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The Ethics of Clarity and/or Obscuration

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Abstract: The essay examines the ethical tensions surrounding the common cultural and disciplinary demand that writers write "clearly." The essay seeks to advance the discipline's engagement with Linda Kintz's and Sharon Crowley's separate critiques of the "ideology of clarity," arguing that clarity potentially manipulates audiences primarily through either strategic or unintentional omissions of critical information. Deploying Kenneth Burke's notion of ingenuous and cunning identification, it advances an argument that, through persistent acts of omission, clarity can become a cunning rhetorical form, a form often set into motion by unintentionally manifested cultural pressures. The essay ends by proposing five definitions of clarity currently circulating within the discipline, before a final reflection upon the inherent tension (both stylistic and disciplinary) between clarity and obscuration.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, I want to suggest that sometimes "clarity" and "clear" prose might be a problem, a liability. But unlike those who have seen a *lack* of clarity as one of the primary deficiencies plaguing student writing, and as an even broader threat to public discourse, I see the *presence* of clarity as a potential problem; like Ian Barnard in his article "The Ruse of Clarity," I am concerned with "the values embedded in this [cultural and sometimes disciplinary] insistence on clarity" (434). But I am not only interested in the values embedded in the insistence on clarity but am interested in clarity itself, and I suspect that the tension surrounding "clarity" indicates a broader ethical dilemma for the discipline of rhetoric and composition as well. While I am not the first scholar to treat the common devotion to what Linda Kintz and Sharon Crowley call the "ideology of clarity" as a potential liability (Kintz, "Clarity" 115; Crowley 146-47), I do want to expand our sensitivity to the liability by positing that clarity itself, and not only the epistemological positions or ideologies frequently allied with "clarity," might be a rhetorical and ethical liability.

In what follows I examine one of the dilemmas implied in *The New Rhetoric* when Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca write that "we should gain an understanding of how notions are clarified and obscured and how *sometimes the clarification of certain notions can bring about the obscuring of others*" (133; emphasis added). The primary means through which the prose style of clarity obscures is through omission. On the one hand, the act of writing is persistently an act of omission; for every word or idea I include in a sentence or essay, I exclude infinitely more. Such inherent and necessary exclusion does not, though, fit the description of "obscuring" that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca provide. Obscuration of the sort that they mean occurs when *relevant* and *meaningful* information is omitted in the course of a rhetor's effort to be clear. The problem is, because clear styles are perceived as "clear" precisely when they demonstrate the greatest economy of language, reading audiences lose the opportunity to interrogate claims that may be excluding critical information. Even precise, detailed deployments of "clarity" can (though do not necessarily) obscure. Simultaneously, if part of the rhetorical work that "clarity" performs is constituted by strategic (or otherwise) acts of omission, we cannot interrogate clear prose for what has been omitted—the language or information simply isn't present. There is then an ethical dilemma presented by a tension between the cultural forces that insist upon clarity from rhetors and the liabilities of omission.

"Ethics" and "clarity" are both slippery terms though, if I can momentarily be permitted that gross understatement.

Perhaps I should back up for a moment. One problem with "clarity" in particular is that the discipline of rhetoric and composition, despite frequent invocations of the term, has no single working definition of clarity, but instead many competing definitions. Because it is a rhetorically contingent quality, always dependent upon a unique relationship between author, text, and audience, we can't point to particular formal qualities in a piece of prose and say "these are the features of clarity." {1} [#note1] "Clarity" is a notoriously elusive term, easily praised and easily vilified, precisely because it is not in fact one term. Within the discipline of rhetoric and composition, a whole host of words are frequently invoked as synonyms to clarity: "plain," "plain style," "realist," "clear," "literalist," "transparent," to name but the most commonly bandied terms. In turn, each of these sometimes-synonymous terms carries its own multiple senses or definitions, and the situation within the discipline becomes even less, well, clear. Obviously it is difficult to take up Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's assertion and investigate whether or not "clarity" also sometimes obscures (much less to weigh in on resulting ethical dilemmas) when we do not, and probably cannot, even have a stable understanding of what constitutes the phenomenon of "clarity."

Any discussion of clarity, then, begins with a definitional problem. Slightly separate from the notion that "clarity" moves under the cover of multiple definitions within the discipline, though, is the idea, already circulating within recent scholarship on "clarity," that clarity and appeals for clarity represent more than a stylistic preference, and frequently represent both a conservative politics and a positivist epistemology. In the most complete recent examination of the role of "clarity" in the public sphere, Paul Butler notes that the preference for "clarity" arises from "the tendency to want to make writing transparent, or to have it seem invisible to those reading it, as if it points to some definitive underlying reality" (132). Linda Kintz describes the same "tendency" that Butler describes as a form of literalism. Kintz writes that the American religious right, in particular, relies upon a two-pronged, clarity-dependent strategy to advance its own conservative, literalist political agendas, relying upon, "(a) the highly complex deployment of strategic vagueness, joined to (b) claims of simple clarity, the entire thing wrapped in passionate, emotional intensity" ("Finding" 111). Kintz labels the resulting phenomenon the "vague clarity of literalism" and describes the style of "vague clarity" not only as a style but, more importantly, as indicative of a conservative worldview, writing that "literalism refers to a general concept of reality as taken for granted and based on a belief that human nature is immediate—unmediated—a commonsense version of natural law that displaces critical distance and depends on a realist concept of language in which the word matches the world" ("Finding" 112). Kintz's critique of the religious right's deployment of "vague clarity" is applicable to other discourse communities as well. Many of the prose styles that might get labeled as "clear" might also qualify, paradoxically, as "vague," for one instrumental path to clear prose is to eschew detail and precision. Sharon Crowley's work follows closely on Kintz's, and Crowley worries that "In rhetorical terms the ideology of clarity opens few spaces for invention" (147). Equally problematic, the ideology of clarity, with its simultaneous potential for omissions and vagueness, can also preclude opportunities for audiences to interpret texts.

To re-deploy Ian Barnard's diagnosis, when considering "clarity" in terms of ethics, perhaps most important is the sly "ideological work" that the "clear" style potentially slips past its audiences when really "clarity's obviousness, objectivity, and innocuousness in fact conceal the ideological work that is done in the name of clarity" (434). I want to extend Barnard's point here, to extend one step further the perhaps counter-intuitive but nonetheless credible notion that "clarity" (which we so naturally intuit as synonymous with "transparency," as Butler points out) might sometimes, through its seeming "transparency," simultaneously "conceal" itself and thereby accomplish significant ideological work, a point I will return to shortly. Because "clear" styles do not call attention to their own uses of

language, audiences sometimes misperceive them as having no style at all, and therein also miss the opportunity to interrogate the claims of “clear” language.

