

# The Fighting Style

Reading the Unabomber's Strunk and White

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*Fight Club* wasn't about winning or losing. It wasn't about words.

—Narrator, *Fight Club*

William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White's *The Elements of Style* turns fifty this year. I A/ To mark the occasion, Pearson Longman has issued a Fiftieth Anniversary Edition, prefaced by blurbs from novelists (Ann Patchett, Richard Ford, Francine Prose), celebrities (Ben Affleck), academics (Henry Louis Gates Jr.), and editors (David Remnick) testifying to the manual's impact. What there are not, however, are any blurbs from composition scholars. This is at once a sad comment on the visibility of our field in public discussions of what counts as good writing, and a statement of the field's general disregard for Strunk and White and the style they have so successfully promulgated. Aside from the occasional nod to acknowledge, and if possible appropriate Strunk and White's singular position at the top of the ever-proliferating pile of writing manuals ("The Strunk and White of academic writing" is the praise Richard Bullock gives Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say*), composition scholars and *The Elements of Style* have been in something like a fifty-year standoff.

This standoff was the second thing to go through my mind when in 2008 I received an email from Pearson asking me if I was a "Strunk and Whiter." The e-ad invited me to celebrate "50 years of style" by adopting Strunk and White with any Pearson English text for a fifty percent cut on the cover price—a great deal for my students. In return, I would get the special hardcover fiftieth anniversary edition. No, my first thought was not about who in our field might take that offer, but about Theodore Kaczynski, aka the Unabomber. However tempting Pearson's offer, the edition of Strunk and White that tells us the most about the manual's legacy, and is also likely to be sold in the coming years, is the one discovered in the Unabomber's mildewing cabin amidst the many other do-it-yourself manuals on his bookshelf (for example, *Handbook of Chemistry and Physics*, *Know Your Rights*, *Psychology of Women*). The price of this volume is yet to be determined. It, along with the rest of the property the FBI seized in its 1996 raid on Kaczynski's home, will likely go to the highest bidder in a government-sponsored murderabilia auction on the Internet, the proceeds to benefit the Unabomber's victims, to whom he owes nearly fifteen million dollars in restitution. Several of Kaczynski's victims have protested this pending sale, most notably Yale computer science professor and contributing editor to the *Weekly Standard*, David Gelernter, according to whom I am a sicky for wondering how *The Elements of Style* helped the Unabomber write his manifesto. Gelernter argued in a letter to the court that as the auction would only feed Kaczynski's insatiable desire for fame, his possessions should be either destroyed or locked up for one hundred years, and then made available at no charge to "scholars of depravity" (Letter 2).

Although agreeing with Gelernter that the auction serves little purpose, I can't see burning or sequestering a copy of *The Elements of Style* just because a terrorist owned it, nor do I imagine the destruction of an old edition of the book would even please

Gelernter, one of Strunk and White's many self-appointed modern guardians. In October 2005, one month before his protest letter reached the court, Gelernter published a column in the "Taste" section of the *Wall Street Journal* decrying as perversions of the classic both the Maira Kalman *The Elements of Style Illustrated* and the pending performance of an operatic version of the work in the New York Public Library. Making the inarguable point that E. B. White himself would have abhorred these developments, Gelernter blamed the New York intellectuals who would take delight in them at the same time as they would neglect their post-9/11 duty to rally behind the Bush administration, whose unpopular war in Iraq Gelernter volubly supported.<sup>1</sup> According to Gelernter, White would be a sound guide for these intellectuals on foreign policy as well as style: White, Gelernter noted, thought democracies should "meddle in other people's affairs frequently, gallantly, and without warning—but with no ulterior motive." Gelernter recalled that in June 1940, with the United States still at peace, White wrote that the president should have "dispatched a destroyer carrying a party of Marines, landed them at a German port, rescued two or three dozen Jewish families from the campaign of hate and shot up a few military police in a surprise movement."

For Gelernter, our foreign affairs and stylistic affairs have both been ruined by the same bugaboos that White avoided: "Feminist language, pseudo-intellectual literary criticism, an elite cultural establishment at odds with plain old middle-American patriotism, a politically corrected version of *'The Elements of Style'*"—they are all connected" ("Back"). This is not the praise that Pearson quoted when it chose Gelernter as one of the thirty-three celebrated writers to extol Strunk and White for their fiftieth anniversary edition; they chose one of the very few passages in Gelernter's essay that does not use Strunk and White to pick some fight. Though Gelernter abhors modernity, his essay in this way seems right in step with it: violence has become the predominant trope through which to understand style. From best-selling books to our own monographs in the field, the language of style is often one with the language of battle. Few can approach the subject without invoking war, fisticuffs, shootings, bombs, and the demise of civilization.

Perhaps this is not surprising. There is nothing really taboo about violence in America. The ability to threaten violence is seen by many as a sacred right that only a gross violation of the social order can take away. In the ability to threaten violence, Americans establish their selfhood. Violence is the ultimate answer to authority, and style is often delivered by authorities, or so T. R. Johnson observes in his 2003 *A Rhetoric of Pleasure*. Johnson began his meditations on prose style by revisiting Columbine and other school shootings initiated by students, and by pondering the motives behind the schoolyard rhymes of the 1970s that imagined in singsong form the kind of violence contemporary students would actually enact.

*Glory, glory allelujah*

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<sup>1</sup> Gelernter wrote numerous columns in the *Weekly Standard* supporting the invasion of Iraq, including "It's America's War" and "Bush's Greatness."

