The Memo and Modernity
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pg. 108

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One can read above the portals of modernity such inscriptions as "here, to work is to write," or "Here only what is written is understood."
—Michel de Certeau, "The Scriptural Economy"

1. Information Society and Information Genres

For the Method of Tradition, I see it hath moved a controversy in our time. But as in civil business, if there be a meeting and men fall at words there is commonly an end of the matter for that time and no proceeding at all; so in learning, where there is much controversy there is many times little inquiry.
—Francis Bacon, *Of the Proficiency and Advancement of Learning* (1605)

Bacon's curious phrase "the Method of Tradition" probably does not suggest a precise meaning to modern readers. In his *Of the Proficiency and Advancement of Learning,* the expanded Latin version of the *Advancement,* Bacon rendered this phrase as "ars tradendi." The Latin was retranslated into English again by Spedding and Ellis in their nineteenth-century edition of Bacon's work as the "art of transmission."[1] Returning to this somewhat arcane notion, the editors of the present volume evoke what is now an enormous field of discourse about the means and modes of communication; but for Bacon, this discourse was still waiting for an inquiry that would establish its basic principles. The "controversy" to which he alludes, perhaps the first attempt at formulating such principles, was initiated by Petrus Ramus, whose notorious "method" of transmitting knowledge by arrangement of concepts into dichotomies was embraced by some for its brevity and systematicity and rejected by others, including Bacon, for its oversimplification and specious rigor.[2] Both Bacon and Ramus were concerned with trans-

1. See Francis Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon,* ed. James Spedding, Robert Ellis, and Douglas Heath, 11 vols. (London, 1879), 1:614, 650, for the Latin text of *De augmentis,* and 4:405, 438, for Spedding and Ellis's translation.
2. For an account of Ramus's system, see Walter J. Ong, *Ramus: Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge, 1958).

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mission in the context of pedagogy; but if that is the venue in which Renaissance theorizing about what we could call communication occurs, the domain of that theory today is vastly larger than Bacon could have dreamed.[3] It is nothing other than the theory of a new world—our "information society." Since at least the emergence of cybernetics with the work of Wiener, Shannon, and Weaver in the 1940s, the question of what information is, and how it is transmitted, has "moved a controversy" across the entire spectrum of disciplines, from physics to literary criticism.[4]

Bacon connected the idea of transmission to the school and to its task of passing on (*tradere*) knowledge; but his restriction of the *ars tradendi* to the scene of pedagogy points to the still unsettled relation between fact and knowledge in his time. Not every fact belongs to the domain of knowledge or is of concern to schooling. Early modernity also seemed to lack a concept for the vast epistemic realm between fact and knowledge we now call information, arguably the notion that made possible a theory of transmission as such.[5] Information is not identical to fact—hence the possibility of mis-

3. The concept of communication was relatively unelaborated in premodern culture; or rather it was *implicit*, entangled in a metaphysics of truth. Antiquity had a voluminous discourse about language and signification oriented toward a notion of truth, but communication is a broader and more elusive concept, which I would argue is correlated with information rather than truth. I attempt indirectly here to offer a reason for the fact that communication emerged so late as the basis for disciplines, such as semiotics and communication studies, which typically suspend the question of truth in order to isolate the scene of communication.

4. See Norbert Weiner, *Cybernetics; or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), and Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana, Ill., 1949). Some major statements in the theory of "information society" include Fritz Machlup, *The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States* (Princeton, N.J., 1962); Marc Porat, *The Information Economy* (Washington, D.C., 1977); *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture*, ed. Kathleen Woodward (Madison, Wis., 1980); Frank Webster, *Theories of the Information Society* (London, 1995); Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1999); *The Knowledge Economy*, ed. Dale Neef (Boston, 1998); Jorge Reina Schement and Terry Curtis, *Tendencies and Tensions of the Information Age: The Production and Distribution of Information in the United States* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1995); Michael E. Hobart and Zachary S. Schiffman, *Information Ages: Literacy, Numeracy, and the Computer Revolution* (Baltimore, 1998); and Albert Borgmann, *Holding on to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium* (Chicago, 1999).

5. It does not matter crucially to my argument, though it is a point of great historical interest, whether the idea of information can be backdated to the semiotics of Peirce or relocated to the site of structural linguistics. From a certain point of view, Jakobson's theory of communication already presupposes a concept of information, implicit in the notion of message. I would suggest, however, that the greater significance of the information concept does date from the later

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information and disinformation. For the purposes of this paper, I define *information* as any given (datum) of our cognitive experience that can be materially encoded for the purpose of transmission or storage.[6] Information begins beyond the ordinary language sense of fact, which might refer to nothing more, for example, than my saying that it is now raining outside; but it also falls short of constituting knowledge, if by that term we mean a practice that organizes masses of information or data (for example, rainfall amounts) into complex structures of intelligibility and uses these structures to discover new relations and new facts.[7]

The difference between information and fact is based on value in transmission. The selling price of a given stock at a given time is a fact that functions in certain contexts as a piece of information because this fact is what one *wants to know* in that context. Fact becomes information when it is, so to speak, value-added.[8] Information demands to be transmitted because it has a shelf life, a momentary value that drives the development of our information technologies in their quest to speed up, economize, and maximize the effectiveness of transmission. Missing the right moment of transmission, information must be stored to await its next opportunity.

Bacon did not possess a concept of information in our sense, but he did connect the art of transmission with writing, an intuition that makes sense from the perspective of information theory. Writing is now widely understood as an information technology, indeed the most ancient.[9] Defining

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nineteenth century and that it can even be seen in Ellis and Spedding's decision to translate Bacon's "tradere" as *transmission* rather than *tradition*.

6. Conformity with fact is thus irrelevant to the status of a message as information. The definition offered here is a synthesis of several current information theories. I have attempted to steer between a kind of universal cybernetics, in which everything is information, and a theory based too narrowly on the concept of digitization and the technology of the computer. For an example of the latter concept of information, see Michael Dertouzos, *What Will Be: How the New World of Information Will Change Our Lives* (New York, 1997). I have adhered most closely to the working definition of Hobart and Schiffman, *Information Ages,* who stress the capacity for transmission and storage as the defining properties of information. For the historical vicissitudes of the concept of fact, see Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago, 1998). The notion of information is closer to what Poovey means by the "modern fact" than to the ordinary language sense.

7. For a discussion of the distinction between knowledge and information, and the argument that all knowledge is embodied in a knower, see John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, *The Social Life of Information* (Boston, 2000), pp. 119–22.

8. For this distinction of fact from information, see James Kinneavy, *A Theory of Discourse: The Aims of Discourse* (New York, 1971); hereafter abbreviated *TD:* "To be informative a statement must enable us to relate the factual basis to some explicit or implicit system about which information is desired" (p. 93).

9. On writing as an information technology, see especially Hobart and Schiffman, *Information Ages.* In *De augmentis,* Bacon places the *ars tradendi* between discussions of writing and rhetoric. His interest in the section on writing in ciphers hints at his groping toward an information concept.

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writing in these terms, however, is complicated by the manifest diversity of its functions. The writing we call literary, for example, has a complex and perhaps ultimately indeterminate relation to fact, information, and knowledge—the *fictional* relation—while other writing, scholarly or scientific, aspires to the condition of knowledge, something more than information. This epistemic polarity is a determining condition of our modernity, even as it seems to rest on surprisingly arbitrary distinctions between genres of writing. I am of course not the first to point this out, but neither is it my interest here to join the chorus of those who would like to dismantle these epistemic categories by exposing the instability of the genres of writing, either by positing the inherent literariness of science writing or the recoverable information content of literary works. On the contrary, my aim is to make visible a peculiar distortion in the foundational epistemic order of modernity, expressed in the very positioning of literature and science at opposite poles of an epistemic axis. Viewing all genres of writing through the lens of this epistemic opposition throws out of focus the great mass of writing that is neither scientific nor literary but exists *primarily* to transmit information.

