Stylized

A Slightly Obsessive History of Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style*

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The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world
is to see something and tell what it saw in a plain way. . . .
To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion all in one.

—JOHN RUSKIN

Oh! Blessed rage for order . . .

—WALLACE STEVENS

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INTRODUCTION

Credo

I hate the guts of English grammar.

—E. B. WHITE

Cards on the table: I love *The Elements of Style.* I love the idea of it; I love its execution. I love the book's history, and I love its attitude. I love the fact that it makes some people nuts. I love its trim size. I love the trade dress of the 1979 third edition: The authors' last names fill the top half of the honey-mustard cover in a stocky, crimson, sans serif typeface—as late seventies as Huggy Bear's hat—with the title itself rendered in thinner, mostly serifed type, black, in the bottom half. And in the bottom right corner, reversed out white inside a black triangle is this come-on: "With Index." Nice.

Over the years, I have collected multiple copies of *The Elements of Style,* though without much in the way of method or even, really, intent. I am apparently unable to pass up nicely preserved editions in used-book stores; it's the same sort of trouble some people face when confronted with a heretofore unseen edition of Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium* or a cache of Wodehouse

novels—or, for others, an unopened six-pack of Billy beer. The copy of *Elements* in my house that has seen the most action is a paperback third edition from my college years. Its yellowed pages are edged with my own marginalia, scribbled in the heat of new revelation, no doubt, but so old and so sloppily written that it's mostly indecipherable now.

My rarest copy is a 1959 first edition, first printing, in great condition, including a perfectly intact dust jacket (thin, elegant black and white serifed type over a background color that a kitchen-appliance manufacturer might call Harvest Gold), that I found on a cold afternoon's romp through Bookmans Used Books in Flagstaff, Arizona. I paid four dollars for it, an edition that I have seen marked as high as two hundred dollars elsewhere in the used-book trade.

My favorite copy, however, is from the fourteenth printing of the 1979 edition. The book is case-bound, with a vinyl-impregnated buckram cover, forest green. Its signatures are Smyth-sewn; its dust jacket is flawless, in the ochre-red-black design just described, and protected by a Mylar cover. It is a pristine edition in all respects but one: A previous owner, perhaps fighting sleep in a mid-April English class—windows open, dogwoods in the school yard blinding white in the afternoon light, fat bees at work among the blooms—etched his name in red block letters across the top edge of the book's pages: PERKINS.

Perkins! Are we keeping you up? Sit up straight, man, and contemplate the prize you hold in your hand. Few books of this size (thin as a buttermilk pancake, six ounces waterlogged), in fact, few books of any size, have had the impact on American literary culture and thought that *The Elements of Style* has. Ounce for ounce, it has done more to establish an American ideal of good prose style than any other book or any teacher, living or dead. Its authors, William Strunk Jr. and E. B. (Elwyn Brooks) White, have

joined the pantheon of twentieth-century creative duos whose names, over time, have been transformed into brands, if not movements. Think Rodgers and Hammerstein, the Wright brothers, Tracy and Hepburn, Lennon-McCartney. In fact, *The Elements of Style* is often called "Strunk and White," usually run together in the pronunciation, "strunkenwhite," the authors' names forever fused, as in "Perkins, please revisit strunkenwhite, Rule 12." And, as with most great duos, the names themselves are now powerful enough to conjure by. For generations the book, by its title or its authors' names, has been widely venerated as a sure, succinct guide to the fundamentals of good writing. But there's more to it than that. No simple book of tips about clear writing sells in the kinds of numbers this book sells. There's something else going on.

The Elements of Style as we know it today almost didn't happen. It took a fat slice of chance circumstance, and thirty-eight years, to draw the elements together. William Strunk Jr., a professor of English at Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York, self-published the first edition of the book in 1918. I have held a copy in the Cornell archives; it's a slight thing, only forty-three pages, with a lightly textured card-stock cover. Intended as a quick-reference guide for his students, *The Elements of Style* covered the basics of clear and clean writing—tips on usage, composition, word choice, spelling—and it simplified Strunk's task of grading papers and saved him the cost, in both time and tedium, of using valuable class time to reiterate the fundamentals. The book's advice was useful and accurate, it covered only the essentials, and its tone was brisk. Strunk's *Elements of Style* sold in the campus bookstore for twenty-five cents, and it enjoyed a respectable run at Cornell, going through several editions in Strunk's lifetime. One of the Cornellians plunking down his quarter in 1919 was E. B. White, a student in Strunk's English Usage and Style class.

