection. However marvelous the resulting prose works could be, their achievements came at a certain cost. I take this to be the largest point of Ian Robinson’s important study The Establishment of Modern English Prose in the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Robinson calls attention to an effect he names “wander,” the tendency of Renaissance English prose to spin out syntactic subordination through great numbers of clauses, separated by colons or semicolons that functioned more as auditory signals than grammatical punctuation. By the later seventeenth century, this extenuated syntax was slowly disappearing from English prose: “In Dryden we find, dependably, a union of rhythm and syntax that we may recognize (however we envy Dryden’s fluidity and mastery) as our own. The periodic phrasing, still important, is the obedient servant of syntactic structure.”25 But what drove this admittedly gradual and uneven development? Robinson traces the first appearance of this syntactic structure to Thomas Cranmer’s serviceable prose, in which he sees an emergent recognition of the “sentence” as a rule-bound grammatical construction, very different from the classical unit of the “thought,” which scarcely needed punctuation. The identification of Cranmer as the hero of this story seems unnecessary to me, however, and raises additional problems of causation in literary history. Robinson’s argument succeeds in a different way, by forcing us to recognize the steady pressure exerted on prose composition by the syntactic constraints for making sense in English. Over time English prose began to yield more readily to these constraints, though we do not know why. By the later seventeenth century, the language had changed irrevocably in many other ways (its diction, for example); the prose that emerged after centuries of Latin imitation was not necessarily simpler than what preceded it, only different.

In a work similar in aim to Robinson’s, The Native Tongue and the Word, Janel Mueller proposes another genealogy of modern prose, with an even earlier date of inception and a different inaugural figure: William Tyndale.26 Here the tendency represented by the name of Tyndale is what Mueller calls
“scripturalism,” her name for the movement to translate the Bible into the vernacular. If biblical parataxis gave vernacular prose a push in a direction contrary to the hypotaxis of humanist writing in the vernacular, this force was hardly overwhelming. Hypotaxis remained a major resource for English writing throughout the Renaissance; nor does it disappear after the Restoration. The most important implication of Mueller’s argument concerns translation itself, which points us to a more likely agent of linguistic change: the vernacularization of literate culture. This was nothing other than the cumulative pressure of all those groups—the literate aristocracy, prosperous merchants, craftsmen, yeomen, and perhaps above all, women—seeking to acquire the knowledge and pleasure sequestered in Latin and Greek texts. In addition to vernacularization, we must cite the immense if ambiguous force of print technology, which arguably accelerated the tendency toward translation of antique texts, including the Latin Bible and its Greek and Hebrew antecedent scriptures. Print disseminated a vernacular scripture and a liturgy that had a direct impact on speakers in all the sites and occasions of religious devotion.

Vernacularization is ultimately an irresistible force; but in the Renaissance it was still a complex and even traumatic process. It proceeded alongside and in tension with the great humanist revival of the languages of antiquity, their stunning ascent to the most prestigious stratum of literary culture. The fortunes of rhetoric were linked by an unbreakable chain to the ancient languages, and classical rhetoric would die only when those languages ceased to dominate the educational system. That moment had not yet arrived in the later seventeenth century, but the demand for vernacular writing was growing ever stronger. The disappearance of Latin composition in the succeeding century means that prose exists for us now as a vernacular form. This point is almost too obvious to see, but its importance can be appreciated by any large-scale comparison of Greek and Latin artistic prose to the vernaculars that succeeded them. The prose of antiquity was in fact much closer to poetry in its aural qualities than to modern prose. Devices such as prose rhythm, internal rhyme, and inversion of word order were all enabled and encouraged by inflection and resulted in what seems to us now an almost musical sort of prose. For the vernaculars of modernity, by contrast, inversion, rhythm, and internal rhyme would all be purged from prose. Prose could no longer sound poetic without sounding wrong.

