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E. B. White Takes His
Leave, or Does He?
The Elements of Style,
Six Editions (1918-2000)

WE LOOKED UP Mr. Eustace Tilley this week, on the eve of his departure from the city.... The elegant old gentleman was found in his suite at the Plaza, his portmanteau packed, his mourning doves wrapped in dotted swiss, his head in a sitz bath for a last shampoo." The scene moves to the street, where Tilley says goodbye: "Well, *au revoir!*" The coachman whipped up his cob, and the little party rumbled off along Fifty-ninth Street, Tilley brandishing his brassie with great ferocity at a horsefly. As we turned, we discovered to our surprise that the sidewalk, where he had paused a moment, was a pool of tears." Thus begins and ends "The Departure of Eustace Tilley," E. B. White's farewell essay in the *New Yorker*.¹ Tilley was the Regency dandy with monocle, top hat, and high collar who symbolized the *New Yorker* throughout its first half-century. Tilley for White was appropriate, for the essays and comments of E. B. White had come to epitomize the magazine's elegance, urbanity, detachment, understatement, humor, and civility.

We looked up Messrs. William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White this week, on the occasion of the publication of the fourth edition of *The Elements of Style*. The elegant gentlemen were found, one in his Cornell classroom, the other in the first-floor study of his farmhouse in North Brooklin, Maine. Alas, this opening is pure whimsy: Strunk died in 1946, and White, in 1985. Still, the new edition provides an occasion to revisit both men and the book that bears their names.

Few books have fared so well as *Elements of Style*. It has sold 10,000,000 copies. It was number 21 on a recent list of the 100 most important non-fiction books of the 20th century. As befits such status, it has drawn detractors as well as admirers, including small-bore competitors bearing the titles *Adios, Strunk and White* and *The Elements of E-Mail Style*. Apart from *Elements of Style*, Strunk has faded into insignificance. Not so E. B. White. The author of *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte's Web*, White lives on in the hearts of his readers—a category that does not include Republican Governor George Pataki of New York. In a Senate campaign debate of 2000 that pitted Democrat Hillary Rodham Clinton against Republican Rick Lazio, Clinton mentioned E. B. White's definition of a New Yorker. Spinning for reporters after the debate ended, Pataki said: "Mrs. Clinton quoted some guy, Wyatt or somebody—I don't think he was from Brooklyn—with some definition of a New Yorker that she must have read somewhere." To a reporter's "Governor, you've never heard of E. B. White?" Pataki responded: "Where's he from? Well, maybe the average member of the media who lives in Manhattan, when they're quoting New York, would use E. B. White, or whatever his name is. I don't think people from Brooklyn or Peekskill would have quoted that person." One columnist reacted: "Excuse me, but do we really have a governor who's never heard of E. B. White? Didn't the man get a degree from Yale? Didn't he have any books as a child? Yes, yes and yes. Forget about *The Elements of Style* and all White's legendary essays in the old *New Yorker*. Doesn't the governor know the story of Stuart Little and the one about Charlotte, the heroic spider, and Wilbur, the runty pig? Apparently not."² And in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the *Boston Globe* and a number of other papers reprinted on op-ed pages one of White's paeans to New York City.

William Strunk, Jr. was born in 1869, shortly after the Civil War, and died in 1946, the year after World War II. He spent his entire career (1891-1937) in the Department of English at Cornell University. In addition to *The Elements of Style*, Strunk is the author of a handbook on poetic meter and editor of essays

of Carlyle, Macaulay, and Dryden and of Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*, Cynewulf's *Juliana*, and two Shakespearean plays. In 1919 one of his students was E. B. White, then 20. Much of what we know of Strunk the man comes from E. B. White's essay of 1957 in the *New Yorker*, "Will Strunk":

From every line [of *The Elements of Style*] there peers out at me the puckish face of my professor, his short hair parted neatly in the middle and combed down over his forehead, his eyes blinking incessantly behind steel-rimmed spectacles as though he had just emerged into strong light, his lips nibbling each other like nervous horses, his smile shuttling to and fro in a carefully edged mustache. [Strunk was then 50 years old.]

"Omit needless words!" cries the author on page 21, and into that imperative Will Strunk really put his heart and soul. In the days when I was sitting in his class, he omitted so many needless words, and omitted them so forcibly and with such eagerness and obvious relish, that he often seemed in the position of having short-changed himself, a man left with nothing more to say yet with time to fill, a radio prophet who had outdistanced the clock. Will Strunk got out of this predicament by a simple trick: he uttered every sentence three times. When he delivered his oration on brevity to the class, he leaned forward over his desk, grasped his coat lapels in his hands, and in a husky, conspiratorial voice said, "Rule Thirteen. Omit needless words! Omit needless words! Omit needless words!"