Perhaps precisely because of the vagaries of both terms—clarity and ethics—the nexus between “clear” styles and ethics has become a point of friction of increasing interest to rhetoricians. In addition to Kintz’s and Crowley’s work, even more recent articles addressing attitudes towards “clarity” have brought needed attention to the often assumed ethical righteousness of the so-called “clear” or “plain” style, focusing on the ideological work done under the aegis of “clarity.” Ian Barnard, in “The Ruse of Clarity,” notes that “[t]he virtues of clarity are routinely expounded” across various instructional texts, echoing Richard Lanham’s much earlier but nearly identical lament that a “perpetual moralizing about language haunts all modern writing about style” (Barnard 434; Lanham 14). Barnard’s issue is not with clarity itself but with how appeals to clarity are used to shut down scholarship and theory associated with leftist politics and manifested in complex, “unclear” prose forms (440). If appeals to “clarity” (or accusations of a lack of “clarity”) are used as excuses to discredit texts, does presenting an argument “clearly” also preclude opportunities for deliberation by failing to provide critical, relevant details?

Catherine Prendergast, in her article “Fighting Words,” also devotes significant energy to discussions of “clarity” and its commonly assumed ethical virtues. Prendergast makes the case that calls to clarity—whether they are in Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* or in the Unabomber’s manifesto—frequently mask conservative politics and ideologies. In her critique of the popularity of Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*, the long-enduring, preeminent pedagogical text advocating on behalf of clarity, Prendergast writes that the book’s popularity derives “not [from] the commonplace advice on writing clearly, but rather the manual’s prescription for life: Better to be wrong than to be irresolute. Reject the timidity of modernity and return to the plain, simple, unadorned, but above all, bold” (15). In essence, for Strunk and White clarity is “an alibi, not the real goal,” and Prendergast’s critique is not of clarity itself, but of the social uses to which Strunk and White marshal clarity in their handbook (personal communication). It is the promise of a confident and certain world that makes *The Elements of Style* and the concept of clarity that it promotes so appealing for many audiences. Clarity as it is advocated in *The Elements of Style* is not so much a prose style as a smokescreen.

“The dark side of this approach,” Prendergast continues, “is that while it pretends to be all about the audience (White said Strunk’s main concern was for the reader), it is really about cutting out the audience, freeing oneself from the interpretations of others” (15). I would extend Prendergast’s analysis of Strunk and White a step further, for the pursuit of clarity is, not only for Strunk and White but many others as well, about “freeing oneself from the interpretations of others.” Clarity is in some situations, whether intentionally or unintentionally, an undetectable means by which to cut off and preclude debate. If a writer can free him- or herself from the interpretations of others, then those same writers can monopolize more rhetorical agency for themselves. The interpretive portion of communication incumbent upon readers is wrested away by the “clarity” of the author, making it more difficult for readers to contest the “clear” conclusions of the “clear” (read, sly, or cunning in such cases) writers that some advocates of “clarity” would have us become. Both Barnard and Prendergast are suspicious of the notion that “clarity” denotes anything resembling ethical righteousness, and indeed both note how attacks on “unclear” texts have historically camouflaged attacks on specific political positions (Barnard 440; Prendergast 13).

In addition to its long-standing enmeshment with political concerns, “clarity” has also long been associated with grammatical correctness. In turn, grammatical correctness has often been thought of, quite problematically, as an indicator of ethically righteous thinking. As did Francis Christensen’s collection *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric* before it, Joseph Williams’s landmark article “The

Phenomenology of Error" helped to reverse the momentum of prescriptivists who mistakenly equated "clarity" with "correctness," and both with righteousness. Going a step further, though, Williams's handbook *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, now selling in a tenth edition, provides his most explicit connection of impenetrable prose styles with ethical failings. In his handbook, Williams initially writes of the "failure" to be clear that "[i]t is a problem that has affected generations of writers who have hidden their ideas not only from their readers, but sometimes even from themselves" (4). Here Williams implies that a lack of "clarity" in prose is often the result of unclear thinking, and also implicitly that such instances of "unclear" prose are *un*intentionally manifested in writing. Within Williams's logic, the failing indicated by "unclear" prose is not yet an ethical one, but more the result of fumbling, a moment in which an author has presented a reader with incomplete or haphazard thinking, but not a situation in which the author has intentionally maneuvered to evade critique by hiding behind the obfuscating or "unclear" prose. Again: Williams has not at this point in his handbook connected "unclear" prose with ethical failings. Instead, Williams seems to be associating unclear prose with, essentially, intellectual clumsiness, or even with writerly inexperience.

But on the same page of his handbook, Williams complicates the ethics of "clarity," arguing, essentially, that "unclear" prose styles frequently *intentionally* exclude their audiences, thereby becoming unethical: "When we read that kind of writing in government writing," Williams continues, "we call it *bureaucratese*; when we read it in legal documents, *legalese*; in academic writing, *academese*. Written deliberately or carelessly, it's a language of exclusion that a democracy can't tolerate" (4; emphasis in original). By describing the "deliberately or carelessly" written *–eses* as "a language of exclusion that *a democracy can't tolerate*" (emphasis added), Williams makes style, and in particular his preference for clarity, into an ethical issue. As well he should. Certainly prose styles that are *deliberately* or *carelessly* exclusionary *do* threaten our democratic values. Or do they? It is obvious how such exclusionary styles might shut out many audiences from important legal, financial, and educational resources. But as Richard Lanham has shown, even the most initially opaque bureaucratic writing styles sometimes serve meaningful, ethical strategic and rhetorical purposes (27). Williams's distinction between fumbling obscuration and unethical obscuration hinges on intentionality—undertaken unintentionally, such styles denote laziness or inexperience, but undertaken intentionally, such obscuration is simply intolerable, is unethical. Authorial intention, as it turns out, may be at the core of the conversation when "clarity" is under scrutiny.