In this essay I explore the generic features of informational writing by focussing on a single genre—the memorandum—that is, the humblest yet perhaps the most ubiquitous genre of writing in the modern world. Although this is an empirical claim, I must leave its proof to those who care to tally the number of trees felled or megabytes consumed for the purpose of transmitting or storing information. Whatever the quantitative share of informational writing, its generic specificity can be grasped immediately by positioning the principal generic modes of writing along an epistemic axis:

literary/journalistic——informational——scholarly/scientific[10]

At one end of this axis, genres of writing are oriented toward epistemic concepts of fiction or opinion; though in a deeper sense both of these con-

10. Some qualifications of the claims implicit in this schema: (1) I have not attempted to offer an exhaustive account of the genres of writing in modernity, only to suggest how these genres might be regarded epistemically; (2) it is of the essence of modernity that the "central" role of information means that discrete bits of information are crucial across the entire spectrum, obviously so in the scholarly and scientific disciplines, but even in the domain of literature, which in both its modern and postmodern forms has been forced to respond in deep ways to the social condition of information overload; (3) the aim of a generic analysis, which is what I am attempting here, is to understand what writing looks like when the claims to truth or knowledge are subordinated to the task of transmitting information. This definitional proscription distinguishes even journalism from purely informational genres, by virtue of the fact that in journalism strands of opinion and entertainment are bundled with transmitted information; (4) I have not distinguished the report from the memo in this essay because I would argue that the report increasingly takes on the generic features of the memo, while freely appropriating elements from legal, scholarly, and scientific writing. The report has affinities with the premodern form of the treatise, the generic precursor for both scholarly and scientific writing in modernity.

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cepts can be subsumed by a notion of truth. At the other end of the axis, genres are oriented toward the disciplinary forms of knowledge. Information is distributed along the entire axis (as news, for example, in journalism, or data in science), but it constitutes the chief generic determinant only in modes of writing such as the *form*, the *memo*, or the *report*. I suggest that all of the writing we consider to be the most intrinsically interesting—literary or journalistic, scholarly or scientific—amounts only to a small percentage of the writing of modernity, crowded to the poles of the epistemic axis. In our epoch, large numbers of people write, are even compelled to write, but they do not for the most part write poems or scientific papers; they fill out forms, compose memos or reports, send interoffice emails.[11] This writing is informational, and it has the same generic specificity as any other kind of writing.

In order for new disciplines such as communication studies or discourse analysis to emerge, it was necessary to get beyond the bipolar reign of science and literature.[12] The idea of information belongs neither to science nor to literature, but to a world of communication in which writing appears as one medium among many. Yet the idea of information is as crucial now to our understanding of writing as it is to the new material technologies of communication. Between the first of these new technologies in modernity, the printing press, and the latest, the computer, *information genres* emerged, and these genres did not rely initially upon any other technology than writing itself and its innate generic possibilities. The memorandum gives directions, makes recommendations, but, above all, it is a means of transmitting information within the large bureaucratic structures organizing virtually all work in modernity.

In recognizing the memo as the quintessential information genre, I do not deny, then, that information pervades the genres of writing along the

11. The epigraph from Michel de Certeau translates *Laborare est orare* for modernity as: *Laborare est scribere*; see Michel de Certeau, "The Scriptural Economy," *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, 1984), p. 134. See also Schement and Curtis, *Tendencies and Tensions of the Information Age*, pp. 216–17, for a similar statement on the ever greater importance of literacy, and writing in particular, in the information age.

12. If this essay might belong informally to one of these disciplinary domains, I must also distinguish the kind of analysis offered here from what is sometimes called rhetorical, as in "the rhetoric of science." The latter enterprise, however worthy, is usually programmatically interested in calling into question the epistemic claims of knowledge discourses. This is just what I am not doing. Although I have made recourse freely to rhetorical concepts, the analysis I have undertaken might be more appropriately called an exercise in poetics. Such an analysis should be possible for any genre of writing, though it is currently underdeveloped for genres other than the literary and the scientific. For an important exception, see Anthony Grafton's recent studies of the scholarly essay in *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999) and *Bring out Your Dead: The Past as Revelation* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001).

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entire epistemic axis. The purpose of isolating the generic form of the memo is, first, to open a space for the formal and historical analysis of information genres as such and, second, to suggest how the phenomenon of information determines the role of writing in modernity. The largest contention of my essay is that writing is more important in our society than ever before, but especially writing in the genres—form, memo, report—that I will name collectively by the concept of the *document,* a term deriving from the Latin *docere,* but not confined to the concept of teaching, or linked in any necessary way to knowledge. The document is the carrier of information and so the object of knowledge rather than knowledge itself.[13]

If the document stands at a remove from the genres of both literature and science, this epistemic positioning is related to another oddity of it, the fact that it is both *ephemeral* and *permanent.* The memo, for example, might have an audience of one, or none; it might be read once, or never. But however vanishingly ephemeral its interest, it must nonetheless be preserved, that is, *filed.* It must stand forever at the ready in its stored form, to be consulted if desired by some hypothetical future reader. In this peculiar ontological state, the document differs essentially from the work of literature, which aspires to nothing less than an eternal reading, to canonicity, in Milton's famous words to be "something so written to aftertimes that men shall not willingly let it die."[14] At the other end of our epistemic axis, the writing of science aspires to release knowledge from the prison of its origin in the singularity of writing. So it is precisely the measure of Newton's scientific achievement that his laws of motion can escape the gravity of his *Principia;* these laws are freed from having to return always to the *incipit* of his writing, however interesting we may find that writing still to be. The document by contrast aspires only to a moment of interest, the moment of its transmission; once transmitted, its interest falls off potentially to a zero degree, and it suffers the indignity of being filed away.

13. But haven't documents in this sense always existed? Yes, certainly, in the sense that written records have been kept of transactions, exchanges, events, and so on. My point here is not that documents did not exist before the modern era, but that the dominion of the document is a feature of modernity. We can also see in this dominion a condition for the development of historical scholarship, for which all surviving writing must be understood first as document—as the carrier of information—*before* this information can be ascertained as factual. Even if historical scholarship cannot, and should not, ignore the generic differences between the forms of writing in the premodern world, differences that must be taken on their own terms, scholarship, as a discourse of knowledge, must regard all forms of writing under the species of document, and so retroconstruct all writing as informational. For a suggestive discussion of modern culture as documentary, in contradistinction to the orientation of premodern culture to a culture based on embodied memory, see Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1990).

14. John Milton, "The Reason of Church Government," *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose,* ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1957), p. 668.