*The teacher hit me with a ruler,  
So I met her at the gate  
With a loaded .38  
And there ain Y no teacher no more! (vi)*

Johnson acknowledges that the link he draws between these rhymes and the tragic events at Columbine is tenuous. “Nonetheless,” he adds, “the link, however limited, seems worth pondering—at least as a starting point for broader inquiry into the ways our students experience our pedagogy” (vii). We have, as Johnson suggests, talked and talked about student resistance to learning, but for him resistance is “too mild a word” to capture the darkest fantasies and plots of our students (vi). Richard Miller seemingly would concur, as his 2005 *Writing at the End of the World* uses Columbine’s Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold’s “dark night of the soul” as an entry point to interrogate the capacity of reading and writing to ennoble. As Miller points out, Harris and Klebold read, wrote, and then killed people. What’s a writing teacher to do?

Although these dark ruminations may have been spurred by repeated school shootings and post-9/11 grief, they have root in a longer-standing trope of civilization-ending fantasy, one in which debates over style are simply out-and-out wars for survival. For this trope we have directly Strunk and White to blame, or rather White, as Strunk’s original edition seems devoid of the exhortative tone later ascribed to its author. White had been approached to revise *The Elements of Style* following publication of his 1957 *New Yorker* essay remembering “the little book” that was required reading in Strunk’s composition class at Cornell (“Will Strunk” 256). That essay, slightly altered, became the introduction to the jointly authored edition. *The Elements of Style* as Will Strunk originally wrote it was a conservative and polemical text, prescribing standard usage whenever possible; however, in E. B. White’s hands, it became a deeply reactionary one. White’s introduction to his 1979 revision of Strunk’s text, the introduction we see today, establishes as the exigence for the text the war to end all wars: “At the close of the first World War, when I was a student at Cornell, I took a course called English 8. My professor was William Strunk, Jr. A textbook required for the course was a slim volume called *The Elements of Style*, whose author was the professor himself. The year was 1919” {*Fiftieth* xiii).

In the 1950s White agreed to revise Strunk’s manual because it allowed him to vent his disgust at the move in rhetoric education toward communication skills and away from literary humanism that World War II had ushered in. Strunk was to be White’s answer to the modern “Anything Goes” school of rhetoric, “where right and wrong do not exist and there is no foundation all down the line” (“Will Strunk” 256). As early as his 1959 revision, White prescribed a strict militarism as the antidote to foundationless modern life: “The reader will soon discover that these rules and principles are in the form of sharp commands, Sergeant Strunk snapping orders to his platoon” (viii). And Sergeant Strunk delivered these orders in gruesome terms. He attacked the worst culprit

identified in *The Elements of Style*, the language of burgeoning business, particularly the language of advertising, thusly: “With its deliberate infractions of grammatical rules and its crossbreeding of parts of speech, it profoundly influences the tongues and pens of children and adults.” It is, in Sergeant Strunk’s (that is, White’s) view, “the language of mutilation” (68).

Far from offending modern sensibilities, however, White’s over-the-top comparisons of poor stylistic choices to miscegenation have set the template for how to write a successful writing manual today. Sergeant Strunk’s warlike, exhortative style, his up-tempo apocalyptic railings against the paucities of modern life, have been picked up by many of *The Elements of Style*’s progeny, including the far more interesting Lynn Truss’s *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, which shot to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list and spawned its own illustrated editions, including one for children. Good punctuation is not simply “the sign and cause of clear thinking” (202) Truss tells us, but the effort to clarify the rules of punctuation themselves, given historical inconsistencies, can lead to “knock-down fights over the comma in editorial offices” (71). While *Eats* is ostensibly about the use of punctuation, it seems to be the element of fight Truss most enjoys as she releases her Inner Stickler, “roaring, salivating and clawing the air in a quite alarming manner” (29). Style is imagined to lift us above our animal wits, but to craft clear prose, one apparently has to get into the muddy trenches—hence, I suppose, White’s return to World War I.

Down in the trenches Gelernter gets as well, in his review of all posthumous and (do I even need to say it) post-feminist revisions of Strunk and White, calling the nod to the acceptability of gender-neutral rules in the fourth edition of Strunk and White’s opus “an assassin slipping a stiletto into someone’s back” (“Back”). Far more revealing of the bloody nature of battles over style, however, is Gelernter’s charge in his protest letter to the court that the public auction of Kaczynski’s possessions would stylize the violence that maimed him:

How exactly will I explain to my two boys that rich bidders are contending for ownership of an autograph diagram of the bomb that turned their father into a semi-invalid? (Will they mount it in a plush frame and hang it on a wall for dinner-party guests to gush over? “That must be the part that took out his eye! Those pieces created the metal fragments that are still embedded in his chest and arms!”)

As Gelernter shows us in these excerpts, style is indistinguishable from bloodlust, the stakes of proper style nothing less than how we live, should live, and should never live. Style is, by definition, a “way” of doing things, most often a way gone by. We were whole, now we are in fragments. Fitting is it that the late Wendy Wasserstein paid homage to Strunk and White by entitling her novel about the search for solace in post-9/11 life *Elements of Styles* the years since 9/11 have brought new life to Strunk and White, who have been retrofitted as comforting spirits from the simpler past, just

as Gelernter complained. But Gelernter, too, has found in Strunk and White a literal grammar for living in unsure times. The misuse of an apostrophe is about more than the apostrophe, the manual tells us: it's about the end of a bright and purposeful past, the premonition of a threatening and murky future.

Long before 9/11, Kaczynski, too, mourned the idyllic past and fretted in his secluded Montana cabin about the planes flying overhead. That he felt he needed to knock those planes out of the sky with the same fervor that he knocked needless words out of sentences is another matter, far outside the acceptable nostalgia that is the hallmark of modern life. As Richard Miller aptly pointed out, Gelernter and Kaczynski, who both distrust modern society, often seem more like "fellow travelers than mortal enemies" (203). True, and never more so, I would add, than in their admiration for *The Elements of Style*. Though a terrorist, Kaczynski is also Strunk and White's target audience: an amateur writer who hates to be wrong. Kaczynski might also be counted as one of Lynn Truss's Sticklers, willing to bare knuckles over the question of a comma, all the while threatening the dire moral consequences of leaving the question unresolved.