There were plenty of things about college young Elwyn didn't care for, but the future essayist, children's author, and voice of *The New Yorker* magazine liked this class, and he liked William Strunk. After White's graduation in 1921, he and Strunk remained friends, but White's memory of *The Elements of Style* eventually faded.

Time passed. Lots of it. E. B. White began his long career at *The New Yorker* in 1926. The Depression came and went. Collections of White's essays, sketches, and poems were published. World War II rolled through. White wrote and published his first book for children, *Stuart Little.* William Strunk Jr., after a forty-six-year teaching career and nine years of retirement, passed away. White published the children's classic *Charlotte's Web* and still more collected essays. Finally, in the spring of 1957, thirty-eight years after he had last laid eyes on the book, and eleven years after Strunk's death, White received a copy of the 1918 edition of *The Elements of Style* in the mail; it had been sent by an old college friend who thought White would find it amusing. What happened next is well known to *Elements* fans—it's recounted in the introduction of every edition—and it's where the story really begins.

When Paul McCartney met John Lennon, at a Quarry Men gig in Liverpool, his first impulse was to pick up a guitar and play. When White re-met *The Elements of Style* in 1957, he, too, turned to his art: He took to the typewriter to tell his readers about *Elements* and about William Strunk. In a "Letter from the East" column published that summer in *The New Yorker,* E. B. White wrote about the "rich deposits of gold" he had rediscovered in the little book and about its author, whom he recalled as friendly, funny, audacious, and self-confident. "Will knew where he stood," White wrote. "He scorned the vague, the tame, the colorless, the irresolute. He felt it was worse to be irresolute than

to be wrong." Strunk tickled White, and White admired his old professor's outlook: Say what you mean, and say it clearly.

The "Letter from the East" caught the eye of Jack Case, a *New Yorker* reader and alert editor working in the college book department of The Macmillan Company. Immediately after reading White's tribute to Strunk, maybe even before finishing it, Case contacted White to say that his company was interested in publishing *The Elements of Style* and using White's essay as the book's introduction. They struck an agreement, and, over the next year, White performed a thorough overhaul and updating of Strunk's original text; revised his *New Yorker* essay to work as the book's introduction; wrote a foreword, "A Note on This Book"; and added a new final chapter, "An Approach to Style." The result, a collaborative teacher-student effort that spanned four decades (not to mention the great divide), was Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style.* First published in 1959, the book vaulted the charts like "Love Me Do" and has hovered in the ether ever since. Before White's death in 1985, two more editions were published, in 1972 and 1979. The current edition, the fourth, was published in 1999.

We've already seen that my tender feelings for *The Elements of Style* extend even to the physical book itself. I recognize that's a little peculiar. In my defense, I'm not the first bibliophile guilty of cherishing a book nearly as much for its look and its feel in the hand as for its content. And, as I think about it, this appreciation for a book's shape and structure over, or aside from, its subject matter is an apt parallel to the main argument of *The Elements of Style* itself—the idea that a clear conception of *form,* the mechanics of communicating ideas through writing, stands behind and makes possible the successful expression of intellectual *content.* The Strunk and White prescription, distilled, is this: Master the fundamentals of good form, and, assuming you have

something to say, the results—communication, style, *art*—will take care of themselves.

Elements enthusiasts are in large supply—the book has sold well over 10 million copies since 1959—and they tend to voice their praise with Strunkian directness. "Most books about writing are filled with bullshit," says Stephen King in his best-selling *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft.* "One notable exception is *The Elements of Style.* There is little or no detectable bullshit in that book. Every aspiring writer should read *The Elements of Style*." Strunk and White sit firmly in the top quarter of the Modern Library's list of 100 Best Nonfiction books. *The Elements of Style* is quoted and recommended warmly in scores of other guides to writing, from William Zinsser's *On Writing Well* and *The Associated Press Stylebook* to *Barron's How to Prepare for the New SAT.*

Today, in the bookstore on the Cornell campus, students can choose from five varieties of *Elements*: a paperback or hardcover fourth edition, a reprint of Strunk's 1918 original or his 1920 revision, and a popular 2005 version of the fourth edition illustrated by the artist and designer Maira Kalman. It is also available in other media. An audio edition, read by *Angela's Ashes* author Frank McCourt, was released in 2008. (McCourt, interviewed for this book, expressed surprise that he had been chosen for the narration job: "It's beyond me—they could've gotten someone with a voice like George Plimpton's, a Harvard kind of voice." But it turns out McCourt's musical accent is a perfect accompaniment to the playful and precise rhythms of Strunk and White.) There is even a video version, created in the late eighties, based on the third edition and hosted by the bow-tied commentator Charles Osgood. For *Elements* or Osgood completists, copies are still obtainable online. Occasionally the book jumps genres entirely: In 1981, a short ballet based on *The Elements of Style* was staged in New York by the choreographer Matthew