The Plain Style
as Vanishing Mediator

The frictional but productive relation between vernacularization and the revival of classical Greek and Latin explains many things, but not
everything. If vernacularization is not only a story about syntax, neither is the plain style. In fact, advocacy of the plain style did not necessarily entail a rejection of classical syntax. On the contrary, what we find most often in these polemics is a complaint against certain vices of diction, such as foreign borrowings or “inkhorn” words, and, even more stridently, the tropes and schemes that constitute the part of rhetoric called *elocutio*, usually Englished in the Renaissance as “eloquence” or “ornament.” In the plain style polemic, tropes were derogated far more often than syntactic schemes, even though the latter provided many techniques for producing *copia*, itself increasingly disfavored by comparison to *brevitas*. It would be easy to show that Sprat himself resorts frequently to devices such as isocolon, but this kind of rhetorical device escapes his censure. This is a puzzling fact, as it makes syntax almost irrelevant to plain style polemics. Changes in prose syntax seem to have taken place slowly and unevenly under the radar of these polemics, perhaps even without being much affected by them. Hence we must admit the possibility that diction and syntax belong to different timelines of change, with different causal mechanisms. Perhaps further work in corpus linguistics will reveal the dynamics of syntactic change, but at present we can hypothesize that obsession with diction obscured the evolution of syntax during the period.

The plain style debate was also shaped by the copresence of another development: the reduction of the term “rhetoric” in later Renaissance usage to a single one of its parts, *elocutio*, usually translated as “ornament” or “style.” This reduction is conspicuous in the rhetorics of Ramus and Talon, and it was already present in English rhetorics as early as Richard Sherry’s *Treatise of Schemes and Tropes* (1550), in which *elocutio* is defined as “the thyrde and pryncipall parte of rhetorique.” When rhetoric itself is identified chiefly with *elocutio*, the plain style begins to stick out from the system. In Thomas Wilson’s *The Art of Rhetoric* (1585), for example, the *genus humile* is described as “when we use no metaphors nor translated words, nor yet use any amplifications, but go plainly to work and speak altogether in common words.” Is this still rhetoric? When the plain style advocates took aim at the tropes and schemes, it seemed that they were attacking rhetoric itself.

The quotation from Wilson raises a large question about the word “style” as our favored translation for *elocutio*, a usage that became common in the later Middle Ages and prevalent in the Renaissance. The word “style” is carried forward from Latin, of course, but for us it is a dead metonymy, a transferred sense of *stilus*, the pointed stick used to inscribe wax tablets. The word was used in the metonymic sense occasionally in late Roman antiquity, but the dominant term remained *elocutio*, which Quintilian tells us is the equivalent of the Greek *phrasis*. Greek rhetoricians used both *phrasis* and *lexis* in this context, and both words, of course, have English
legacies. With the appearance in the Renaissance of vernacular rhetorics, *elocutio* was at first dropped onto the page without translation. Wilson later Englishes the word minimally as “elocution,” defined as “the apt choosing and framing of words and sentences together.” He does not yet translate *elocutio* as “style,” but reserves that word for translating *genera dicendi*, rendered as “manner or styles or enditings” (195). As with most translations of *genera dicendi*, speaking is elided in favor of writing. In later sixteenth-century usage, the word “style” is sometimes used to translate both *elocutio* and *genera dicendi*, unfortunately erasing a useful distinction between style, which has many different components, and levels of style. (The Loeb translations of classical rhetoric ordinarily use “style” for both *genera dicendi* and *elocutio.*) As the name for ornament, *elocutio* passed out of vernacular rhetorics by the eighteenth century, only to reappear, confusingly, as the declamatory practice called “elocution,” which played a large role in the modern school system. In antiquity, delivery was the fifth part of rhetoric, called *actio*, not *elocutio*. Clearly by this point rhetoric had lost its systemic integrity, and its various parts could be refunctioned in ways never dreamed by Cicero or Quintilian. Rhetoric in ancient Greece was born out of a new prose form, oratory. Two millennia later, new developments in vernacular prose put oratory into a quite different relation to the rhetorical system.

