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"I don't see writing as a communication
of something already discovered,
as 'truths' already known.
Rather, I see writing as a job of experiment.
It's like any discovery job;
you don't know what's going to happen
until you try it,"

William Stafford

Conformity and Commitment in Writing

Peter C. Wason

It is argued that conformity to stereotyped styles of writing tends to conceal a sense of commitment to what is being said. The effect is both to alienate the individual from the practice of writing, and to encourage a kind of obscurantism which may be inimical to clear thinking. The conditions for recovering a committed voice and the benefits of so doing are described.

1 CONFORMITY

"You a member of the establishment then?" I was talking to a small group of trainee managers from a leading computer firm about a pet deductive problem of mine. "It's those funny words you use in your writing. When you talk to us it all becomes clear." Remote and forbidding, my prose had apparently been perceived as an example of what Claire Lerman (1981) calls the "institutional voice," cultivated over about twenty-five years to fit the constraints of learned journals. I defended myself by saying that if I were to unpack my words for an untutored audience, then my articles would have to be very much longer, but this argument didn't satisfy my managers at all. Still, they had a point. They felt, and I think a lot of us would agree, that a great deal of what lands on our desks is impenetratably obscure. Furthermore, they implied by the term "establishment" that it was needlessly and perhaps deliberately obscure. Increasingly, it would seem, the voice of a person with something to say is lost.

In some cases one would be inclined to think this is a good thing. Consider technical reports which purport to provide no more than factual information, e.g. "The Loads Exerted by Grass Silage on Bunker Silo Walls"—surely to write about that in a committed way would be inappropriate. And yet I am unsure. In the nineteen-fifties a flourishing group, The Presentation of Technical Information Group, was set up at University College London, led by the late Professor R. O. Kapp, precisely to study ways of rendering such information more interesting and palatable. I am reluctant to draw a limit between different kinds of writing, although I suppose that a philosophical paper allows more scope for commitment than a technical report. What I try to do in this essay is to sketch the forces which induce conformity on style, and speculate on how commitment may be recovered through writing.

At its very worst, a peculiarly offensive style does seem to infect the literature of the social sciences and relatively new disciplines which borrow concepts from a variety of older ones, e.g., semiotics and design. This style

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is conspicuously absent in philosophy (especially the philosophy of mind) and in the natural sciences. One may ask why it is tolerated and published when it appears to be so unintelligible. Perhaps the layman, anxious to increase his knowledge, is being held at arms length.

There is a counter-argument to this criticism. In an influential book, Kuhn (1962) pointed out that even the observations of the scientist are determined by the paradigm in which the research is done. They are certainly not "objective." Hence, if something as basic as observation is conceptually loaded, it is hardly surprising that the reporting of results is similarly affected. But this counter-argument is a defence of specialized, or technical, literature and I exempt such writing from my attack. The unfortunate tendency of the layman to dismiss anything he can't immediately understand will be corrected.

1.1 Three types of obscurity

I distinguish three types of obscurity in writing; (1) is venial, (2) is unavoidable, and (3) is pernicious.

(1) There is a fairly common, but relatively trivial kind of obscurity which results from grammatical error. It is often manifested in ambiguity which seldom has really serious consequences. All of us in the trade would, I'm sure, be guilty at times of this kind of obscurity if our writings were to be put under the microscope of the purist. We delight to pounce on it, especially when it occurs in our students' essays, but I shall say no more about it here because I don't want (now) to be a nag.

(2) There is the obscurity of technical, or specialized writing. A moment's reflection will persuade one that it is inevitable and legitimate. The development of knowledge in nearly every domain entails an increasingly specialized vocabulary so that it is notoriously difficult for experts in even related fields to understand each other. Some specialists affect to despise the vulgarizing works which seek to interpret such literature, but that seems to be their own limitation. In any case, I am not alarmed by this problem.

