

On Sociological Writing¹

Kai T. Erikson

I

It is widely thought, both inside and outside our profession, that sociologists do not express themselves very well. The critic Malcolm Cowley complained years ago that the wisdoms of sociology, such as they are, tend to be conveyed "in a language that has to be learned almost like Esperanto."² And Edmund Wilson, who once toyed with the idea that the writing of every specialist in the university should be reviewed by professors of English, doubted that sociologists would ever be able to survive such a test. Exposing the defects of sociological writing is a literary sport of long standing.

The editor of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, in an entry on "sociologese," thought he knew why:

We live in a scientific age, and like to show, by the words we use, that we think in a scientific way. . . . Sociology is a new science concerning itself not with esoteric matters outside of the comprehension of the layman, as the older sciences do, but with the ordinary affairs of ordinary people. This seems to engender in those who write about it a feeling that the lack of any abstruseness in their subject demands a compensatory abstruseness in their language. . . . There are of course writers on sociological subjects who express themselves clearly and simply; that makes it all the more deplorable that such books are often written in a jargon which one is almost tempted to believe is deliberately employed for the purpose of making what is simple appear complicated,

¹ Portions of this paper have been borrowed from other sources, three of them published and another on its way to press. To that extent, this may be one of the most brazen acts of plagiarism ever printed in a leading sociological periodical. But the theft is from writings of my own, and I plead innocence on the ground that the passages reproduced here are being put to a special purpose. Portions of the below have appeared in *Contemporary Sociology*, 15:808-811, 1986; *The Yale Review*, 78:525-538, 1989; and Albert Hunter, ed., *The Rhetoric of Social Research: Understood and Believed*, Rutgers University Press, 1990. Other portions are scheduled to appear in *The Eye of a Stranger: Reflections on Social Life*, to be published someday by the Yale University Press.

² Malcolm Cowley, "Sociological Habit Patterns in Linguistic Transmogrification," *Reporter*, 15:41, 1956

exhibiting in an extreme form the common vice . . . of preferring pretentious abstract words to simple concrete ones.³

Most sociologists are aware that the abuse we attract on this score is in large part justified. We are not often persuaded that our prose suffers greatly from comparison with that of economists or political scientists, mind you – nor, for that matter, are we inclined to blush with embarrassment when we read what professors of English have to say these days. Still, we frequently wonder in the quiet of our own counsels what there is about the sociological project in general that seems to induce such murky prose.

The lines a person composes, of course, reflect the furnishings of the mind that fashioned them, and to that extent a prose style is an individual thing like a signature or a voice. We can begin by noting, then, that we sociologists are for the most part recruited from those parts of the scholarly world where people are neither trained in nor committed to literary graces. We are likely to regard good writing as an ornament rather than as an important professional qualification, and while many of us honor it and appreciate it, we seldom reward it in the coin of advancement.

So our students are not chosen in the first place for the sweetness of their voices. But that is probably not the root of the matter anyway, for quite a number of them seem to feel that whatever writing skills they brought with them into the field began to erode the minute they entered a sociological apprenticeship in earnest. Thus the lines people compose are not only a reflection of their individual imaginations but of the disciplines to which those imaginations are being tuned – those habits of mind and temper that are among the intellectual reflexes of the field. That complicates things.

II

What is the charge against sociological language anyway? Here are four samples of sociological prose selected by writers anxious to identify and correct our many faults. Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff seem to have been very struck in 1970 by the scholar who wrote:

a highly consistent structuration of the external stimulus world may, at times, be experienced with sufficient intensity because of its personal implications to inhibit the operation of usually applicable internal structururations or standards of judgment.

Hanan C. Selvin and Everett Wilson, both uncommonly literate sociologists themselves contributed this scrap in 1984:

The impression is commonplace that a family system marked by such factors as late-age-at marriage, a high degree of non-marriage, a high incidence of marital disruption, and a low marital fertility schedule is conducive to the high involvement of women in economic activities outside the home.

³ H. W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. 2nd ed. rev. Sir Ernest Gowers, Oxford University Press, 1965, pp. 569-570

Sir Ernest Gowers, author of the entry on "sociologese" in *Fowler's English Usage* cited earlier, thought the following should be added to the gallery:

The home is the specific zone at the periphery of which is an active interfacial membrane or surface furthering exchange – from within outward and without inwards – a mutualizing membrane between the family and the society in which it lives.