Nash. ("The dancers were merry," the *Times* reviewer offered, "but Mr. Nash never quite decided what he wanted his ballet to be. . . . And, surely, neither Mr. Strunk nor Mr. White would have approved of indecisiveness.") And in 2005, in conjunction with the publication of Maira Kalman's illustrated edition of *Elements,* an operatic song cycle composed by Nico Muhly, *The Elements of Style: Nine Songs,* was performed in the reading room of the New York Public Library before a sold-out audience. The tenor and soprano were accompanied by viola, banjo, and percussion (including vibraphone, teacups, typewriter, and duck call). *Newsweek*'s reviewer was unsure: "Unfortunately, the operatic style of the piece rendered the lyrics all but unintelligible to this listener—in ironic contrast to the simplifying ethos of 'Elements'—though that may be more the fault of the acoustics of the library venue, which was, after all, designed for silence."

For decades, other publishers, on seeing the eye-popping sales of *The Elements of Style,* have whistled quietly through their teeth and then set out to replicate its success (or at least test the drafting effect of trailing in its wake) by appending the phrase "The Elements of" to titles on a Dummies-rivaling array of subjects. There are books on "The Elements of" graphic design, legal writing, architecture, computer programming, drawing, mentoring, boatbuilding, information theory, horse training, public speaking, editing, politics, art, music, health, organic gardening, golf, bankruptcy, ethics, prayer, and more. Most of those other publishers have eventually discovered that the title is not where the magic lives.

While strong in its chapter-to-chapter specifics and as useful as a pocketknife, *The Elements of Style,* like most lasting literary or artistic works, also turns out to have something else going on. The whole is greater than the sum of its elements. What's behind this short book's long success?

First, *The Elements of Style* works as advertised; it's a straightforward, functional guide to clear expression. Generations of teachers credit the book for its help in the effort to unclutter and sharpen their students' prose. In my own career, editing books by subject-matter experts who sometimes have little writing experience, I have seen that recommending Strunk and White usually helps. Writers who take the book's advice to heart find that it helps them clarify their thoughts, discover the simpler line through their material, and get the right words down on paper in good order.

Second, there is an appealing complexity to the book's voice. *The Elements of Style* is sometimes mischaracterized as little more than a short list of do's and don'ts delivered in a schoolmarmish tone by two old jaspers who were simply way too sure of themselves. But a closer look reveals a greater degree of nuance, humor, and heart than that caricature admits. The book's textured voice is thanks to the characters of its coauthors. *The Elements of Style* is the product of not one mind but two, and those two further apart in temperament and effect than is usually assumed. The book doesn't speak with one monolithic, "strunkenwhite" voice. It is as multifaceted as any other product of creative collaboration. There is a head-heart, Spock-Kirk dynamic to the Strunk-White partnership, a stirring mix of reason and feeling that gives the book a very human character and creates just enough tension to keep things interesting. The charge created by these two distinct voices sparking off each other as they approach writing's basic questions is one of the book's hidden strengths and an important source of its staying power. E. B. White described Strunk's voice on the page as being "in the form of sharp commands, Sergeant Strunk snapping orders to his platoon," and it's true, the professor seems to spend much of his time in an imperative mood: "Do not break sentences in

two," "Use the active voice," "Omit needless words." It's a natural enough idiom, considering his day job; Strunk sounds teacherly, though he's not without humor.

White's voice, on the other hand, is that of the writer, the practitioner of long experience whose sympathies favor the artistic side of the enterprise. In the foreword to the 1959 edition, White, in describing his Chapter V essay, "An Approach to Style," lets readers know that Strunk "had no part in this escapade, and I have no way of knowing whether he would approve." The caveat is offered because, in Chapter V, White intends to take the discussion in a new direction, and he does. In the opening paragraphs of the chapter, he is careful to explain that, while his ideas are presented as rules ("since the book is a rulebook"), he invites readers to think of them instead as "mere gentle reminders." Strunk and White's tag-team approach makes the creative whole possible. If Strunk is the master boatbuilder, teaching readers about the basic tools and techniques of the trade, White is the pilot, sharing what he has learned about getting safely out of harbor and taking the craft where he wants to go.

Finally, true believers have always felt something more, an extra dimension that has likely been a fundamental source of the book's success all along: As practical as it is for helping writers over common hurdles, *The Elements of Style* also embodies a worldview, a philosophy that, for some, is as appealing as anything either author ever managed to get down on paper. *Elements* is a credo. And it is a book of promises—the promise that creative freedom is enabled, not hindered, by putting your faith in a few helpful rules; the promise that careful, clear thinking and writing can occasionally touch truth; the promise of depth in simplicity and beauty in plainness; and the promise that by turning away from artifice and ornamentation you will find your true voice.