Our modern notion of prose style might be understood retrospectively as complementing the late seventeenth-century concept of “poetic diction” introduced by John Dennis in his *Remarks on a Book Entitled Prince Arthur*, published in 1696. Dennis notes “the differences between a Poetick and a Prosaick diction,” but it was the term “poetic diction” that gained currency thereafter.33 The word *style*, on the other hand, became more consistently associated with prose. *Prose style* and *poetic diction* are thus correlated concepts, both ultimately vernacularizing *elocutio*, but dividing the world of rarified literary discourse between poetic and prosaic forms. This distinction between poetry and prose is one of the chief consequences of the modernization of prose, as it enabled poetry and prose to develop in tandem by exaggerating their lexical and syntactic differences from one another. In the Renaissance, by contrast, the rhetorical difference between poetry and prose was minimal, and treatises on rhetoric and poetics offered examples differently from poetry and prose in discussions of ornament. Our later notions of prose style and poetic diction are fugitives from the rhetorical system. “Style” is not just a translation of *genera dicendi*, then, but a repurposing of it in different social conditions of writing, conditions that increasingly favor composition in the vernacular.

If this hypothesis is valid, we should be able to discern different principles at work in the antique concept of *genera dicendi*, ways of speaking, and in the concept of *style*, meaning essentially ways of writing vernacular prose.
Here we can draw attention to an aspect of the three “levels of style” in antiquity that does indeed strike moderns as alien. These stylistic levels were, we recall, employed alternately within the same work, adjusting the level of style continually to the matter and moment of the oration. The chief statement of this principle is found in the Ad Herennium, 4.11.16: “But in speaking we should vary the type of style [here translating figuram], so that the middle succeeds the grand, the simple the middle, and then again interchange them, and yet again. Thus, by means of the variation, satiety is easily avoided” (269). Adhering to what was proper or apt (aptus, alternatively expressed in the nominal form of decorum), the orator shifted to the grand style only when the subject was grand, or when summing up in the peroration; the same principle of decorum governed the other levels. I will call this system an analytic of style, according to which different kinds of matter or purpose in a text determine different “kinds of speaking.”

The discourse of style in early modernity moves in another direction, signaled by the name of Cicero himself, ironically the great practitioner of the analytic of style. The very concept of the “Ciceronian” gives us the key to its operation: identity. In the Renaissance imitation of Cicero, his works came to be regarded as the expression of a single style, in effect synthesizing his alternating deployment of different levels of style. I will call this opposing tendency the synthetic of style. The notion of the “Ciceronian” names a style that fuses all of the works composed by the author named “Cicero,” along with all of the moments in those works, whatever “level of style” those moments exhibit. An “author function” guides these stylistic choices in a manner very different from the principle of decorum, more hidden, because emerging out of the radical idiosyncrasy of persons. The synthetic of style is really what we mean by style today, an identity concept. In retrospect, we can see that the debate in antiquity between Attic and Asiatic styles was an early instance of a synthetic conception of style in operation; but the analytic “levels of style” scheme remained dominant. By the later sixteenth century, these two principles of style were already beginning to compete for position, as in George Puttenham’s The Art of English Poesy (1589). In his chapter “Of style,” Puttenham first defines style as “a constant and continual phrase or tenor of speaking and writing, extending to the whole tale or process of the poem or history,” thus fixing style synthetically to the individual work as a coherent whole. But he quickly recognizes that authorial identity gives a better sense of what he means by “constant and continual”: “So we say that Cicero’s style and Sallust’s were not one, nor Caesar’s and Livy’s, nor Homer’s and Hesiod’s, nor Herodotus’ and Thucydides’, nor Euripides’ and Aristophanes’, nor Erasmus’s and Budaues’s styles.” The concept of style slides away from the techné of rhetoric to a more nebulous realm of psychology: “This continual course and manner of writing or speech sheweth the matter and
disposition of the writer’s mind more than one or few words or sentences can show." Puttenham is groping for a way to conceptualize style, but his effort is actually belated in relation to Renaissance practice. The synthetic of style was long since a resource of humanist scholarship in dealing with questions of attribution and dating. With the development of new scholarly techniques of textual analysis, the style of a text would henceforth betray its author, or its time and place of origin, even a text that was a clever forgery.