And a reporter for the *New York Times*, not knowing what else to say about the papers he was being exposed to at an annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in 1988, was more impressed by the language he was listening to than the information he was learning. He quoted one person who began with the comment, "In the emphasis on diversity, the notion of a hegemonic sexual discourse is deconstructed, even among those who claim to have one," and then went on to point out that "the exploration of sexuality within feminism is attentive to the postmodern concern with the multiplying mutations of the self."

Passages like these – I could have selected hundreds of others collected by alert critics both inside and outside the field – would pain the most obdurately tone-deaf of us. They are awful. No argument there. The fact that those particular specimens have been so carefully selected for examination, of course, means that they need not be regarded as ordinary, workaday offenses, drawn randomly from the millions of sentences that make up the sociological literature. They stood out even in what those critics already saw as a wasteland of inert prose. They were gathered in the way a prosecutor sifts the record for evidence, and in that sense they need not be seen as representative misdemeanors but as high crimes.

But what makes them so bad? An uncommon number of the words in them have several syllables, to be sure, but they can be found in the working vocabularies of most educated speakers of English, and the sentences themselves adhere to all of the published rules of composition. So the problem is not that they are technically inaccessible, as is so often the case with the technical writings of other specialists. The problem is that these sentences lumber painfully across the page, bent low by the weight of all the unnecessary syllables and complex locutions they are being asked to carry. They are ponderous, convoluted, hulking, bovine, full of a contrived profundity. The passage quoted by Barzun and Graff means something like "a plausible enough stimulus [a hoax, in this case] can throw you off stride so completely that you lose your ability to judge it correctly." The Selvin and Wilson sample really says "women who marry late, who remain single, who are separated from their husbands, or who have fewer children to take care of, are more likely to have jobs away from home." The Gowers selection: "A home is a contained space in which a family lives, but it is a space that both influences and is influenced by the social world around it." As for the *New York Times* quotation, I simply remain at a loss.

Since the passages exhibited here were lifted out of their original contexts, it is difficult to know what purpose they were supposed to serve in the longer arguments of which they were once a part. But, sitting all alone on the page, the ideas they seem to be expressing look like modest ones by any standard. And that is Gower's charge exactly –

that sociologists so often convey a thought of slim dimension in the most abstract and pretentious language they can devise. It is an effort to lend a kind of technical authority to what are otherwise simple and sometimes even quite self-evident observations.

Howard S. Becker, author of a wonderful treatise on sociological writing,⁴ argues convincingly that these writing habits run deep in the intellectual grain of the discipline. The "verbal folklore of sociology," Cowley once called them. They include a remarkable ability to coin neologisms, to slip into the passive voice, and in general to erect complex configurations of words that have the effect of making the thought being expressed seem wiser and more scientific than common sense might otherwise suggest. One writer from the *New Statesman* clipped the following passage from a report that came across his desk: "In the London Traffic Survey, future traffic flows are seen to depend more than anything else on car ownership, and that in turn is shown to be a function of household income."⁵ These are simple words, every one of them. Two out of three of them, in fact, have only one syllable. But the construction of the sentence that contains them is not so simple. It can be translated: "When incomes go up, people buy cars, and that means more traffic."

Another part of the problem is how we learn to construct arguments. The process by which we *arrive* at a conclusion is seldom as straightforward as the conclusion we are prepared to draw from it, and the temptation to let readers in on the process so that they will not underestimate the effort involved is not only very human but a well-established convention of sociological writing: we learn early in graduate study to inform our fellow sociologists in exacting detail how we came to the place in which we now find ourselves.

In his introduction to *England in the Age of the American Revolution*, Sir Lewis Napier contrasted English scholars (like himself) who "prefer to make it appear as if our ideas came to us casually – like the Empire – in a fit of absence of mind," and the prototypical German scholar "who prefaces his monumental work by long chapters on methodology, and hesitates ever to take down the scaffolding which he has erected, for fear people might think the building had grown by itself."⁶ Sir Lewis might very well conclude that American social scientists write in the same language as British scholars, but learn how to phrase an argument from German ones. That should not be hard to understand. We sociologists are encouraged by the nature of our discipline to describe the paths along which we travel to our destinations as carefully as possible so that others can trace the journey or even replicate it. That is the way of science.