(3) There is the obscurity of power which I shall call *obscurantism*. I believe it to be particularly important as an obstacle to effective writing. It is represented by the language of some social institutions, and it aims to be objective and impersonal. Its effect is to delimit an area of enquiry so that the uninitiated fail to understand it, but remain suitably impressed by what they take to be erudition. In the social sciences, at any rate, the abstruse has a compelling attraction, especially for some students who may imitate this style for two reasons. First, it appears to set the seal of scientific respectability on their own writing, and second, it need not betray original thought or commitment. This institutional style may also be inimical to the exercise of thinking—a plausible hypothesis anticipated in politics by Orwell (1948), and argued with zeal by Andreski (1972) in relation to the social sciences.

It is with this third type of obscurity that I am concerned. I present a test to distinguish it from the obscurity of specialized language, but first I consider its influence on (a) academia and (b) bureaucracy. Both these institutions share the attempt to be objective and to impose conformity.

1.2 The language of academia

It is as a university teacher that I am primarily concerned about the *effects* of the obscurantist style. The issue has been admirably summed up by one of my correspondents who had been a student counsellor:

"Somewhere along the line we take nice, co-operative children or adolescents, and we convince them that if you write incomprehensibly you are an expert, and if simply, puerile. In fact you personally, and perhaps a majority of the members of staff in most universities, would more or less reverse that. If you write simply, you are an expert. If you write simply about very difficult topics, you are an outstanding expert. It is incomprehensible writing which is puerile. But given the apparent fact that most staff prefer simplicity, or at least say they prefer it, how does it happen that those nice, co-operative students become so invincibly certain of the direct opposite?" (Malcolm France, personal communication, 5/5/1975).

Not only students. Quite a time ago I offered to republish the paper of a friend in a book I was editing if only he were to rewrite it in such a way that it would be comprehensible. My offer was declined. Perhaps he thought the paper was wrong, or intellectually worthless, even though I thought it highly original. After all, creative people do often denigrate their earlier work, or perhaps he thought the paper would be in some way less objective if it were to be expressed in plain English. Who can tell? Another correspondent illuminated for me the roots of conformity:

"My own theory is that these peculiarities of style result from an inferiority complex on the part of psychologists and sociologists: (they are comparatively rare with physicists, biologists, doctors, etc.—except psychiatrists). We feel that we are not yet accepted as really scientific, so we try to impress ourselves and our public, by adopting what sounds like a scientific vocabulary. At the same time, to show how widely we read, we take both our ideas and our language from foreigners rather than compatriots—in my day it was German authorities who were usually quoted (Wundt rather than Sherrington or Ward); later French (Binet rather than Galton); now of course it is American . . . 'Girls of seven have another way of saying the same thing' sounds too humdrum: so it becomes 'The seven-year-old female school population are differentiated by an idiosyncracy (sic) in the strategy of their learning behaviour'. . ." (Cyril Burt, personal communication, 19/12/1969).

In rather the same vein, other academics (e.g., Mahoney, 1976, p. 85; Van den Berghe, 1970, pp 97-98) have, tongue in cheek, cautioned the student to use "seasoned jargon" if he wants to get anywhere at all. J. Scott Armstrong of the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, forgoes irony in saying virtually the same thing: "It soon becomes obvious that the

purpose of writing is not to communicate but to impress. The ability to write in an incomprehensible way is useful for people who have nothing to say. And in the time you spend making it easier to read, you could be writing another incomprehensible paper" (*The Times*, 9/4/1980).

Finally, I cannot resist quoting the start of a letter by Bob Short (sic) entitled "Monosyllabic Writing" which appears in Faraday's (1816-1846) unpublished commonplace book: "Sir, I think it would be well for all if our mode of speech could be made more plain as well in what we write as what we say—so that each myght read as he runs. I know there are those who will laugh at this but why should they?" The criticism of verbosity and obscurantism is clearly not a contemporary phenomenon, but the forces which perpetuate it are too entrenched to yield to individual voices. I might add copious examples of pretentious writing from my own data base, but I have done this elsewhere (Wason, 1980). In any case, it seems a little unfair to slang the efforts of my own students and associates, when anyone might dig up similar cases in my own papers. But it is not just our seats of learning which are responsible for the cultivation of obscurantism. In fact, it pales into insignificance when it is compared with the style of officials. In the spirit of fairness, and for the sake of the record, I shall describe my own attack on official language before returning to my target.