Intentionality is difficult to assess in nearly any prose, though, whether the prose is "clear" or "obscured," and the ethics of a given instantiation of "clarity" are no easier to assess on Williams's implied basis of intentionality. Maybe, then, intentionality can't be the metric for assessing a prose style's ethics. Further, manifestations of "clarity" likely function differently in different modes of prose, just as they function differently in interactions with different audiences. Certainly, though, ethical dilemmas are present whenever we talk or write about "style" and "clarity," for "style is a means by which power and advantage are negotiated, distributed, and struggled over in society" (Brummett xi). So the stakes, when we talk about prose style, are high. Appropriately then, T.R. Johnson, in *A Rhetoric of Pleasure*, writes of his own classroom practices that he has "tried to push the question of prose style constantly towards questions of ethics" (29). Praising or damning a text solely on the basis of style, whether it is perceived as clear or opaque, might be what is ethically suspicious. And yet, as Barnard and Kintz especially demonstrate, politically motivated attacks on some prose are only ever grounded in (unwarranted) critiques of style, rather than in engagement with a text's ideas (Barnard 440; Kintz "Clarity" 115). I do not want to—and the point of this article is not to—cast "clarity" as a universally unethical prose style. I am of accord with Kathryn Flannery, who admonishes that "[n]o style, rhetoric reminds us, is inherently good or bad" (20). Unethical examples of clarity or obscuration, then, cannot be discovered by their formal qualities, but only by the ideological work that they do, or that they avoid.

Finally, the tension between clarity and obscuration, I want also to suggest, puts the discipline of rhetoric and composition itself into an ethical dilemma. On the one hand, as Butler implies and as Kintz and Crowley and Barnard and Prendergast argue explicitly, arguments on behalf of clarity are often coded arguments on behalf of a particular politics. And yet, there is widespread social and cultural pressure put on rhetors to "be clear," an "ideology of clarity," as Crowley calls it, that, sometimes dangerously, only feigns to be ethically neutral. Kintz's response to the culturally powerful (perhaps even culturally dominant) expectation of "vague clarity" from rhetors is to promote ambiguity as an antidote to the ideology, as a means of actively resisting the conservative agendas obscured by the ideology of clarity and its proponents ("Clarity" 118-19). But promoting the rhetorical uses of ambiguity (or, indeed any prose style not immediately perceived as "clear"), especially among students, is rhetorically risky in a culture where "clarity" is the *de facto* prose style of business, educational institutions, and many professions. Essentially, the discipline of rhetoric and composition is left at an impasse, on the one hand responsible for educating students to write effectively and ethically in a culture that will demand clarity from them, but at the same time recognizing as a discipline that the ideology of clarity entails tremendous rhetorical and ethical liabilities of its own. Teaching students to resist the "ideology of clarity" risks marginalizing the discipline as irrelevant within a broader culture that almost unequivocally demands "clarity" from rhetors. But teaching students to write clearly might effectively put the discipline into the position of reifying the very ideology of clarity that so many within the discipline have convincingly critiqued. Stalemate?

Obscuration, and Ingenuous and Cunning Identification

In a section of *The New Rhetoric* titled "Clarification and Obscuration of Notions," Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca argue that "[t]he necessity for a univocal language, which dominates scientific thought, has made clarity of concepts an ideal which one feels bound to try and achieve, forgetting that this very clarity may stand in the way of other functions of language" (133). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca see the pursuit of clarity, the "ideal which one feels bound to try and achieve," as arising primarily from the conventions of rationalist, positivist twentieth-century scientific discourse (133). And while the rationalist, positivist moment that prompted their thinking has essentially passed, some of the moment's legacies endure, not least of which is the "ideal" of "clarity of concepts," an ideal that continues to be promoted from some locations within the discipline of rhetoric and composition, and, as Kintz and Crowley and Barnard and Butler demonstrate, is even more commonly demanded by certain conservatively impelled constituents within the broader public. In Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's formulation of the term, "clarity of concepts" is quite explicitly a quality that is intentionally pursued, if indeed one "feels bound" to achieve it, or to attempt to achieve it. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca do not offer a blanket condemnation of the pursuit of clarity, but an awareness (in their own time relatively new) that "clarity," in addition to whatever persuasive advantages it may offer a rhetor, and like all prose styles, also entails rhetorical and ethical liabilities. For all that it reveals through its accessibility, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca remind us, clarity also potentially obscures through what it omits or excludes in order to be perceived as "clear" by a particular audience.

It is not enough, according to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, to simply be aware that "clarity may stand in the way of other functions of language," and instead (I cite again), "we should gain an understanding of how notions are clarified and obscured and how *sometimes the clarification of certain notions can bring about the obscuring of others*" (133; emphasis added). Importantly, neither clarity, nor the pursuit of the ideal of clarity, always brings about the obscuring of another notion, but only "sometimes" so. Nonetheless, the relationship that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca describe is a direct one, with clarification of an idea simultaneously bringing about the obscuration of another, presumably closely related, idea. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca also observe that "clarity" is a

conditional or contextually dependent quality in prose, writing that “[t]he clearness of a text is conditioned by the possibilities of interpretation that it offers” (125). But texts are conditioned, oftentimes, in subtle, unconscious ways, not always as intentionally as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca imply here.

Kenneth Burke points out that when we speak of rhetoric, we are not always talking about intentionally motivated speech, “[f]or there is a wide range of ways whereby the rhetorical motive, through the resources of identification, can operate without conscious direction by any particular agent” (*Motives* 35). The phenomenon of “affecting a lack of affectation” (a calculated oversimplification) that Robert Hariman describes Machiavelli of orchestrating quite intentionally in *The Prince* through his own then-unique deployment of “clarity,” might also occur completely unintentionally, according to Burke, when, “having woven a rhetorical motive so integrally into the very essence of his conception, the writer can seem to have ignored rhetorical consideration” (Hariman 19; Burke, *Motives* 37). Burke describes a scenario in which a writer’s motives are so rhetorical, so designed to persuade, that the writer’s utterance transcends the realm of persuasion, becoming so wholly and seamlessly rhetorical as not to *appear* to persuade at all. Is such rhetorical transcendence not the very aspiration of clarity? Isn’t such invisible persuasion precisely Machiavelli’s great feat, as Hariman describes it, and the ruse of which Barnard is so rightly suspicious? The critiques of clarity cited thus far have all assumed that “clarity” is a quality in prose that rhetors consciously pursue. And it often is. But Burke presents another possibility, the complicating idea that “clarity,” especially given its cultural force, might often be the product of unintentional or unconscious motives. If this is the case, if clarity in prose is sometimes the product of unconscious motives, then the ethics of both clarity and obscuration become even more complicated. In some cases prose, through its clarity, through its economy of language, or through a paucity of words, might become cunning, or unethical, through no conscious effort of the rhetor, but through the unconscious, powerful cultural forces that persistently urge rhetors to write “clearly.”

