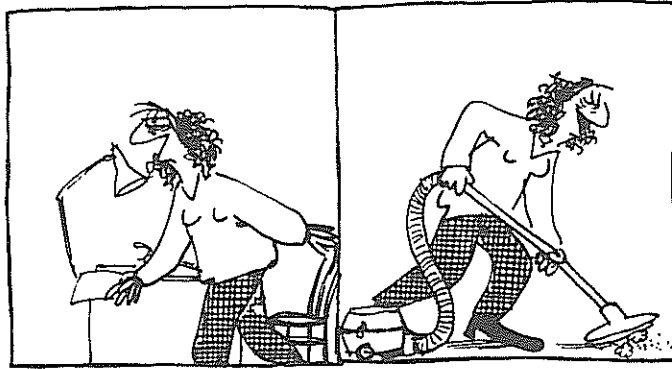


TWO



Persona and Authority

Rosanna Hertz, now a colleague but then a very advanced student, came into my office one day and said she'd like to talk to me about a chapter of her thesis-in-progress, which I had edited for her. She said, in a careful tone which I supposed hid a certain amount of irritation, that she agreed that the writing was improved—shorter, clearer, on the whole much better. But, she said, she didn't quite understand the principles that governed what I had done. Could I go over the document with her and explain them? I told her that I wasn't sure what principles governed my editorial judgment, that I really edited by ear (I'll explain that expression, which does not mean that there are no rules at all, in Chapter 4). But I agreed to do my best. I wondered whether I actually did follow any general principles of editing and thought that, if I did, I might discover them by trying to explain them to her.

Rosanna brought her chapter in a few days later. I had rewritten it extensively, cutting a lot of words but, I hoped, not losing any of her thought. It was a very good piece of work—rich data, imaginatively analyzed, well-organized—but it was very wordy and academic. I had removed as much of the redundancy and academic flourish as I thought she would stand for. We went over it, a page at a time, and she quizzed me on each point. None of my changes involved technical sociological terms. Where she wrote “unified stance” I substituted “agreement,” because it was shorter. I replaced “confronted the issue” with “talked about,” because it was less pretentious. A longer example: where she wrote “This chapter will examine the impact of money or, more specifically, independent incomes on relations between husbands and wives with particular regard to the realm of financial affairs,” I substituted “This chapter will show that independent incomes change the way husbands and wives handle financial affairs,” for similar reasons. I removed meaningless qualifications (“tends to”), combined sentences that repeated long phrases, and when she said the same thing in two ways in successive sentences, took out the less effective version, explaining what I was doing and why as I went along.

She agreed with each of my ad hoc explanations, but we weren't discovering any general principles. I asked her to take over and work on a page of text I hadn't done anything to. We went over a few lines and then came to a sentence which said that the people she was studying “could afford not to have to be concerned with” certain things. I asked how she thought she could change that. She looked and looked at the sentence and finally said that she couldn't see any way to improve that phrasing. I finally asked if she could just say that they “needn't worry” about those things.

She thought about it, set her jaw, and decided that this was the place to make her stand. “Well, yes, that is shorter, and it certainly is clearer. . . .” The thought

hung unfinished as blatantly as if she had spoken the four dots aloud. After a prolonged and momentous silence, I said, "But what?" "Well," she said, "the other way is *classier*."

My intuition told me the word was important. I said that she could repay all the favors she owed me by writing five pages explaining exactly what she meant when she said "*classier*." She looked embarrassed—it's obvious now that I was taking unfair advantage both of friendship and professorial authority—and said she would. I couldn't blame her for making me wait a couple of months for those pages. She told me later that it was the hardest thing she had ever had to write because she knew she had to tell the truth.

I am going to quote from her letter at length. But this is not just a matter of one author's character and language. "*Classier*" was an important clue precisely because Rosanna was saying out loud what many students and professionals in the scholarly disciplines believed and felt but, less courageous, were less willing to admit. They had hinted at what she finally wrote and the hints convinced me her attitude was widespread.