The fiercest of our critics, then, sometimes conclude from the opaqueness of the languages we often use that sociology is a kind of confidence game, an effort, as George Orwell once put it, to give "an appearance of solidity to pure wind."⁷ That strikes fairly close to home, but the issue is far more complex than that – a complexity which Orwell himself, who had a sharp, incisive sociological sensibility, did not have the patience to

⁴ Howard S. Becker, *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*. University of Chicago Press, 1986. One of the sources from which I am borrowing for the purposes of this article was a review of this book I wrote for *Contemporary Sociology*

⁵ Mervyn Jones, "The Sociology Ploy," *New Statesman*, 75(2 September):313, 1966

⁶ second edition, St. Martin's, 1961, p. 14

⁷ "Politics and the English Language," in *A Collection of Essays by George Orwell*, Harcourt Brace, 1946, p. 156

recognize. The first question we need to ask is: what is it about the sociological project that sometimes acts to encourages such prose?

III

Most critics of sociology come from fields where things do not need to be stated very precisely and where the need for specialized vocabularies and specialized ways of presenting information are relatively small. In that sense, sociologists occupy a kind of borderland, positioned between the holdings of historians and literary critics, say, who often use language to reach out to wider audiences, and the holdings of economists and statisticians who circulate material to one another written (if that is the right word) in a species of code. To the first set of neighbors we look inelegant; to the second we look inexact.

Orwell once translated a familiar passage from *Ecclesiastes* into what he took to be a representative sample of sociologese. The original passage reads:

I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, or yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

And Orwell's parody reads:

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.⁸

Orwell wants us to note that the language of the first passage is vastly richer than the language of the second, and who would argue with that? The original is wondrous poetry, while the translation is as labored and as dreary as the cunning of a brilliant writer could make it. Yet there is another moral here, one that Orwell did not intend for even a moment. The poetry is enchanting. It bathes one in its warmth. But it does not ask to be read critically, which the parody, for all its deliberate clumsiness, does. And that really matters, too, for once readers are invited to listen to the *thought* rather than the language, the *logic* rather than the mood, they may more easily note that the passage is full of the most doubtful conclusions. The facts are that the race almost always *does* go to the swift, the battle to the strong, the advantage to people of knowledge and skill; and while time and chance may now and then supply exceptions to those rules, no sensible person would dream of living by so contingent a philosophy as that. What government would base a defense system on it? What brokerage an investment portfolio? Damon Runyan understood exactly: "The race may not be to the swift nor the victory to the strong, but that's how you bet it."

H. L. Mencken made much the same point in an essay on Abraham Lincoln:

⁸ Ibid., p. 156

The Gettysburg speech is at once the shortest and the most famous oration in American history. . . . Nothing else precisely like it is to be found in the whole range of oratory. Lincoln himself never even remotely approached it. It is genuinely stupendous.

But let us not forget that it is poetry, not logic; beauty, not sense. Think of the argument in it. Put it in the cold words of everyday. The doctrine is simply this: that the Union soldiers who died at Gettysburg sacrificed their lives to the cause of self-determination – "that government of the people, by the people, and for the people" should not perish from the earth. It is difficult to imagine anything more untrue. The Union soldiers in that battle actually fought self-determination; it was the Confederates who fought for the right of the people to govern themselves.⁹

Whether Mencken was reading the logic of the address correctly himself does not matter for our purposes here. The point is that literally hundreds of millions of Americans have read the Gettysburg Address and tens of millions have memorized all or parts of it. I was one of them. But how many have ever been moved to "think of the argument in it."

The challenge for sociological writing, then, is to convey ideas and information with enough clarity to be easily understood outside the narrow precincts of the discipline and yet with sufficient precision to allow for careful inspection and evaluation within it. We would be entirely right to dismiss the rebukes of a Gowers or a Cowley or an Orwell out of hand, first because they had no notion what sociology is about and second because they were probably wrong to think that social life must be easy to understand and write about because it involves "the ordinary affairs of ordinary people." None of them would argue, presumably, that physics ought to come easily to us because we are subject to the laws of motion or that physiology ought to come easily to us because we occupy living bodies. Why is it so much easier to suppose that human social life is simple and well within the grasp of anyone who lives in a society?