Burke suggests that language that fails to offer enough detail, that is oversimplified or over-clear, can function in cunning, problematic ways: “This aspect of identification,” Burke writes, “whereby one can protect an interest merely by using terms not incisive enough to criticize it properly, often brings rhetoric to the edge of cunning” (*Motives* 36). And omission, or not over-burdening readers with too much information or too many words, is a consistent feature (or demanded absence) of “clear” styles. The phrase “terms not incisive enough to criticize” can be read at least two ways. In the first sense, Burke may be referring to simply vague language, to prose (or speech) that lacks precision , that lacks enough detail to be subjected to any sort of critical reading, prose that omits too much. Importantly, “precision” and “clarity” are not equivalent terms. Burke himself can be read as a rhetor who writes quite precisely, even if not always “clearly.” Prose that lacks precision appears to fit the description of “terms not incisive to criticize,” but so too might some forms of “clarity.” So, in one sense, Burke’s critique can be read as a call for greater precision in writing.

But in another sense the phrase “terms not incisive enough to criticize” anticipates Kintz’s notion of “vague clarity” and her similar critique of language that reads clearly, but that through its simultaneous vagueness precludes attempts to read critically. Interests can be protected by being shrouded in terms “not incisive enough” for criticism, and such shrouding is itself cunning, whether intentionally or unintentionally orchestrated. The idea of prose cunningly shrouding interests because it has been couched in “terms not incisive enough to criticize” is also synonymous with T.R. Johnson’s definition of empty speech, which “seeks only to assert that which is too vague and too general to be contested, too simple to solicit active engagement” (93). Burke is not simply calling for precision, but also eloquence.{2} [#note2]

The phrase “not incisive enough to criticize” might evoke, though, precisely what is wrong with attempts to teach a universalized, decontextualized form of “clarity” that may be produced through oversimplifications of conceptual information. While we can recognize that in many rhetorical situations writing that is “clear” to the target audience is a real persuasive asset, I am hard pressed to think of a context in which oversimplified prose would be anything other than a liability. Simplified prose might be an asset, but *oversimplified* is by definition *too simplified*. The pursuit of clarity for its own sake seems likely to lead to instances of oversimplification. If “clarity” or “terms not incisive enough to criticize” (or “vague clarity” or “empty speech”) are pursued for the purposes of evading critique—whether that pursuit is intentional or unintentional—we approach cunning, and we approach an ethical dilemma.

We cannot split "ingenuous" off of the term “ingenuous and cunning identification,” for it is the rhetor's ingenuousness, or sincerity, in Burke’s use of the word, that ultimately renders an utterance cunning. Cunning rhetors are convincing because they believe the things they say, and say them in terms "not incisive enough” to be criticized. If the pursuit of clarity is an effort to render language transparent, as both Butler and Kintz point out, then it is also an effort on some level to deny the rhetorical nature of language, and to preclude opportunities for others to question or to interrogate the “clear” utterance. Burke addresses these same issues of style further in his essay “Semantic and Poetic Meaning,” asserting that his essay “is intended to give support, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, to the thesis that the ideal of a purely ‘neutral’ vocabulary, free of emotional weightings, attempts to make a totality out of a fragment” (138). In his own way, Burke is echoing the concern of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, arguing that *some* attempts at “clarity” or “plainness” or “neutral” language necessarily obscure or obfuscate important parts of a larger rhetorical situation by oversimplifying, by representing a *part* of a rhetorical situation as a *whole*. Burke also indicates that he too is reacting against the modernist and positivist thinkers of his time who were attempting to render language transparent (“Semantic” 141). Significantly, Burke specifically identifies attempts to couch prose in “neutral” language as relying upon the “elimination” of language, of words, for it seeks “to achieve this end [linguistic neutrality] by the programmatic elimination of a weighted vocabulary at the start” (“Semantic” 149). And such neutrality, or at least the appearance of neutrality, is precisely the aspiration of many attempts to achieve “clarity,” as we’ve already seen. Burke identifies the desire to omit or eliminate whole classes or categories of words from the utterances of those aspiring to a wholly “neutral” (read: “clear”) use of language.

To combat such reductive uses of language (whether intentionally or unintentionally motivated), Burke calls for “a more strenuous cult of style” (“Semantic” 161). “Cultivation” might have been a better lexical choice than “cult,” which seems to imply a blind faith uncomfortably similar to the one practiced by many advocates of “clarity.” Nonetheless, Burke anticipates possible objections, remarking, “Style for its own sake? Decidedly, not at all” (“Semantic” 161). Instead, Burke calls for eloquence, a sort of anti-clarity: “I have wondered if we might legitimately try to introduce some new kind of Occam’s Razor, some new test for exclusion of the inessential. Suppose, for example, that a man were permitted only to say something that he could grow eloquent about” (“Semantic” 164). Burke’s notion of eloquence seems intended to preclude those rhetorical moments wherein a rhetor offers language that appears to be clear but that simultaneously obscures its agendas, information, or critical meanings. Burke’s is a metric designed to expose “terms not incisive enough to criticize,” “vague clarity,” and “empty speech,” and it resonates with Kintz’s subsequent defense of ambiguity as a counter to “vague clarity.” Burke’s advocacy for eloquence (and Kintz’s later advocacy on behalf of the hermeneutic value of ambiguity on similar grounds) is a complete inversion of the values that undergird much of the historic and contemporary advocacy on behalf of “clarity.” Whereas advocates of clarity might argue that what can’t be stated “clearly” shouldn’t be stated at all, Burke argues that if a rhetor cannot wax eloquent on her topic, we ought to be suspicious of the resulting prose. Quite elegantly, Burke’s brief on behalf of a test of eloquence makes a non-issue of whether or not the

"terms not incisive enough to criticize" have been intentionally or unintentionally motivated. Burke's focus is on the reception of language. However it is motivated, Burke seeks to assure that there is enough, and meaningful enough, language at hand to put to the test of inspection and criticism.

After admitting that "much persiflage would be released upon the world" under his notion/test of eloquence, Burke argues that it would be outweighed when "much that now gets 'scientific immunity' by reason of its very pallor (a kind of 'protection of unnoticableness') would in its attempted keying-up expose itself more readily to weeding out" ("Semantic" 164). The obligation to "grow eloquent" would provide the "more strenuous cult of style," would remove the mask of "vague clarity" or "pallor of unnoticableness." Burke mistrusts the clear, technical language that receives "scientific immunity" on the basis of its perceived clarity. Whereas Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca merely describe the scenario wherein positivist manifestations of "clear" language "obscure" other, important information, Burke's agenda is more confrontational. He is reacting against positivists who, in the tradition of Bertrand Russell, would attempt to overcome the vagaries of language through a (seemingly) scientifically precise application of (seemingly) disambiguated words. Indeed, the continued privileging of "clarity" is a legacy of both modernist and positivist theories of language. More to the point, though, is that the "pallor" of clarity continues to prevent audiences from fully interrogating the meanings of some "clear" language.