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2. The Yates Thesis: Forgetting Rhetoric, Remembering the Memo

In our present culture, rhetoric has no place.
—E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1953)

The technical principles of the business letter differ somewhat from the traditional rules of rhetoric. . . . Indeed, a business letter that is noticeably rhetorical, or that shows signs of having been carefully elaborated, may fail for that very reason.
—George Burton Hotchkiss, Edward Jones Kilduff, and J. Harold Janis, *Handbook of Business English* (1914; 1945)

The genre of the memo has attracted little attention as an object of study because it would seem to lack the features of what in literary theory we like to call a text. Individual memos are less representative of the genre in the very proportion that they are more interesting as texts. But the ubiquity of the memo belies its triviality and raises questions about writing in modernity that cannot be answered by asking these questions only of figures such as Joyce, Freud, Darwin, or Heisenberg. We can begin to enrich the interpretive context of the memo by referring it to the theme of *bureaucracy*, a subject of long-standing sociological interest. Unsurprisingly, Weber observes in his great work *Economy and Society* that "the management of the modern office is based upon written documents ('the files')" and that this form of writing is necessarily connected to the very idea of the office or "bureau" as the spatial means of organizing scribal labor.[15] The generic features of these written documents also express the impersonality Weber saw in bureaucratic authority because the author-function is attenuated in this form. Yet Weber evinced little further interest in the particularity of bureaucratic writing. Its study has been parceled out to several other fields: the practical discipline of business writing (later a subfield of composition), the emergent field of communication studies, and the field of business history.

For reasons that no doubt have their own interest, the most significant historical scholarship on the memo to date has been done by a business historian, JoAnne Yates. In her major work, *Control through Communication* and several related articles (one coauthored with Wanda Olikowski), Yates describes the emergence of the memorandum as a new genre of writing in the context of the development of systematic management techniques in the large corporations of the later nineteenth century.[16] I will summarize

15. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff et al., ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Witich, 2 vols. (Berkeley, 1978), 2:957.

16. See JoAnne Yates, *Control through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management* (Baltimore, 1989); "The Emergence of the Memo as a Managerial Genre," *Management Communication Quarterly* 2 (May 1989): 485–510; and Yates and Wanda Orlikowski, "Genres of Organizational Communication: A Structurational Approach to Studying Communication and Media," *Academy of Management Review* 17 (Apr. 1992): 299–326.

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her argument here under the handle of the Yates thesis before raising some questions Yates herself does not pursue:

1. Yates begins from the careful premise that one must not confuse media and genre and that there are distinct "genres of organizational communication" emergent in the nineteenth century.[17] Thus, while she discusses media instruments such as the telegraph, the typewriter, and the vertical filing system as new means of managerial "control through communication," she points out that these media innovations are not the only such means. The task of organizing and controlling large institutional structures also put considerable pressure on the *generic* features of written communication, which evolved in response to those pressures and not initially to the creation of new media.

2. The major form of written communication in business before the later nineteenth century was the business letter, the primary means of communication for entrepreneurs and their factors. Although Yates is not interested in the earlier history of letter writing, she observes that nineteenth-century entrepreneurs and their scribes were likely to be schooled in traditional rhetoric, which still dominated the curriculum. In fact, the compositional norms of the business letter descended from a rhetorical practice going all the way back at least to the *ars dictaminis* of the later medieval era, the art of letter writing in which ecclesiastical and state functionaries were trained.[18] The *ars dictaminis* recombined selected elements derived from classical rhetoric, particularly those connected with the epideictic occasion, the motive of praise or blame (the other two occasions being the forensic and the deliberative). Epideictic defined the social stakes underlying the exchange of letters in the medieval and early modern eras when such communication had to negotiate the complexities of the status hierarchy and when letters were often written simply to beg for money or position. Schooled in this tradition, composers of business letters continued to strive in their prose for effects of the ornate and flowery while attending to the epideictic aim of complimenting the writer or addressee of the message.

3. As long as business was confined to relatively small labor forces dominated by single owner-entrepreneurs, the business letter sufficed for most contexts of written communication. But with the growth of large-scale cor-

17. See Yates and Orlikowski, "Genres of Organizational Communication," p. 310.

18. For a good introduction to the *ars dictaminis,* see Les Perelman, "The Medieval Art of Letter Writing: Rhetoric as Institutional Expression," in *Textual Dynamics of the Professions: Historical and Contemporary Studies of Writing in Professional Communities,* ed. Charles Bazerman and James Paradis (Madison, Wis., 1991), pp. 97–119.

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porate enterprises, such as the railroads and chemical companies of the later nineteenth century, the need for *internal* communication across distances and between levels of management increased exponentially.[19] Yates argues that the emergence of the memo, as a new genre of internal communication, was occasioned by the development within large-scale business organizations of layers of management whose purpose was to relay communications back and forth between the top and the bottom of the organization or laterally between departments. In addition to the growing need for preserving information about the firm's transactions in paper documents, for which numerous standardized forms were devised, information of a more analytical sort also had to be transmitted, along with the directives emanating from the managerial stratum. For this kind of internal communication, the business letter was wholly unsuited, and it was replaced by the memo, a form composed by deliberately "eliminating the polite but wordy conventions of the letter-writing tradition."[20]

4. The Yates thesis, then, is that the memo emerged as a result of a new kind of managerial practice and *not as a development of rhetorical theory.* On the contrary, the invention of the memo entailed a deliberate forgetting of rhetoric, an act of oblivion. The memorandum was not an evolution of the business letter but a new genre of writing. The term *memorandum* in this new generic sense began to be used in the later 1870s and early 1880s, although it did not become common until the 1920s, by which time the form of the memo was in widespread use.[21] The idea of the memorandum as a "note to oneself" precisely captures the situation of internal communication within an organization. Hence Yates speaks of the memo as constituting an "organizational" memory.[22] That this mode of remembering, displaced from individual minds to documents, was premised on the forgetting of rhetoric underscores the little revolution in the history of writing Yates rediscovers.[23]

19. See Yates, "The Emergence of the Memo as a Managerial Genre," p. 489.

20. Ibid., p. 503. This procedure, Yates emphasizes, was entirely deliberate. She cites a report of 1913 for the Du Pont Corporation recommending systematic changes in internal communications, including the standardization of format and the reduction of unnecessary words. The report gives an example of a letter written in the old style, which takes 118 words to get its message across, and a revised version of the message, coming in at only 49 words.

21. See ibid., p. 497. Although the concept of the circular letter was also used during the same period for internal communication, the ultimate triumph of the term *memo* seems inevitable in retrospect. The term *memorandum* was in circulation to a sufficient extent by 1918 for Thorstein Veblen to indulge in his usual wicked wordplay by subtitling his *The Higher Learning in America* as *A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men.*

22. Yates, *Control through Communication*, p. 6.

23. Yates's invocation of a "documentary impulse" in the modern business organization runs parallel to much social theory without succumbing to the technological determinism that afflicts recent versions of this theory. Hence she is able to present the typewriter and the vertical file as correlated developments in systematic management without demoting the memo merely to an effect of these material instruments.

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Several questions remain unanswered in Yates's account, including the large historical question of how the transfer of the generic features of business writing to virtually all other bureaucratic and administrative venues came about. Correlatively, the "official" writing practices of premodern and early modern bureaucracies ask to be more closely examined in relation to the compositional practice that emerged in the corporation of the nineteenth century. This question would direct us to another site of the ancient rhetorical tradition, the *forensic,* and to the development of legal or jurisprudential discourse as the favored technical language of ecclesiastical and state administration. But raising this question does not undermine Yates's thesis so much as it suggests the need for an inquiry into how legal and other discourses have themselves changed as a result of assimilating the generic conventions of the commercial document.