He was a memorable man, friendly and funny... Will knew where he stood. He was so sure of where he stood, and made his position so clear and so plausible, that his peculiar stance has continued to invigorate me—and, I am sure, thousands of other ex-students—during the years that have intervened since our first encounter... [White was writing in 1957 of a class he had taken 40 years earlier!]

He scorned the vague, the tame, the colorless, the irresolute. He felt it was worse to be irresolute than to be wrong. I remember a day in class when he leaned far forward in his characteristic pose—the pose of a man about to impart a secret—and croaked, "If you don't know how to pronounce a word, say it loud! If you don't know how to pronounce a word, say it loud!" This comical piece of advice struck me as sound at the time, and I still respect it. Why compound ignorance with inaudibility? Why run and hide...?

Will felt that the reader was in serious trouble most of the time, a man floundering in a swamp, and that it was the duty of anyone attempting to write English to drain this swamp quickly and get his man up on dry ground, or at least throw him a rope.

Thus White as Boswell to Strunk's Dr. Johnson.

E. B. White was born in Mount Vernon, New York, in 1899, youngest (and last) child of a prosperous middle-class manager of a piano factory. At Cornell (1917–1921) White took the year-long English 8 with Professor Strunk. More than a decade later White would speak of Strunk as the person “who first hoped to graft me on the tree of knowledge by emphasizing the sanctity of an English sentence.” After Cornell White held a succession of jobs in New York City, traveled across the continent in a Model T, and returned to New York for more jobs before catching on with the *New Yorker*, then finishing its second year of publication. His first contact at the magazine was Katharine Sergeant Angell, right hand of Harold Ross and the wife of a lawyer; in 1929, E. B. and Katharine married, a marriage that lasted until her death in 1977.³ Harold Ross, Katharine White, E. B. White, James Thurber, Wolcott Gibbs: these were the key figures behind the success of the *New Yorker*.

White worked at the magazine through most of the Depression, taking his Eustace Tilley departure in summer 1937. Except for a brief return to regular *New Yorker* contributions during World War II, White never returned to full-time work. Instead, he lived mainly at the farm in North Brooklin, Maine. Even before leaving the *New Yorker* in 1937, he had published a book of poetry and (with James Thurber) *Is Sex Necessary?* Then came *Stuart Little* in 1945, *Charlotte's Web* in 1952, and *Trumpet of a Swan* in 1972. Along the way, of course, came three editions of *The Elements of Style*.

Strunk's *Elements of Style* (1918) is 43 pages long. It has six short sections: “Introductory”—five paragraphs; “Elementary Rules of Usage”—eight rules; “Elementary Principles of Composition”—ten principles; “A Few Matters of Form”—Headings, Numerals, Parentheses, Quotations, References, Titles; and “Words and Expressions Commonly Misused”—ten pages. Here is one excerpt from “Elementary Principles of Composition”:

Rule 13. Omit needless words

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

Forty years later, in his essay on Strunk, White wrote of this paragraph: “There you have a short, valuable essay on the nature and beauty of brevity—sixty-three words that could change the world. Having recovered from his adventure in prolixity (sixty-three words were a lot of words in the tight world of William Strunk, Jr.), the Professor proceeds to give a few quick lessons in pruning.”

Strunk was didactic but not pedantic. The final paragraph of “Introductory” includes these lines: “It is an old observation that the best writers sometimes disregard the rules of rhetoric. When they do so, however, the reader will usually find in the sentence some compensating merit, attained at the cost of the violation. Unless he is certain of doing as well, he will probably do best to follow the rules. After he has learned, by their guidance, to write plain English adequate for everyday uses, let him look, for the secrets of style, to the study of the masters of literature.” There are rules that it helps to know, but they are not the Holy Grail.

Strunk published *Elements* privately in 1918 and 1919 before Harcourt, Brace and Company brought out an edition in 1920. In 1934 the same publisher issued a “Revised Edition” listing as authors Strunk and Edward A. Tenney, “Instructor in English in Cornell University.” Almost twice as long as Strunk’s original, this edition is also more didactic, more technical, and more pedantic. More didactic: “Warning! Do not use contractions in formal writing.” More technical: two lists of grammatical terms—“If you cannot recall the definitions for the following words and terms, look them up”—that extend beyond noun and pronoun to conjunctive pronoun and conjunctive adverb and complex-compound sentence and restrictive word phrase; it features two pages of sentence diagrams—“Study the following

diagramed sentences and give the reason why each name or symbol is correct.” More pedantic: gone is the concluding paragraph of Strunk’s *Elements* noting that style is ultimately the domain of the masters. The “Revised Edition” accentuates the negatives of the first edition and eliminates many of its positives.

