

Review Essays

The Revelatory Qualities of Style

Kathy Rees

Thinking through Style: Non-Fiction Prose of the Long Nineteenth Century, ed. Michael D. Hurley and Marcus Waithe (Oxford University Press, 2018), xiv + 359 pp., \$81.00 cloth.

The cover image of “Thinking *through* Style” positions the reader/viewer on the gallery of the Doge’s Palace, looking through the Venetian Gothic arcade to the island of San Giorgio. Our reading of the distant church of San Giorgio Maggiore, with its classical temple façade and its much later neoclassical bell tower, is enhanced by the act of looking *through* the elegant trefoil-cusped apertures. This carefully chosen image directs us to the originating impulse of this collection of essays: the notion that the processes of thinking, reflecting, reasoning, and interpreting are engendered, animated, and elaborated with the aid of, or in consequence of, style.

On the cover, the title stands out boldly against the shadow of the arcade, and as the use of italicization in “Thinking *through* Style” suggests, the particle is working very hard to forge a symbiotic relationship between the verbal noun “thinking” and its object “style.” The editors, Michael Hurley and Marcus Waithe, contend that since thought is not something “pre-verbal” that uses language as “a secondary delivery system,” style cannot be regarded either as “the dress of thought,” something ornamental and self-serving, nor “its handmaiden,” merely delineating and accenting meaning (1). Style, they assert, “is a mode of thinking *through*” (1).

We never learn how this project came into being, but it seems that its twenty contributors were charged with the task of analyzing how authors of the long nineteenth century who “have gained reputations as ‘stylists’ or as ‘thinkers’ negotiate the *what* and the *how* of their prose” (1). Hurley and Waithe explain that they kept the category of style “open” in order to help “to refine it, insofar as differing and contrasting practices provide new contexts for understanding” (3). This is both a strength and a weakness of the book: on the one hand, it affords contributors the freedom to delve deeply into stylish idiosyncrasies peculiar to their subject, and to produce what are certainly insightful and innovative arguments; but on the other hand, it results in twenty essays, each of which stands in isolation from its fellows. One is left regretting that there was not a greater sense of cohesion or dialogue between essays; the book lacks a sense of collective wrestling with this elusive but all-important question of form.

This lack of cohesion is exacerbated by an insufficiently detailed index: this will become clear if we consider the scenario of a student interested in the style of S.T. Coleridge. He or she will read the superb chapter by James Engell on the profundity and variety of Coleridge’s stylistic praxis. If the student wishes to explore other writers’ attitudes to Coleridge in this volume without reading it in its entirety, the index will lead them to seven different references, but others they will miss. Michael O’Neill, for example, borrows Coleridge’s use of the word

"rondo" in relation to Percy Shelley's prose (79); Marcus Waithe notes not only John Ruskin's allusions to Coleridge in *Modern Painters* (1843) but also his response to "Coleridgean vitalism" (184, 194); David Russell notes that Matthew Arnold called Joseph Joubert a "French Coleridge" (213); and Catherine Maxwell alludes to Sidney Colvin's description of the romantic manner of Shakespeare, Coleridge, and Keats "with its thrilling uncertainties and its rich suggestions" (292). None of these references is indexed under "Coleridge." Since the importance of Coleridge's writing to his successors only becomes clear when one reads the volume *en bloc*, the student who is guided solely by the index will miss out.

When the book is accessed online,¹ there are abstracts giving succinct and helpful summaries of content at the head of each chapter. Reading these abstracts is a quick way of eliciting the names of all twenty contributors and their subjects (which sadly cannot all be included here) as well as the approaches adopted and themes addressed; it is therefore pointless for me to duplicate that information in this review. Instead, I will raise questions and explore ideas that struck me during the course of my reading. Indeed, my sense of being "struck" by certain aspects of this book takes us immediately to William Hazlitt, whose style, Freya Johnstone tells us, was both "embattled" and "pugnacious" (56). One of the highest compliments that Hazlitt could pay to another artist was to say that he had been "struck" by his or her work. In Hazlitt's usage, the word owned greater agency and intensity; its gradual diminution in lexical force illustrates how the expression of thought may become compromised over time by shifts in the weight and value accrued by certain words. Given his robust and muscular feeling for style, Hazlitt would also no doubt excoriate my use of "therefore" in the second sentence of this paragraph, for he claimed that "saying 'therefore' is like giving the reader a bang on the nose" (56)—a memorable admonition.