Why did I go to the University of Michigan Labadie Collection of Social Protest Literature to read Kaczynski's writings currently available to the public: his correspondence, his legal notes, and copies of several drafts of "Industrial Society and its Future" (what is popularly called the "Unabomber Manifesto")? I had a stupid, though gnawing, question: What words in the first draft of this work Kaczynski would kill to see published did he consider unnecessary? The answer to this question proved at once fascinating and mundane. The handwritten draft shows a line through the first six words of the initial sentence, deleting "In this article we argue that" to leave the version that would eventually appear in the *New York Times*: "The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race." On the second page of the draft, "We are unable to predict any of that" is shortened to "We can't predict any of that." On the draft's tenth page, "We remind the reader that..." becomes "We emphasize that..." And so on (United States).

Although any of these revisions could be lifted off the manifesto draft and placed in Strunk and White's manual to model brevity, I soon realized I had discovered nothing singular about Kaczynski: Strunk and White is simply the way we write today. Despite intra-field analysis of Strunk and Whitian *shibboleths* (as Paul Butler terms them), clarity, brevity, and correctness have defined the conventional wisdom of what counts as good style for the last fifty years (Butler 20). What has made *The Elements of Style* durable, however, is not the commonplace advice on writing clearly, but rather the manual's prescription for life: Better to be wrong than to be irresolute. Reject the timidity of modernity and return to the plain, simple, unadorned, but above all, bold. The dark side of this approach is that while it pretends to be all about the audience (White said Strunk's main concern was for the reader), it is really about cutting out the audience, freeing oneself from the interpretations of others. Ultimately the goal of Strunk and White's lessons is to take language out of the public sphere, to in fact

do away with the public sphere (since without shared language there is none), and to remake a world distinctly in one's own image: one style, one moral essence. Kaczynski is perhaps the worst-case scenario of devotion to this plan. Throughout his own journey toward better English prose, he sought the lack of debate, the clear moral right and wrong, the experience of certainty. Nobody believed in the power of clear, correct prose to right wrongs more than Kaczynski. He wrote clearly and correctly, and then he killed people.



# A Cabin in the Woods

*In the world I see, you are stalking elk through the damp canyon forests  
around the ruins of Rockefeller Center.*

—Tyler Durden, *Fight Club*

When he was first approached by the publishing house Macmillan to revise Strunk's original *Elements of Style* for wider circulation, E. B. White was packing to leave New York for Maine, for good. White's *New Yorker* essay remembering Strunk captured this moment as a yearning for simplicity: looking around his apartment, White decides to purge his books, but can't bring himself to burn his 1919 version of *The Elements of Style*. White had earlier quit the city to live on a Maine salt farm for much of World War II. Chronicling his life there in monthly essays for *Harper's* under the ambiguous header "One Man's Meat," he explained the move as a run from excess furniture. Realizing he owned 117 chairs between his country and city houses, he sold half his worldly goods, quit his job, and moved to New England.<sup>1</sup> The "Meat" essays (which include the oft-anthologized "Once More to the Lake") find White coming to terms with deer hunting; writing a letter to his hero, Henry Thoreau, on a visit to Walden Pond; and inveighing against progress and change while admitting that he can't bring himself to cut the power to his house. Although White moved back to New York in 1943, he would retire to Maine permanently in 1957. There he would work on his revision of *The Elements of Style* in a boathouse the size of Thoreau's cabin (10' by 15'), outfitted with little more than a table, a chair, and a woodstove.<sup>2</sup>

The setting of the manual's revision is not beside the point. It is the point. When in 1958 White wrote his editor J. G. Case about the changes he planned to make to Strunk's text, he cautioned, "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 beartraps were to give the book what White referred to as "an extra dimension, which, considering what is taking place, it can probably use" (Guth 415); they were set for the descriptivists, just those New York liberals White had gone to Maine to escape. White's additional chapter on style, which he wasn't sure even Strunk would have approved of, is a salvo against liberalism. He wrote Case that in this chapter he would discuss the "broader meaning" of style, "not style in the sense of what is correct but style in

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<sup>1</sup> These essays were later collected with a few others for the still-in-print *One Man's Meat*, the most recent edition's cover photo of which is of White writing in his boathouse.

<sup>2</sup> For more on White's move, see Scott Elledge's biography of White.

the sense of what is distinguished and distinguishing” (Guth 415). Since the urban setting had failed to produce men of distinction, White wrote *The Elements of Style* as a guide to the stylistic woods. The writer, Strunk and White told us as early as 1959, is “a gunner, sometimes waiting in the blind for something to come in, sometimes roaming the countryside hoping to scare something up” (*With Revisions* 55). White might not have succeeded in completely ridding his life of modern civilization, but Strunk’s manual in White’s hands became a successful primitivist tract.

Perhaps that seems like an overstatement, but in fact what counts as *primitivist* is flexible, Marianna Torgovnick reminded us, entirely dependent on what bugs one about the modern. The key feature of primitivism, Torgovnick offered, is defining the primitive in reaction to the present: “Is the present too majestic? Primitive life is not—it is a precapitalist utopia in which only use value, never exchange value, prevails. Is the present sexually repressed? Not primitive life—primitives live life whole, without fear of the body” (8). For Strunk and White, modern life was verbose and obscure, so primitive life must be brief, direct, and clear. New things are bad things, new words the worst of all. The words *offputting* and *ongoing* appear in the third and subsequent editions of *The Elements of Style* as “newfound adjectives, to be avoided because they are inexact and clumsy” (*Third Edition* 54). The suffix *oriented* is lambasted as “a clumsy, pretentious device, much in vogue” (*Third Edition* 55). *The Elements of Style* thus had become, over a period of nearly unprecedented technological progress, the perfect complement to the manual typewriter—a deliberate rejection of “books with permissive steering and automatic transitions” that made our lives easier but rendered our prose impotent and our character lax (xvi). For impotence and laxity, *The Elements of Style* offers a program of stylistic and moral restitution, word by word.