IV

Most sociologists think of their discipline as an *approach* as well as a subject matter, a *perspective* as well as a body of knowledge. What distinguishes us from other observers of the human scene is the manner in which we look out at the world – the way our eyes are focused, the way our minds are tuned, the way our intellectual reflexes are set. Sociologists peer ut at the same landscapes as historians or poets or philosophers, but we select different details out of those scenes to attend closely, and we sort those details in different ways. So it is not only *what* sociologists see but the *way they look* that gives the field its special distinction.

I suggest to my students: Imagine that you are walking down a sidewalk at rush hour in New York. You pass thousands of people in the space of a few moments, all of them intent on their own individual errands, absorbed in their own individual thoughts,

⁹ "Abraham Lincoln," in *The Vintage Mencken*, ed. Alistaire Cooke, Vintage, 1955, pp. 179-180 (1920)

making their own way through the crowd. Each face is different. Each gait is different. It is difficult to sense any pattern or order in that scene, for what the eye sees down there at ground level is an immense scatter of persons who are moving to their own rhythms and living out their own lives. If you are looking for an element of human drama in that scene, you would probably find your attention drawn to certain of the people passing by – that woman over there who seems to be in such an urgent hurry, that man who seems to be talking crazily to himself, that child who looks as though she is about to do something very special. At ground level, one sees a thousand different people, imagines a thousand different stories.

Suppose, however, that you climb to the fourteenth floor of a building nearby and look down on that same sidewalk. At that elevation, you are too far removed to see the expressions on those faces, and too far away to make any guesses about the motives that impel those people along their individual paths. From that point of vantage, the eye sees a mass of humanity in motion, a swarm of particles that weave in and out as if moving along invisible tracks. Thousands of people may pass down that thin strip of pavement in a matter of minutes without so much as a single collision, flowing in currents that no one seems aware of. And if you are looking for drama in *that* scene, it may occur to you that you are witnessing a remarkable act of coordination. The movement on the sidewalk seems patterned, governed by rules, choreographed; and the wonder of it is that no one down there can tell you how the trick is done.

Sociologists can be said to look at social life from the peculiar vantage of a 14th floor. The individual qualities of persons seem less distinct and even less interesting at that height, for one can sense that there are forces out there in the world that give shape and direction to the flows of everyday behavior in somewhat the same way that they give shape and direction to the flows of traffic on a sidewalk. When we sociologists speak of "society," then, we are usually speaking of tides, currents, forces, pulls – something in the organization of social life that induces people to act in reasonably predictable ways. It seems obvious when one views the world from a 14th floor that there are consistencies in the way people think and act; consistencies in the way they move from place to place; consistencies in the way they see the universe around them, relate to one another, and even negotiate a path through moving swarms of pedestrians on a sidewalk. Human life is subject to social forces that give it form and pattern.

There is pattern in the way we humans grow up, become adults, form families, raise children. There is pattern the way we become ill, commit crimes, think thoughts, compose music. There is pattern in the way we compete for scarce resources. There is pattern in the way we make common cause with some of our fellow humans and pattern in the way we exploit, abuse, and even slaughter others of them.

These patterns and consistencies are the subject matter of sociology. They are its challenge as well as the source of its intellectual excitement. But they are also a source of our difficulty in communicating to readers outside the discipline whose good opinions we should value, because our vocabulary can seem so lifeless and our syntax so knotted when we look for ways to speak of those designs. We put language to a very different set of conceptual tasks than is the case for most of those people who appoint themselves our critics. We have our own landscapes to describe, our own forms of reality to convey, and

we need a prose suited to the uniqueness of that perspective. The question then becomes: but what is so unusual about that perspective?