Is style contagious? In 1956, on the publication of Coleridge's *Collected Letters*, Elizabeth Bishop wrote to her friend and fellow poet,

Robert Lowell, saying that she was “completely absorbed” by the letters: “I read Coleridge, and read him, & read him—just couldn’t stop” (qtd Engell 20). Bishop is “mesmerised,” and Engell argues that, as a result, “she writes Coleridgean sentences” (20-21). In a similar way, many contributors in this volume seem to have “caught” the brilliance of their subjects. When Matthew Bevis discusses Charles Lamb’s half-serious, half-ironic prose, he adopts a similarly playful but perceptive style: he refers to a “lambent Lambian pun” (38) and compares Lamb’s “puckish” prose (43) with the wisdom of Lear’s fool or Hamlet’s gravedigger (40). By contrast, the razor-sharp tone of Stefan Collini’s commentary on T.S. Eliot conveys the “dry-ice heat” of that critic’s prose as it “scorched” its targets (332), and when Collini comments that Eliot was sometimes guilty of “showing off in the course of showing up [others’] shortcomings” (345) one can almost imagine Eliot approving such fulgent phrases. Is it the case, then, that by immersion in the work of an author, a critical reader imbibes its style, or is it rather that the scholar is drawn to write about an author whose style resonates with his or her own way of thinking?

Is style about identity? Does it define the writer? How can a writer keep developing and advancing his prose style when in order for “a style” to exist, it requires a recognizable form? This was the problem that preoccupied the American transcendentalist philosopher-poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Adam Phillips explains that because Emerson grew up in a family that was ravaged by disease and death, he “wanted a style to look forward with” since writing was his means of dispelling grief (136). Emerson’s style therefore operates like “a kind of alarm system” that is alert to the danger of tradition, imitation, and repetition (142). Appropriately for the New World, Emerson was committed to “the untried and the unknown” (138), so style is always “a work in progress” (144), an aspiration rather than an achievement. However, this engenders a tricky paradox, since by forging a style that is consistently new and unprecedented, it can never be recognized as discernibly Emersonian. Any consideration of repetitive and

identifiable styles must also address the work of Matthew Arnold, famous for the use of catchy slogans, such as "sweetness and light" or seeing "the object as it really is." Though such phrases have long been derided as repetitious and vague, David Russell argues that they functioned like spiritual exercises, opening the narrow minds of the prosperous, confident, calculating liberal middle classes, Britain's "philistines." By repetition, these phrases made space in middle-class minds to accommodate new ideas about communal social needs. Though very different in tone and purpose, the styles of both Emerson and Arnold privilege originality, even though repetition for Emerson represents the road to decay and death, while for Arnold repetition is a means to foster insight and enlightenment.

When writing is determined by pedagogical aims, one might expect the act of thinking through style to be more explicit and unequivocal. James Williams reminds us of the sheer laboriousness of Charles Darwin's negotiations of the nuances of language in his desire to be fully comprehended, coupled with his unfailing good manners to opponents and supporters alike. Williams reads the ethical dimensions of Darwin's style through the three theological virtues, redescribing faith, hope, and charity in intellectual and secular terms. He reads Darwin's "faith" in terms of the "as-yet-unverified account of nature which is capable of accommodating multiplicities of facts" (155); he sees "hope" in terms of Darwin's tentative imaginative reach but also "the glue holding the reasoning together" (157); and he characterizes "charity" as the "kindly feeling" but also the "intellectual rigour" that Darwin extends to his readers (159). Williams' alliterative phrase describing Darwin's writing as "grace and graft" (150) is efficient and neat but it also highlights the problem of nuance, since the word "graft" not only conjures the intended sense of hard work, but also—with punning propriety in Darwin's case—the transplantation of living tissue from one plant to another.²