One can hardly help but imagine Kaczynski embracing this volume, in his cabin in Montana (10’ by 12’), as he typed his manifesto out on his manual typewriter. Kaczynski might have particularly relished the implied rejection of cars with automatic steering and “transitions.” Style doesn’t need technology. Style is the man; a man is his style. Reading through the manifesto drafts, however, I was reminded of a peculiar warning attached to this principle in White’s chapter on style that most people can afford to ignore, but Kaczynski surely should have heeded: “No writer long remains incognito” (*Third Edition* 67). Style reveals a man’s identity, “as surely as would his fingerprints” (68). It wasn’t like Kaczynski to miss such things, and yet the publication of the manifesto in the *New York Times* did reveal his identity, bringing the FBI after a nearly twenty-year manhunt to his door. Kaczynski’s brother, David, had tipped off the agency after recognizing the phrase “cool-headed logicians” as Ted’s. The FBI then conducted a stylistic comparison of Kaczynski’s letters and essays with the manifesto (purportedly written by “FC” or “Freedom Club”), using this analysis as grounds to gain a search warrant for Kaczynski’s home. There, they discovered the damning evidence: the typewriter Kaczynski used to write both the manifesto and the letter parts of the letter bombs, and some other bomb parts.

The FBI's thick report comparing the Unabomber's writings to Kaczynski's had to make much ado about style in order to win their warrant. The report begins with the famous police sketch of Kaczynski in a hooded sweatshirt, followed by an epigraph by literary critic Paul de Man, which establishes the one-to-one relationship between man and language: "The writer's language is to some degree the product of his own action; he is both historian and the agent of his own language" (United States 2). According to de Man (at least as the FBI read him), Kaczynski's letters are the stylistic equivalent of a police sketch, providing a different kind of thumbnail of the terrorist. The FBI used a computer to search these letters and the manifesto for similarities in word frequency, spelling, and verbiage. Kaczynski and his defense team's first order of business was to argue in return (although Kaczynski really didn't believe it) that one can't reliably dust for style. They claimed that Kaczynski never wrote the manifesto, that it could have been written by anyone with an anti-technology bias. Much was at stake in maintaining this improbable scenario: if the defense could successfully challenge the stylistic analysis, it could invalidate the search warrant and thereby render inadmissible as evidence everything confiscated in the raid.

Kaczynski himself pored over the FBI's report in an effort to prove de Man wrong. Where the FBI, for example, identified idiosyncratic (that is, British) and errant spellings as Kaczynski's—*analyse* versus *analyze*, and *instalment* rather than *installment*—Kaczynski, writing in the margins of his copy of the warrant, countered "uncommon but acceptable." This comment, though accurate, curiously does nothing to distance Kaczynski from the manifesto. Even less useful would be his (rather Strunkian) corrections of clumsy FBI prose. Where the FBI pegged the manifesto's topic as "modern technology and its associative evils," Kaczynski circled *associative* and wrote next to it "associated." In the summary section of the report, Kaczynski circled the word *analyzation* and wrote next to it "analysis?" Throughout his copy of the FBI's analysis, Kaczynski's notations identified repetitions, misspellings, misplaced quotations, and factual errors. After Kaczynski got through with it, the analysis looked like a shoddy document, a piece of poorly written if no less persuasive copy.

To persuade, however, was not really Kaczynski's goal. For Kaczynski, as for Strunk and White, clarity in prose was a sign of character. Kaczynski's letters sent from prison show that he edited people compulsively and flagrantly. In a 1998 letter responding to a correspondent who sought a recommendation letter to Harvard Divinity School (even Kaczynski was incredulous that he could be of any help), Kaczynski wrote, "By the way, I know it's rude to correct people, but I do it anyway; so I'll point out that the singular of 'species' is 'species' (unless you're talking about money)" (19 Sept. 1998). He assented to the writer's request for a recommendation, handwriting to Harvard that the applicant displayed "a certain roughness or carelessness in his use of the English language, which leads to a lack of clarity in his written expression," showing the applicant to be "impetuous and undisciplined" ("Letter to Dean").

Somehow, Kaczynski saw himself as not impetuous, despite having blown up people indiscriminately. Maybe under different circumstances he would have argued that the

letters in the letter bombs were well written. Indeed, he came close to implicating himself in such a way. Kaczynski was so devoted to the connection between correctness and character that he couldn't stop himself from correcting versions of the manifesto circulating, even when providing such corrections begged the legal question of how he could be the source of the text's verity without also being its author. Several versions of the manifesto exist in the Kaczynski archives: the handwritten draft, carbon copies of the typed version sent to the newspapers, and the FBI's transcription. None of these, according to Kaczynski, is error free. To explain the source of the corrections to one particular draft, he enclosed a note written in black pen:

Note: The corrections made on this copy of the "Manifesto" are derived from the FBI's transcription of the "Manifesto" that accompanied the FBI's application for a search warrant in April, 1996.

Below this note Kaczynski penned another in blue ink, an oblique suggestion of his authorship of the manifesto:

The above note is false. I stated that the corrections were based on the FBI's transcription of the Manifesto in order to give a plausible source for the information that enabled me to correct the Manifesto, and because in November of 2001 thought that for legal reasons it would be imprudent to reveal the *real* source of the information on which I based the corrections of the Manifesto. (9 Oct. 2003)

Style may identify, but hyper-correctness absolutely incriminates.