The idea of clear prose gaining "protection by unnoticableness" seems very closely affiliated with the "terms not incisive enough to criticize" that Burke writes of in *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Clarity often seeks to secure for itself a "protection by unnoticableness" from interrogation, precisely by relying upon "terms not incisive enough to criticize." This is the very definition of ingenuous and cunning identification. In terms of our own contemporary pedagogical practices, we cannot simultaneously claim to value and teach "critical thinking" (a well-meaning but rarely defined phrase with its own problems) and simultaneously advocate a decontextualized "clarity," which in many incarnations exists precisely in order to cut off the possibility of "critical thinking" for its audiences. Nor can we condemn naïve or nefarious advocacy for "clear" writing wholesale when clear writing is precisely what will be demanded of students in their professional and public lives. With his articulation of ingenuous and cunning identification, Burke theorizes the rhetorical mechanism that allows, in Prendergast's words, for those who deploy "clarity" strategically to go about "cutting out the audience" and "freeing" their writing "from the interpretations of others" (15). The rhetorical functions of language that Burke classifies as gaining "protection by unnoticableness" and existing as "terms not incisive enough to criticize," define those instantiations of clarity that mask (intentionally or otherwise) their own agendas and advocacy. The antidote is a test of eloquence.

The Savvy (or Cunning) Application of Clarity

From a rhetorician's perspective it is all too easy to critique the logical contradictions and rhetorical naïveté that allow some writing teachers, authors of writing handbooks, and popularizers of rhetoric to promote images, aesthetics, and ethics of a magical clarity that transcends our writing beyond the fray of confusions, special interests, and cynically motivated persuasion. Similarly, it is all too easy to critique the more instrumental applications of clarity that in the manner of Burke's ingenuous and cunning identification camouflage (whether intentionally or unintentionally) agendas and persuasion, and in that masking convince their audiences more easily by *seeming* not to convince at all.

But for better or worse, the broader culture within which our discipline is situated prizes "clarity" (Prendergast 15; Kintz, "Clarity" 115-17; Crowley 146-47). It prizes those utterances that through their simplicity (or, much more dangerously, through their over-simplicity) mask the role of language and present the illusion that language can be rendered "transparent" and freed from the perceived shackles of persuasion and special interest, freed from the pejorative connotations of

rhetoric. The "preachers of plain style," those who we might regard as our derivative stylistic Machiavellis, are one of the categories of rhetors that Wayne Booth labels as "quacks" (xiii). But these "quacks" have an audience, and a point. "Clarity," "plain" styles, *even the most obviously affected stances of plain-spokenness*—these are frequently the marks of trusted authority in our culture. While subtle or complex thinking *of course* can be rendered in simple terms for particular audiences, it seems that subtlety and complexity are often the first cognitive virtues lost in pursuit of "clarity." Critical omissions are the constant danger lurking behind the impulse to "be clear."

Consider Colin Powell's speech to the UN just prior to the American invasion of Iraq, in which he stated, "every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources. These are not assertions. What we're giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence." Throughout the speech, Powell's language could not be much "clearer," not be much more understandable, and is probably as broadly accessible as it could be made. The form of his sentences in the speech is consistently simple, declarative, direct. We know that in the immediate wake of Powell's speech American support for the invasion peaked (Jones). But we also now know that Powell's statement belied the uncertainties of the intelligence community about Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction. His statements *were* assertions, *were not* facts, and were based largely on *speculative*, rather than "solid," intelligence. I can't help but wonder if American support for the invasion would still have spiked after Powell's speech if he had couched his claims in a more qualified manner, if his language had reflected the uncertainty of the *even then* uncertain intelligence that he referred to. And perhaps necessarily, expressing the uncertainty behind the pre-invasion intelligence might have had to take a less direct, less clear, form.

This leads in turn to a sort of rhetorical chicken-and-egg question: did Powell use such clear language to disingenuously mask the uncertainties within the pre-invasion intelligence, or did a more innocent desire on Powell's part to explain the situation "clearly" to the global public result in the ultimately misleading oversimplification of the intelligence? Or, in Burke's manner of ingenuous and cunning identification, did Powell believe his theses so deeply that he obscured the unknowns of the time on a subconscious level? We cannot know the answer to my question, but it brings us to the crux of the problem with clarity—language that isn't present can't be analyzed. Even though "clarity is the most highly constructed, most ambiguous" prose style, it is constructed to omit, and we cannot analyze what has been omitted (Kintz, "Clarity" 116). As impractical as it sounds, I cannot help but wonder if the public would have found Powell's speech so persuasive if Powell had been subjected to Burke's test of eloquence. Would Powell's claims have been "weeded out" by such a test?

Of course, the Machiavellian "master trope" that Hariman describes, of claiming to have no style at all, to be above the deceptions of artistry, of eschewing "construction," is an ancient one. Plenty of savvy rhetors have learned the rhetorical effectiveness of Machiavelli's strategy. The cult of clarity has become a feedback loop. In his own article, Barnard deploys a citation from Judith Butler to cinch up his point—that clarity does not represent any sort of an inherent connection to truthfulness—and I cite part of that same Butler passage here:

> The demand for lucidity forgets the ruses that motor the ostensibly "clear" view. Avital Ronell recalls the moment in which Nixon looked into the eyes of the nation and said, "let me make one thing perfectly clear" and then proceeded to lie. What travels under the sign of "clarity," and what would be the price of failing to deploy a certain critical suspicion when the arrival of lucidity is announced? Who devises the protocols of "clarity" and whose interests do they serve? (xix)

Butler's critique in turn leads Barnard to conclude that "clarity, then, can be duplicity or obscurity, the very things that it purports to rectify, whether maliciously (as with Nixon) or innocently" (441).

Barnard's claim is bold, for he argues that a given notion of clarity, because it potentially elides other, competing notions of clarity, is a means of control exerted through language. Clarity is the prose style that says without saying, and it is all the more rhetorically effective, the more persuasive, when it obscures or obfuscates its real purposes.