Puttenham senses that what I have called the synthetic of style is different from the analytic system of levels, yet he attempts to suture the synthetic conception to the old system of levels: “Then again may it be said as well that men do choose their subjects according to the mettle of their minds, and therefore a high-minded man chooseth him high and lofty matter to write of; the base courage, matter base and low; the mean and modest mind, mean and moderate matters after the rate” (234). In the following chapter, “Of the high, low, and mean subject,” he tries again to fix the definition of style by reattaching it to the externality of subject matter; but the psychological basis of the synthetic of style has undermined the principle of decorum upon which he everywhere depends in his treatise: “if a writer will seem to observe no decorum at all, nor pass how he fashion his tale to his matter, who doubteth that he may in the lightest cause speak like a pope, and in the gravest matters prate like a parrot” (236). Despite Puttenham’s assertion of decorum, which is a matter of making the right choice of level, the concept has moved beyond this prescriptive framework. Style is no longer defined by a deliberate choice between rhetorical levels or *genera dicendi*, but emerges out of the psyche or character of the individual.

The question of stylistic choice was crucial in the dissemination of the plain style, to which we may now return, armed with our distinction between two conceptualizations of style. It would seem that the concept of the plain style sits comfortably within the analytic system of levels of style; but I have said that it also circulates as an internal critique of the rhetorical system. The plain style in the seventeenth century, I would argue, is both belated and a kind of “vanishing mediator” of change.35 As we have seen, the plain style expressed a desire to move discourse beyond ideological dispute, the kind of dispute that resulted in the wars of religion. This desire, like so many desires, is fantasmatic; it is nothing other than the desire for no style at all, as Sprat tells us, a “mathematical plainness.” If Sprat’s version of the plain style has a privileged relation to natural philosophy, it nonetheless resonates with plain style polemics on preaching, and potentially other kinds of discourse as well. Arguably the plain style is a condition for Wilkins’s scheme in his *Real Character*, which expresses the desire for perfect and unambiguous communication in all fields of discourse. All language would consist of nothing but report, nothing but news, nothing but the words of Mercury, without
embellishment: “The King ... is dead.” But I want to understand this fantasy of perfect communication in relation to the long history of rhetoric.

If the plain style is fitted to just one of the three offices of rhetoric—the instructive—this correlation will give us a clue as to how to proceed. The instructive function is associated with particular genres, including the essay, the treatise, and the sermon. The plain style is obviously suited to the first two genres, but the sermon, as a genre, is scarcely exhausted by the instructive function. Sermons were the most important social site for the practice of oratory in the seventeenth century and might be expected to draw upon the full range of rhetorical strategies, including all three levels of style. Yet plain style advocates such as Joseph Glanvill typically excluded the middle and grand styles from sermons, even for the aim of persuasion. As Glanvill writes in his Essay Concerning Preaching: “Plainness is for ever the best eloquence, and ‘tis the most forcible.” The word “forcible” is in context a technical term, the equivalent of the Latin movere. This kind of statement envisions a plain style that overrides or synthesizes even generic difference, reducing all such differences to the pure function of instruction or communication. The fellows of the Royal Society might indeed have seen their experimental discourse as modeling all communication, even sermons, but this was manifestly a fantasy. The plain style goes beyond even this fantasy, however, in its role as vanishing mediator; it is a style that attempts to synthesize at the highest level of abstraction, at the level of prose itself. This urge to synthesize, though it would not succeed in its ultimate aspiration of reducing all styles to one, did succeed in liberating the concept of style from the analytic system of rhetoric, and prose itself from its immemorial subordination to that system. The Royal Society’s program of language reform is not the cause of this displacement, but the recognition of it—or rather, the misrecognition of it in the guise of the plain style.