In the (admittedly small) segment of popular lore that does not dismiss him as a madman, Kaczynski is romanticized as an idealist who held fast to his beliefs, resolutely seeking to represent himself in court even though self-representation would almost certainly lead to the death penalty. But Kaczynski was not nearly that consistent, nor that resolute. He was not above hiding facts or even distancing himself from his writing if he felt doing so would free him from incrimination, as the note above about hiding the "real" location of the manuscript suggests. Nonetheless, Kaczynski saw himself as a bearer of standards, a gentleman immune to the politically correct permissiveness of liberal modern life. He often apologized to correspondents if he felt his prose unpolished, his handwriting unclear, and occasionally if his tone was irate; ironically, given his stance on political correctness, he once apologized when he thought he might have offended a possibly Jewish correspondent by wishing him a Merry Christmas. But that's virtually all he apologized for. I read through several linear feet of boxes of his letters expecting to find at least one instance when Kaczynski admitted that he killed people, that he was the Unabomber, that he wrote the manifesto threatening even more violence. He never did.

# Death by Comma

Let's return for a minute to Johnson's contention that we might see recent school shootings as payback for poor pedagogy. I think that's a big conceptual leap, one we shouldn't make. Worth exploring, however, is why we're suddenly willing to make these leaps. Are we really worried our students are going to kill us? Speaking of the Unabomber directly in *Writing at the End of the Worlds* Richard Miller asked, "Who, in their darkest hours, hasn't entertained ideas about the value of obliterating such a world and starting over" (62)? Miller's rhetorical question gives me the chance to challenge the depiction of our students and one another as barely repressed mass murderers, because I can honestly answer, "Me," for starters. Perhaps this reveals something about gender, but even in my darkest hours I'm more prone to give the system the benefit of the doubt; it's individual people I imagine need to go, and by go, I mean to another town. I further suspect that for a good many of our students, no matter how frustrated they might become with the bureaucracy of higher education and the repressive orders of the classroom, if they have such dark hours, those hours are a few amid thousands—not, as in the case of Kaczynski, pretty much every waking one.

Let's remember, upon hearing of the shootings at Virginia Tech, that Nikki Giovanni knew immediately which one of her students had done it. Later we were to find out that not a few failures of the mental health system were implicated.<sup>1</sup> Several systems broke down—tragically mundane breakdowns that have been repeated nationally. Even Kaczynski tried to get help for his persistent insomnia and stress when he was in the woods, but more often he tried to address his problems himself rather than risk the stigmatizing diagnosis of mental illness. To take the examples of Dylan Klebold, Eric Harris, Seung-Hui Cho, and Theodore Kaczynski as paradigmatic of a greater Zeitgeist among students badly misjudges our students, and, I think, misjudges what makes people snap.<sup>2</sup>

Moving closer to the arguments over the uses and abuses of style, the problem with the notion that we are "writing at the end of the world" is that it folds too neatly into the apocalypticism of the Sticklers, they who are looking for the rhetorical end of days, using style as the vehicle to bring about the final conflict that will even

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Cho's mental state and treatment, see the Virginia Tech Review Panel's report on the tragedy.

<sup>2</sup> Kaczynski was diagnosed, I believe accurately, as a paranoid schizophrenic. He is mentally ill, and while the bulk of violence is committed upon the mentally ill, and not by the mentally ill, he happens to be one of those well-publicized exceptions, and no less ill for it.

all scores, close all the books.<sup>3</sup> Although Kaczynski may not be the model psyche to understand our students' discontents, he does present an interesting case study of Stickler fighting spirit. While his pretrial was in progress, Kaczynski was already working on "Truth versus Lies," a treatise arguing against his family's portrayal of him as mentally ill. This 548-page rebuttal had for Kaczynski evidentiary significance, so it's not surprising that in his correspondence with the would-be publisher of the manuscript, Beau Friedlander, Kaczynski's inner editor would *go* into overdrive. When a copyeditor changed the spelling of *extravert* to *extrovert*, Kaczynski wrote Friedlander a full page on the Latin origins and contemporary misspellings of the word, concluding

Introvert (turned inward) and extravert (turned outward) were originally (and, I claim, correctly) spelled with an o and an a respectively. However, because the two words were paired, there was confusion about where the o and the a were supposed to go, and consequently one encountered the misspellings intravert and extrovert so frequently that they eventually became accepted as alternative spellings. (4 Dec. 1998)

Kaczynski had set the editorial terms with Friedlander in an October 1998 letter, asking that Friedlander not make any changes that would alter the meaning of the text, or that not so many changes be made "that the writing would no longer be my own" (2). Subsequent letters would reveal that he really wanted next to no changes at all. In an April 1999 letter, Kaczynski charged that Friedlander had failed to honor his wishes, and parsed Friedlander's edits into four categories: those that changed his meaning; those "not clearly right or wrong" but simply an imposition of personal preference; those "clearly wrong"; and finally, those few edits that fixed a definitive flaw in the prose. Kaczynski gave examples of each category, emphasizing the debasement of both his prose and the English language. In category one he gave as an example, "On p. 2, line 2 you change 'they must have sensed my contempt for them' to 'Perhaps they sensed my contempt for them.' But 'must have' is precisely what I meant, not 'perhaps'" (3). For an example of a "clearly wrong" edit, Kaczynski, tacking on a lesson in idiomatic style, wrote

On p. 28, lines 10-11, you want me to say: "I never had more than a handful of philosophical or intellectual discussions with K. H." This won't do. You can speak literally of a handful of pennies or a handful of peanuts, and you can speak figuratively of a handful of people or a handful of cases, but you can't speak of a handful of discussions. It just isn't idiomatic English.