While rhetoricians can critique naïve enactments of clarity all we want, we have to recognize that oftentimes the rhetors who give in to its allure do so because there may simply not be another way to be rhetorically effective in a given situation. How do we reconcile our criticisms of "clarity" with the cultural exigencies that demand it of rhetors? Could Powell really have delivered the sort of careful, plodding, qualified presentation of pre-invasion that I, for one, would have preferred? Was such a presentation even really a rhetorical option for him? Despite my intellectual hand-wringing over the issue, prose styles that enact the surface features of "clarity" and "concision" and "simplicity" and "plainness" remain the *lingua franca* of American language, culture, business, government. In seeking to enact clarity, many rhetors simply seek to fulfill their audiences' expectations. If the overwhelming expectation in our culture is for "clear" prose, do we as teachers do our students a disservice by not teaching them an instrumental, even cunning, style of "clarity" that would most likely be persuasive when those students deploy such "clarity" later in their lives? Or, by resisting "clarity," are we simply denying our students an effective persuasive tool that the broader culture expects them to master?

As an example of this dilemma, consider for a moment an admonition aimed at the intelligence community, the network of spies who advise our military and political leaders on issues of national security, and who Powell refers to in his previously cited speech. Intelligence analysts communicate with policymakers primarily through written reports, and they were the source of Powell's own information when he made his February 2003 speech to the UN. I cite a line here from a textbook called *Communicating with Intelligence*, the *only* writing textbook written to-date specifically for the intelligence community. In the book's forward, intelligence professional Herbert Meyer writes that "even a brilliant projection of the future is worthless if it isn't delivered to policy makers so clearly, and so concisely, that even the dimmest among them cannot fail to grasp it" (xiv). This might be the most explicit call to clarity any of us is likely to come across. "Clear" writing here has certainly become affiliated with ethics, and even more strongly, with morality. In Meyer's statement it becomes the obligation of clear writing not only to convey information accurately, but to overcome the intellectual deficiencies of our dimmest political leaders (a tall order indeed). The ethical righteousness that is presumed here to reside solely within "clarity" should be striking. It only takes a small step for Meyer's readers, who themselves drive national foreign policy, to associate "clarity" with matters of life and death. Unclear writing, Meyer implies, kills.

Prose that presents itself as "clear" is the prose of authority and trustworthiness in our culture. An author who writes "clearly" is assumed to be thinking clearly and rightly. Consider how many anecdotes from your own experience reinforce this problematic notion—wherein clarity and sincerity and right-mindedness have been collapsed into the same thing. If the intelligence community wants to enjoy any credibility and authority among the political leaders that it advises on matters of war and peace, then its writers are compelled to attempt "clear" or "plain" styles, which are intuitively assumed in our culture to be the only styles representative of "clear" and "right" thinking. The intelligence community must either conform to the demands for prose that presents itself as "clear," or risk having its work go unread by overburdened and impatient political leaders. The risks for oversimplification and miscommunication in such a context are tremendous.

Some intelligence community insiders recognize the risks of the situation. A Central Intelligence Agency psychologist, Richards Heuer, writes that "analysts who write clearly are assumed to be thinking clearly. Yet it is quite possible to follow a faulty analytical process and write a clear and persuasive argument in support of an erroneous judgment" (178). Herein we have the crux of the

ethical dilemma that presents itself when we are dealing with clarity. “Clear” does not equal “correct” or “accurate.” The intelligence reports alleging that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction in late 2002 were written perfectly clearly, but their content turned out to be perfectly inaccurate. The problem is that we have a human tendency to assume that what can be stated clearly must be accurate, a sort of cognitive, and potentially cognitively misleading, Occam’s razor.

We know how institutions work—because the characteristics of clarity are frequently assumed rather than defined, those in authority end up defining the term by their own whims. It is in this way that striving for “clarity” can potentially have a silencing effect on discourse. Within the setting of a hierarchical discourse community—such as the intelligence community—when we talk about “clarity,” we are really talking about the boss’s definition of clarity. Authority’s version of what constitutes “clear” prose is the one that is rewarded, while others are sanctioned. Because clarity is a rhetorically contingent quality, we must ask ourselves: “Clear to whom?” As long as clarity remains a rhetorically contingent quality—and it always will—then whatever is privileged in a given rhetorical context as “clear” eclipses the possibility of alternate manifestations of “clarity.” In a similar observation, Barnard notes that “the very proponents of clarity often use strikingly ‘clear’ language to convey arguments that are convoluted, misleading, and enigmatic” (440). It might be counterintuitive to think about language that appears to be “clear” also functioning in ways that are “misleading” or “enigmatic.” But this is precisely the phenomenon that Kintz describes with her term “vague clarity.” Barnard refers to content that is simultaneously “clear” and “misleading.”

Critiques of clarity are often mistakenly heard as calls to confusion, to opacity, to obscurity, and to privileged, inaccessible writing. Like Williams before me, I too am deeply troubled by the notion that some writing communities might actually write texts with built-in barriers to understanding (unnecessary jargon, unnecessary complexity, obfuscation) precisely for the purposes of excluding certain reading audiences and in a cynical effort to protect or advance their own interests. In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner helpfully points out that critics of the notion of, or enactments of, “clarity” “can only be heard as proposing inanities: that bad writing is necessary; that incomprehensibility should be cultivated” (137-38). The reaction—in which critics of clarity are mistakenly heard to be proposing “inanities” as an alternative—arises from a logic that Warner describes as “assumed rather than reasoned” (137). Warner offers his own critique of clarity as part of a defense of politically progressive academic writing, which he, like Barnard, Kintz, and Crowley, perceives to be under assault from conservative cultural critics.

I would characterize my own wariness about “clarity” as one that arrives before we even consider the politics of an utterance (if such a distinction is possible). Warner and Barnard both defend a set of contemporary theoretical texts that have been attacked as opaque and unclear, texts with progressive agendas in which the accusations of opacity might have been intended more to silence the authors’ politics than to offer legitimate prose style critiques. My concern is the inverse. Whereas certain cultural critics have attacked “unclear” writing in the humanities, my interest is in those texts that are perceived to be perfectly “clear” and the means by which such artifices of “clarity” may enable political agendas *of all varieties* to influence audiences without detection, but within plain sight. Like Burke, I am concerned about prose that is so “clear” and oversimplified that it might evade critique altogether.