By the end of the century, William Wotton can look upon the dominance of the plain style as an accomplished fact:

The humour of the Age which we live in is exceedingly altered. Men apprehend or suspect a Trick in every Thing that is said to move the Passions of the Auditory in Courts of Judicature or in the Parliament-House. They think themselves affronted when such Methods are used in Speaking, as if the Orator could suppose within himself that they were to be catched by such Baits. ... Even in the Pulpit, the Pomp of Rhetorick is not always commended; and very few meet with Applause who do not confine themselves to speak with the Severity of a Philosopher as well as with the Splendour of an Orator,—two Things not always consistent. What a Difference in the Way of Thinking must this needs create in the World!

Wotton marvels at the change, which he knows is connected somehow with the cultural position of rhetoric; and he knows this because a new style has encroached upon even the traditional sites of rhetorical practice, the forensic
(the courts), and the deliberative (the Parliament), as well as the sacred oratory of the pulpit. If this change was so striking and universal, it seems all the more unlikely that it was brought about by the Royal Society alone.

Yet it is not surprising that historians of literature such as Jones found the Royal Society’s program of linguistic reform to be the likeliest explanation for the change in prose style of the later seventeenth century. Moreover, Jones and his followers could point to an extraordinary example in support of their argument: Joseph Glanvill’s revisions of his writing to bring it into conformity with the Royal Society’s program. Glanvill’s enthusiasm for the new science was expressed first publicly in a treatise of 1661, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, which was composed in a style very close to that of Thomas Browne, and which earned him Henry Oldenburg’s dismissal as a “florid writer.” But when Glanvill understood that this style was incompatible with the society’s program of language reform, he set out to revise his treatise, calling the first revision *Scepsis Scientifica* (1664), and a second, much briefer essay version, “Against Confidence in Philosophy” (1676). Glanvill’s revisions were examined by Jones in his essays on science and prose style, and he finds in them the supreme confirmation of his thesis. Robert Adolph, who follows Jones in many respects, departs from him in his study *The Rise of Modern Prose Style*, rejecting the Royal Society and even the New Science as the prime movers of change in prose style, granting this role instead to a pervasive new utilitarian attitude. He sees the Royal Society’s language reform as only another symptom of this attitude, as he does also Glanvill’s revisions. The Baconian ideal of utility was of great consequence culturally, and certainly underlay many of the claims made by the Royal Society and the new experimenters; but it is nonetheless difficult to see how this ideal was expressed in particular aspects of diction and syntax. And as to utility, the aims of pleasure and persuasion—the offices of the middle and grand styles—can just as easily be defended for their utility as the “instruction” of the plain style.

Setting aside the singularity of Glanvill’s case, as someone seeking the approval of the Royal Society, the meaning of Glanvill’s revisions lies somewhere other than Jones and his followers thought. Brian Vickers and Paul Arakelian have shown that Glanvill’s prose scarcely changed at all syntactically from the first treatise to the third. What Glanvill’s revisions do attest is what he thought was enjoined by the society’s reform program, specifically changes in diction and in the use of tropes. In his “Address to the Royal Society” prefacing *Scepsis Scientifica*, Glanvill informs his readers that his earlier “way of writing” is “less agreeable to my present relish and Genius; which is more gratified with manly sense, flowing in a natural and unaffected Eloquence, then in the musick and curiosity of fine Metaphors and dancing periods.” The language of this denial tells us that Glanvill can no more than Sprat avoid the trap of performative contradiction. But he gamely tries in *Scepsis Scientifica*
and then again in “Against Confidence in Philosophy” to “reduce the style” of his writing. In lieu of an extensive comparison of passages, which has been undertaken by others, I offer one example of Glanvill’s revision, discussed by Jones, a sentence from The Vanity of Dogmatizing:

And thus, while every age is but another shew of the former; ’tis no wonder, that Science hath not out-grown the dwarfishness of its **pristine stature**, and that the Intellectual world is such a Microcosm. (138)

And the revision of this sentence, from “Against Confidence in Philosophy”:

And thus while every Age is but the other shew of the former; ’tis no wonder that humane science is no more advanced above it’s ancient stature. (25)