Kaczynski then proposed that Friedlander limit himself to one hundred edits. Later, in an August 1999 letter, Kaczynski seemed to reach the pinnacle of Sticklerdom: "Your

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<sup>3</sup> That said, anyone who has lost a loved one, such loss being the occasion of Miller's book and the root of its mood, certainly will recognize it to be end of some world or other, which end Miller brilliantly captures.

page proofs usually indicate an ellipsis together with a period by 4 equally-spaced dots: ‘Man bites dog...’ Thus there is ambiguity as to whether the ellipsis precedes or follows the period. (Note the difference between ‘Man bites dog... ’ and ‘Man bites dog...’). Ideally this distinction should be preserved.” As usual, he had a point, but still...

If you are reading Kaczynski’s letters with the purpose of writing about them some day—and really, why else would you be reading them—these punctilious disquisitions, one after another, can be unnerving. To quote in publication from the material in the Theodore Kaczynski archives, you first have to secure the permission of the copyright-holder, who in most cases is Kaczynski. The more I read of Kaczynski’s correspondence from prison with the various writers who sought permission before me, the more I despaired. Kaczynski noted every comma, every dash that a writer had misplaced, every turn of phrase taken out of context. He further seemed to have a copy of every letter he had received or written to people, even through chains of correspondence lasting years. I imagined him perched in his cell on top of stacks and stacks of letters, copies of the same letters I was reading through in Ann Arbor. But that didn’t seem possible. He kept mentioning to correspondents that he couldn’t accept unsolicited books, however kindly meant, as he was allowed to have only a certain amount of material in his cell at any one time. Perhaps he simply remembered everything verbatim. True to form, when he gave me permission to cite from his work, he corrected two typos I had made in the transcriptions of his letters.

At the end of my third day of reading through the Kaczynski files, I emerged from the archives depressed, sorry I even started the project, ready to go across town to my friends’ house to hold their baby. I was depressed about the mental health system, the criminal justice system, and most of all worn down by Kaczynski’s relentlessness, by the abundant evidence of what his forensic psychologist Karen Bronk Froming called “an inability to form personal relationships.” I found Friedlander and emailed him, in part to get permission to quote his correspondence, but really because I wanted to talk to someone who understood. Friedlander, after all, had gotten some of the worst of Kaczynski’s exactitude and scorn. When Friedlander had suggested to Kaczynski that his complaints about his mother sending unwanted packages were unlikely to arouse the reader’s sympathy, Kaczynski accused him of pandering to the general public. He was writing the truth, not a public relations effort. He really didn’t care what people thought, or what they felt about how he treated his family. What mattered, Kaczynski made clear, were his own feelings:

You said you don’t understand my relative indifference to sales. So I’ll try to explain: I’m not completely indifferent to sales. All else being equal, I’d like the book to have a large sale. But it’s not terribly important to me. It will be adequate for the satisfaction of my personal feelings if I put on record, and make available to anyone who wants to read it, the truth about my relations with my family. (1 Jan. 1999)

Or put differently in E. B. White’s 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. Start sniffing the air, or glancing at the Trend Machine, and you are as good as dead, although you may make a nice living. (*Third Edition* 85)<sup>4</sup>

Mired in copyright and permissions issues, “Truth versus Lies” never did get published. Friedlander’s fledgling press slid into bankruptcy, and the correspondence between Friedlander and Kaczynski ended—sort of. In 2005, Friedlander wrote Kaczynski that he had turned down an offer to talk about him at a symposium on the subject of evil, adding, “I owe you an apology. My work as an agent of the machine that is publishing conflicted with your work as an agent of refutation.” Friedlander told me when we spoke that he was deliberately using “Kaczynski-speak” in this letter. Kaczynski’s mind, he had come to understand, was made up of “crystalline highways.” As long as you stayed on those highways, you were fine, “but the moment you veered off, that’s when he would beat you to death with a comma.”

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<sup>4</sup> Ironically this charge is conveyed in gender-neutral language in the fourth and subsequent editions: “Your whole duty as a writer is to please and satisfy yourself” (*Fourth Edition* 84).



# The Ghost Speaks

*Hey, you created me. I didn't create some loser alter-ego to make myself feel better.*

—Tyler Durden, *Fight Club*

The editorial process for *The Elements of Style* was not entirely smooth. According to White's biographer, Scott Elledge, White informed his editors at Macmillan that he didn't really need editorial help but rather would write, as he always did, to please himself. His editors at Macmillan, apparently not so much in reverential awe as in need of profit, nevertheless sent pre-publication copies of the manuscript to several English composition teachers for review. The teachers wrote back that the book was too prescriptive, and cited its failure to acknowledge that correct usage was a matter of current practice. When White's editor J. G. Case suggested to White that he soften the manual's rigid approach to meet the demands of the market, White questioned Case's manhood:

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 have been sympathetic all along with your qualms about “The Elements of Style,” but I know that 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... .In your letter you are asking me to soften up just a bit, in the hope of picking up some support from the Happiness Boys, or, as you call them, the descriptivists.[...]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. I feel a terrible responsibility in this project, and it is making me jumpy.[...]The above, written by the below, are, of course, fighting words, and will, I am sure, bring you out of your corner swinging. But I think it is best that I get them down on paper. (Guth 416)

Here invoking Strunk as the ultimate *hombre*, the voice of timeless authority, White essentially invites the editors to take it outside. He declares that he is ready to come to blows to defend not only himself, but also his mentor, the “dead precisionist” with

whom he considers himself a package deal. His single purpose in writing the volume, White tells Case, “is to be faithful to Strunk as of 1958”—a curious construction, as by 1958 Strunk had been dead for more than a decade (Guth 416).