V

In the first place, we sociologists are invited by the logic of our perspective to be more concerned with *general tendencies* than with *particular events*. Our assignment in the world of scholarship is to move up onto the plane of generality as soon as our data permit (if not a good deal sooner), attending to those regularities that are the substance of everyday human experience rather than those unique persons and unique moments that stand out as special (and for that very reason tend to attract the interest of journalists and dramatists and historians). Dennis Wrong speaks of "the intense straining" often found among sociologists "for universality, for a language that transcends the particular and the commonplace by breaking through its own limits."¹⁰ Indeed, we sociologists are taught, quite properly, to distrust the individual case as being idiosyncratic and unrepresentative, while journalists and writers from many other walks of life routinely begin their articles with profiles of individual persons, asking them in effect to portray, represent, stand in for, even act out the lives of larger populations. This is a way of focusing attention and establishing a tone – of giving the problem at hand a kind of personality and texture – and it is a rhetorical strategy found in virtually every form of expository writing. But it offers few opportunities for us, whose responsibility it is to draw group profiles with a distinct accent on numbers, percentages, tendencies, and underlying structural forces. We sometimes explain that ours is a *nomothetic* science rather than an *ideographic* one, and that old distinction speaks volumes not only about the epistemological boundaries within which we work but about the languages we are required to use in doing so. Our pursuit of the general has given most sociologists the feeling that they have to more or less abandon the arts of portraiture and description, of painting social landscapes, so to speak, with words. Not for us the lavish cadences of a historian like Johan Huizinga, even though he is engaged here in an intellectual activity that could as easily be called ethnographic:

To the world when it was half a thousand years younger, the outlines of all things seemed more clearly marked than to us. The contrast between suffering and joy, between adversity and happiness, appeared more striking. All experience had yet to the minds of men the directness and absoluteness of the pleasure and pain of child-life. Every event, every action, was still embodied in expressive and solemn forms, which raised them to the dignity of ritual. . . . Calamities and indigence were more affecting than at present; it was more difficult to guard against them, and to find solace. Illness and health presented a more striking contrast; the cold and darkness of winter were more real evils. Honours and riches were relished with greater avidity and contrasted more vividly with surrounding misery. We, at the present day, can

¹⁰ "Professional Jargon: Is Sociology the Culprit?", *University: Academic Affairs at New York University*, 2:3-7, 1983, p. 7

hardly understand the keenness with which a fur coat, a good fire on the hearth, a soft bed, a glass of wine, were formerly enjoyed. . . . The contrast between silence and sound, darkness and light, like that between summer and winter, was more strongly marked than it is in our lives. The modern town hardly knows silence or darkness in their purity, nor the effect of a solitary light or a single distant cry. All things presenting themselves to the mind in violent contrasts and impressive forms, lent a tone of excitement and of passion to everyday life and tended to produce that perpetual oscillation between despair and distracted joy, between cruelty and pious tenderness which characterize life in the middle ages.¹¹

This is the opening of *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. Would a sociologist be allowed to publish such lines as these in a standard professional journal? [*Sociological Inquiry*, under its present editorship, might do so (it just did, in fact).] But most of us would feel uncomfortable with that confident prose in the absence of confirming sources as well as notes on method, on "the literature," and on the place we imagine the writing to occupy on the map of contemporary sociology ("this is meant as a contribution to the sociology of . . ."). Huizinga, who had spent a lifetime studying the sources and knew what he was talking about, simply tells us what he knows. To my ear, this is one of the most compact and compelling descriptions of a social scene I know of. But, like most sociologists, I doubt that I would have risked it even if I was able to compose it. Most of us would feel uncomfortable with so lush a description. One of the most honored elders of our tribe, William Fielding Ogburn, knew what to think about that. He expressed the hope in 1930 that sociology would soon be characterized by "the writing of wholly colorless articles," a much needed "antidote," he thought, to the "bad legacy" of scholars like Thomas Huxley and William James, who wrote with personality, vigor, grace, and occasional moments of passion.¹²

In the second place, sociologists are invited by the logic of their perspective to think in terms of *collateral* arrangements rather than *sequential* ones. Our stock in trade has been the relations that obtain at any given point in time among people and events and institutions – the way income relates to voting, the way working helps shape personality, the way migration affects the urban prospect, the way poverty influences household composition, and in all of those instances, vice versa. Ours is the language of concomitance. This means that we are rarely in a position to employ a narrative line, or simply to tell a story. That's a true loss, because one of the surest ways to sort out one's thoughts and to organize one's material is to arrange them in chronologies. Malcolm Cowley, to draw on his view of the matter one last time, complained that the sociologist (generally described as a "he" in those days)

seldom uses transitive verbs of action, like "break," "injure," "help," and "adore." Instead he uses verbs of relation, verbs that imply that one set of nouns and adjectives, used as compound