The letter I got was four double-spaced pages, and I won't quote all of it or quote it in sequence because Rosanna was thinking out loud when she wrote it and the order is not crucial. She began by remarking,

Somewhere along the line, probably in college, I picked up on the fact that articulate people used big words, which impressed me. I remember taking two classes from a philosophy professor simply because I figured he must be really smart since I didn't know the meaning of the words he used in class. My notes from these classes are almost non-existent. I spent class time writing down the words he used that I didn't know, going home and looking them up. He sounded so smart to me simply because I didn't understand him. . . . The way someone writes—the more difficult the writing style—the more intellectual they sound.

It is no accident, as they say, that she learned to think this way in college. The excerpt expresses the perspective of a subordinate in a highly stratified organization. Colleges and universities, pretending to be communities of intellectuals who discuss matters of common interest freely and disinterestedly, are no such thing. Professors know more, have the degrees to prove it, test students and grade their papers, and in every imaginable way sit on top of the heap while students stand at the bottom. Some resent the inequality, but intelligent students who hope to be intellectuals themselves accept it wholeheartedly. They believe, like Rosanna, that the professors who teach them know more and should be imitated, whether what they do makes sense or not. The principle of hierarchy assures them that they are wrong and the teacher right. They grant the same privileges to authors:

When I read something and I don't know immediately what it means, I always give the author the benefit of the doubt. I assume this is a smart person and the problem with my not understanding the ideas is that I'm not as smart. I don't assume either that the emperor has no clothes or that the author is not clear because of their own confusion about what they have to say. I always assume that it is my inability to understand or that there is something more going on than I'm capable of understanding. . . . I assume if it got into the *AJS* [American Journal of Sociology], for example, chances are it's good and it's important and if I don't understand it that's my problem since the journal has already legitimated it.

She makes a further point, which other people mentioned as well. (Sociologists will recognize it as a specific instance of the general problem of socialization into professional worlds, as discussed, for example, in Becker and Carper 1956a and 1956b.) Graduate students learning to be academics know that they are not

real intellectuals yet—just as medical students know they are not yet real doctors—and search eagerly for signs of progress. The arcane vocabulary and syntax of stereotypical academic prose clearly distinguish lay people from professional intellectuals, just as the ability of professional ballet dancers to stand on their toes distinguishes them from ordinary folks. Learning to write like an academic moves students toward membership in that elite:

While I personally find scholarly writing boring and prefer to spend my time reading novels, academic elitism is a part of every graduate student's socialization. I mean that academic writing is not English but written in a shorthand that only members of the profession can decipher. . . . I think it is a way to . . . maintain group boundaries of elitism. . . . Ideas are supposed to be written in such a fashion that they are difficult for untrained people to understand. This is scholarly writing. And if you want to be a scholar you need to learn to reproduce this way of writing.

(This is as good a place as any to note that, in writing the excerpts I have been quoting, Rosanna deliberately adopted a point of view she has since abandoned. When I asked her, she said that she no longer thinks that writing style has anything to do with intelligence or the complexity of ideas.)

She gave some examples of "classy" writing she had caught herself at, with explanations of why she found these locutions attractive:

Instead of choosing to write "he lives at" I prefer "he resides at." Instead of saying "Couples spend their extra money" (or "additional money" or even "disposable income") I'd choose "surplus income." It sounds more grown-up. Here's a favorite of mine: "predicated upon the availability of" is classier than saying "exists because of" [or,

for that matter, "depends on"]. Maybe it sounds more awesome. Here's another one. I could say "domestic help" but what I choose to do is say "third party labor." The first time I use it I put a "that is" after the phrase and explain it. Then I am at liberty to use "third party labor" throughout, and it sounds fancier. I think the point here is that I am looking for a writing style that makes me sound smart.

None of these classy locutions mean anything different from the simpler ones they replace. They work ceremonially, not semantically.

Writing in a classy way to sound smart means writing to sound like, maybe even be, a certain kind of person. Sociologists, and other scholars, do that because they think (or hope) that being the right kind of person will persuade others to accept what they say as a persuasive social science argument. C. Wright Mills said that the

lack of ready intelligibility [in scholarly writing], I believe, usually has little or nothing to do with the complexity of the subject matter, and nothing at all with profundity of thought. It has to do almost entirely with certain confusions of the academic writer about his own status. . . . In large part sociological habits of style stem from the time when sociologists had little status even with other academic men. Desire for status is one reason why academic men slip so easily into unintelligibility. . . . To overcome the academic prose you have first to overcome the academic pose. (Mills 1959, 218–19, emphasis in the original.)