We know a lot about E. B. White, but what do we really know of William Strunk Jr., the better half of Strunk and White? The details are sparse: born in Cincinnati, Ohio, Strunk received his PhD from Cornell University in 1896. He taught at Cornell for the next forty-six years, during which time he published, locally, two brief monographs—*The Elements of Style* in 1918, and, in 1922, a sixty-one-page pedagogical reference book on English meter. He edited a few literary volumes including John Dryden’s *Essays on the Drama*, in the introduction to which Strunk somewhat gratuitously faulted Milton for the “inordinate length of his sentences” (Dryden, the clear winner of the comparative brevity test) (xxxvi). He published a few papers from conferences in the proceedings. Aside from a smattering of literature classes, Strunk taught a heavy rotation of composition and journalism courses. Strunk, in other words, was deadwood.<sup>1</sup>

It was exactly this deadwoodness of Strunk, however—his lack of academic presence, substantial publication record, and, let’s be frank, intellectual heft—that paradoxically enabled White’s construction of his mentor as an infallible authority. How this process works is best revealed in one of Strunk’s own publications, a paper on the importance of the Ghost’s directions to Hamlet (this paper culled from conference proceedings). The gist of the paper is this: had Hamlet only listened more carefully to the Ghost’s injunctions, he would have resolved to overcome his enemies sooner, and the bloodbath that ends the play could have been avoided. In Strunk’s view, Hamlet is the essence of the irresolute man, the Ghost not only Hamlet’s authority but also his foil; the Ghost does not indulge in pointless ruminations, would never wonder whether ‘twas nobler to be or not. Even when laying out Hamlet’s instructions, the Ghost, Strunk noted admiringly, avoids needless words: “If the ghost has nothing further to say upon these points, the reason must be that Hamlet is in need of no further exhortation” (“Importance” 482). In Strunk’s analysis, the contemporary critical dithering about what the play really means would all be cleared up if we just listened to the Ghost, the voice of Shakespeare, the infallible truth.

White similarly wanted to skirt the debates over language and meaning that characterized his age rather than engage them directly in his revision of Strunk’s book. His message: just listen to the Ghost. Strunk was a figure so shadowy and poorly defined that he could easily be made mythic in stature. Strunk, through White’s prose, became the primitive that irresolute White himself never could be: bold, uncompromis-

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<sup>1</sup> Strunk was certainly deadwood by today’s standards, but likely also undistinguished by the standards of his day. One of the professors who retired at the same time as Strunk was the head of his field’s professional organization, for example. To be fair, Strunk did have some career highlights of an unusual nature: he was the technical advisor for a film version of *Romeo and Juliet*, earning him leave to go to Hollywood. He also was honored by the French government for a translation of a pamphlet outlining France’s important role during World War I.

ing, even irrational—but free. White looked to Strunk to cure his modern malaise, just as subsequently millions of readers would dust off their *Elements of Style* to remember the clear, uncluttered, carefree days of college. They would find there a manifesto on stylistic self-reliance, for manifesto, and not manual, is what the *The Elements of Style* has become.

The manifesto, Janet Lyon reminded us in her seminal work on the form, is the z/r-genre to critique modernity. It enacts this critique through sheer force of exhortation, by embodying, rhetorically, “nascent fury” and “fervid, even violent rage” (14). Deriving from the Latin composite of *manus* and *fectus* for “hostile hand,” the manifesto is “a fist striking through the scrim of civic order.” It is at once “word and deed, both threat and incipient action” (14). The manifesto leaves no room for debate or conciliation in its tight rhetorical structure. It strikes a combative tone and keeps striking. “It conveys resolute oppositionality and indulges no tolerance for the fainthearted” (9). The manifesto, in short, was perfectly suited to White’s purposes of chastising the English composition teachers of 1958, and every year after. The rhetorical feat that the manifesto accomplishes is in making its threat continual, without resolution. The manifesto spoils for a fight and never ceases.

As Lyon pointed out, the manifesto establishes its timelessness by locating its authority in an unspecified “we,” thereby both invoking a broader community and inviting participation in it. The power of the manifesto thus comes from the “potentially infinite constituency” it creates (26). The blurbs Pearson selected for the fiftieth anniversary edition of *The Elements of Style* nod to the manual’s ability to create such a transfinite constituency; on the one hand, there are a lot of blurbs, and on the other, vast scopes of time and demography are referenced in them. Ann Patchett declares that *The Elements of Style* “remains an unwavering beacon of light in these grammatically troubled times.” David Remnick offers that the book “never seems to go out of date.” Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls it a “Bible” and attests, “I still direct my students at Harvard to their definition about the difference between ‘that’ and ‘which.’” Jim Lehrer offers, “For writers of all kinds and sizes the world begins and ends with Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style*” (*Fiftieth* front matter). The time the book addresses is always now, the group it enjoins expandable and always avid.

Like all potentially infinite constituencies, however, the one that encompasses disciples of Strunk and White rigorously polices its boundaries, in this case by marking the line between writers good and bad. Richard Ford suggests that he leaves a copy of the book on his desk like the Gideons leave Bibles in hotel rooms “as a way of saying to the hapless inhabitant: ‘In case your reckless ways should strand you here, there’s help’” (*Fiftieth* front matter). *The Elements of Style* thus invites you to join the constituency of Sticklers while leaving your constituency of peers to perish in flames. Conveniently, however, you can make the leap from bad writer to good simply by signing on, and you need never fear seeming uncharitable to those who failed to follow. After all, you’re just following Strunk, who represents “good taste, good conduct, and simple justice” (“Will Strunk” 256). When E. B. White decided these qualities were lacking in the

people around him, he reached for Will Strunk as the sock through which he could ventriloquize his disdain for the era in which he—not Strunk—lived. Without Strunk to back him up, White might have been dismissed as an irascible old man, barking at the modern world. With Strunk, White merely passes on the ancient word. Kaczynski, too, must have understood the importance of having someone else do the barking for you. Even now, after all his criminal appeals have been exhausted, he still refuses to claim authorship of the manifesto. When I approached him for this article, he suggested that I should consider the possibility that the Unabomber may have deliberately used uncommon spellings to confuse the FBI. Kaczynski might be in prison, diagnosed and dismissed as a madman, but the Freedom Club could still be lurking in the woods, hatching its plans to bring the technological society to its knees.