1.3 The language of bureaucracy

The language of official forms and instructions has long been accepted as a minor irritant and a feeble joke. I think Sheila Jones and I were the first academics to become seriously interested in this problem in the mid-nineteen-sixties (e.g., Jones, 1968; Wason, 1962; Wason, 1968). We even received a grant from the Medical Research Council to investigate it, and we introduced the term *logical tree* (which subsequently became *algorithm*) into the vocabulary of government circles. We demonstrated experimentally that in several cases the language of inter-related rules was almost impossible to understand in continuous prose because of the complexity of the syntax, and we forecast that the problem would be exacerbated in the future because the drafting of legislation proceeds by accretion. Moreover, we developed a technique which, in principle, eliminates consumer difficulty.

After a few ripples of excitement and much shuffling around from one government department to another, guided by a more or less benevolent Treasury, the interest appeared to wane. But it gets aroused again periodically, as one group of assiduous proselytizers after another takes up the cause. The most active of these groups today, The Plain English Campaign, led by Chrissie Maher and Martin Cutts of the Salford Form Market, have developed a missionary zeal in their desire to root out all symptoms of officialese. This has involved the shredding of forms in front of the Houses of Parliament, a gesture which apparently achieved only an evanescent publicity.

The problem is a real one, and in an ideal society it would not exist, but it is more complex than most critics appreciate. After a fair amount of experience of dealing with enlightened officials spurred on by the interest of

the media, my submission is that piecemeal onslaughts and articulate advocacy will change nothing. It might be an interesting psychological exercise to penetrate the mental processes of the writers of official leaflets (as we once contemplated doing), but the dominance of bureaucratic obscurantism would remain untouched because it is motivated (in a very broad sense) by political interest. Lucidity is not the prime consideration of those who wield power, as even a socialist Minister of the Crown confessed to us in a casual remark. In such cases control is truly exerted through the written word: rules are made to bind people.

1.4 The obscurantism test

Consider, if you will, the following six extracts taken (respectively) from works on psychology, sociology, semiotics, philosophy of science, mathematics, and the philosophy of politics. The first three I shall claim are obscurantist, the fourth and fifth specialized, and the sixth a model of expository prose.

(A) "The purposive base of science is all too readily forgotten. We are both pushed and pulled towards presumptions of anonymity. We are pushed because purpose is in our blood and creeps all too readily into what we know. We have none of us wholly escaped our self-centred past—so self-centred, indeed, that it was unaware of its own relevance." (60 words)

(B) "An element of a shared symbolic system which serves as a criterion for selection among the alternatives of orientation which are instrinsically open in a situation may be called a value . . . . But from this motivational orientation aspect of the totality of action it is, in view of the role of symbolic systems, necessary to distinguish a 'value-orientation' aspect." (And so on for another 272 words, 331 in all)

(C) "Thus Derrida's thought denies itself the facile illusion of having passed beyond the metaphysics of which it stands as a critique; of having emerged from the old models into some unexplored country whose existence such a critique had implied, if only by the negation of a negation. Instead, his philosophic language feels its way gropingly along the walls of its own conceptual prison, describing it from the inside as though it were only one of the possible worlds of which the others are nonetheless inconceivable." (85 words)

(D) "We can now ask the corresponding question about theory-constitutive metaphors: Given that it is possible to employ a nondefinitional account of reference to defend the view that theory-constitutive metaphorical expressions should be understood as referring, why is this view preferable to the view that theory-constitutive metaphorical expressions are non-referential and are merely heuristically useful?"

(E) "During the last few years some interest has been shown in the problem of classifying up to homotopy the spaces of H-spaces of small rank."