Living as an intellectual or academic makes people want to appear smart, in the sense of clever or intelligent, to themselves and others. But not only smart. They also want to appear knowledgeable or worldly or sophisticated or down-home or professional—all sorts

of things, many of which they can hint at in the details of their writing. They hope that being taken for such a person will make what they say believable. We can explore what people mean when they talk or think about writing in a "classy" way, or in any other way, through the idea of a *persona* (Campbell 1975), if I can be forgiven that classy term. Although writers display their *personae* through the devices of style, I will not discuss style at length. Strunk and White (1959) and Williams (1981) analyze style and show writers how to use its elements effectively, and readers should pursue the subject there. (Earlier readers of this manuscript added Bernstein 1965; Follet 1966; Fowler 1965; and Shaw 1975 as useful guides to stylistic problems.) I want to emphasize how writers use *personae* to try get readers to accept their arguments.

Just as a Briton's accent tells listeners the speaker's class, a scholar's prose tells readers what kind of person is doing the writing. Many sociologists and other scholars, both students and professionals, want to be "classy" people, the kind of people who talk and write *that way*. Writing classy prose, they try to be or at least create the appearance of being classy.

But what is a classy person, to a young or even middle-aged scholar? My guesses about the content of these fantasies may be wrong. In fact, fantasies of classiness must vary considerably, so no one characterization will do justice to all of them. I imagine it this way: a classy person, to a young professorial type, wears a tweed jacket with leather patches at the elbow, smokes a pipe (the men, anyway), and sits around the senior common room swilling port and discussing the latest issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* or the *New York Review of Books* with a bunch of similar people. Mind you, I don't mean that the people who have these fantasies really want to be like that. The stylish young woman whose remark provoked this meditation wouldn't be caught dead in such an outfit.

But they want to talk like such a person. Perhaps not that person exactly, but the image gives the flavor.

Whether or not some young academics and academics-in-training want to be classy, the possibility reminds us that everyone writes as someone, affects a character, adopts a *persona* who does the talking for them. Literary analysts know that, but seldom examine its implications for academic writing. Academics favor a few classic *personae* whose traits color academic prose, shape academic arguments, and make the resulting writing more or less persuasive to various audiences. Those *personae* inhabit a world of scholars, researchers, and intellectuals in which it is useful or comfortable to be one or another of these people.

The academic-intellectual world has an ambiguous and uneasy relation to the ordinary world, and many academics worry about their own relation to ordinary people. Do we really differ from them enough to warrant the privileged lives we feel entitled to and often actually lead? When we claim to be thinking hard about something, although visibly just loafing in a chair, should other people let us do that? Why should we have months off from regular work "just to think?" And, especially, should anyone pay any attention to what we think? Why? The *persona* we adopt when we write tells readers (and by extension all the potential skeptics) who we are and why we should be believed, and that answers all the other questions.

Some *personae* authors adopt—general human types—deal with the problem of the relations between intellectuals and laypeople directly. Many *personae* emphasize the differences between us and them—our superiority in important areas—that justify our lives and show why everyone should believe us. When we present ourselves as classy, we want to see ourselves and have others see us as worldly, sophisticated, "smart" in both commonsense meanings. (Becoming an intellectual has helped enough people move up in the class system that it would be silly to ignore that

meaning of "classy.") If we write in a classy way, then, we show that we are generally smarter than ordinary people, have finer sensibilities, understand things they don't, and thus should be believed.

This persona is the one that leads us to use the fancy language, big words for little ones, esoteric words for commonplace ones, and elaborate sentences making subtle distinctions that Rosanna used to find so compelling. Our language strives for the elegance we would like to embody and feel.