Did White know about this edition? Had he seen it? The copyright page of the first edition of Strunk & White lists it, but White himself never mentions it, and none of the 1934 revisions survives into 1959. It is a good thing that in 1957 White encountered the 1918 version and not the 1934 version, for the first edition called Strunk’s classroom to White’s mind as the revision would not have. Redeeming the 1934 edition would have posed much greater problems than updating the 1918 original.

In 1919 White had sat in Strunk’s class but apparently had never owned a copy of *Elements of Style*. In 1957—a dozen years after Strunk’s death—a classmate sent White a copy, apparently filched from the Cornell library, and White reacted strongly: “I was overwhelmed to get the little book.... Last night I went through it, seeing Will in every word and phrase and line.... What a book, what a man! Will so loved the clear, the brief, the bold—and his book is clear, brief, bold.... I take it no use is made of it by the English Department in this day and age; it would be considered too arbitrary, too cocky, too short.”⁴ White wrote “Will Strunk,” and the essay brought an instant response from J. G. Case, an editor at Macmillan: would White undertake a revision of *The Elements of Style*?

For all his praise of Strunk and the book, White had his criticisms, too. “Some of its charm and value for me,” White wrote Case, “unquestionably derives from my memory of the man himself—his peculiar delivery of these rules of usage and the importance with which he managed to invest the subject. Sometimes the book, like the man, seems needlessly compressed, and it is undeniably notional.” Still, White was willing to undertake a revision provided “the Strunk heirs were happy about the project.” In the event, White split the royalties evenly with the Strunk heirs.

White went to work, and by early November he had a complete draft. He wrote Case: "I have tinkered the Strunk text—have added a bit, subtracted a bit, rearranged it in a few places, and in general have made small alterations that seemed useful and in the spirit of Strunk. The first two sections of the 'Composition' chapter sustained the heaviest attack; I felt that they were narrow and bewildering. (In their new form they are merely bewildering.) ... In the main, though, the 'little book' will end up very nearly the same size as the original: it will still be small, concise, opinionated, non-comprehensive—a squeaky voice from the past." White's major original contribution, the essay on style, he described as follows: it "runs about 3500 words, I would guess. I have been letting it stand, to see if some of the lumps and other impurities would settle, and I hope to improve it before I have done. In writing it, I deliberately departed from the strict rhetorical face of style, in an attempt to give the little book an extra dimension.... In short, I shall have a word or two to say about attitudes in writing, the why, the how, the beartraps, the power, and the glory."

The opening paragraph of "An Approach to Style (With a List of Reminders)" is itself a stunning essay, worthy successor to Strunk's own sixty-three words on brevity that so delighted White:

Up to this point, the book has been concerned with what is correct, or acceptable, in the use of English. In this final chapter, we approach style in its broader meaning: style in the sense of what is distinguished and distinguishing. Here we leave solid ground. Who can confidently say what ignites a certain combination of words, causing them to explode in the mind? Who knows why certain notes in music are capable of stirring the listener deeply, though the same notes slightly rearranged are impotent? These are high mysteries, and this chapter is a mystery story, thinly disguised. There is no satisfactory explanation of style, no infallible guide to good writing, no assurance that a person who thinks clearly will be able to write clearly, no key that unlocks the door, no inflexible rule by which the young writer may shape his course. He will often find himself steering by stars that are disturbingly in motion.

Style is less *rules* than *mystery*.

White offers 21 “Reminders.” They range from “Use orthodox spelling” to “Do not construct awkward adverbs” to “Write with nouns and verbs.” There are rules, but no *iron* rules. Or only one iron rule. White concludes the essay: “Style takes its final shape more from attitudes of mind than from principles of composition, for, as an elderly practitioner once remarked, ‘Writing is an act of faith, not a trick of grammar.’ This moral observation would have no place in a rule book were it not that style is the writer, and therefore what a man is, rather than what he knows, will at last determine his style.... The whole duty of a writer is to please and satisfy himself, and the true writer always plays to an audience of one.” The essay presents not *the* approach but *an* approach, in full awareness (as White wrote under “Reminder” to “Prefer the standard to the offbeat”) that “the language is perpetually in flux: it is a living stream, changing, receiving new strength from a thousand tributaries, losing old forms in the backwaters of time.” With this essay White has taken Strunk’s handbook and turned it into a philosophy, a way of life; he has distilled his own life-long quest for distinction. In an essay of 1939 on poetry, White had remarked: “Being democratic, I am content to have the majority rule in everything, it would seem, but literature.”