(F) "Methodological essentialism, i.e., the theory that it is the aim of science to reveal essences and to describe them by means of definitions, can be better understood when contrasted with its opposite, *Methodological nominalism*. Instead of aiming at finding out what a thing really is, and at defining its true nature, methodological nominalism aims at describing how a thing behaves in various circumstances, and especially, whether there are any regularities in its behaviour. In other words, methodological nominalism sees the aim of science in the description of the things and events of our experience, and in an 'explanation' of these events, i.e., their description with the help of universal laws. And it sees in our language, and especially in those of its rules which distinguish properly constructed sentences and inferences from a mere heap of words, the great instrument of scientific description; words it considers rather as subsidiary tools for this task, and not as names of essences."

Wright Mills (1959) translates (B) (Parsons, 1951) thus: "People often share standards and expect one another to stick to them. In so far as they do, their society may be orderly". He claims that this translation, which reduces a passage of 331 words to 23 (a ratio of 0.07), loses none of the explicit meaning; it contains "all that is intelligible in it." Inspired by his example, I translate (A) (Holmes, 1977) as: "We are attracted to science because we are human beings," a reduction of 60 words to 10 (a ratio of 0.17); and (C) (Jameson, 1972) as: "Derrida's thought just manages to avoid being metaphysical," a reduction of 85 words to 8 (a ratio of 0.09). These translations, following that of Mills', aim to capture only the explicit meaning of such passages.

Now we turn to prose which is obscure but not, I claim, obscurantist. (D) (Boyd, 1979) is infelicitous because the author is trying to say too much in too few words. You would have to know about "reference" and what the terms "theory-constitutive" and "nondefinitional" mean in contemporary philosophy of science, and some of this information might be gleaned from the context. But the syntactic frame is clear: "Given that it is possible to employ *b* to defend the view that *a* should be understood as *c*, why is this view preferable to the view that *a* is *not-c*?" That is packed but it is intelligible and rational. It is only the technical terms which render the sentence unintelligible, and the author could, I am sure, spell these out until we understood more than we did initially.

Similarly, we could find a mathematician to give us at least an inkling of what (E) (taken at random from a mathematical journal) is all about. If I knew the meaning of "homotopy" and "H-spaces" I might even be well on the way. I know already that the author is not concerned with H-spaces of *large* rank and that the interest in classification does not extend *beyond* homotopy. Pretty useless knowledge, you may say. But the point is that knowledge of this kind (or perhaps any kind) cannot be derived from (A), (B), or (C). (F) (Popper, 1952) is included for purposes of comparison; it requires no translation.

This analysis provides the basis for a test to discriminate obscurantism from specialized language. If an adequate translation is *shorter* than the text, then the text is obscurantist; if it is *longer*, then the text is specialized

language. Thus, as we have seen, (A), (B), and (C) can be radically reduced without loss, but (D) and (E) would have to be radically expanded by an expert to be made comprehensible. The adequacy of such a test obviously depends on the knowledge and sensitivity of the analyst. Furthermore, it is a test only of expository prose which purports to elucidate an argument directly. There is an interesting style, used especially by some philosophers and theologians, which is closer to poetry than expository prose; it is allusive and analogical. For instance, Wisdom's (1952) *Other Minds* consists of an inconclusive dialogue about a well-known philosophical problem. The arguments are clarified through a kind of dramatic presentation of contending points of view. Writing of this kind is clearly exempt from any test designed to assess lucidity. In justice, it seems that (A) may belong to this genre, and hence should not be subjected to the obscurantism test.

2 COMMITMENT

Intentionally, or unintentionally, an obscurantist use of language conceals the commitment of the author. In contrast, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Popper, 1952) is written with a highly distinctive and committed voice. It is something which is essentially human and individual; neither a machine nor a committee could write in this way. And contrary to popular belief, I think it cannot be imitated. It comes from having a particular attitude to what you want to say. But how do you find out what you have to say? Perhaps you knew it all along. This I seriously doubt.