Jones sees this kind of revision as indisputable evidence of the effect of the Royal Society and the New Science on prose. But why exactly did Glanvill think the revised sentence was plainer, as clearly he did? The revisions consist only in his having removed the metaphoric and periphrastic expressions in the sentence: “dwarfishness,” “pristine stature,” “Intellectual world,” “Microcosm.” Although the revised sentence is shorter, that is almost the accidental result of removing the periphrastic language, here as elsewhere in his revisions. When the plain style becomes a deliberate program, then, it entails nothing other than subtracting ornamental elements from prose. It is as though the reform took the copious text as a kind of original state, which is subsequently “reduced” to plainness, a procedure that reverses the ordinary sequence of composition. The subtraction of ornament might conceivably go all the way to “bare speech,” a zero degree of ornament, a condition that was always implicit in the very idea of prose, or rather, as we saw, in the paradox of prose. But Glanvill need not go so far in order to make our point for us, that the plain style is a purely conceptual entity, like the physicist’s frictionless surface. Such a surface does not exist in the real world, but it serves a useful purpose in mathematical representations of physical surfaces. The plain style is best understood as the projection of such an impossible surface, bare and even, not the natural state of prose but its condition after the hypothetical removal of all traces of style. The plain style is a device, then, for discovering prose, for getting at its nature by imaginarily removing everything that might disturb its smooth and featureless surface. Today we would call this imaginary surface of prose a medium, like the stone before the sculptor begins to carve. Wilkins, Sprat, and Glanvill did not have a concept of prose as medium, but they misrecognized this medium in the motif of the plain style, an imaginary zero degree of style. The impossibility of that style ensured its ephemerality, its vanishing as a supposedly prescriptive principle of composition. It would be a mistake, for that reason, to identify the plain style with modern prose. It is rather the annunciator of prose itself.43
The development of prose style moves in new directions in the eighteenth century, reorienting written discourse around notions of “correctness” and “politeness.” We might want to see this new prose as a kind of *genus medium*, neither plain nor grand. But if this style seems to point in the direction of Joseph Addison’s *Spectator*, as it has for a certain received literary history, its regulatory power is nonetheless limited. No more than the plain style does it determine prose composition in modernity, or we would have no Samuel Johnson, no Thomas Carlyle, no Walter Pater, no Virginia Woolf or James Joyce. Again, theoretical or normative concepts slide over practice, which has its own less visible motors.

Before letting our plain style mediator vanish entirely, it is worth returning to one other phrase from Sprat’s famous sentences in his *History*, when he tells us that the Royal Society’s discourse is closer to the language of “Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, than Wits or Scholars.” This was a clever rhetorical ploy, at a moment when the mercantile interests of England as much as religious factions were driving the political agenda (the 1660s brought war with the Dutch, otherwise England’s religious ally). Sprat’s nod to merchants and the middling sort betrays the fate of the mediatory plain style, as the association of prose with artisans and merchants would not survive the emergence of the norm of politeness, a concept that oriented prose to the manners of the aristocracy. The analogy of prose style with occupational types, or social class, is intriguing, if unreliable. We know that the members of the Royal Society did not *speak* like artisans and merchants. By and large, they were gentlemen. What did Sprat mean, then?

In another work, “An Account of the Life of Mr. Abraham Cowley,” Sprat offers a comment on the relation of prose to social discourse, with perhaps a clearer sense of their connection. At this moment in his account of Cowley’s life, we find Sprat praising Cowley’s Pindaric poems, first for their effects of generic variety (the odes are variously amorous, heroic, philosophical, and so forth), and then for their extreme variation in meter and rhyme: “Besides this [diversity of genre] they will find, that the frequent alteration of the Rhythm and Feet, affects the mind with a more various delight, while it is soon apt to be tyr’d by the settled pace of any one constant measure.” For Sprat, this “alteration” of meter brings Cowley’s verse very near to prose:

But that for which I think this inequality of number is chiefly to be preferr’d, is its near affinity with Prose: From which all other kinds of English Verse are so far distant, that it is very seldom found that the same Man excels in both ways. But now this loose, and unconfin’d measure has all the Grace, and Harmony of the most confin’d. And withal, it is so large and free, that the practice of it will only exalt, not corrupt our Prose: which is certainly the most useful kind of Writing of all others: for it is the style of all business and conversation.
Sprat’s equation of Cowley’s “variety” effect with that of prose is far-fetched, but it suggests that poetry and prose are already developing in tandem, defining each other by opposition. Dryden makes a similar kind of argument, with a different critical agenda, when he dismisses blank verse in his “Of Dramatic Poesy: An Essay” as “properly but measured prose.” This notion might be puzzling to us now, but it is a transitional formulation; soon it will be impossible to think of either poetry or prose without thinking of them antithetically. Prose will no longer be all speech that is not poetry, but a rich discourse of its own, capable even here, at the moment of its first steps, of lending its innocent luster to Cowley’s hoary exercise in classical imitation.

Sprat seems to intuit this potentiality when he says that Cowley’s odes should “perhaps be thought rather a new sort of Writing, than a restoring of an Ancient” (“An Account,” xxvi). This new writing is really nothing other than an idea of prose as the “style of all business and conversation.” If Cowley’s Pindaric odes are close to prose, this new sort of writing is close to conversation, but of a particular sort. This conversation is “useful,” conversation in which business gets done. The important point is that it is not oratory. It does not have an “oral residue” so much as it is modeled from the start on a certain idealization of conversation, a speech that declines the rhetorical voice for other kinds of communicative virtues. The value expressed in this ideal of conversation is doubtless utilitarian, but I do not believe it can be reduced to utilitarianism. Utility does not create prose; rather, prose creates utility, new “ways of speaking,” of doing things with words. The proximate movers here are more generic than ideological, a rearrangement of the genre system to accommodate the explosion of composition in the forms of treatise and essay, and to bring these forms closer to conversation than to oratory. Sprat goes on to praise especially Cowley’s letters, adding the familiar letter to the genres in which this new kind of writing appears: “But they [letters] should have a Native clearness and shortness, a Domestical plainness. . . . And accordingly you may observe, that in the Prose of them, there is little Curiosity of Ornament, but they are written in a lower and humbler style than the rest” (xxxi). We are a long way here from the rhetorical manuals of the Renaissance, which so often used the letter to exemplify the techniques of copia. The familiar letter has somehow mutated for Sprat into a genre of “Domestical plainness.” If Sprat still depends on the language of the old rhetorical system, echoing the genus humile with his “humbler style,” he is at the same time moving steadily away from that system. As tempting as it may be to impute to a notional utilitarianism the power to transform prose, this transformation is in my view too complex to be caused by a single idea, or reduced to the interest of a single group, such as the Royal Society, or a single class, such as merchants and artisans. These mutations of writing, I would argue, are mediated by a prime mover as yet
hidden by the very complexity of its mediations. We can say, however, that in plain style advocacy the medial possibilities of prose began to be recognized, and that the condition of this recognition was a reorientation of the genre system in favor of discursive forms such as the essay and the treatise. But even this new hierarchy of genres was only temporarily privileged in the seventeenth century. The recognition of prose as a medium hints at much more, the possibility of new genres, novel kinds of writing. Sprat’s comments on Cowley may have had little effect on how anyone actually composed works in prose, but his speculation projects a future for prose in which bare speech is liberated from the system of rhetoric and becomes instead a plastic medium, full of possibility.

Notes


10. K. G. Hamilton, in *The Two Harmonies*, traces the widening rhetorical difference between poetry and prose in the seventeenth century. By contrast, the sixteenth century was marked by the “relatively close relationship of poetry with oratorical prose” (42). Hamilton is close here to Ong’s argument in “Oral Residue in Tudor Prose Style.”
11. The paths to standardization will be different for different languages. For a sampling of positions in the case of English, see Laura Wright, ed., *The Development of Standard English, 1300–1800: Theories, Descriptions, Conflicts* (Cambridge, 2000).
12. For a comment on this question, see Nina Nørgaard, Beatrix Busse, and Rocío Montoro, *Key Terms in Stylistics* (London, 2010), 28–29.
17. See Jackson I. Cope, introduction to Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society*, ed. Jackson I. Cope and Harold Whitmore Jones (St. Louis, 1958), xxvii: “May not Sprat have felt that if men habituate themselves to the plain, unimpassioned style so necessary when they move in the rational world of science, they might carry it from the laboratory into the street?”