A letter from Case a month later almost killed the whole project. Case had solicited comments on the manuscript White submitted from a number of academic experts, and White reacted vehemently. Your letter, he wrote Case, “stopped me cold.... I was saddened by your letter—the flagging spirit, the moistened finger in the wind, the examination of entrails, and the fear of little men. I don’t know whether Macmillan is running scared or not, but I do know that this book is the work of a dead precisionist and a half-dead disciple of his, and that it has got to stay that way. ...I cannot, and will-shall not, attempt to adjust the unadjustable Mr. Strunk to the modern liberal of the English Department, the anything-goes fellow. Your letter expresses contempt for this fellow, but on the other hand you seem to want his vote. I am against him, temperamentally and because I have seen the work of *his* disciples, and I say the hell with him.” White

had another term for these academics: “the Happiness Boys, or, as you call them, the descriptivists.” White continued: “I am used to being edited, I like being edited, and I have had the good luck and the pleasure of being edited by some of the best of them; but I have never been edited for wind direction, and will not be now. Either Macmillan takes Strunk and me in our bare skins, or I want out. . . . The above, written by the below, are, of course, fighting words. . . .” White proceeds to discuss *like/as*, one apparent issue in the assault of the academics, before concluding with this postscript: “When I said, above, that Macmillan would have to take me in my bare skin, I really meant my bare *as*.” White’s fighting words carried the day. This incident perhaps explains the passage at the end of “An Approach to Style”: “The whole duty of a writer is to please and satisfy himself, and the true writer always plays to an audience of one. Let him start sniffing the air, or glancing at the Trend Machine, and he is as good as dead, although he may make a nice living.”

But is White an inflexible traditionalist, an unreconstructed prescriptivist? If we follow his example and his *Elements of Style*, are we frozen in stylistic amber? Hardly. His “An Approach to Style” broadens the issue and put the rules of grammar in a distinctly secondary position. White complained repeatedly when people tried to edit him, and his comments tell us why. Yes, he wanted to “construct a sentence that lasts a hundred years”—in 1954 he wrote in an essay that “It is probably no harder to eat a woodchuck than to construct a sentence that lasts a hundred years,” but he made full allowance for flexibility and for change. To a medical doctor who wrote complaining of redundancy in White’s phrase “yellow jaundice,” White replied (May 17, 1957): “Thank you for your watchfulness. You say you have an advantage in that you are a doctor. But I have an advantage, too, in that I am not. I just listen to what people say, and sometimes, when a colloquialism serves my purpose (or seems to), I use it.” And he admitted (January 1970) that times change: “I regard the word ‘hopefully’ as beyond recall. I’m afraid it’s here to stay, like pollution and sex and death and taxes.” In an essay (January 1940) recounting an unsuccessful attempt on a snowy morning in

Maine to find an honest-to-goodness sleigh, White concludes with a comment that concerns more than means of transportation: “A man can go round just so long hollering for the past, then he quits and gets on with the present.” But he is also permissive: in an essay of 1954 he quotes a convoluted sentence from *Walden* with this comment: “A copy-desk man would get a double hernia trying to clean up that sentence for the management, but the sentence needs no fixing, for it perfectly captures the meaning of the writer and the quality of the ramble.” White respects fine editing, but if the choice is between inspired author and rule-bound copy editor, White chooses the author. It is not even a serious dilemma.

Long before White revised Strunk, a colleague at the *New Yorker* had accused him of being interested only in style. Ralph Ingersoll, the socialite activist who later founded and edited the newspaper *PM*, stated as much both in print and, here, in a letter of March 1937: “Doesn’t that well-fed stomach of yours ever turn when you think what you’re saying? [White had written of Roosevelt’s plan to pack the Supreme Court: “Let us sleep on it.”] Let us sleep on suffering, want, malnutrition. Let us sleep too on young men who are so fond of phrasing things exactly that humanity never troubles them.”⁵ For whatever reason, White infuses more political opinions into his essays during and immediately after the war, including a striking concern with the atomic bomb and the need for world government.

Ingersoll’s criticism finds an echo after the war in Robert Warshow’s critique of White’s political writings for the *New Yorker*: “The *New Yorker* at its best provides the intelligent and cultured college graduate with the most comfortable and least compromising attitude he can assume toward capitalist society without being forced into actual conflict.” It offers “a private and pseudo-aristocratic world of good humor, intelligence, and good taste.” It deals with experience “not by trying to understand it but by prescribing the attitude to be adopted toward it.” Of White’s specific stances, Warshow writes: “The purpose . . . is not to say anything about democracy or the nature of the war or the possibility of permanent peace, but only to arouse certain familiar

responses in the liberal middle-class reader.”⁶ There is, of course, some truth to the criticism: when the world is burning, what use is style? But the criticism also understates White’s political concern and fails to see White’s style as one way to arouse interest in broader issues among people who are otherwise notably well-off. Is elegance of style incompatible with social concern? Hardly.