The question that solicits our immediate attention in pondering the Yates thesis is the mechanism by which the weight of the rhetorical tradition was thrown off in order to bring the memo into being. Because Yates confines her analysis to the context of systematic management, the long history of rhetoric weighs no more heavily upon her than it apparently did upon the inventors of the memo. Yet the intersection of her narrative with a certain climactic moment in the history of rhetoric is highly suggestive. The emergence of the memo coincides with the abandonment of the rhetorically based curriculum in schools, the final collapse of what Barthes called the "rhetorical empire."[24] Historians of rhetoric trace the beginning of this collapse to a critique already emergent in the early modern period, if still murky in its contours. By the time that Adam Smith was lecturing on rhetoric in the 1750s, he could dismiss much of classical rhetoric as "a silly set of books" and attempt to reformulate the subject on new grounds.[25]

The final collapse of the rhetorical empire was assured when Harvard president Charles William Eliot established the elective system in the 1870s

24. Long identified, according to Barthes, with the "super-civilization" of the West (Roland Barthes, "The Old Rhetoric: An *Aide-Mémoire,*" *The Semiotic Challenge,* trans. Richard Howard [1985; New York, 1998], pp. 14, 15; see also pp. 42–43). For the decline of rhetoric, see, among others, Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages,* trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, N.J., 1953), pp. 62–78; Gerard Genette, "Rhetoric Restrained," *Figures of Literary Discourse,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1982), pp. 103–26; Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language,* trans. Robert Czerny et al. (Toronto, 1977), pp. 44–64; Hayden White, "The Suppression of Rhetoric in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Rhetoric Canon,* ed. Brenda Deen Schildgen (Detroit, 1997), pp. 21–32; *The Ends of Rhetoric,* ed. John Bender and David E. Wellbery (Stanford, Calif., 1990); R. H. Roberts and J. M. M. Good, *The Recovery of Rhetoric: Persuasive Discourse and Disciplinarity in the Human Sciences* (Charlottesville, Va., 1993); and *Rhetoric Revalued,* ed. Brian Vickers (Binghamton, N.Y., 1982).

25. Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (Indianapolis, 1985), p. 26. I have attempted elsewhere a more thorough analysis of what I would call the "postrhetorical condition," in work in progress on "Literary Study in the Age of the New Class."

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that effectively ended the curriculum in Greek and Latin within which rhetorical texts commanded so prominent a place. Later, Harvard also led the way in abandoning entrance requirements in Greek and Latin, removing pressure on the primary and secondary schools to compel the study of classical languages. The hold of rhetoric in translation proved subsequently to be much weaker than anyone imagined; vernacularization itself was thus implicated in rhetoric's demise.

A second tendency in the nineteenth century, equally undermining, was the increased reliance on written as opposed to oral techniques of evaluation in the schools. The lapse of *disputation* and later of *recitation* as standard classroom practices knocked away another prop of rhetoric by depriving it of its living connection with oral performance.[26] The growing importance of writing both within and without the schools also hobbled the numerous attempts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to erect a vernacular rhetoric based on public speaking, in imitation of classical practice.[27] But this very enterprise raises the question of why rhetoric was thrown back into the oral sphere at all.

A clue to that failure can be detected in the very dismay with which defenders of the old rhetoric contemplated a new kind of speech whose norms derived from a new kind of writing. In 1879, for example, at the very moment in which the new managers were turning away from the old rhetoric, a noted belletrist critic, William Mathews, published an elegiac tome called *Oratory and Orators,* in which he complained explicitly about the coincidence of rhetoric's decline with the emergence of scientific and commercial culture. In a chapter entitled "Is Oratory a Lost Art?" he laments the absence of demand for oratory, even in the political sphere: "The great majority of the questions that now come up for decision by our political assemblies turn on masses of fact, antecedents in blue-books, tabulated statistics, which all necessitate not only elaborate inquiries, but differences of opinion after the inquiries. The Demosthenic vehemence is, therefore, out of place." It only remains to summon this vehemence for lamenting the decline of rhetoric, done in by the modern lawyer with his crabbed technicalities, "who has no time to gather the flowers of Parnassus," and the even more crabbed "man of business, who crams down the throat of his audience a heap of statistical facts."[28] Mathews is repelled by something he cannot name exactly, not sim-

26. Kinneavy notes that "the disputation system had disappeared at Cambridge in the early eighteenth century," and at Oxford a century later (*TD*, p. 11). Over the course of the nineteenth century, written examinations almost completely displaced oral.

27. For an excellent account of the failure in the nineteenth century to ground vernacular rhetoric in oratorical practice, see Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, 1990).

28. William Mathews, *Oratory and Orators* (1878; Chicago, 1896), pp. 35, 37, 49.

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ply facts or statistics, but the *sermo* or discourse that has been irrevocably altered by the reign of the document, by genres of writing. This new style of communication is founded on the same act of oblivion Yates sees at the origin of the memo.[29]

The story of rhetoric's demise has been told often enough to have provoked a revisionist history in which it never died at all, but was rather dispersed, in which the motives of rhetoric were hidden behind even the most scientific language. The revisionist history is credible if rhetoric, as the art of persuasion, is rediscovered wherever the motive of persuasion exists. The rhetoric that seems to be nowhere is then said to be everywhere.[30] Some very sophisticated reassertions of rhetoric have relied upon this line of argument, for which Nietzsche's will to power is often invoked as a precedent, as the truth rhetoric tells about every speech act. Against this view, I would argue that if rhetoric is the *art* of persuasion, it makes a difference if the art disappears, leaving us only with persuasion. It must make a difference if information genres are founded on the deliberate suppression of rhetorical techniques. Such writing may fail to transcend the motive of persuasion, but it cannot fail to be different *generically* from what preceded it.[31]

Looking back on the critique of rhetoric that emerged in early modernity, it is evident that it was just the motive of persuasion that came to be suspect. In a prescient hypothesis about the significance of this development, Wilbur Samuel Howell argues in his history of British rhetoric that the originality of Adam Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* consisted in his "position that the new rhetoric must define its function as broadly communicative rather than narrowly persuasive."[32] At last, a the-

29. The refusal of rhetorical technique was a standard motif in business-writing manuals of the period from the 1870s to the 1950s. In addition to George Burton Hotchkiss, Edward Jones Kilduff, and J. Harold Janis, *Handbook of Business English* (1914; New York, 1945), p. 25, quoted in the epigraph, see Philip B. McDonald, *English and Science* (New York, 1929), p. 1, which begins with a complaint about the "old-fashioned rhetoric" taught in the schools, which "encourages verbosity and tolerates vague, stilted language." See also the well-known rhetoric of John F. Genung, *The Practical Elements of Rhetoric* (Boston, 1886), p. 13, which acknowledges the mutual exclusivity of information and rhetoric: "Some modes of exhibiting facts, as in statistics, reference-tables, formulae, and the like, are too rudimentary to admit the idea of style. There can be no degrees of effectiveness in the presentation of them, nor is such effectiveness looked for; their interest centers solely in the thing that is said." Genung does not yet see the possibility of stylistic choices in the "presentation" of information, noted below in connection with the work of Edward Tufte.

30. For a version of this argument, see Bender and Wellbery's volume *The Ends of Rhetoric,* who propose in their introduction that ours is not an age of rhetoric but of "rhetoricality," the ubiquitous dispersal of the rhetorical motive.

31. There is a growing consciousness of this difference, as attested in the epigraph from Hotchkiss, Kilduff, and Janis, *Handbook of Business English,* a key text in the field and frequently reprinted between 1914 and 1945.

32. Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton, N.J., 1971), p. 575.

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ory of communication! To communicate, in whatever genre of speech or writing, means that I *transmit* my thoughts or sentiments to you with minimal loss (or, as we say now, noise).[33] To persuade does not require that you know my thoughts or sentiments at all, only that you believe what I want you to believe or feel what I want you to feel. It is on the basis of this distinction that rhetoric was indicted, as a corruption of the communicative function, which was in a real sense *discovered* in the very process of formulating the critique.