John Ruskin, also intent upon teaching (and preaching), does not extend such courtesy to his readers; rather, as Waithe suggests,

Ruskin's "talent for unbridled provocation is not so easily separable from what makes his writing effective, and indeed enjoyable" (188). We cannot help but delight in Ruskin's famous conception of the whole Darwinian system as "a 'hairbrush' falling in love with a 'steam whistle' and laying an egg" (189). Waithe shows that Ruskin's attraction to the grotesque leads him toward "freakish combination," the forging of definitions that are not just unexpected, but "intensely imagined, manifestly rethought, and utterly subversive of routine distinctions" (192). Waithe quotes Ruskin's describing a swallow as "a bat that loves the morning light. It is the aerial reflection of a dolphin. It is the tender domestication of a trout" (193). Waithe unpacks this eccentric mode of thinking so that in the end its ingenious associations appear utterly logical. Thus, on being told that Ruskin's swallow "is a bat, not just like one" (193) we, the audience, can imagine the equivalence between the erratic modes of flight manifested by both the bird and the mammal. The swallow's ability to soar without resistance recalls the graceful leap of the dolphin, and the swallow's loyalty of its annual migration imitates the instinct of the trout. Ruskin's manner of tracing "patterns of likeness across conventional boundaries" produces an animated form of redescription. Both Ruskin and Darwin offer audacious visions of the interrelation of species, but while Darwin gently leads us into new thinking, Ruskin shocks us into it.

I have already suggested the usefulness of the cover image, which incidentally has strong associations with Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53), in picturing the central theme of thinking *through* style. Art historical models can be very effective in elucidating literary style, and several writers in this volume use such parallels. By her inspired use of the image of the characteristically hazy focus of Julia Margaret Cameron's photography, Dinah Birch represents the way in which George Eliot's writing moves "in and out of a sharp focus, according to the shifting requirements of her arguments" (176). Pictured thus, we instantly recognize how Eliot's wide knowledge, acquired through "years of ambitious reading" (180), and her powerful sympathy, her

"generous openness to the lives and needs of others" (179), seem to move imperceptibly into the foreground of her writing, keen and salient, and then gradually recede like Cameron's soft-edged dreamy outlines. Both women thereby make an "assertion of artistic autonomy" (176). In relation to Oscar Wilde's style and "stylishness," Hugh Haughton quotes Susan Sontag's argument that the "hyperdevelopment" of style in Mannerist painting and Art Nouveau is "an emphatic form of experiencing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon" that arises "in reaction to an oppressively dogmatic style of realism" (269-70). This acutely captures Wilde's characteristic use of aphorism, paradox, hyperbole, and inversion, his "self-delighting rapier thrusts" at critical orthodoxy (270). "Stylish thinking," comments Haughton, "is always a rhetorical protest against realism" (270). Coming from a more biographical perspective, Catherine Maxwell notes that Vernon Lee was "somewhat dismissive of much French impressionist painting which she felt privileged technique over imagination" but that she admired James McNeill Whistler and John Singer Sargent, both of whom used "impressionistic effects of colour and tone to convey imaginative vision" (287). This helps us to recognize in Lee's prose the importance of "shaping, [...] ordering and arranging" words, figures, clauses, and sentences. The act of stepping outside literature in this way produces an illuminating perspective on its patterns, frames, and contours.