The Multiple Definitions of Clarity and/or Obfuscation

In his essay “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar,” Patrick Hartwell defines five meanings of grammar, and I suspect that we need also to define more than one meaning of “clarity.” Here I propose five definitions of clarity, all of which seem to be circulating within the discipline simultaneously. While I present five distinct categories of “clarity” here, they are likely not so distinct

but more likely exist along a continuum. Not all instantiations of clear writing can be condemned, for not all that is clear entails the liabilities of "vague clarity" or derives from the "ideology of clarity." Similarly, that an audience perceives an idea to be expressed "clearly" does not necessarily make the idea ethically defensible. As these definitions attempt to show, manifestations of "clarity," while appearing similar in their formal qualities, might actually be quite different from one another.

Clarity_1 is potentially cynically deployed, masking the rhetor's goals, motives, and persuasion. It seeks to persuade by pretending that it does not persuade at all.

Clarity_2 is promoted as a means of regaining an idyllic but mythical past wherein language was carefully and consistently ordered, in which strict adherence to rules is thought to have prevented miscommunication and misunderstanding, and is a version of clarity frequently linked to "cultural values."

Clarity_3 is characterized by the oversimplification of important information. It is a clarity in which important details or implications are elided, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in the attempt to be clear.

Clarity_4 is a style wherein a text is perfectly clear to an insider or target audience, but not at all clear to an outsider audience. When this form of clarity is deployed, it may become contentious, but the contention may really be over who should be able to expect easy linguistic access to the text.

Clarity_5 is simultaneously complex and sophisticated but always accessible, conveying complex ideas and relationships without falling into over-simplification. It is often advocated and attempted, and rarely achieved.

I hope that the earlier discussion of Burke's work shows that clarity is not only a quality manifested in prose through intentional choices, but that much of the rhetorical work performed by clarity is also set into motion unintentionally, beneath or before a rhetor's conscious decisions, "interwoven" into the rhetor's motive. The same critique applies to the definitions here—when I propose "Clarity is . . ." in each of these five definitions, one of my hopes is to communicate that, whichever definition of clarity is in operation, it may have been put into play by either intentional or unintentional forces. The attempt to differentiate between species of clarity is an attempt to contribute to the "more strenuous cult of style" that Burke calls for.

Notice also that I do not attempt to define any of these versions of "clarity" upon formal features but instead define them through their rhetorical effects. With a shift in context or audience, a single piece of prose might be able to shift from one category of clarity to another, a further indication that, as others before me have argued, "clarity" *cannot* be defined in terms of strictly formal qualities. It would be far more convenient if we simply could have different words for each of these different incarnations of "clarity." But we all know that language is not so simple. Categories, while useful, and in this case possibly preferable to all of the competing definitions of "clarity" currently careening into one another within the discipline, are not so tidy as a table might make them appear. I do not mean for my five categories to be definitive, but rather generative. They will likely need further revisions.

Table 1. Five Definitions of Clarity

	Definition	**Scholarly Descriptions**	**Popular Advocates**

Clarity$_1$	A clear style that masks itself as a style and similarly masks its efforts to persuade audiences. Often cynically deployed. This is the clarity that some scholars view as potentially manipulative. The cunning clarity.	"Machiavelli successfully affects a lack of affectation; he is a consummate stylist who persuades us that he is without artistry. The influence of *The Prince* on its readers begins with its author's concealment of its artistry, a master trope opposing nature and ornament, a real world and the distractions of a text" (Hariman 19) "[C]larity's obviousness, objectivity, and innocuousness in fact conceal the ideological work that is done in the name of clarity" (Barnard 434).	This form does not appear to be advocated in explicit terms, but rather is implicitly advocated whenever a proponent of clarity presumes that "clear" writing is the only effective prose style.
Clarity$_2$	A nostalgic clarity, promoted in the name of a simpler past that likely never actually existed. It is advocated and deployed in an attempt to defend against the perceived threats of modernity and the loosening of prescriptive grammar rules.	"But Gelernter, too, has found in Strunk and White a literal grammar for living in unsure times. The misuse of an apostrophe is about more than the apostrophe, the manual tells us: it's about the end of a bright and purposeful past, the premonition of a threatening and murky future" (Prendergast 14).	"But since writing is communication, clarity can only be a virtue. And although there is no substitute for merit in writing, clarity comes closest to being one" (Strunk and White 79). "We have a language that is full of ambiguities; we have a way of expressing ourselves that is often complex and allusive, poetic and modulated; all our thoughts can be rendered with absolute clarity if we bother to put the right dots and squiggles in the right places. Proper punctuation is both the sign and the cause of clear thinking. If it goes, the degree of intellectual impoverishment we face is unimaginable" (Truss 201-02).

Clarity$_3$	Attempts to be clear that result in oversimplification.	Burke's phrases "terms not incisive enough to criticize" and "pallor" and "protection by unnoticableness" might apply here, as they also do to clarity$_1$.	"[E]ven a brilliant projection of the future is worthless if it isn't delivered to policy makers so clearly, and so concisely, that even the dimmest among them cannot fail to grasp it" (Meyer xiv).
Clarity$_4$	Prose that is clear and accessible, but only to a targeted, and possibly specialized, audience.	"The project of an academic discipline requires rigor of definition, argument, and debate. One could argue on this basis for clarity, where what would count as clarity might remain highly specialized and inaccessible to lay audiences or journalists. Indeed, to the extent that clarity might require conceptual precision of very unfamiliar kinds, it might compete with accessibility" (Warner 139).	"Clarity is not the prize in writing, nor is it always the principal mark of a good style. There are occasions when obscurity serves a literary yearning, if not a literary purpose, and there are writers whose mien is more overcast than clear" (Strunk and White 79).
Clarity$_5$	A clarity often advocated but rarely achieved, which preserves nuanced and complex ideas, but delivers them in a manner that is straightforward and widely accessible. A style that in its pursuit of clarity does not forsake other complex, sophisticated stylistic concerns, such as rhythm, and deft use of rhetorical figures to a persuasive purpose.	"A prose style may be eloquent, lyrical, witty, rhythmical, and fresh as Montana air, but if it lacks clarity, few readers will stay with it for long" (Trimble 8). "[E]ase, economy, euphony, or any of the virtues of style" (Christensen 14).	Most advocates of clarity seem to *believe* that this is the version of clarity that they themselves are actively promoting.