Before we too hastily dismiss the indictment for its Enlightenment naivete, let us consider what it means generically to posit the communicational motive as supreme. Here rhetoric itself will assist us by providing a set of terms with which we can begin to construct a generic analysis of information genres. In a famous passage of his *Institutio oratoria,* Quintilian speaks of three aims of rhetoric, which he names *docere, delectare, movere.*[34] These terms resonated down through the centuries, but for our purposes we must emphasize the connection between *movere* and persuasion. When the auditor is moved to believe or act as the orator desires, this is persuasion; but the orator seldom persuades without also instructing and pleasing. Information genres by contrast discard the strategy of *delectare* as a good-faith gesture and distance the motive of persuasion in favor of permitting a certain instruction to speak for itself. It is not that for the writer of the document there exists no desire to persuade, but that persuasion is implicit in *docere,* in simply transmitting information.[35]

33. Again, I do not mean that communication was never thought before, but that the emergence of the communication concept in modernity entails disentangling the scene of communication from the question of truth. Whether what I am thinking is true or not is irrelevant, in Smith's account, to the question of whether my communication is successful. This is why Smith's new rhetoric makes no great distinction between the communication of affects (putting across how I feel) and the communication of ideas or propositions.

34. Quintilian, *The "Institutio Oratoria" of Quintilian,* trans. H. E. Butler, 4 vols. (1922; Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 12.10.58, 4:483. Quintilian derives his schema from Cicero's in the *Orator* 69, although Cicero uses the terms *probare, delectare, flectere.* Augustine famously cites Cicero in his *On Christian Doctrine,* bk. 4, chap. 27, but uses Quintilian's three terms. In the Renaissance, the *docere, delectare, movere* triplet was a commonplace, invoked by Rudolph Agricola, Thomas Wilson, and many other writers of rhetorical handbooks.

35. So Hotchkiss, Kilduff, and Janis, *Handbook of Business English,* p. 25: "All this is because the prime purpose of the letter is to transmit a business message. If the reader understands it as the writer intended, and acts favorably upon it as the writer wishes, it has done its work." Similar strictures on indulgence in rhetorical techniques can be found in another important statement in the field of business English, McDonald, *English and Science,* pp. v–vi, 1–5. Although it might appear that a similar characterization can be made of scientific writing, which refrains from certain conspicuous rhetorical strategies, scientific writing is different in crucial respects from the mode of information genres, principally in the fact that information does not have the same argumentative sufficiency in science it does for the informational genres. Kinneavy's discussion is suggestive on this point. He argues that for "reference discourse," which is roughly (though not

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This folding of *movere* into *docere* is visible in two common bureaucratic scenes of information transmission. When the memo *directs* others to act, there is no question of persuasion, of having to back up a command with the vehemence of Demosthenes. The direction to act is received *as information*, as the answer to the subaltern's question, What should I do? In the second scene, where a course of action is *recommended* to equals or superiors and argument is supplied, the weight of the argument must be carried by information, and contestation occurs around the question of what course of action the information actually implies.[36] Again, such discourse is not devoid of the rhetorical motive, if by that we mean the desire to persuade; but the document's institutional context requires the sacrifice of conspicuous rhetoricity as a generic requisite, as the very condition of possibility for persuasion.

The relation of context to genre here is definitive. If rhetoric has been easy—too easy—to resurrect as the inescapable expression of a will to power in discourse, informational writing is better understood as an expression of *control*. When Yates speaks of "control through communication," she is not simply offering *control* as a synonym for *power*. Her concept of control is derived from a carefully elaborated theory of organizational structure, first introduced by Adolf A. Berle and Gardiner C. Means in their seminal work, *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*.[37] Berle and Means argue that although one might suppose that the owners of corporations control what they own, in fact the control of large corporations in the twentieth century was passing to the corps of managers. (Recent corporate scandals seem to have confirmed this argument.) Berle and Means's insight is the starting point for a more recent important historical account of information society, James R. Beniger's *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society*.[38] Beniger argues that the emergence of large, complex corporations created a "crisis of control," a lag between the development of productive technologies and communicative technologies. The rapid creation of both new modes of bureaucratic organization and

exactly) equivalent to what I call informational discourse (Kinneavey includes journalism in his category), "the logic of subject matter rather than the logic of proof frequently provides the matrix of organization" (*TD*, p. 152).

36. In an interesting study of memos in the Three Mile Island incident, J. C. Mathes, *Three Mile Island: The Management Communication Failure* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1986), p. 27, notes the tendency of the engineers involved to present information without spelling out their recommendations because they evidently thought these recommendations to be implicit in the information itself.

37. See Adolf A. Berle and Gardiner C. Means, *The Modern Corporation and Private Property* (1932; New Brunswick, N.J., 1991). For a Marxist take on this argument, see James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution: What Is Happening in the World* (New York, 1941).

38. See James Beniger, *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986). See also, in this context, Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977).

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new communication technologies responded to this crisis, and the information society is what we call the result.

The memo has always been considered a bit player in this story; but there is good reason to regard it as a central instance of the control revolution, as Yates implies. The connection between the document and control is attested at the deep level of philology. Our word *control* derives from *contrarotulare*,[39] a procedure by which Roman officials compared facts at hand "against the rolls," against the state administration's written records or scrolls (*rotulae*). The document may have had only a small effect on the daily lives of most persons in the Roman era; but it would be hard to dispute the fact that modern society, as Horkheimer and Adorno famously argued in *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* aims to be totally administered.

Unlike the face-to-face scene of oratorical persuasion, the scene of administration or control is best modeled by a thoroughly impersonal mechanism, such as a thermostat, which emits its commands in direct response to information. Admittedly this model is ideal. The thermostat cares only for the good of the building, which is far simpler than a bureaucratic organization, riddled with interpersonal relations that interrupt the mechanisms of control. Still, control is not just another name for power, a point that we can confirm quickly by comparing it to Foucault's concept of power-knowledge, and to his favorite scene of power, the doctor-patient relation. This scene is very different from the site of control in complex organizations, where individuals in vast communicative networks are dependent, whatever their rank, on the transmission of information possessed by others and where all functionaries are equally compelled, whenever they write, to submit their writing to certain generic constraints. Even the doctors have learned of late what it means to be controlled, or managed. That control often trumps their knowledge and so their power.

3. Forgetting the Forgetting of Rhetoric: Internal Contradictions of Information Genres

> Intraschool Communication . . .
>
> Dear Bea—
>
> How can I take seriously such mimeographed absurdities as "Lateness due to absence," "High under-achiever," and "Polio Consent slips"?
>
> Dear Syl—
>
> I'll match yours any day with: "Please disregard the following."
>
> —Bel Kaufmann, *Up the Down Staircase* (1964)

In this section I offer an account of the principal stylistic norms of information genres, with the aim of exploring a contradiction that quickly

39. See Beniger, *The Control Revolution,* p. 8.

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overtook the development of this writing in all of its venues. Although these genres were based on norms of *concision* and *clarity*, "bureaucratic" writing came to be widely associated in the twentieth century with features of verbosity and obscurity. In order to understand this contradiction, we must refrain from concluding too quickly that the faults of informational writing represent only a falling away from its norms and consider instead the possibility of tensions that are inherent in the demands to which this writing responds.

Concision and Verbosity

Against the act of oblivion described above, I begin by invoking two terms from the rhetorical corpus: *brevitas* and *copia*. Brevity or concision is a familiar norm, but *copia*, or the capacity for elegant variation and elaboration of a given theme, is not. These terms appear to be mutually exclusive principles, but they are never regarded as such in antiquity. The choice between them is a question of what is appropriate to a particular context or aim. And yet in retrospect the rhetorical tradition can seem heavily weighted in favor of *copia*. Although Erasmus contended, for example, in his hugely popular *De copia* that "no artist will better compress speech to conciseness than he who has skill to enrich the same with as varied an ornamentation as possible," the work itself was given over, as its title promises, to the techniques of elegant variation.[40] The concept of *copia*, as Terence Cave has pointed out, was never a technical term in rhetoric, but the popularity of Erasmus's work suggests why it came in some ways to stand for rhetoric itself.[41] When other stylistic norms emerged in the revisionist rhetorics of Adam Smith and his successors, the choice for *brevitas* over *copia* expressed an implicit dissatisfaction with the whole system of rhetoric.