2.1 An affective problem

"Why don't you write an article analysing exactly what is wrong with all those monstrous sentences you have in that file?" somebody once said to me. He thought it would be helpful to be made aware of error in writing. But in spite of numerous manuals, and in spite of the rather bourgeois obsession with the niceties of style (typified by Philip Howard's column in *The Times*), we know deep down that the possession of prescriptive rules does not overcome the central problem of writing. It is generally acknowledged that writing is hard work, but it is not like giving a lecture, or playing chess, which are just as intellectually demanding, but which possess sufficient constraints to start and terminate performance. "It's a skill, isn't it?" a former student has just said to me on the telephone. "Yes, it's a skill," I replied. She meant that it is something which improves with practice. Partly right—practice is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for what I call "happy writing," a kind of writing, familiar to experienced writers, in which the output is associated with a sense of elation and commitment (or engagement). My answer on the telephone had ignored the affective problem (Wason, 1980).

Any kind of serious writing involves a confrontation with the self because it creates an object which is both a part of the self and a part of the world of ideas. In reading the text, or working over it, the writer is shown a reflection of himself. The object can be criticized, elaborated, or destroyed. And

doing any of these things, I have argued, modifies the consciousness of the writer (Wason, 1970).

Such processes are basically affective. They involve a perception of the self and especially self-esteem. Lionel Trilling told me that, when he was teaching rhetoric at Columbia University in the nineteen-thirties, some of his students expressed an admiration for his own writing, but said they could not possibly write like that because "they were not gentlemen." A similar elitist assumption, held by more than one of my friends, is that writing is a gift which they do not (regrettably) share. One has only to think about the fetishistic rituals that some authors have performed before starting to write, in order to appreciate that writing, or at any rate happy writing, does not seem to respond to a volitional act. One does not surround oneself with rotten apples before sitting down to do the income tax; there is no need to invoke a muse for such a menial task. Elsewhere I have disputed this "natural function theory" (the wait-for-it effect) as stemming from our romantic notions of creativity, and I cited journalism as a counter-example. But I am now inclined to think I was wrong.

Happy writing demands a relaxed attitude. All too often, most individuals are convinced that writing is going to be difficult, and so of course it does become difficult and peculiarly unpleasant. Hence I am impressed by some of the techniques advocated by Rohman (1965), such as analogical exercizes, in his "prewriting method." Like meditation, or prayer, writing depends on an inner dialogue which is non-volitional. It is something which is not entirely under conscious control. The importance of this problem has been more widely acknowledged in the United States with the attention paid to writing workshops in university departments. More conservative academics, of course, will view this particular scene with scepticism and distaste because it touches on the emotional life.

2.2 The myth of conceptual innocence

One might entertain the romantic fantasy that voice has been lost through experience. One might suppose that in some golden age we saw the world with fresh eyes, and could write about it in an unaffected way, and that we ought to be able to recover that vision. This idea which derives from Blake, Rousseau, and Wordsworth (among others) is obviously attractive and does not seem to me entirely false. It is attested by the aesthetic quality of young children's drawings.

In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Pirsig, 1974) the protagonist Phaedrus, a teacher of rhetoric, encounters one of his students who wants to write a five-hundred-word essay about the United States. This is never even attempted. Success only comes when the topic is finally restricted: "Narrow it down to the *front* of *one* building on the main street . . . the Opera House. Start with the upper left-hand brick." The result is a five-thousand-word essay. This release from a block is attributed to a fresh found ability to look and see rather than to repeat what she had already heard so many times before. As a result of trying out further exercizes, Phaedrus concludes that the compulsion to imitate (absent in young children) has to be broken down

before real rhetoric teaching could start. The recovery of voice is achieved through detailed descriptive writing. The analysis seems to me basically correct: conformity to a stereotyped objective standard has a stultifying effect on the writing of most students. The value of the exercize, however, remains unclear. The critical question is whether such writing would help the individual to write in other ways, especially in more abstract or general terms which do not depend on observation. At any rate, Nancy Kuriloff, a writing therapist in California, who specializes in the treatment of writing block, seems to have developed a similar technique: "Write about stone . . . . Don't stop. Don't correct. If you get stuck, write about how it feels to get stuck." (*Time:* 14/6/1980). She has a profound but simple point: the important thing in writing is to keep going. The superior wisdom of everyman's "Critic" (as she calls it) must be denied.