That's a lot of promise for such a little book. And not everyone believes it. Despite, or perhaps because of, the success it has enjoyed, *Elements* has drawn its share of critical fire over the years. Earlier, I mentioned the book's propensity for making some people nuts. Here we are. While admirers appreciate *Elements*' devotion to form and its occasionally bracing Dutch-uncle tone, those same qualities fuel most of the criticism leveled by detractors. Some writers and readers, reflexively distrustful of certainty from any quarter, reject *The Elements of Style* for the stubborn, doctrinal, vaguely medicinal air that they claim clings to it. For all its popularity, its plain common sense, and its decades of success in the classroom, it is surprising the extent to which Strunk and White have gotten up the noses of some academics and critics. In books such as *Adios, Strunk and White; Clear and Simple as the Truth;* and *The Sound on the Page,* and in the academic press, in articles with titles like "Interrogating the Popularity of Strunk and White," "A Multi-Million Dollar Hoax?" and "Ideology, Power, and Linguistic Theory," critics have attempted to knock the conceptual pins out from under this perennial best-seller. It's a critical reaction that was not unanticipated in 1959, and the fact that *The Elements of Style* succeeded not in spite of but largely *because* of its willingness to buck liberalizing trends in the humanities has, for some, been a source of considerable irritation.

The Elements of Style does, of course, have its limitations. It is neither a complete rhetoric nor an exhaustive, methodical grammar. It is a collection—some have called it a hodgepodge—of several distinct kinds of advice for writers, reflected in the titles of its five sections: "Elementary Rules of Usage" (commas, colons, subject-verb agreement, and a few other common trouble spots); "Elementary Principles of Composition" (writing's larger elements—sentences, paragraphs); "A Few Matters of Form"

(the mechanics of margins, spacing, hyphens, spelling out titles and numerals, et cetera); "Words and Expressions Commonly Misused" (*effect/affect*, *lay/lie*, and the like); and "An Approach to Style" (White's twenty-page essay on fundamental aspects and attitudes of writing). Its authors would have been the first to admit that *Elements* is incomplete, idiosyncratic, opinionated, and not infallible. As strong as the book is on the whole, weaknesses can be found in each of its five sections. And some parts are more timeless than others. "Words and Expressions Commonly Misused," for instance, has been revised more thoroughly than any other section, for the simple reason that vocabulary changes relatively quickly. And for all its broad applicability, *The Elements of Style* is a resolutely personal book. On seeing it in 1957, for the first time in thirty-eight years, White was charmed, but he also noted, "Sometimes the book, like the man, seems needlessly compressed, and it is undeniably notional." The 1918 *Elements of Style* was a clear reflection of William Strunk's standards and personality, but White felt it was largely accurate in its details and astute in its attitude. He knew Strunk was on the right path. Jack Case and Macmillan, in turn, put their trust in White, and, with the addition of White's voice, the book's character came alive. If *The Elements of Style* is not unassailable in every one of its details, it pulls together as a whole, and then some, on the strength of that character.

I began the legwork for this book in the Cornell University Library's Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, which houses E. B. White's collected letters and manuscripts. My days were spent working with the collection in the division's reading room, two levels below ground. At the time of my visit, the university was enjoying the first warm, bright days of spring. Each day at noon, I came up and out of the archive to sit in the sun

on a bench near the Arts Quad and eat my lunch. Each day, the quad's lawn was filled with students. With the sudden change in weather, they had all gone over to T-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops. Bookbags and backpacks had been thrown aside, Frisbees and footballs were in the air. Dogs jumped. Music played. Groups of young men and women lounged in the grass, laughing, talking, shouting, flirting. It looked like a May Day fling in the Sheep Meadow. And it was a welcome sight, after a too-long winter. But I didn't linger outside. I stayed just long enough to finish a sandwich, eat an apple, and down a bottle of water before getting back to the archive.

Here's why: the letters. Anyone who has read the published collection, *Letters of E. B. White,* knows their addictive power. White was a master of the form, and his letters make ridiculously pleasurable reading: They're playful, sharp, and lit by White's childlike curiosity and his pragmatic but beautifully slanted sensibility. They span White's life—his family, *The New Yorker,* his books, his fans, his friends—and they run from the serious to the seriously silly. The archive is also a pointed reminder of just what we lost when we gave up writing letters. What were we thinking? I suppose we really weren't; it wasn't a conscious choice. Technology took over, and we simply outpaced the medium. Our days no longer have the kind of elbow room that letter writing requires.