Smith's *Lectures* elevate the principle of brevity virtually above all other compositional norms: "When there are no words that are superfluous but all tend to express something by themselves which was not said before and in a plain manner, we may call it precision."[42] The effect of precision or conciseness is also associated with clarity, or what Smith calls "perspicuity." Again, this association is present in antiquity, where *brevitas* and *claritas* are frequently linked. But in Smith these norms are correlated in such a way as to supersede the balance of norms Quintilian described as "correctness, lu-

40. Desiderius Erasmus, *On Copia of Word and Ideas*, trans. Donald B. King and H. David Rix (Milwaukee, 1963), p. 14. *De copia* was published in several editions between 1513 and 1526.

41. See Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 5–15.

42. Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, p. 6.

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cidity, and elegance."[43] If lucidity or clarity implies brevity here, elsewhere elegance harbors the complementary value of *copia*.[44]

Until the later nineteenth century, there existed no definitive rhetoric that displaced the norm of elegance altogether, not even Smith's. But rhetorical theory generally did not require the kind of logical consistency that could deduce all stylistic norms from a single principle. The first rhetoric to attempt such a deductive theory of composition was that of Herbert Spencer, whose *Philosophy of Style* was published in 1871.[45] The relevance of Spencer's little book will be apparent immediately, given its threshold moment in the narrative I am recounting and its peculiar disconnection with the classical tradition. Though Spencer was familiar with the popular rhetorics of Blair, Campbell, and Whately, he never learned Greek or Latin, and he was uninterested in classical rhetoric. He was trained as an engineer and developed his then famous but now largely ignored evolutionary social theories out of a recognizably modern intellectual formation. If a rhetoric could be extrapolated from the emergent documentary genres, it would be Spencer's. But this is really to say that Spencer responded in his *Philosophy of Style* to the same demand on language to which the documentary genres responded, the demand of information.

Noting in the opening of his book rhetoric's failure to develop a "general theory of expression," Spencer goes on to sum up the advice of the rhetoricians in a single principle: brevity. Unconstrained by any commitment to received doctrine, he produces the following explanation for the supremacy of this principle:

> On seeking for some clue to the law underlying these current maxims, we may see shadowed forth in many of them, the importance of economizing the reader's or hearer's attention. To so present ideas that they may be apprehended with the least possible mental effort, is the desideratum towards which most of the rules above quoted point. When we condemn writing that is wordy, or confused, or intricate—when we praise this style as easy, and that as fatiguing, we consciously or unconsciously assume this desideratum as our standard of judgment.[46]

43. Quintilian, *The "Institutio Oratoria" of Quintilian*, 1.4.1: "Iam cum omnis oratio tris habeatvirtutes, ut emendata, ut dilucida, ut ornata sit."

44. See ibid., 10.1.5–6, 4:5, 7.

45. See Herbert Spencer, *Philosophy of Style: An Essay* (New York, 1871). Aldo Scaglione, in *The Classical Theory of Composition; from Its Origins to the Present: A Historical Survey* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1972), p. 403, discusses Spencer's originality in relation to the rhetorical tradition.

46. Spencer, *Philosophy of Style*, p. 11.

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As in Smith, a rhetoric has been generated from a communication theory. And this theory anticipates, if it does not actually arrive at, a concept of information. The principle of an "economy of attention," which mandates Smith's smallest possible number of words for any thought, is the same that governs information technologies generally, and the documentary genres in particular. The principle presupposes something that we now call processing, for which ease and speed are indeed ultimate desiderata.

If it seems, however, that this is a crude principle to apply to every sort of communication, this is just what Spencer sets out to do. Later in his essay, he extends his theory even to poetry, the obvious counterexample. In an argument notably ingenious, if not persuasive, he asserts that poetry is in fact more economical than prose in its demand on the reader's attention. The evidence for this point is the extreme compression of poetic language, particularly figurative language; but Spencer has confused compression, which might very well tax the reader's attention by producing ambiguity, with a concept of brevity that would seem to resist ambiguity as an impediment to communication. Despite Spenser's attempt to assimilate poetry to his economic theory, later composition theory would confine itself to prose as essentially governed by the norms of brevity and clarity.[47]

Brevity and clarity came to dominate composition theory in modernity. It would not be difficult to demonstrate the influence of Spencer on this tradition. He is quoted with approbation by John Genung, author of the very popular *The Practical Elements of Rhetoric,* published in 1886, and by Strunk and White's even more popular handbook, *The Elements of Style,* first published by Strunk in 1919 and continuously republished down to the present.[48] But whether or not Spencer is invoked, the norm of conciseness has only been more urgently advocated in response to the spread of what Richard Lanham calls the "official style" and against which he recommends ever more vigorous acts of concision, which let us call *amputatio.* Lanham exemplifies this procedure when he gives us a sentence of twelve words:

> Short-term planning is foremost in the prioritization of the planning loop.

and shows us how it can be reduced to five—

47. In modernity poetry claims the right to be obscure, to resist ease of communication. This claim, I would argue, is not intrinsic to poetic discourse but is an effect of modernity's development of prose genres of communication.

48. See Genung, *The Practical Elements of Rhetoric,* p. 25, and William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style* (1959; New York, 1979); see original editions by Strunk, 1919, and by Strunk and Edward A. Tenney, 1934.

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Short-term planning *comes first.*[49]

Though Lanham is often enough right in practice, the questions that concern me are not practical but historical. It is unfortunately the case that to write in the manner that Lanham denounces is now the default mode for all writing. It *is* the writing of modernity. Given this tendency of bureaucratic genres, it is surprising to recall that techniques for producing brevity originated with these very genres, as Yates demonstrates in her discussion of the Du Pont report. The point of these techniques was to unlearn a rhetorical mode that was copious, though not copious in quite the same manner as Lanham's example of the official style. How did it happen that the very information genres that cultivated brevity by unlearning rhetoric now have to relearn that unlearning? This later moment in the evolution of information genres is the forgetting of the forgetting of rhetoric. In this second moment, a technique of brevity is reintroduced as though it were itself a *new* norm for writing.

As a norm of modern writing, brevity is something other than the soul of wit. When new genres of writing emerged with the aim of transmitting information, new techniques of economizing transmission were called forth by that aim. These genres did not rely only on a method of using fewer words to do the same job. The standardized form, for example, discarded the connective tissue of sentences and paragraphs altogether in order to transmit information in a new way: by dividing up the page into fields, by offering boxes to fill or check rather than sentences to write.[50] The shift from continuous prose to a graphically organized page is just as much a feature of writing

49. Richard Lanham, *Revising Business Prose* (1979; New York, 1992), p. 3. In fact, most revision for Lanham aims at cutting words. See also Lanham, *Revising Prose* (1982; Boston, 2000). The importance of concision as a norm of writing would be easy to demonstrate in the vast majority of writing manuals between Spencer and Lanham. Typical of these is McDonald, *English and Science,* pp. 107–13. McDonald offers conciseness as "the cardinal secret of style," and is even more radical in his feats of pruning than Lanham, reducing a paragraph of one hundred words to fourteen. This tradition had already reached a reductio ad absurdum by the 1940s in the work of Rudolph Flesch, who devised the famous "readability index," a simple correlation between words per sentence, syllables per word, and "ease" or "readabilty." See Rudolph Flesch, *The Art of Readable Writing* (New York, 1949). In the readability index one can see the ancestor of the various computer software programs since devised to catch writing in the act, as it were, of transgressing the norm of concision. It will be evident from my discussion below that the readability index and its software programs confuse concision with clarity or reduce the latter to an effect of the former.