2.3 Discovery

In 1970 the editor of *Physics Bulletin* invited me to write an article on writing scientific papers, perhaps expecting some useful hints and rules of composition put over in an encouraging manner. He received an hypothesis about the generative power of writing, and I received six requests for off-prints (Wason, 1970). My technique, described in that paper, consists in the serial alternation of two distinct modes of writing: (a) an uncritical exteriorization of thought, and (b) a critical re-writing of the exteriorized mass. Hartley (1980) claims that this technique is idiosyncratic, and I am delighted to hear that I escape the charge of redundancy. My argument is that when these two modes are allowed to interact (successively between drafts, *not* concurrently within drafts) they facilitate, clarify, and enlarge thought. Happy writing becomes an important source of discovery. Let me repeat myself and say just a little about these two modes.

Exteriorization may seem inimical to intellectuals because it implies the production of an object in a free-associative manner, akin to Freud's primary process. Particularly repugnant, one would think, is the toleration of the rubbish often produced by this mode. So much incoherent, hackneyed, and altogether bad material may tempt the writer to correct as he goes along, or start afresh. Such a bow towards Kuriloff's "Critic" tends to induce inhibition because the mode of trying to say something cogently interferes with the mode of finding out what to say at all. This would be the point at which the pen is laid down on the desk.

The more considered mode which attacks and moulds the exteriorized object in a critical way would also appear alien to many individuals. Personally, I find it congenial to see what I think and then analyse what I say. However, Murray (1978) in a perceptive essay claims it possesses a vaguely clandestine quality. He argues that the discovery of meaning through re-writing from the "zero draft" has not been studied because it has not been experienced (or admitted) by writers in the less imaginative forms of writing, and because it is not considered academically respectable. Two professors of his acquaintance implied that they were ashamed of writing in this way, and did not discuss it with their students. My own experience

confirms that many individuals simply do not know what it means to re-write anything in a different way. One of my friends even claims that her successive drafts get worse instead of better. There is, to a large number of people, something odd about the very idea of re-writing. Is it that unconsciously re-writing is like prevarication in speech? Or is it connected with the idea that self-expression implies a self which is somehow sacrosanct and inviolable?

The thesis that discovery (or invention) is a function of writing, and especially of re-writing, is more familiar to rhetoricians (e.g., Young, 1978) than to experimental psychologists. Techniques of writing need to be developed in the psychological laboratory which might enable the individual to be liberated from that tunnel vision which forces only a narrow point of view, and hence precludes discovery. Our experience suggest that some school children are highly receptive to novel techniques in composition (Wason and Williams, 1978). The Whorfian hypothesis (that language moulds thought) does seem to have stronger claims in writing than in speech. This, of course, is an optimistic declaration which befits publication in an American journal. Actually, I am sanguine that the undoubted fruits of writing can be captured in an experimental investigation. The counter-argument is that the control entailed by an experiment is incompatible with the conditions for happy writing.

2.4 Therapy

Committed writing may be (in computer terms) a unique way to empty the store so that more space is made available for new ideas. It follows that what is written is not necessarily of value to anyone else. The writing of angry memos, without sending them, is proverbially supposed to have a cathartic effect on the emotions of frustrated managers. Similarly, the headaches caused by intellectual confusion might be alleviated by putting them down on paper. I owe this interesting hypothesis to a conversation with Ivor Stilitz, and recently observed a concrete instance of the effect which was more compelling than any experimental result.

June 10, 1980. Jan Smedslund from Oslo discusses with me some problems of rationality and the extent to which this is an empirical issue. I am not conscious that I can help much beyond listening sympathetically. He is blocked in his thinking about the problem, and tells me that this is stopping him from writing. I suggest (of course) that it might help to write.

The next day he telephones to say that immediately after leaving me he wrote for two hours without interruption and covered four pages. "What came out was totally unexpected, and this really surprised me." It was also wrong, but it apparently clarified the topic, and enabled the writer to locate the source of the block in his thinking. Thus a conceptual difficulty had been illuminated, not by thought or discussion, but by emptying the store of deficient material.