I am privileged to reprint in this book letters not only from E. B. White (many never published before) but also from William Strunk Jr. and White's editors at Macmillan. White leads the pack, but all had a strong grip on the form. Strunk's letters are the correspondence of friendship: reminiscences of school days, chatting about mutual friends, books, writers, writing, and the small events of the day. The exchanges between White and Jack Case offer a look over the shoulders of author and editor at work, and details about how *The Elements of Style* was born

and took shape. Today's office workers, accustomed to the staccato, dispassionate vernacular of e-mail, may marvel at the expansiveness, humor, and warmth of the White-Case letters. They are a wistful reminder of the days when business took the time to breathe.

Also in the E. B. White archive are many notes written in response to letters he received from readers of *The Elements of Style.* Shortly after the book's publication, White discovered that he had strolled onto a minefield. Letters from readers started coming in early 1959, and they were still arriving at the time of his death, twenty-six years later. Every conceivable human reaction to writing advice is represented in the letters. Some readers wrote to complain, in achingly correct prose; some sent verbal bouquets of thanks; some sent suggestions for revisions; some sent poems, essays, even homemade crossword puzzles, on the subject of style; some wanted to argue—about *got* and *gotten, that* and *which, he* and *she,* and just about anything else; some praised White for catching their own favorite peeves, others decried him for missing theirs; some wrote to suggest changes in English grammar or spelling, as if White were the keeper of the keys; some had been driven to insight by the text and were thankful for it; some reveled in having caught either White or Strunk violating one of his own rules. Many of the readers' more sensible suggestions and fixes were incorporated into later editions.

The letters, and the necessity of keeping up with revisions and updates for the book, sometimes tried White's patience. As early as the fall of 1959, he complained to a friend, "Life as a textbook editor is not the rosy dream you laymen think it is. I get the gaa damndest letters every day from outraged precisionists and comma snatchers, complaining every inch of the way." During his work on the second edition, he griped to another friend:

"I hate the guts of English grammar." Much, not all, of White's grumbling was tongue in cheek. It's clear he enjoyed corresponding with readers, and his replies were invariably patient, good-humored, and never less than kind. A sampling of White's notes to readers of *The Elements of Style* are sprinkled throughout the pages that follow.

When I began working on this book, one thing I knew for sure was that I wanted to include the thoughts of other writers on the subject of *The Elements of Style* and on the ideas about *Elements* that I was hoping to explore. Keeping in mind White's maxim, expressed near the end of *The Elements of Style,* that "the whole duty of a writer is to please and satisfy himself," I began with the admittedly selfish move of approaching some of my favorite writers. I was more than pleasantly surprised when most of them happily accepted the invitation. It seems that Strunk and White mean something to just about everyone who takes writing seriously, though opinions about the book are as varied as the writers themselves. A writer's presence here should not necessarily be interpreted as a full embrace of my own wild-eyed, crusading *Element*ism; the writers speak for themselves, and their voices will be heard throughout the book.

This book about *The Elements of Style* is the story of the writers and editors who created it and the influences that shaped it—of Strunk's own education and his stylistic models; of White's devotion, like that of his hero Thoreau, to the ideals of simplicity and clarity, in life and on the page; and of the blood bonds linking White's style, *The New Yorker,* and *The Elements of Style.* It is also an appreciation of the broader worldview underlying the *Elements* ethos, which includes such old-fashioned, unironic virtues as correctness, simplicity, truth, and the value of the individual voice. With my own biases laid bare, and with Mr. Strunk and Mr. White fending for themselves quite capably, it

also seemed fair to let some of the academic naysayers have their (nay)say. They have strong feelings and interesting ideas about what this little book is up to.

Elements is a Rorschach of a book, and fans and critics both delight in telling what they see in it. It's only fitting that Strunk and White affect readers so variously, because their book *is* something of a hodgepodge. But in my view, and in the views of many others, it's a hodgepodge that hits the fundamentals in a memorable way, boosts the reader's faith in the aforementioned virtues, and puts writers on a path to clearer, better prose. It is not the only path available, but it is one that thousands of writers, and millions of readers, have found congenial. The *New Yorker* writer Adam Gopnik, interviewed in these pages, memorably describes *The Elements of Style* as "a very good guide to writing the kind of prose that it's a very good guide to writing." I can live with that. And for my money, *Elements* is also a very good guide to writing the kind of prose I like to read: prose that is supple enough to convey complex ideas clearly; that shuns gratuitous decoration while welcoming insight and wit; that's as lean, sturdy, and fit for its purpose as a pump handle.