50. Beniger, *The Control Revolution,* p. 16, points out the paradox in the fact that with the introduction of standardized forms, a "proliferation of paperwork" followed. The failure of the paperless office to emerge is a great irony of the computer age, brought home to all of us on September 11 who saw the World Trade Center surrounded before its fall by a halo of silvery confetti floating in the building's convection currents, the vast ejecta of materialized scribal labor. As we later learned, it was paper, not jet fuel, that brought the topless towers to the ground.

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in modernity as its degeneration into prolixity. So the memo replaced elaborate salutations with fields: "To" and "From." This also is brevity.

If Spencer grasped the norm of brevity from the verbal perspective, the more farsighted Alexander Bain sensed the new demand that information would make upon the spatial organization of the page. Bain's famous *English Composition and Rhetoric,* published in 1866 and frequently reprinted, offered the first division of writing into discursive modes, of which he identified five: description, narrative, exposition, persuasion, and poetry. Though this taxonomy was somewhat incoherent, it had the distinction of bringing to light a new discursive mode, exposition, absent from the work of Blair, Campbell, and Whately. Exposition was writing that dealt with science and information, categories that Bain was not yet able to distinguish clearly.[51] He did understand, however, that exposition was driven by a principle of economizing attention much like Spencer's and also that this principle could be invoked to explain the emergence of new modes of writing that incorporated graphic and numerical features, such as tables and lists, that were foreign to the conventions of the old rhetoric.

Bain also saw that inference, or "relations of subordination," in such writing need not be expressed in traditional forms such as the syllogism, but that they could and were being expressed graphically by recourse to *indentation, enumeration,* and *font type.*[52] In the terms of the old rhetoric, the logic of argument was displaced from *inventio,* the "finding" of arguments, to *dispositio,* or arrangement. Arrangement—organization itself—came to constitute the logic of transmission for expository writing.[53] Memos and reports developed an articulated structure, in which conclusions were supposed to be implicit in the order in which information is presented (the most important point first, and so on). Early business-writing manuals such as Hotchkiss, Kilduff, and Janis's *Handbook of Business English* strongly emphasized such techniques of presentation.[54]

51. See Alexander Bain, *English Composition and Rhetoric* (1866; Delmar, N.Y., 1996), p. 185.

52. See ibid., p. 208.

53. The tendency of *dispositio* to supplant *inventio* can be traced to Ramus, but, again, it must be stressed that Ramus was concerned with devising the most expeditious means of transmitting school knowledge. The realization of the "control revolution" was contingent upon discarding the rhetorical system upon which Ramus necessarily depended in developing his revolutionary method. An interim moment in this trajectory can be identified in the "universal language" schemes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Roger Chartier remarks on another such moment in *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, and Audiences from Codex to Computer* (Philadelphia, 1995), p. 11, with Condorcet's *Esquisse,* which lauded "tables and charts" as new "'technical methods'" enabling "the reader to grasp the relations and combinations that link facts, objects, numbers, and formulas." The history of such methods—"arts of transmission"—has scarcely begun to be explored.

54. See Hotchkiss, Kilduff, and Janis, *Handbook of Business English,* pp. 272–73.

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Two further observations confirm the importance of arrangement in this new writing:

First, the economic imperative forced graphic features into ever greater visibility, a principle that I will call, in deference to its most recent expression, *formatting*. The difference between formatting and *dispositio* can be understood by recalling the parts of an oration as the classic instance of the latter. As important as these divisions may have been in composition, they were not announced in delivery; the orator need not say, "Now the peroration begins." Informational writing by contrast makes formatting as visible as possible; it calls attention to features such as headers, indentation, and, more recently, bullets. Formatting is like the external articulation of structural features in modern architecture.[55]

Second, if articulated structure displaces verbal connective tissue in argument, the effect of such brevity can be a kind of poverty, an overreliance on mere enumeration as a result of which logical relations fail to manifest themselves at all.[56] Recently Edward Tufte, author of magisterial works on the graphic and visual representation of information, has offered a severe critique of PowerPoint for just this failure. In PowerPoint, connective verbal tissue is removed entirely, and oral presentations based on this skeletal writing often display a version of Ong's "secondary orality" impoverished of information content, in which argument is reduced to mere list.[57] Tufte's

55. It seems likely, as Yates notes (Yates, "Genres of Organizational Communication," p. 314), that tab stops made indentation easier and therefore the typing of lists (and, later, bullets?). It should also be remembered that the spatial organization of the document provided the model for the Graphical User Interface (GUI) or computer desktop. It is not an accident that the commercial/bureaucratic scene and not, say, the laboratory, left this crucial imprint on computer design. This point should deter us from lapsing into technodeterminist styles of argument when we are dealing with a mutual interaction of social forms and technology. For an unapologetically technodeterminist argument on the relation between the typewriter and writing, see Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, Calif., 1999). Kittler is interested in Nietzsche's use of the typewriter as a consequence of his failing vision and by extrapolation in the determination of the most rarified philosophical discourse by media. He is also interested in the emergence of a corps of women writers (typists), but uninterested in the kind of writing that was actually typed by women in large organizations.

56. See John D. O'Banion, *Reorienting Rhetoric: The Dialectic of List and Story* (University Park, Pa., 1992), for an interesting if elusive contrast between rhetorical and scientific writing, where the latter is epitomized by the list. O'Banion sees this history through the lens of the two cultures, which I have attempted not to do.

57. See Edward Tufte, "The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint," www.edwardtufte.com. Tufte's argument can be appreciated in the parodic example he cites, Peter Norvig's rendition of the Gettysburg Address in PowerPoint. He also effectively skewers the notorious PowerPoint presentation that failed to persuade NASA managers that there was a problem with the shuttle *Columbia*. For Tufte's trilogy, see *Envisioning Information* (Cheshire, Conn., 1990), *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* (Cheshire, Conn., 2001), and *Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence, and Narrative* (Cheshire, Conn., 1997). In my view Tufte's trilogy is the *Institutio oratoria* of our time. He has produced what is unmistakeably a rhetoric of information

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critique of PowerPoint confirms a distinction between concision and clarity; the burden of his critique is to remind us that sometimes *more* words are required in order for communication to be effective. There is no easy correlation between the quantity of words and the quality of communication, and this mysterious intransigence of language, which goes very deep, means that it will probably never be possible to reduce writing to rules, schemata, or the algorithms that run computer programs.