¹¹ *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, Doubleday, 1954, pp. 18-19

¹² "The Coming Age in Sociology," *Scientific Monthly*, 30:300-306, 1930, p. 301

subject of sentence, is larger or smaller than, dominant over, subordinate to, causative of, or resultant from another series of nouns and adjectives.¹³

Well, what did he expect? Relations between things and changes in those relations are what sociologists take as their subject matter, and if our repertoire of verbs seems meager to someone who likes the sound of *break* and *adore*, that is the product of our intellectual craft and not of our prose style.

Third, it can be noted that when sociologists contemplate a conversation between two people or a wider interaction involving several, they are invited by the logic of their perspective to attend to the pattern that ensues rather than to the particular contributions of the individual participants. A distinguished law professor of a generation or more ago is supposed to have said to his students: "If you can think about the relationship between two objects without thinking about the objects themselves, then maybe you have a legal mind." I have no idea how that relates to the law, but it certainly fits sociology. Our eyes are trained on the *spaces between* interacting individuals – on the shape of their conversation, the architecture of their transaction, the way the words spoken and the gestures enacted form a composition independent of the persons who make it up.

And, finally, the sociological eye is attuned to the behavior of multitudes rather than the behavior of individuals. We are interested in the processes by which multitudes form, change, dissolve; we are interested in the bonds that link persons together within multitudes, and the differences that separate them; we are interested in all the shifting and maneuverings and clashes that keep social life in continual motion. We are often in the position of being able to capture an accurate likeness of such forces only by counting the human particles caught up in them. How else might we portray the way populations flow from place to place? The way values change from time to time? The way risks or money or opportunities are distributed within a particular population? We need to count things and to speak of the way those counts relate to one another in order to portray the world we study accurately. Counting can be an art form as well as a scientific method, as Edward Tufte and others have pointed out beautifully; but it is not an art form taught in departments of English.

Sociologists, then, often have to do without several of the rhetorical strategies on which more humanistic ways of portraying reality depend – drawing individual profiles as a way of conveying the properties of congregations of people, organizing events into narrative chronologies, and, in general, focusing on details as a substitute for attending to the nature of wholes. It is easier to describe persons than populations, personalities than cultural textures, the behavior of individuals than the behavior of assemblies.

There are many similar matters that could be raised here, but the chief point to be made is that the languages of sociology tend toward the abstract at least in part because the perspectives of sociology tend toward the abstract. The social realities we study are a prospect unique to scholars who look out at the world through a special disciplinary lens, and the languages we employ to convey what we have seen through that lens have to be able to capture that marvelous, peculiar vision. Yet another critic of sociological writing,

¹³ op.cit., p. 41

Joseph Wood Krutch, may have been closer to the mark than he knew when he suggested forty years ago that "the war between science and religion will be settled long before that between literature and sociology. The proponents of each were born under different stars and are equally incapable of seeing the same things as either significant or interesting." Krutch had no doubt as to which stars are the right ones to steer by; but if you take out the tone of annoyance and the exaggeration that follows from it, you have here a shrewd observation.¹⁴ That is the difference, to be sure, but wouldn't Krutch have been wiser to celebrate it rather than to regret it?

So it is important to open discussion of sociological writing by drawing attention to the context in which we do our work. Our task must be to distinguish between those of our usages that have to be counted as an inevitable consequence of the sociological way of looking at things, and those usages that amount to little more than bad habits that have drifted in among all the other conventions of the field and do not serve a useful purpose at all.

VI

Once sufficient allowance is made for all the conceptual burdens our language has been asked to carry, we must then face the fact that a good many of the infelicities of our prose style are mindless reflexes that form like a crust over so many of the lines we write – those "verbal folkways of sociology" of which Cowley spoke. As I bring these remarks to a close, then, let me shift from defense to offense and suggest that those folkways have found their way into the intellectual weave of the discipline without any deliberation at all. Our old habit of avoiding the pronouns *I* or *me* in the most ordinary of sentences, for instance, has to be viewed as a kind of conceit – an example, to give Gowers his due, of trying to sound scientific. To write "one thinks" or "it is thought" when a writer really means "I think" has the effect of removing the writer from the field of action and giving the utterance to follow a hint of universality for which there is no warrant at all in reality. It is as if nature had made the point, and the writer is only acting as its scribe in bringing it up.