There probably is no longer any way to prevent the Unabomber's Strunk and White, along with the Unabomber's other possessions and writings, from being auctioned off, even though, as David Gelernter is right to argue, the auction will be a macabre spectacle serving no one.<sup>2</sup> The auction could have been prevented had government agents, instead of arguing in court that they had the right to hold Kaczynski's property indefinitely, simply acceded to Kaczynski's request for its return. One wonders what they were scared of. As Richard Miller pointed out, the Unabomber

Manifesto has fomented nothing; as revolutions go, it was a dead letter. Quite possibly the Unabomber's Strunk and White will be released to the public the same year as Pearson's Strunk and White. In fact, it could happen while this essay is in press. Kaczynski's appeal to stop the court-ordered auction was rejected in January of 2009. In at least delaying the auction that will deprive him of the original copies of 40,000 pages of his writing, however, Kaczynski has in part succeeded. Like all those who stand for clarity, Kaczynski isn't really in it to communicate. He's in it for the fight.

There's a lesson for compositionists in this, a way to make peace with our marginalization in public discussions of what counts as good writing. The only way to stop the fight is by refusing to fight. We can resist the urge to counter catastrophizing with catastrophizing, the Stickler nostalgia for a perfectly ordered world that never existed with our nostalgia for an equally mythic parallel universe where students get to write something meaningful. We can monitor our own syllabi, writings, and in-class tangential rants for where we are mourning stylistic or moral worlds gone by, and where we are spoiling for a fight to bring them back. Those fights mark those places where we reject what our students bring us, and what they have to offer us and one another (if we let them). Our students are not writing at the end of anything, but at the beginning of what we can hardly imagine. It is humble work to greet these students, and the various writing technologies, modes, and exigencies that come with them, not with

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<sup>2</sup> Except possibly me, because I really still do want to read the Unabomber's Strunk and White, and would bid for it.

fear and please, not with *The Elements of Style*, but instead with the hope that their continued presence in our classes asks of us.

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# Comment Responses

## Comment No.1

I am surprised that so good a scholar as Catherine Prendergast should have ignored an important matter in her interesting September 2009 *College English* article on the Unabomber and Strunk and White's book. Somebody had to have been Ted Kaczynski's first-year composition teacher at Harvard and might even have written about that discovery and that experience. I was stunned when the FBI interviewed me some years ago to find out that I was that teacher, and I wrote about the meaning of that discovery in "Dangerous Reading: The Unabomber as College Freshman." I won't repeat here what I said there, but *CE* readers may want to know that we did *not* use Strunk and White (no relation) in that course, and that a certain amount of what we did read worked its way into the manifesto that finally revealed the identity of the Unabomber.

Edward M. White  
University of Arizona  
Tucson, Arizona

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## Comment No.2

This is a response to Catherine Prendergast's article. The stubbornness that E. B. White showed in his dealings with his editor while drafting the third edition of *The Elements of Style (TEOS)* is misinterpreted by Professor Prendergast. She sees it as macho posturing and irascibility, whereas it was really the insistence of an artist—a creative writer—on his vision: he was not about to have this compromised by the opinions of others, a fight that all artists must continuously wage. *TEOS* has survived—and is still so widely used—because it puts in readable English basic principles of grammar, diction, and punctuation so that students (and professional writers) can easily grasp them. Neither group cares whether White's approach was descriptivist or prescriptivist; in fact, students probably prefer the latter because it is simpler. The underlying problem with Professor Prendergast's piece is its premise: she draws a parallel between a possibly quirky but withal gifted and humane individual best known for *Charlotte's*



*Web* and *Stuart Little* and someone with a mental disorder who maimed many and killed three. That she doesn't realize, ipso facto, that this comparison is absurd suggests that she takes herself too seriously. Her argument goes thus: White = *TEOS* = the Unabomber's manifesto = Kaczynski = the Bush administration = conservatives = what (I guess) is wrong with the world. This *is* a mite extreme. Her views are predictably postmodern and—although well argued—motivated by animus. To make statements such as “Style is indistinguishable from bloodlust” (661); or “Strunk, through White's prose, became the primitive that irresolute White himself never could be”; or (best of all) “The manifesto [*TEOS*], in short, was perfectly suited to White's purposes of chastising the English composition teachers of 1958, and every year after” (671) is, as she accuses others of being, apocalyptic to say the least.

William Linn

University of Michigan-Dearborn

# Catherine's Response to the Responses

I did read Edward White's fascinating article, but I didn't discuss it in this piece because all biographies I have of Kaczynski suggest that his schizophrenia did not manifest until after college. Because the onset of schizophrenia is a profound event, I did not want to assert a continuity of beliefs between the younger and older Kaczynski. It hadn't occurred to me that those who had read White's article might imagine that continuity where none was suggested, so I offer him many thanks for his letter.

In response to William Linn, there is not a thing I can say about how unsound the principles of grammar offered in *The Elements of Style* actually are that Geoffrey K. Pullum, coauthor of *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, hasn't said better in the *New York Times*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and, most recently, an essay titled "Prescriptive grammar in America: The Land of the Free and *The Elements of Style*" (available online at <http://ling.ed.ac.uk/~gpullum/LandOfTheFree.pdf>). Although I do reject as emerging from my article the elementary equivalencies Linn describes, I stand by the entire piece, including my characterization of E. B. White's letter to the editor as irascible macho posturing. I will let the reader decide for herself if to flag machismo where one sees it qualifies as apocalyptic; I can see how some might view it that way. Finally, I'm not sure if the article, which conforms to academic conventions adhered to for decades, can be described as postmodern; it is, however, definitely post-Strunk and White. Let's move on.

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The Ted K Archive

Catherine Prendergast  
The Fighting Style  
Reading the Unabomber's Strunk and White  
September 2009

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JSTOR

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