I was blocked before writing this essay, and indeed, I could not decide whether to write it at all. This indecision is unusual for me because I generally find writing can be relied upon to put myself into a good mood. Moreover, I

set myself firm deadlines which I invariably meet ahead of time. On holiday I realized I was not taking my own medicine, so I wrote down a kind of scenario which, like Smedslund's piece, was also unplanned (see appendix). On reflection, it represented a statement to myself of how I stood at the moment of writing, but the effect was to make me feel less alienated from my own thoughts and feelings. I experienced a disproportionate exaltation after having written something objectively trivial. And in a couple of days I was at last able to begin a first draft without too much trouble. It was as if this writing of a scenario had to be done before more serious work could start.

Let me cite one more example, a more serious one, of writing which may achieve a similar purpose. In 1979 Virginia Valian sent me some essays in exploratory self-analysis written in a particularly fluent and natural style. Many of the topics clustered round the problems of being a woman in a predominantly male academic world. For instance, the attitude towards difficulties in cooking and in academic work are compared. The overall impression to me was that such writing was an attempt to render an individual life more meaningful and coherent. What interested me, however, was that the author possessed an unusual need to write, for just these purposes, and I pointed this out to her. She confessed that, before reading my letter, this idea would have seemed incredible because of the pain she experienced in writing, but now its truth seemed obvious. Indeed, the essays are being cast in the form of a book, *A Life's Work*.

These three examples, Jan Smedslund's, my own, and Virginia Valian's, illustrate the therapeutic power of committed (and yet perhaps involuntary) writing. It is evident that such writing may empty the store, or, at a higher level, impose a pattern on daily experience. And perhaps for some people this kind of writing is necessary (even though it may not be recognized as such) in order to get on with the main business of living. My constant attempts to cajole friends and colleagues into writing may have some rational justification.

3.0 CONCLUSION

Beneath the surface of this essay there is the continuous awareness of the sorrow and difficulty which so many people experience in writing. It has been written in the faith that this apparent difficulty is not resolved by exhortation or by precept, but that it can be overcome if only such people were to free themselves from the tutelage to stereotyped models to which they assume (consciously or unconsciously) that they should conform. Through the process of writing and re-writing a committed voice can be recovered in which such individuals are allowed to find out what they think, say what they think, and then stop. To them this essay is dedicated.

APPENDIX

A scenario: the setting of a scene: July 17, 1980

Let me set the scene. I am writing this in our Suffolk cottage. It is a typical summer day — cold, damp, and overcast. This morning I mowed an incredible amount of grass, and then had a nap in the afternoon. Ming returned from Sudbury market to announce that she is starting a campaign for the more humane treatment of pigs. I think this is a splendid cause, and we talk about it. After a bit I continue to stare out of the window. Two crammed note-books and four files lie on my desk giving the illusion of industry and scholarship. Away from it all, as they say: no students, no committees, no tedious bus journeys to College, the ideal situation for productive work. Perhaps. We have a nice vegetarian meal. I write down a couple of sentences, and then stomp about my study. I walk into the main room only to be confronted by Mr. Reagan at the Republican Convention. Even this does not depress me; I cannot get on but I am totally preoccupied. I write down a few more sentences, stoke up the boiler, and then decide to go to bed. But a torrent of thoughts assails me as soon as I hit the pillow. A familiar situation, I can hear you saying: a case of writing block. Not familiar to me. Well, instead of making such a fuss about it, you should write that other paper — you know, the one about pragmatics — which will probably go much better. You haven't written anything for at least four months, you know . . . . (At this point the scenario turned into a dialogue with myself.)

Shop Hill Cottage, Alpheton, Suffolk.

"The impulse of the pen.
Left alone, thought goes as it will.
As it follows the pen, it loses its freedom.
It wants to go one way,
the pen another.
It is like a blind man
led astray by his cane, and what I
come to write
is no longer what I wished to write." Jules Renard

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