

Review Essay

How Long is the “Long Nineteenth Century”?

Barry Charles Tharaud

***Thinking through Style: Non-Fiction of the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Michael D. Hurley and Marcus Waithe (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), xiv + 359 pp., \$85 cloth.**

Michael D. Hurley (St Catherine’s, Cambridge) and Marcus Waithe (Magdalene, Cambridge) have put together a collection of twenty essays on (mostly) *Non-fiction Prose of the Long Nineteenth Century*—as the subtitle has it—by distinguished British scholars from Oxford, Cambridge, York, Durham, Liverpool, London, and St Andrews, with one lone ‘Yank’ from Harvard. The main title, it is stressed on the dustjacket, is “Thinking *through* Style.” The cover photo on the dustjacket shows Palladio’s sunlit classical Renaissance basilica on the island of San Giorgio, in sunlight, shot from the shadows of the gallery of the Doge’s Palace in Piazza San Marco, *through* the Venetian Gothic arches. The contrasts of the cover—shadow/light, medieval Gothic/classical Renaissance—apparently are meant to contrast style and thought or thought and language. How the landscape and architectural styles of Venice relate to the overall theme of the book is another question altogether since the essay on Ruskin doesn’t address Ruskin’s pertinent thoughts on architecture or Venice. The back-dustjacket blurb suggests there are two traditional ways to conceive of the

relation between “style” and “thought in language”: first, style as detachable ornament; second, style as the handmaiden of thought, to highlight ideas already expressed in words. The editors propose a third way: “Rather than figure thought as primary and pre-verbal, and language as a secondary delivery system, style is conceived here as having the capacity to shape, refine, or generate thinking.” Fortunately, the essays generally don’t follow esoteric philosophical questions about transcendental or existential relations between thought and language.

The broad range of authors and periods tends to defy easy generalizations about “style.” The brief introduction by Hurley and Waithe admits as much: they tell us at the outset that “No single definition [...] can account for it; tendencies rather than orthodoxies emerge” (1). They briefly recapitulate the two basic ways of looking at style that are found on the back dustjacket, and they suggest that style is “a mode of thinking *through*,” although they also “intuit” that in fact the tension between style and content is “messier.” Although the preference for the “content” side of the equation is associated with “ancient Platonic roots,” we might better bring the comparison up to the early modern period—to the French Renaissance anti-Aristotelian thinker, Ramus, who became a foundation of the Puritan “plain style.” Milton, for example, wrote a Ramistic rhetoric, and the attitude that content was more important than style played into religious as well as literary rhetoric—“God’s altar needs not our polishing,” as the Bay Psalm Book has it. And although such attitudes could result in the doggerel of the primers that Puritan children in the Massachusetts Bay colony used to learn the alphabet (**A**: “In Adam’s fall/ We sinnèd all”), the Puritan attitude toward style could apparently also result in the poetry and music of Milton. Such distinctions are especially important for American literature and surely pertain to Emerson and Thoreau—but the relation is complex and demonstrates that these distinctions may be more theoretical than practical. Such ideas suggest, in good Puritan fashion, that style is a reflection of soul or some ultimate reality—and not just for Puritans, since Spenser taps into similar ideas from a more obviously Platonic root: “For of the soul the body form doth

take,/ For soul is form, and doth the Body make." This example seems to stand on its head the old chestnut, "The style is the man" [Le style c'est l'homme même]: is 'style' a reflection of some inner reality or, in good Enlightenment mode, does style *construct* a reality that is relative and 'fashioned'? Perhaps the simplest beginning approach is to refer to Will Strunk's little book, *Elements of Style*, which is still in print after more than a century, although with each new edition it is twisted to more closely conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*—which tends to obscure or negate the terse good sense of the original edition. Bottom line: thought creates its own style. Perhaps this is Hurley and Waithe's idea of "thinking *through*." Or maybe not: the editors at one point quote Matthew Arnold's comment that the "only secret of style" is to "Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can"—to which Hurley and Waithe reply, "as if expression were merely the accident of thought's independent substance" (1-2). Still, Arnold might be seen as a precursor to Strunk.

The brief "Introduction" makes no attempt to organize the rich variety of styles found in twenty authors into some sort of systematic approach to non-fiction prose style. We are told that style can "be pursued from many angles," and that the essays are "a selection" rather than an "organic tradition." Therefore, instead of giving us a systematic examination of the various styles discussed in the twenty essays, the editors provide fascinating comments on style by many of the writers examined in the collection. For example, Newman's idea that style is "thinking out into language" is quoted (2), which might suggest philosophical debates about the relation between thoughts and words; or, if we wish to avoid putting undue pressure on such a statement, we might see it as an evasion or avoidance of definition. In any case, I would suggest that such a statement, from *The Idea of a University*, takes on quite a different hue if applied to *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, where the author carefully constructs a justification of his conversion to the Roman Catholic faith, which in effect is a justification of his very being. Further along, the editors suggest this very idea when they consider "Newman's context" in a variety of genres, "as he moves between the sermon (which demands a certain kind of

democratic translucency) and his attempts to capture the ‘semi-logical’ grammar of religious faith [...]” (6). Elsewhere, the editors remark on “affinities” among authors, and some are mentioned in the essays themselves, such as the surprising and pleasing observation that Wilde at times fulfills Emerson’s attitude toward “consistency” (2; 266) that is expressed in “Self-Reliance” (“A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds”).