For White criticism became a fact of life. Writing in October 1959 to a friend recuperating from stomach surgery, White noted: “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. They are out to get my colon, just the way your doctor was. I shall soon turn on these hungry hordes and let ‘em have it. Still and all, I am glad I revived the little book, and so is Emilie Strunk.... My favorite review, so far, was by a bearded columnist in Peterboro, Ontario, who offered the opinion that everything I write sounds as though I were just going to bed with a hard cold. I snapped a post card right back, saying, ‘Hard cold nothing. This is cholera.’”

The second edition appeared in 1972. Once again, White had to deal with flak. To a copy editor at *The New Yorker* whose assistance White solicited, he wrote: “As near as I can make out, practically every grammarian in the land, irritated beyond belief by having an upstart crow like me edit a rulebook, grabbed *The Elements* before it had even cooled off and marked the bejesus out of it. Macmillan has already sent me the inflammatory reactions of *four* of these indignant pros, and I have dutifully sifted their cries of rage and scorn, incorporating a few in the text, hurling the others into the sea.” The Whites’s long-time secretary Isabel Russell set down one exchange between White and his wife Katharine:

White: If that isn’t ambiguous, I’m a barn swallow and I shall so inform them.

Katharine: If what isn’t ambiguous?

White: This neat little tidbit that was on a stuffer the phone company enclosed with our bill... "You can call your mother in London and tell her all about George taking you out to dinner for just sixty cents."

Katharine: Certainly it's ambiguous. Who says it isn't?

White: Bumby of Mac's College & Professional Division.

Katharine: Perhaps he was the one the phone company consulted when they composed the thing.

Here, too, White emerged the winner.⁷ But well before he finished the revision, White was fed up. In August he wrote: "The book has grown whiskers and does need some attention, but it's not the kind of work I find easy or pleasurable or both." In September he wrote a New York friend: "I don't expect to come to New York 'to deal with the publisher.' The only way to deal with him would be to shoot him, and I don't want to spare the ammunition. The guy who got me embroiled in syntax and rhetoric is happily dead. His name was Jack Case and he was a very nice fellow although I've never forgiven him." In late October he wrote: "I have been busier than a monkey lately—in fact have worked every day, including Sundays and holidays, since the first of August, and am getting sick of work and would like to do a little playing. I'm still slugging away at a revision of *The Elements of Style* for Macmillan. I hate the guts of English grammar...."

There is no record of White's frustrations as he prepared the third edition of *The Elements* (1979); the *Letters of E. B. White* (1976) was already in print at the time. The closest we can come is his introduction of 1977 to the publication in book form of his essay on Will Strunk. There he writes of working on the first edition:

I discovered that for all my fine talk I was no match for the parts of speech—was, in fact, over my depth and in trouble. Not only that, I felt uneasy at posing as an expert on rhetoric, when the truth is I write by ear, always with difficulty and seldom with any exact notion of what is taking place under the hood.

The Strunk book, which is a "right and wrong" book, arrived on the

scene at a time when a wave of reaction was setting in against the permissive school of rhetoric, the Anything Goes school where right and wrong do not exist and there is no foundation all down the line. The little book climbed on this wave and rode it in. ... [The permissive approach] struck many people as chaotic and degenerative, and that's the way it struck me. Strunk was a fundamentalist; he believed in right and wrong, and so, in the main, do I. Unless someone is willing to entertain notions of superiority, the English language disintegrates, just as a home disintegrates unless someone in the family sets standards of good taste, good conduct, and simple justice.⁸

The sole *structural* change among the three editions that White presided over comes in 1979, when White adds four items to “Elementary Rules of Usage”: colons, dashes, numbers, proper case (Rules 7 through 10). But there are many lesser changes. As an example of acronyms to be spelled out, NAACP (1959) yields to SALT (1972); it will yield in 2000 to MALD. Eisenhower makes an appearance in 1972, as does John F. Kennedy’s “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” As examples of how to punctuate titles, the second edition adds “Horace Fulsome, Ph. D.,” Billy the Kid, “the novelist John Fowles,” William the Conqueror, and Pliny the Younger. An excerpt from Willa Cather (1959) yields to one from John Cheever (1972) and then to one from Jean Stafford (1979). Jim Hawkins, David Balfour, Kim, Carlyle, and the Bastille (1959) yield to Walter Mitty, Dick Diver, Rabbit Angstrom, Faulkner, and Yoknapatawpha County (1972). New as well (1972) are, as an example of misplaced modifiers, “New York’s first commercial human-sperm bank opened Friday with semen samples from 18 men frozen in a stainless steel tank,” and, as an example of how not to hyphenate, *The Chattanooga News-Free Press* (after the News and the Free Press merged).

Many of the changes among editions come in the section “Words and Expressions Commonly Misused.” There were 88 entries in the first edition. In the second edition White dropped six (Aforesaid, At, Can’t Hardly, Oftentimes/Ofttimes, Phase, Prove) and added 31. For the third edition he dropped a few more (Kudos, Me, Relevant, Should, Whom) and added a dozen.