While many within the discipline are critical of clarity$_1$, $_2$, and $_3$, many intelligent laypeople in the public may hear instead criticisms of clarity $_4$ and $_5$. When scholars in rhetoric and composition have spoken of clarity in the past, they often have been speaking of slightly different things. But public audiences will not likely have the patience to hear distinctions between five varieties of clarity, differentiated from one another by cute subscript and scholarly citations. Within the discipline, we need a diagnostic, a means of categorizing all of the different things we mean when, in our own work

and conversations amongst each other, we invoke the word “clarity.” Taxonomy in this case is a step toward an ethics. Our field seems currently to be divided into two camps, one of which sees the pursuit of “clarity” as a fool’s errand, and potentially an inhibitor to sophisticated thinking, and in cases like the “vague clarity” that Kintz describes, as outright disingenuous and unethical. The opposing camp, I would wager, sees the first as somewhat elitist and too enamored of theory. While my taxonomy of “clarity” likely is not *the* definitive taxonomy, I think it has the potential to break us out of the “with us or against us” attitude that seems to surround the contemporary “clarity” debate.

If the discipline can recognize different, more subtly graded manifestations of “clarity,” then perhaps we can better teach those qualities in writing that help to make writing accessible to appropriate audiences and, similarly, to teach students to avoid the pitfalls of omission and oversimplification that may result when “clarity” is pursued simply for its own sake. Perhaps multiple definitions of “clarity” will also allow the discipline to differentiate between those moments when a rhetor is nobly trying to keep his or her prose accessible and those moments when a more cunning rhetor is using “clear” language to obfuscate deeper, more complex issues, omitting information that might be damaging to his or her rhetorical purpose. Even though scholars such as Barnard and Prendergast have eloquently shown the liabilities of “clarity,” texts such as *The Elements of Style*, as well as much more recent handbooks authored from within the discipline, continue to promote “clarity” and to have their adherents. Why? How can two such seemingly contradictory positions coexist in contemporary rhetorical education? The problems with texts like *The Elements of Style* is not that they attempt to teach “clarity,” but that the “clarity” they promote is both singular and ill-defined and is promoted as a universal, rather than contingent, quality in prose. Further, as Williams’s handbook argues, alternate prose styles are categorized not only as less preferable, but as unethical.

Even those in the discipline who are suspicious of the “virtues” of “clarity” are sometimes writing through and around competing definitions of the term, perhaps without realizing that it is not clarity that is the fundamental problem, but all forms of obfuscation, which we might define as any stylistic element that denies intellectual access to an audience that should reasonably be expected to be able to access a given text. An interesting paradox arises: both proponents of “clarity,” who hope for language to be rendered transparent, *and* critics of “clarity,” who are inclined to see the over-simplification or ingenuous and cunning identification that often undergirds “clear” styles as liabilities, are fighting against obfuscation, both fighting against an intellectual denial of access to prose. Both proponents and critics of “clarity” are seeking to address the very real problem of inadvertent and nefarious obfuscation in writing, but coming at the problem from different perspectives and cracking their skulls together somewhere along the way. If the discipline can find a way to reconcile this paradox we may very well make a tremendous contribution to public discourse by combating obfuscation in writing, whether that obfuscation is the result of a style of unnecessary opacity or the result of a disingenuous clarity.

If you argue against obfuscation, as I am, you aren't necessarily arguing for, or against, “clarity.” Some forms of “clarity” are, however, a subset of obfuscation, while not all instantiations of “clarity” obfuscate. But if you argue against obfuscation, you *are* arguing against concealment. When discourse and data are unconcealed, things can get messy, less “clear.” Recognizing that obfuscation is the real problem, and that certain instantiations of “clarity” form a subset of obfuscation, might be a productive turn in the disciplinary conversation about prose style, a turn that Kintz has already set into motion.

Prendergast argues that those who advocate for clarity are seeking a fight and not communication (26). I can’t help but think that at this particular moment in her text Prendergast too is spoiling for a fight. Some of those advocates of clarity might actually be in it to communicate. But just moments later she pleads to the discipline of rhetoric and composition that “the only way we can stop the fight

is by refusing to fight" (26). The fight over "clarity" and style *has* been largely unproductive, and we ought to refuse to fight. Toward Prendergast's goal, I propose that we take a more nuanced view of the clarity that many of us are inclined to be critical of, recognizing that while some instantiations of clarity might be quite damaging to discourse, even unethical, that other incarnations of clarity are quite necessary and ethically sound.

Whatever our definition of it, how can the discipline reconcile its criticisms of "clarity" with the cultural exigencies that demand it of rhetors? I can't propose an answer to the question here. What I can propose is that the question cannot possibly have a single answer and needs constantly to be entertained. While his claims are directed at the discipline of rhetoric more generally, I think that one of Pat Gehrke's conclusions in *The Ethics and Politics of Speech* is quite apt if we apply it to the ethics of clarity. Gehrke writes, "In terms of ethics, the contradictions and variances at any given moment, as well as the changes across time, make the idea of a credo or system of ethics for communication questionable. Instead, we have a call to take up questions of ethics again and again, without any finality to our responses" (166). Similarly, because clarity and obfuscation are both rhetorically contingent qualities, we can never arrive at precise definitions or categories of either, but in our scholarship and teaching both, we must recognize that ethical negotiations are always present, and that those negotiations need to be constantly reconsidered. It is that constant reflection and renegotiation that is our primary avenue to ethical applications of prose style and the avoidance of unethical obfuscation. Not only must we practice such constant ethical reflection, but we must teach our students to practice such reflection as well.

Notes

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1. Clarity is much like the rhetorical concept of kairos, or appropriate timing, in this regard. We can tell students that rhetorically successful utterances generally have a good sense of kairos, which is to say that they are uttered at an ideally timed moment, when the utterance's audience is most likely to be receptive to its purpose. But, just as with "clarity," we can't in good faith tell students precisely what "appropriate" or "ideal" timing is, for those qualities are always, and will always be, dependent upon particular circumstances that are potentially infinite in number. (Return to text.) [#note1-ref]
2. It might be too convenient to try to assert, by pointing out the liabilities of "terms not incisive enough to criticize," that Burke is referring to "clarity." After all, he does not reference "clarity" specifically in the relevant passage, but the cultural advocacy for "clarity" and "plain language," as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca demonstrate, was already common in Burke's own time. And while Burke may not in fact be referring specifically to "clarity" or calls to "clear" language, I think it is fair to read his critique across our more contemporary critiques of clarity, a reading-across justified by the closeness of the phenomenon that Burke describes and more contemporary analyses by Kintz and Crowley of "vague clarity" and the "ideology of clarity" (to name but two contemporary terms). (Return to text.) [#note2-ref]

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