22. A good example of the tendency of plain style advocacy to stigmatize rhetoric itself can be found in Robert Boyle’s *Some Considerations Touching the Style of the Holy Scriptures* (London, 1675), in an argument that does not engage directly in polemics against the nonconformists, but defends the plain style of scripture: “So the Scripture, not only is Movinger than the Glitteringest Humane Styles, but hath oftentimes a Potenter Influence on Men in those Passages that seem quite destitute of Ornaments, than in those where Rhetoric is Conspicuous” (246–47).


24. My argument here runs close to Eric Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (Princeton, 1953) in acknowledging the perennial resistance to the system of the levels of style in Western literature. The period I consider, however, falls into a gap in Auerbach’s episodic narrative.

25. Ian Robinson, *The Establishment of Modern English Prose in the Reformation and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1998). Robinson’s argument for the importance of Thomas Cranmer is based on an analysis mainly of Cranmer’s liturgical works, which for Robinson capture the rhythms of English in sentences that are punctuated in recognizably modern fashion, that is, grammatically rather than rhetorically. This gives Robinson his perspective on the later debate concerning seventeenth-century prose style: “So the well-formed sentence was developed in English not as a result of the activities of the Royal Society, to purify the language and make it fit for science, but to approach God” (103).


27. I emphasize the high prestige of classical languages in order to avoid the “Whig” interpretation of vernacularization criticized by Peter Burke in *Language Communities in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2004), 61–71.

28. The process of vernacularization never ends and is perpetuated in the institutions of standardization long after Latin has ceased to dominate the school system. For moderns, Latin is a ghostly substructure of grammar and vocabulary. On these aftereffects, see Françoise Waquet, *Latin, or the Empire of a Sign*, trans. John Howe (London, 2001).

29. The other “parts” of rhetoric were *inventio*, the finding of arguments; *dispositio*, the arranging of arguments; *memoria*, memorization of the speech; and *actio*, delivery of the speech. Of these, only *actio*, which will be discussed in what follows, has further relevance for my argument.


35. For the concept of the vanishing mediator, see Fredric Jameson, “The Vanishing Mediator; or, Max Weber as Storyteller,” in *The Ideologies of Theory* (Minneapolis, 1988), 2:3–34.


41. Joseph Glanvill, “Address to the Royal Society” [1664], preface to *Scepsis Scientifica*, in *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, c4. Subsequent references in the text to *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* and “Against Confidence in Philosophy” are to this facsimile edition.

42. See Kittay and Godzich, *The Emergence of Prose*, 197.

43. Yet the misrecognition of prose in the motif of the plain style persists and is a condition for later analyses such as that of Northrop Frye, who asserts as a given in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), 167, that “prose is by itself a transparent medium.”

44. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Corte Madera, CA, 2003), 277, sees Joseph Addison and Richard Steele’s *Tatler* and *Spectator* papers as the first prose fully adequate to the medium of print by virtue of the “technique of equitone. It consisted in maintaining a single level of tone and attitude to the reader throughout the entire composition.”


47. For Marshall McLuhan, not surprisingly, this prime mover is none other than the print medium. See “The Effect of the Printed Book on Language in the 16th Century,” first published in *Explorations* 7 (1957); reprinted in *Marshall McLuhan Unbound*, ed. Terrence Gordon (Berkeley, 2005), 11: “Not until the later 17th century did it become apparent that print called for a stylistic revolution. The speeding eye of the new reader favoured, not shifting tones, but steadily maintained tone, page by page, throughout the volume.” McLuhan’s predicate, “called for,” raises many questions of causality, along with the puzzle of the lag between the introduction of the printing press and the new prose style. Nonetheless, McLuhan is signposting a road for further inquiry.