Other writers adopt personae which emphasize their esoteric expertise. They like to appear knowledgeable, to be the kind of person who knows "inside stuff" ordinary folks will have to wait to read about in next week's newspaper. Most specialists in matters that concern lay people in some way—labor relations, domestic politics, or perhaps some country which gets itself into the news—love to let people in on what only they know. "Inside dopesters," as David Riesman called them, let readers know who they are by a wealth of detail, mostly unexplained. They write as though their audience consisted of people who knew almost as much about it, or at least about its background—whatever it is—as they do. They mention dates, names, and places only a specialist will recognize, and don't explain. The barrage of detailed knowledge overwhelms readers, who feel compelled to accept the author's argument. How could someone who knows all that be wrong? (I have foregone including detailed examples both because they are so easily available and because each field has its own variations, which I hope readers will find and analyze for themselves.)

James Clifford has described the classic anthropological persona, invented (more or less) by Bronislaw Malinowski, which persuades the reader that the argument being made is correct because, after all, the anthropologist was there: "Malinowski gives us the imago of the new 'anthropologist'—squatting by the campfire, looking, listening and questioning, recording

and interpreting Trobriand life. The literary charter of this new authority is the first chapter of *Argonauts [of the Western Pacific]*, with its prominently displayed photographs of the ethnographer's tent pitched among the Kiriwinian dwellings" (Clifford 1983, 123).

Clifford identifies some of the stylistic devices Malinowski used to project the I-was-there persona: sixty-six photographs, a "Chronological List of Kula Events Witnessed by the Writer," and a "constant alternation between impersonal description of typical behavior and statements on the order of 'I witnessed . . . ' and 'Our party, sailing from the North . . . ' " He calls these devices claims to "experiential authority":

based on a "feel" for the foreign context, a kind of accumulated savvy and sense of the style of a people or place. . . . Margaret Mead's claim to grasp the underlying principle or ethos of a culture through a heightened sensitivity to form, tone, gesture, and behavioral styles, or Malinowski's stress on his life in the village and the comprehension derived from the "imponderabilia" of daily existence are cases in point (Clifford 1983, 128).

Sociologists who do fieldwork in the anthropological style use similar devices to display a persona whose claim to authority rests on intimate knowledge. William Foote Whyte's description (1943, 14–25) of bowling with the out-of-work men he studied, known to every sociologist, is a classic example.

I gave samples of classy writing from Rosanna Hertz. It is much harder to give examples of writing that project the authoritative persona. Writing only has that character in relation to an audience. Naming the first president of the Bagel Makers' Union and giving the date of the passage of the Wagner Act will not affect a labor relations expert as it does a less specialized reader. So authoritativeness is not inherent in any piece

of writing. These devices only work on an audience unfamiliar with the area. (But it might be necessary to use the same devices to convince experts that you know what you are talking about. An expert in photographic history once warned me that a paper I had written about photography would be ignored by her colleagues because I had incorrectly spelled Mathew Brady's name with two ts and Georgia O'Keeffe's with one f.)

Many academic personae make authors appear generally authoritative, entitled to the last word on whatever they are talking about. Authors who adopt these personae love to correct lay errors, to tell readers definitively what will happen in some delicate international situation whose outcome we can't imagine, to explain what "we scientists" or "we sociologists" know about things lay people have the wrong idea about.

These authorities speak in imperatives: "We must recognize . . ." "We cannot ignore . . ." They speak impersonally, talk about "one" doing things rather than using the first person. (Some grammarians think that "one" substitutes for the second person and cannot be used in place of the first person. They must never have met authorities like the ones I know.) These authorities use the passive voice to convey how little what they say depends on them personally, how much, rather, it reflects the reality their unique knowledge gives them access to. Latour and Woolgar (1979) show that laboratory scientists habitually use a typical authoritative style which conceals any traces of the ordinary human activity which produced their results. (Gusfield 1981 and Latour and Bastide 1983 explore this problem further and give additional examples.)

Some writers—I favor this persona myself—take a Will Rogers line. We are just plain folks who emphasize our similarity to ordinary people, rather than the differences. We may know a few things others don't, but it's nothing special. "Shucks, you'd of thought the same as me if you'd just been there to see what I seen. It's just

that I had the time or took the trouble to be there, and you didn't or couldn't, but let me tell you about it." Something like that. (In fact, this whole book is an extended example of that persona.)