The 19 pages of the first edition became the 27 pages of the third. In many of the additions White is at his playful best:

Flammable (2nd ed.): An oddity, chiefly useful in saving lives. The common word meaning “combustible” is *inflammable*. But some people are thrown off by the in- and think *inflammable* means “not combustible.” For this reason, trucks carrying gasoline and explosives are marked FLAMMABLE. Unless you are operating such a truck and hence are concerned with the safety of children and illiterates, use *inflammable*.

-ize (3rd ed.): Do not coin verbs by adding this tempting suffix. Many good and useful verbs do end in *-ize*: *summarize*, *temporize*, *fraternize*, *harmonize*, *fertilize*. But there is a growing list of abominations: *containerize*, *customize*, *prioritize*, *finalize*, to name four. Be suspicious of *-ize*; let your ear and your eye guide you. Never tack *-ize* onto a noun to create a verb. Usually you will find that a useful verb already exists. Why say “moisturize” when there is the simple, unpretentious word *moisten*?

Nauseous. Nauseated (3rd ed.): The first means “sickening to contemplate”; the second means “sick at the stomach.” Do not, therefore, say “I feel nauseous,” unless you are sure you have that effect on others.

Prestigious (3rd ed.): Often an adjective of last resort. It’s in the dictionary, but that doesn’t mean you have to use it.

Relevant. Irrelevant (2nd ed.): Use these words to express a precise relationship, not a vague discontent. “My history course doesn’t seem relevant.” Relevant to what? A student who finds society out of joint, or himself out of joint, takes refuge in the word *irrelevant*, using it as a general term of disapprobation. He damns history and wipes out the past with a single stroke. There is a kind of arrogance in labeling everything that has taken place in the world as “irrelevant.” What the student means, of course, is that he finds the story of the past curiously unrelated to the spectacle of the present. This is his privilege, as well as his hard luck. But the relationship should be stated, not left to the imagination.

The chapter “An Approach to Style” changes very little from first through third editions. Under “Prefer the standard to the offbeat,” White adds (1972) a paragraph about the language of the young: “Youth invariably speaks to youth...” In 1972 the examples are *uptight*, *groovy*, *rap*, *hangup*, *vibes*, *copout*, *dig*; in 1979 *groovy*, *hangup*, and *dig* yield to *ripoff*, *dude*, and *funky*. (In 2000

ripoff, *dude*, and *funky* remain, and they are joined by *psyched*, *nerd*, *geek*.) The revised edition of Strunk (1934) had accentuated negatives and eliminated positives; White's revisions of Strunk accentuated positives and undercut negatives. Without those revisions, *Elements of Style* would never have stood the test of time.

What's new in 2000 with the fourth edition? First and foremost, gender-neutral language. "He" becomes "she" or the plural "they" or is effaced through other means. For example, "Every writer, by the way he uses the language, reveals something of his spirit, his habits, his capacities, his bias" becomes "All writers, by the way they use the language, reveal something of their spirits, their habits, their capacities, and their biases." In the interests of gender equality, a "he" farmer becomes a "she," and a "she" dishwasher becomes a "he." A cow stays a "she," but a dog goes from "he" to unspecified: "Unless disciplined, a dog..." "America" as "she" yields to "this country," "it." The gender-change surgery is not always simple. Take one of White's most glorious illustrations, an example of how to misuse participial phrases (it had appeared first in 1972): "As a mother of five, with another on the way, my ironing board is always up." Reconstruction, the editors must have decided, was impossible, so the example disappears.

The editors betray unease with the term "girl." White illustrated the proper use of like/as with "Chloe smells good, as a pretty girl should"—Chloe a stand-in for Winston ("Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should").⁹ The fourth edition keeps Chloe's name but changes her age: "Chloe smells good, as a baby should." "Be prepared for kisses when you give your girl this merry scent" is from the old editions; in the new edition "girl" becomes "girlfriend," and the editors forfeit an opportunity for true neutrality: they switch neither the gender nor the sexual preference of the recipient.

This fourth-edition unease with "girl" calls to mind a sentence that raised minor havoc between White and Case, the Macmillan editor. White dreamed up the sentence to demonstrate when it is not okay to omit *that* in subordinate clauses: "He felt that the girl had not played fair." Omit the *that*, and the sen-

tence begins, “He felt the girl....” But this was 1957, and Case found the sentence inappropriate for classroom use. White responded:

As for the controversial matter of that girl on P. 81, I am in favor of leaving her in. She illustrates the embarrassments of prose, and she will be missed if you dismiss her. But I’ll not make a fuss about it if you are sure you want to make the cut. [Having won the war against the Happiness Boys, White was apparently willing to let Case win one battle.] I thought of two sentences that would make a substitute:

He felt the fur was too costly.

He saw the light was off.