Clarity and Technicity

If the norm of brevity is troubled by the possibility of linguistic poverty, the weedy verbosity springing up alongside our information highways may be a misguided attempt at a remedy. These weeds are, in a way, our flowers of Parnassus. But the roots of verbosity are more complex still because they are intertwined with the other norm governing informational writing, clarity. Again, we must begin by acknowledging the ancient pedigree of clarity, but with the caveat that the concept of clarity did not mean quite the same thing after a theory of communication such as Smith's challenged the agenda of the old rhetoric. The norm of clarity is in fact extrinsic to the development of information genres, despite the deference it is paid in these genres. It emerged as an ideal of belles lettres in the eighteenth century. For the belles lettrists—the literary critics and grammarians who dominated the public sphere of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—clarity was the supreme aim for all the genres of discourse, including the literary. Linked more to notions of *politesse* and correct usage than to knowledge or information, the center of gravity for belletrist discourse was not science but literature and journalism (forms of writing seldom distinguished at the time). The norm of clarity arose from the *publicness* of print culture, which presupposed that written communications were addressed ideally to everyone, to the hypothetical general reader. The belles lettrists thus cultivated a strong bias against terms of art, the diction that was specific to professions and crafts. Reinforced by the usual social snobbery, belles lettrist norms were from the beginning at odds with the linguistic needs of the sciences and professions, which required the freedom to devise "technical" lexicons if they were to advance at all.[58] Such terms of art became indispensable because these terms can be arbitrarily and therefore precisely defined. They can be forcibly removed from a domain of circulation in which their semantic field would otherwise expand to include multiple and ungovernable significations.

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genres, for which no matter of presentation is too small or merely ornamental, even the thickness of the lines in a graph; see Tufte, *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, p. 185.

58. For this point, see Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence*, p. 16.

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This linguistic norm, which I will call *technicity*, presupposes communications that are addressed to specialized audiences, sometimes extremely small. Technicity is not an impediment to communication, but it limits the range of specific communications.[59] It produces a tension within the field of modern writing between the domain of expertise and the laity. For the layperson, the technical language or jargon of the professions and the sciences produces an effect of opacity, an impediment to communication. It is easy to confuse this opacity with obfuscation or incompetence; conversely, experts can easily exploit technical language for the sake of exclusion or to hide their aims from the regard of the laity.[60]

With the emergence of information genres, technicity becomes fraught with social consequence. As I have noted, information genres are essentially empty forms with no specified knowledge content; they are conduits for the language of any science or profession and answerable less to those disciplines than to bureaucratic agendas. With the rise of these genres, technical language is no longer confined to sites of knowledge production but is disseminated; and the further it ranges, the less precise such language becomes. With the penetration of technical language into the general field of discourse, technicity competes with clarity as a rival norm. Language that does not replicate the sound of technicity fails to sound authoritative. This is surely one source of the verbosity that so troubles modern writing. This effect is further intensified by the emergence of a technical language of administration. If professions and sciences were bureaucratized in modernity, management conversely was scientized. The language of management mimics and intensifies even as it disseminates the technicity of the sciences and professions.[61]

To complete this account of technicity we must acknowledge an unintended consequence of abandoning the classical curriculum. The increasing distance of literate professionals and managers from the Latin language transformed Latin roots, prefixes, and suffixes into the components for an enormous expansion of the technical lexicon of English. Where before it was Latin itself that separated the learned from the laity, now it was the Latinate technical lexicon, which came to constitute what the linguist Tom

59. Technical language can be described as precise rather than clear, a distinction that is not always easy to grasp. For an early attempt to relate technicity to precision, see T. A. Rickard, *Technical Writing* (London, 1920), pp. 39–56.

60. This tendency of technicity converges with the general tendency of bureaucracy, noted by Weber, *Economy and Society*, 2:992, toward "*keeping secret* its knowledge and intentions."

61. The manual writers universally denounce this prose. Exemplary is Gary Blake and Robert W. Bly, *The Elements of Business Writing* (New York, 1991), p. 59: "When you write in an overly formal style, you sound like a lawyer or a bureaucrat." But what if you are a lawyer or a bureaucrat?

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McArthur calls a "lexical bar."[62] The remoteness of Latinate English rendered it technical by default, and much of what Lanham and others mean by verbosity or "bureaucratese" can be understood in this way. A word like *prioritize* has the quality of technicity without any longer being traceable to a particular technical lexicon. This free-floating lexical technicity is an effect of alienated Latinity, scouring away at the supposedly simple foundations of brevity and clarity.

These tensions were interestingly played out in the twentieth century in the teaching of business and professional writing. The first attempts to teach business, professional, technical, and scientific people how to write were by and large undertaken by persons in those fields. The aims of this pedagogy were very close to those expressed by the originators of the memo form: to break with the old rhetoric and to fashion new genres of writing. Even as late as 1929, Philip McDonald complained in his *English and Science* about the way in which English was taught in the schools, which he saw as promoting obscurity, pomposity, and ornateness.[63] But McDonald means to indict a rhetorical style. His conclusions favored the continued segregation of technical writing from English departments. Yet after the Second World War, business and technical writing came under the province of English and composition teachers, who were more disposed to favor the norm of clarity descending from belletrist culture than the norm of technicity regnant in the professions.[64] The technical fields put up little resistance to this transfer of teaching authority because they were themselves increasingly troubled by the tension between technicity and clarity.[65]

The reassertion of a literary norm within the field of informational writing seemed to respond to a perceived decline in the communicative effectiveness of writing that paced the explosion of information and media. The tension between clarity, which posits a hypothetical general reader, and technicity, which assumes a specialized addressee, has never been resolved. The failure of modern writing to achieve clarity brings technicity into disrepute; but technicity is an inescapable requisite of modern writing and is not, in itself, incompatible with clarity or communication. An analysis of

62. See Tom McArthur, *The English Languages* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 193–96.

63. See McDonald, *English and Science*, pp. 89–100.

64. On the shift of business and technical writing to English departments, see Teresa C. Kynell-Hunt, *Writing in a Milieu of Utility: The Move to Technical Communication in American Engineering Programs, 1850–1950* (1996; Stamford, Conn., 2000), and Bernadette Longo, *Spurious Coin: A History of Science, Management, and Technical Writing* (Albany, N.Y., 2000).

65. Failures of communication can of course be studied after the fact; only then does the memorandum solicit a reading in anything like the literary critical sense. For an interesting case study, see Carl G. Herndl, Barbara A. Fennell, and Carolyn R. Miller, "Understanding Failures in Organizational Discourse: The Accident at Three Mile Island and the Shuttle *Challenger* Disaster," in *Textual Dynamics of the Professions*, pp. 279–305.

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informational writing that fails to recognize the complex relation between clarity and technicity is unlikely to yield a composition pedagogy adequate to the demands upon writing in modernity. The reassertion of clarity by the literary professoriate, like the reassertion of brevity, forgets the inaugural act of information genres, forgets the forgetting of rhetoric.

If I must pause here, at the threshold of a subject that would appear to be of less than universal current interest—composition pedagogy—it is in the recognition that the subject of composition, how to compose one's thoughts and words, was the greater part of education from antiquity to the nineteenth century. What we call expository writing, the one- or two-course sequence that our university students are everywhere compelled to take, is only an echo of this immemorial "method of tradition." The failure to reduce writing to method in our modern post-Ramistic sense, to a quasi-science of transmission, is related to the larger failure, perhaps the necessary failure, of modern educational theory to bring communication within the system of the disciplines, as both object of knowledge and means of transmitting knowledge. In this postrhetorical condition, information technologies proliferate with familiar paradoxical effects, such as the degradation in the communicative efficacy of writing lamented by Tufte and Lanham. Without falling back upon a narrative of decline, which would in any case concede a failure of historical understanding, I conclude on the threshold of a second question, much larger than that of composition pedagogy in the contemporary university. On this threshold, I envision, or call for (in the spirit of my epigraph from Bacon) an inquiry into the question of why writing has remained the indispensable "art of transmission" in the era of technologically mediated information.[66]

66. On the question of the relation between writing and media, which is perhaps *the* question of a larger inquiry beyond my own, I have benefited from exchanges with Alan Liu. See his "The Future Literary: Literature and the Culture of Information," in *Time and the Literary*, ed. Karen Newman et al. (New York, 2002), pp. 61–100.

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