Just as rhythm and rhyme in language may enact the process of thinking, so the act of thinking may generate certain sounds or forms in prose. Michael O'Neill shows how in Percy Shelley's prose, "words mime their impulse" (71). In Shelley's essay *On Life* (1819) we are led to imagine the effect of "words leaving us in the lurch" (71). Shelley contemplates what to call "that verge where words abandon us," musing "what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of—how little we know" (71). O'Neill points out the powerful effect of the "assonantal off-chime between 'abandon' and 'wonder,' and the full rhyme between 'we grow dizzy' and 'how little we know'" (71).

(emphases added)” (71). These techniques convey Shelley’s apprehensions about the deficiencies and shortcomings of language. The structure of language also preoccupies Susan Sellers, who discusses Virginia Woolf’s apprehensions about the deficiencies and shortcomings of institutional attitudes to women by highlighting a similar interplay between rhythm and sense in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). The female narrator, whilst wandering through Oxbridge,³ experiences obstruction and exclusion: in particular, she is being prevented from consulting a manuscript in the library.⁴ Woolf employs a range of stylistic devices—jarring switches of narrator, contradiction, altercation, half-rendered citations, and alterations in rhythm and pace—that constantly disturb and unsettle the reader so that he or she will share the experience of the disempowering interruptions and prohibitions to which women are subjected (322).

Another key aspect of prose writing is the role of punctuation and its power to accentuate meaning and to organize thought. Although fewer contributors address this issue than one might have expected in a book about style, it is certainly covered more widely than is indicated by the index, which cites only two page references. One function of the semicolon is to separate clauses that, as demonstrated in the work of John Henry Newman and Walter Pater, can produce very different effects. Newman, in response to the view that it was a fantasy to suppose that Christianity would regain its former organic power in society, writes: “I cannot help that; I never said it could” (106). Such “paratactical economy” gives Newman’s writing “a cultivated impatience” and “a severe tone”; the “punctuation points,” says Hurley, “have sharp edges” (106). By contrast, Pater’s use of the semicolon does not produce sharpness but elasticity. Used in conjunction with the colon and the dash, the semicolon helps the sentence to become a “qualifying instrument, full of obstacles and deviations” (224). Indeed, it speaks for itself that Angela Leighton’s example of a typically digressive and meandering Paterian sentence is much too long to quote in this review. Nevertheless, Leighton’s exquisite exposition shows

how the "secondary, uncertain, fading" nature of Pater's sentences capture "the very condition of modernity" (224) and that his "dream rhythms [...] force us to revise or to rethink the very sense, when it comes to literature, of the word 'thinking'" (229).

After reading these twenty self-contained essays, I felt keenly the lack of an Epilogue. As a substitute, I returned to the introduction, and appreciated anew the comments about affinities between some of the writers, the observations on style, and the positioning of this volume in relation to earlier critical work on style, but I still felt that after this sumptuous feast of essays, a *digestif* was wanting. It would have been fascinating to read the views of these editors, both of whom contributed stellar essays to the volume, about stylistic change over the long nineteenth century, and what those changes tell us about concomitant developments in the culture, as well as their view on the directions in which all this hard thinking and stylizing might take us in terms of future research. This experience leads me to raise wider questions about the organization of collected essays in volumes such as this one. Should contributors be given a completely free rein to interpret a theme, or should there be more guidance about modes of enquiry to facilitate a more unified interrogation of the subject matter? Could editors intervene more actively at draft stage to encourage more dialogue between contributors so that correspondences and relationships between essays are better signposted for the reader? Current technologies facilitate communication at all levels: how can we use them to enhance the representation of collective scholarship?

Wolfson College, University of Cambridge

Notes

¹ <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/10.1093/oso/9780198737827.001.0001/oso-9780198737827>.

² Darwin actually coined the term "graft hybridization."

³ Woolf employs the term "Oxbridge" as it was coined by Thackeray in *Pendennis* (1850), meaning a fictional university

conceived as a composite of Oxford and Cambridge, rather than its current usage in regarding the two institutions together in contrast to other British universities.

⁴ This famous incident did not take place at “the University Library” as Sellers asserts (321), but at the Wren Library, Trinity College. See Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Anna Snaith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 255.

