History of English Prose Style (borrowed from Lisa Spangenberg)

**Pre-Ciceronian Prose:**

In the late 14th century English once again becomes the dominant written language. Scholars begin translating the Bible into Middle English.

By the 16th Century Scholars are enthusiastically borrowing and coining words from Latin, French and even Italian; hence the sometimes vitriolic attacks on “ink-horn terms.” School boys are reading Latin plays. Teachers are beginning to write English prose that consciously imitates Latin prose styles and syntax. The “plain style” of Hakluyt and Deloney become popular models.

Plain style is characterized by the “simple colloquial or aggregative sentence, with sprawling members, loosely connected by temporal and coordinating conjunctions…it contains the simplest kind of amplification—cataloguing, the heap of synonyms, words of similar meaning, or phrases of similar construction; for oral ornament it employs alliteration and synonymous word pairs” (A Senecan Amble):

*Winifred, who had but of late years with her own father received the Christian faith, became so superstitious that she though the wealth of the world forever would have been an heavy burden for her soul and have drawn her mind from the love of her Maker; wherefore, forsaking all manner of earthly pomp, she lived a long time very poorely, hard by the side of a most pleasant, springing well; from which neither her friends by entreaty, nor her foes by violence, could bring her; which Sir Hugh hearing, he went thither immediately after unto her, which was the time limited by them both, and finding her mind altogether altered , he wondered not a little what she meant. – Thomas Deloney*

Ciceronian or “isocratic” Style: characterized by symmetry and ornament

Ciceronian style is particularly dominate during the Tudor era in the mid to late 16th Century. The form and sound of prose (euphonics) are often more important than content. Ciceronian style Emphasizes:

* Balance—Parallelism
* Antithesis—opposition used for emphasis (see Shakespeare).

Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has few pleasures

Usually requires parallelism.

* Alliteration
* Copia—is a virtue; the fullness of rhetorical expression—endless repetition and elaboration
* Anadiplosis, Gradatio; Repetition of the last word/phrase in a clause, in the next:

Pleasure might cause her read, Reading

might cause her know;

Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain.

Euphuism: An elaborately patterned prose style, characterized in particular by the extensive use of similes and metaphors, parallelism, alliteration, and antithesis. Adjective: euphuistic

*The freshest colours soonest fade, the teenest razor soonest turneth his edge, the finest cloth is soonest eaten with moths, and the cambric sooner stained than the coarse canvas: which appeared well in this Euphues, whose wit, being like wax, apt to receive any impression, and bearing the head in his own hand, either to use the rein or the spur, disdaining counsel, leaving his country, loathing his old acquaintance, thought either by wit to obtain some conquest, or by shame to abide some conflict; who, preferring fancy before friends and his present humour before honour to come, laid reason in water, being too salt for his taste, and followed unbridled affection, most pleasant for his tooth."*

*(John Lyly, from Euphues, 1579)*

Anti-Ciceronian Style

Bacon (like Erasmus in 1528) objects to the Ciceronian style as a type of “delicate learning” in which writers begin “to hunt more after words than matter.” The anti-Ciceronian battle cry was “Things, not words,” or as Claudius says to Polonius “More matter and less art.” Expressiveness is favored over beauty. This style is sometimes called Attic, Senecan or Baroque style. Erasmus defines attic style as “more genuine, more concise, more forceful, less ornate, and more masculine.” The era is rich with examples of inductive writers, a writer who often doesn’t know what he’ll write till she writes it. Quite often, these are writers of meditational writing, writers for whom writing is discovery, writers who begin with a topic but no form. These writers tend to use both Seneca and Tacitus as models. M. W. Croll divides Anti-Ciceronian style into two basic styles:

* Curt Style (stile coupe): Short clauses that could stand alone but are often linked to other clauses, though the”links” may be of different sizes and asymmetric. Compared to a chain in style and syntax, appropriate for exploration.
  + Expected connectives and reflexive pronouns are missing, resulting in seemingly unbalanced sentences, without the coordinating conjunctions “and” or “but.”
  + Uses colons and semi-colons. Typically associated with stoic thought.
  + Main Stylistic Traits:
  + colons and semi-colons set off short members.
  + First member likely a complete and self-contained statement of the whole idea of the period. Followed by successive elaborations, new ideas of the first.
  + Asymmetrical—varying lengths of members, though they may begin a pattern of starting them with the same word (a pattern soon broken).
  + Brevity is the central characteristic.
  + “and,” “but, “or” or “nor” frequently omitted; except in Browne, who uses them to connect two synonymous statements of an idea:  
      
    *Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong, putteth the law out of office. Certainly, in taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior; for it is a prince's part to pardon. And Solomon, I am sure, saith, It is the glory of a man, to pass by an offence. That which is past is gone, and irrevocable; and wise men have enough to do, with things present and to come; therefore they do but trifle with themselves, that labor in past matters*. – Sir Francis Bacon
* Loose Style: Loose connectives, asymmetrical sentences, things left ”up in the air.” Typically associated with the more skeptic aspects of 17th century. Style of Browne, Bacon and Donne’s letters. Meditative.
  + Frequently they begin with an idea stated in one form and then follow it with a series of clauses and phrases that expand, elaborate, modify and restate the original idea, often via metaphors, analogies.
  + Not like Ciceronian, because it is too organic, and not pre-meditated. Jonson’s prose comedies.
  + Main Stylistic Traits:
    - Coordinating conjunctions used as links: and, but, for, whereas, nor, and not—and correlatives though, yet, as, so.
    - Absolute participle (dangling ing) frequent; Browne favors them early in a period.
    - Parenthesis.
    - Relative pronouns (which, that) may not have an obvious referrent.
    - Parataxis Gk. “Placing side by side”; opposite of hypotaxis. Clauses and phrases arranged independently, so that they may stand alone; sometimes without the usual connectives, as here: I came, I saw, I conquered.
    - Hypotaxis Gk. “Subjection” Clauses or phrases arranged so that they depend on each other for meaning. Opposite of Parataxis:

*Antiquity held too light thoughts from objects of mortality, while some drew provocatives of mirth from anatomies, and jugglers showed tricks with skeletons, when fiddlers made not so pleasant mirth as fencers, and men could sit with quiet stomachs while hanging was played before them*.

Loose style:

*For my religion, though there be several circumstances that might persuade the world I have none at all,—as the general scandal of my profession,—the natural course of my studies,—the indifferency of my behaviour and discourse in matters of religion (neither violently defending one, nor with that common ardour and contention opposing another),— yet, in despite hereof, I dare without usurpation assume the honourable style of a Christian. Not that I merely owe this title to the font, my education, or the clime wherein I was born, as being bred up either to confirm those principles my parents instilled into my under standing, or by a general consent proceed in the religion of my country; but having, in my riper years and con-firmed judgment, seen and examined all, I find myself obliged, by the principles of grace, and the law of mine own reason, to embrace no other name but this. Neither doth herein my zeal so far make me forget the general charity I owe unto humanity, as rather to hate than pity Turks, Infidels, and (what is worse) Jews; rather contenting myself to enjoy that happy style, than maligning those who refuse so glorious a title.* – Sir Thomas Browne, Religio Medici