Such writers want to use their similarity to others, their ordinariness, to persuade readers that what they are saying is right. We write more informally, favor the personal pronoun, and appeal to what we-and-the-reader know in common rather than what we know and the reader doesn't.

Every style, then, is the voice of someone the author wants to be, or be taken for. I haven't explored all the types here, and a proper study would begin with a thorough analysis of the major voices in which academics and intellectuals write. That ambitious study is more than this book needs. (A number of social scientists have begun the job. In addition to Clifford 1983, see Geertz 1983 on anthropology and McCloskey 1983 and McCloskey in an unpublished paper on economics.)

This analysis of personae may suggest that there is something illegitimate about speaking in any of these ways. Clearly, you can use these devices illegitimately, to disguise inadequacies of evidence or argument. But we will often, quite reasonably if not logically, accept an argument in part just because the author clearly knows the field (including presidents of the Bagel Makers' Union) or has a general cultural sophistication we respect. The author can't be nobody, so every author will necessarily be somebody. It might as well be someone readers respect and believe.

The list of available personae varies among academic disciplines, because one source of personae is famous teachers or characters in a field. Admiring their teachers, students imitate not only their personal mannerisms, but also the way they write, especially when that style projects a distinctive personality. Thus, many philosophers adopted the diffident, tentative, arrogant persona and the worrying, conversational prose style of

Ludwig Wittgenstein, just as many sociologists who took up ethnomethodology decorated their papers with the endless lists and qualifications of its founder, Harold Garfinkel.

Imitating teachers is the specific form of a general tendency to indicate theoretical and political allegiances by the way one writes. Scholars worry a lot about which "school" they belong to, with good reason, for many fields, highly factionalized, reward and punish people by the allegiances they display. Disciplines seldom do that as rigorously or ruthlessly as authors think, but nervous scholars do not wholly imagine the dangers. You can easily demonstrate your allegiances by using a school's code words, which differ from the words adherents of other schools use, in part, because the theories they belong to in fact give them a slightly different meaning. Most sociological theories rely, for instance, on the idea that people remake society continuously by doing, day in and day out, the things that reaffirm that that is the way things are done. You might say that people create society by acting as though it existed. You might say, if you were a Marxist theorist, that people reproduce social relations through daily practice. If you were a symbolic interactionist, or an adherent of Berger and Luckmann, you might speak of the social construction of reality.

These are not just different words. They express different thoughts. Still, not that different. Code words don't always contain a core of unique meaning, but we still want to use them rather than some other words that might lead people to think that we belong, or would like to belong, to some other school. The allegiance-signalling purpose of stylistic devices is clearest when the author says things that conflict with the theory the language signals, when the desire to say "I am a functionalist" or "I am a Marxist" overcomes the desire to say what you mean. (Stinchcombe elaborates this idea in an article cited and discussed in Chapter 8.)

John Walton, reading an earlier version of this material and thinking over his experience teaching a seminar something like mine, points out that often

People want very much to show their theoretical colors, to signal to the hip reader (professor or editor) that they are on the right side of a controversial issue. I see that most with writing that wants to communicate sophistication in Marxism without appearing as orthodoxy or susceptible to being branded as such. A term like "social formation" dropped in the right place says what you want to other sophisticates, without carrying much risk.

Walton puts an important point into that parenthesis—that we want to signal somebody in particular, not an abstraction. Whom we want to signal depends on the arena we are operating in, and arenas are often more local than scholarly writers realize, particularly for students. The sociologists and other professors I see in Chicago have different worries and make different criticisms than those Walton sees in Davis, California, and we both have larger professional audiences which differ as well.

Remember that academic writers take on many allegiances to schools and political positions while still in graduate school. That accounts for another major source of stylistic problems. When I argued with students about how they wrote—when I suggested to Rosanna that she write in a way she thought not classy—they told me that I was wrong because that was the way sociologists wrote. I spent a lot of time arguing about that before I saw their point.

The point is professionalization. Academics-in-training worry about whether they are yet, can ever be, or even want to be professional intellectuals of the kind they are changing themselves into. Second or third or fourth year graduate students have not taken

binding vows. They may have second thoughts. Nor have they been finally chosen. They might flunk out. Their committee might turn their theses down. Who knows what might happen?