They are pale by comparison to my girl, whom I am beginning to admire for her pluck, but you may have them if you want them. They won’t create a disturbance in class. (That may be one trouble with classrooms nowadays—no disturbance, all down the line.) My reason for believing that this girl is in good taste and would not be an embarrassment is that she is presented as an embarrassment. And anything that is presented as an embarrassment is not likely to prove embarrassing, just as anything that is presented as funny or interesting is not likely to be f. or i.

This girl should have me for her lawyer.

Yrs for the iron word and
the felt girl,

E. B. White

In mid-January the girl was still on White’s mind: “Take this fine girl away and bring on Queen Elizabeth. I am now madly in love with the girl, and will do everything I can to protect her—which starts with keeping her out of a textbook.” Had the felt girl made it past J. G. Case’s case of jitters, she surely would have succumbed to the gender purification of the fourth edition.

To justify this wholesale slaughter of the “he”s, the fourth edition must do violence to the first three editions. Under “They” (in “Misused Words and Expressions”), they all include a lengthy disquisition. Its author is White, not Strunk: “The use of *he* as a pronoun for nouns embracing both genders is a simple, practical convention rooted in the beginnings of the English language. *He*

has lost all suggestion of maleness in these circumstances. The word was unquestionably biased to begin with (the dominant male), but after hundreds of years it has become seemingly indispensable. It has no pejorative connotation; it is never incorrect. Substituting *he or she* in its place is the logical thing to do if it works. But it often doesn't work, if only because repetition makes it sound boring or silly." White proceeds to quote a paragraph from Somerset Maugham in two versions, the original and an altered form that White introduces as follows: "Rewritten to affirm equality of the sexes, the same statement verges on nonsense." White concludes: "No one need fear to use *he* if common sense supports it. The furor recently raised about *he* would be more impressive if there were a handy substitute for the word. Unfortunately, there isn't—or, at least, no one has come up with one yet. If you think *she* is a handy substitute for *he*, try it and see what happens. Alternatively, put all controversial nouns in the plural and avoid the choice of sex altogether, and you may find your prose sounding general and diffuse as a result." White's "Try it and see what happens" seems to anticipate a result worse than the original.

The fourth edition's section has an amended heading: "They. He or She." The first sentence quoted above ("The use of *he*...") remains, but what follows immediately thereafter is new: "Currently, however, many writers find the use of the generic *he* or *his* to rename indefinite antecedents limiting or offensive." There follow "strategies to avoid" this use: "Use the plural rather than singular," "Eliminate the pronoun altogether," "Substitute the second person for the third person." Maugham is gone, together with White's rewriting of Maugham, and the section concludes: "No one need fear to use *he* if common sense supports it. If you think *she* is a handy substitute for *he*, try it and see what happens. Alternatively, put all controversial nouns in the plural and avoid the choice of sex altogether, although you may find your prose sounding general and diffuse as a result." White's "Try it and see" presupposed a thumbs down; this "Try it and see" leaves open the possibility of a thumbs up. The precise words are White's; the meaning is quite different.

But gender neutrality is not solely a matter of dotting i's and crossing (out) "he"s. There has been a changing as well of the literary guard. Dick Diver, the hero of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*, yields to Molly Bloom, the heroine of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Seven dead white males (and a living one) have lost their places in favor of eight females, seven dead, one living:

Editions 1-3

John Fowles
 Pliny the Younger
 Robert Louis Stevenson
 John Keats
 William Wordsworth
 Edwin Arlington Robinson
 Somerset Maugham

Edition 4

Jane Austen
 Sappho
 Mary Shelley
 Sylvia Plath
 Toni Morrison
 Marianne Moore
 Emily Dickinson
 Edith Wharton

The substitution of Sappho for Pliny the Younger is the fourth edition's only nod in the direction of the gay and lesbian community. There is no nod—in *any* edition—to Black English or to any other ethnic variant. The new edition is politically correct only insofar as concerns gender.

The first three editions warn against "breeziness" with this example from a putative class notes column: "Well, chums, here I am again with my bagful of dirt about your disorderly classmates, after spending a helluva weekend in N'Yawk trying to view the Columbia game from behind two bumbershoots and a glazed cornea. And speaking of news, howzabout tossing a few chirce nuggets my way?" Updated in the year 2000, this becomes: "Well, guys, here I am again dishing the dirt about your disorderly classmates, after pa\$\$ing a weekend in the Big Apple trying to catch the Columbia hoops tilt and then a cab-ride from hell through the West Side casbah. And speaking of news, howzabout tossing a few primo items this way?" Home is

still New York City, the class is still upper, and there is no ethnic inflection.