Others of those folkways are the product of ancient instructions, their origins long forgotten. They have to do, as Becker noted, with the social organization of scholarly life in general and with the nature of the sociological enterprise in particular. The habits of thinking and writing taught in the academy, the pretensions that often serve as emblems of membership in a profession, the rules observed by trade journals, the awe with which we learn to regard "the literature" – these are the main reasons, Becker says, why we so frequently stiffen before a keyboard and turn out passages that owe a good deal more to lazy conventions than they do to individual inspirations. [I hope that further examples will be offered in the comments to follow.]

¹⁴ "Through Happiness with Slide Rule and Calipers," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 46:69-72, 1963, p. 72

VII

The question then becomes whether the languages of sociology can be adjusted to reflect the special character or our disciplinary vision and yet at the same time to reflect the grace and clarity and plainness of line that critics so often miss in our prose. The first answer to that question can only be: why not?

In *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain described his apprenticeship in another trade that involves a special way of perceiving the world. He asked a wily old riverboat pilot one day how to tell the difference between a "bluff reef" and a "wind reef" – the one as dangerous as a charge of explosive and the other nothing more than a slight tremor on the surface of the water – and the pilot could only say: "I can't tell you. It's an instinct. By and by you will just naturally *know* one from the other, but you never will be able to explain why or how you know them apart."

It turned out to be true. The face of the water in time became a wonderful book – a book that was a dead language to the uneducated passenger, but which told its mind to me without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it uttered them with a voice. And it was not a book to be read once and thrown aside, for it had a new story to tell every day. Throughout the long twelve hundred miles there was never a page that was devoid of interest, never one that you could leave unread without loss, never one that you would want to skip, thinking you could find higher enjoyment in some other thing. There never was so wonderful a book written by man. . . .

Now when I had mastered the language of this water, and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition. But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of this majestic river!

Twain goes on to tell of a "wonderful sunset" he had witnessed when steamboating was still new to him, a scene in which the shifting colors of the sky lent a new cast and texture to everything, in which the shadows of rocks and trees slanted across the moving surfaces of the water like delicate tracings. "There were graceful curves, reflected images, woody heights, soft distances, and over the whole scene, both far and near, the dissolving lights drifted steadily, enriching it every passing moment with new marvels of coloring." It was a picture of extraordinary beauty.

But Twain then informs us what the eye of an experienced riverman sees in such a scene: the reflected colors of the sun and the shadows of the forest and the shimmers of the water had become something else – signs of danger, forewarnings of bad weather yet to come, symptoms of some deep disturbance in the order of the river. The eye had been disciplined to see that which is the pilot's special business to know.

No, the romance and the beauty were all gone from the river. All the value any feature of it had for me now was the amount of usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat. Since those days, I have pitied doctors from my heart. What does the lovely flush in a beauty's cheek mean to a doctor but a "break" that ripples above some deadly disease? Are not all her visible charms sown thick with what are to him the signs and symbols of hidden decay? Does he ever see her beauty at all, or doesn't he simply view her professionally, and comment on her unwholesome condition all to himself? And doesn't he sometimes wonder whether he has gained most or lost most by learning his trade?¹⁵

The problem for any professional – river pilot, physician, sociologist – is how to train one's eyes to read the whorls and ripples and boils on the surface of one's subject and then to develop a conceptual vocabulary that can portray them accurately to others. That is what Orwell and the others fail to see. Sociologists look out at the same human scene as poets, exactly as river pilots look out at the same body of water as passengers, but their professional business is to see it and experience it and describe it in a special way.

But here's the good news. We need only read the above lines to realize that the beauty and the poetry of the Mississippi did not really desert Twain at all, even if they were distant from his thoughts while he was actively engaged in plying his trade. And that's a project worth pursuing: to combine the eye of a river pilot with the voice of a Mark Twain.

[How we might go about that project is one of the questions being raised in the commentaries to follow.]

¹⁵ *Life On the Mississippi*, Dillon Press, 1967 (original 1883), pp 69-72