That uncertainty creates another reason (beyond those discussed earlier) for magical thinking and practice. If you act as though you already were a sociologist, you might fool everyone into accepting you as one, and even take it seriously yourself. Writing is one of the few ways a graduate student can act like a professional. Just as medical students can only do a few of things real doctors routinely do, graduate students do not become professionals until they get their Ph.D. degrees. Until then, they can teach as graduate assistants and work on other people's projects, but will not be taken as seriously as people with degrees. At least, they think that's true, and they are mostly right, so they adopt what they see around them, the style professional journal articles and books are written in, as an appropriate signal of their guild membership.

What kind of writing will do that for them? Not writing plain English prose. Anyone can do that. Students share the attitudes of many art audiences toward "ordinary" modes of expression:

Artistic innovators frequently try to avoid what they regard as the excessive formalism, sterility, and hermeticism of their medium by exploiting the actions and objects of everyday life. Choreographers like Paul Taylor and Brenda Way use running, jumping, and falling down as conventionalized dance movements, instead of the more formal movements of classical ballet, or even of traditional modern dance. . . . [But] less involved audiences look precisely for the conventional formal elements the innovators replace to distinguish art from nonart. They do not go to the ballet to see people run, jump, and fall down; they can see that anywhere. They go instead to see people do the difficult and esoteric formal movements

that signify "real dancing." The ability to see ordinary material as art material—to see that the running, jumping, and falling down are not just that, but are the elements of a different language of the medium—thus distinguishes serious audience members from the well-socialized member of the culture, the irony being that these materials are perfectly well known to the latter, although not as art materials (Becker 1982a, 49–50).

Students are like that. They know plain English but don't want to use it to express their hard-earned knowledge. Remember the student who said, "Gee, Howie, if you say it that way it sounds like something anyone could say." If you want to convince yourself that the time and effort spent getting your degree are worth it, that you are changing in some way that will change your life, then you want to look different from everyone else, not the same. That accounts for a truly crazy cycle in which students repeat the worst stylistic excesses the journals contain, learn that those very excesses are what makes their work different from what every damn fool knows and says, write more articles like those they learned from, submit them to journals whose editors publish them because nothing better is available (and because academic journals cannot afford expensive copy editing) and thus provide the raw material for another generation to learn bad habits from.

I thought the idea that "they" made you write that way was only student paranoia. When I published chapter 1 in *The Sociological Quarterly*, the editors received a letter which made some of the same points:

We suggest that a new voice, an "unknown" in the field today has to earn the "respect" of the profession through a compilation of notable research and traditional writing before s/he receives the license to adopt the direct, uncluttered style advocated by Becker. Some journal editors may be "licensed" to use this style, and thus receptive to

it, by the time they achieve editorial positions; however, the receptiveness of editors may be a moot point since most journals are refereed. Perhaps some referees are receptive to this writing style, but perhaps most are not. Articles that are verbose, pretentious, and dull still abound in sociology. . . . We question the wisdom of advising students and faculty just entering the world of "publish or perish" to abandon the ponderous, rigid style of the discipline. . . . Currently, and in the probable future, graduate students . . . will "learn" to write by reading what is written. They generally find dull, verbose, pretentious writing, perpetuating the problem and suggesting that most referees expect such a stilted style (Hummel and Foster 1984, 429-31 [my emphasis]).

Three



One Right Way

Scholarly writers have to organize their material, express an argument clearly enough that readers can follow the reasoning and accept the conclusions. They make this job harder than it need be when they think that there is only One Right Way to do it, that each paper they write has a preordained structure they must find. They simplify their work, on the other hand, when they recognize that there are many effective ways to say something and that their job is only to choose one and execute it so that readers will know what they are doing.

I have a lot of trouble with students (and not just students) when I go over their papers and suggest revisions. They get tongue-tied and act ashamed and upset when I say that this is a good start, all you have to do is this, that, and the other and it will be in good shape. Why do they think there is something wrong with changing what they have written? Why are they so leery of rewriting?