Strunk died in 1946, and White in 1985. Who made the changes in the fourth edition? Few reviewers have bothered to ask. Chris Redgate did raise the question of editorship: "If you bought the book recently, it may not be the original. It may be just the latest edition. That's right. When you thought you were quoting the pithy Professor Strunk, you may merely have been quoting the editors or writers of the latest revision.... What would Strunk or White have said? Who knows? But how would you like it if someone changed your words and put your name on the result in order to make an extra buck?"

From the book itself, there is no way to tell who the editors are. In his "Foreword," step-son Roger Angell abjures responsibility: "This edition has been modestly updated.... I *notice* that 'America' has become 'this country....'" (the italics are mine). And in his "Afterword" Charles Osgood writes of "the editors of this edition." From a short piece by Martin Arnold in the *Times* we learn that Roger Angell "really didn't much want to do the introduction but finally decided to write it because the originally proposed foreword 'had some careless, common mistakes' and 'didn't sound very much like Andy White.' He said his sister-in-law, Allene White [wife of White's son Joel], 'was on watch' as sort of the family Praetorian Guard of the work." Arnold followed the trail to Allene White: "Mrs. White says that the publisher sent the galleys to the Whites 'out of the goodness of his heart' but that sending them 'to the White family was like sending raw meat to a cage of lions.' [Now *there's* the White touch!] She added, 'When push comes to shove, we shove so well, we make so much noise. Essentially it now has the same point of view as Mr. White had.'"

The Elements of Style (fourth edition) is closer undoubtedly to White's vision than what might have appeared had Allene White not intervened. But on significant issues it offers us neither Strunk nor White. The change is not a reversal, but it is striking

nonetheless. In its first three editions Strunk & White set itself apart because of its personality, its crotchets, its humor, its *philosophy*. The fourth edition rounds off many of the edges.

White is dead, and “The Happiness Boys”—perhaps now we must say The Happiness People—have won a round. The NEW EDITION tag on the cover of the new paperback version calls to mind the advertising campaigns for NEW Old Dutch Cleanser and Talbot’s “updated classic” women’s wear. Perhaps the last thing to do with a classic is to update it. Consider White’s own verdict on Thoreau’s *Walden* (in an essay celebrating the centennial of that classic): “To reject the book because of the immaturity of the author and the bugs in the logic is to throw away a bottle of good wine because it contains bits of the cork.” We can say much the same of *The Elements of Style*.

Has White taken his leave? Will we find “a pool of tears” on the site of the fourth edition? White cannot weep or speak, but let us, at least, heave a few deep sighs. And hope that this departure is not final.

NOTES

¹“The Departure of Eustace Tilley,” Aug. 7, 1937; in E. B. White, *The Second Tree from the Corner* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 151-154.

²Ellis Henican, “Governor Draws A Literary Blank,” *Newsday*, Oct. 9, 2000, A-7.

³See esp. Linda H. Davis, *Onward and Upward: A Biography of Katharine S. White* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987). Davis speaks (p. 125) of the goal that Katharine shared with the *New Yorker* staff “for perfection in the English language . . . disdain of sham . . . love of humor.” She shared that goal as well with E. B. White, who wrote, in one of his many poems to her, of “...the imperfect script: / The misspelled word of circumstance, the play / Of error, and places where the pen slipped. / ... By eight o’clock she has rewritten noon / For faults in style, in taste, in fact, in spelling; / Suspicious of the sleazy phrase so soon, / She’s edited the tale before its telling” (Davis, *Onward*, 125-126).

⁴Letter to H. A. Stevenson, April 2, 1957; in *Letters of E. B. White*, ed. Dorothy Loblano Guth (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 434-435. Two years earlier, a friend had sent White a poem, and White had responded playfully: “I don’t think I ever thanked you for the Omsk poem, which reached me...when—come to think of it—I was sitting in nothing but my trunks. I made an effort to bring your poem to the attention of the editors of the *New Yorker*, but I think they were barely conscious and it did not get taken. Willie

E. B. White Takes His Leave, or Does He?

Strunsk would have liked it, though; but Willie is dated, alas, and so are the days when poems had hearts that were young and gay and were written by extroverts and drunsk” (Letter to Howard Cushman, June 15, 1955). White’s secretary Isabel Russell laments that much word play got edited out of the *Letters* (Isabel Russell, *Katharine and E. B. White: An Affectionate Memoir* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1988], 90). All quotations from White letters come from *Letters of E. B. White*.

⁵Ingersoll to White, May 17, 1937; in Scott Elledge, *E.B. White: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 199.

⁶“Melancholy to the End,” *Partisan Review*, Jan.-Feb. 1947; in Warshow, *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre & Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (New York: Anchor, 1964), 63, 65.

⁷Russell, *Katharine and E. B. White*, 49-50.

⁸In *Essays of E. B. White* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 256.

⁹White cites the cigarette slogan without mentioning the brand name in “An Approach to Style” (first edition).

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