Before tackling some thematic implications of the goals and procedures of *Thinking through Style*, I need to briefly consider the scope of this collection. Those who are accustomed to considering the ‘long nineteenth century’ as approximately from 1776 or perhaps 1789 to around 1918, with some spillage on either end, are in for a surprise. Chapter 17, by Catherine Maxwell on Vernon Lee’s *Handling of Words* (1923), can be justified by the fact that various chapters of that work were written and published earlier, and that Lee was educated in works of rhetoric and grammar from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Blair’s *Rhetoric* was published in 1783, and Cobbett’s *Grammar* was published in 1818), although Lee’s literary criticism seems to prefigure far in advance the much later currents of twentieth-century close reading of texts and reader-response criticism. Next, in Chapter 18 on Chesterton, Simon Jarvis pushes the ‘long nineteenth century’ envelope further as he demonstrates stylistic features in Chesterton’s essays from 1906 and 1917, on up to 1932 and 1935. Nevertheless, his examples demonstrate elements of style that are a “mode of thought” as described in the prospectus. And in Chapter 19, Susan Sellers pushes the envelope of the long nineteenth century still further as she discusses the critical and stylistic concerns of Woolf’s non-fiction prose beginning in 1905 with “The Decay of Essay-Writing,” which traces the lineage of the essay back to Montaigne and then extends her considerations to the early novels of the late teens and then onward to Woolf’s essays of the 1920s and 1930s, including *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), “Craftsmanship” (1937), and *Three Guineas* (1938). And finally, in Chapter 20, Stefan Collini, focuses mostly on the essays of T.S. Eliot that were gathered into *Selected Essays 1917-1932*. Both Sellers

and Collini engage their subjects as demonstrations of ways in which style becomes a kind of critical thought. Perhaps we can qualify the time span of Hurley and Waithe's volume as "the *very long* 'long nineteenth century'"; or we can justify the extension as showing a trajectory from the long nineteenth century well into the twentieth century, with T.S. Eliot as a sort of capstone that brings us a good deal closer to our own time (for some of us). I would not have these later essays cut by any means: I consider Sellers' essay on Virginia Woolf the very best and most enjoyable of the entire collection. It was beautifully written and engaging in a way that one rarely finds in scholarly writing; for me it was an enjoyable page-turner—and I'm not a particular fan of Woolf although I have a fondness for her drama-cum novel, *The Waves*.

The chronological extension of the "long nineteenth century" in this collection is a 'stretch,' but there is a corresponding contraction on the other end: the volume starts with Coleridge, but although more than one chapter mentions Edmund Burke's published reaction to the French Revolution, there is no chapter on Burke—or Edward Gibbon; or Thomas Paine; or William Godwin. Perhaps as a Yank I feel the loss more than the average Brit since American political, philosophical, and cultural foundations are so bound up in the Enlightenment—or rather the tension between Enlightenment and Romanticism, with the Declaration of Independence (1776) a reflection of the latter, and the Constitution (1789) a reflection of the former. In sum, if we're really considering the "long nineteenth century," shouldn't we consider important works from the last quarter of the eighteenth century? Moreover, another question arises concerning the choice of writers: most all the usual suspects appear in these pages, but where is De Quincey? Where is John Stuart Mill? And a much greater omission—where is Henry David Thoreau?! Thoreau's omission seems especially odd since the editors display a more-than-passing knowledge of Thoreau in the brief "Introduction" (2, 3-4). And even if we include T.S. Eliot as a Yank (one doesn't move from St Louis or from Harvard to London and become a Brit), it does seem that we're under-represented—as are women generally, although it's nice to see

Vernon Lee included, and it's especially nice to see Harriet Martineau rightly appearing among so many of the intellectual giants of the nineteenth century. I suppose we can all point to omissions—where is Dickens' journalistic prose or his travel literature, for example? But on the bright side, it's nice to see Darwin and William James included. I'll proceed by commenting briefly on a selection of essays in order to demonstrate some of the theoretical approaches, and I'll attempt to suggest a more systematic way of approaching some of the twenty essays, starting with Eliot since his chapter is most fresh in memory.

The twenty essays are works of professional scholarship that are often closely argued and sometimes suppose the reader's familiarity with more than popular canonical works, which makes it difficult to make meaningful generalizations about such a broad range of writers. Moreover, I found that this collection is not one that can easily be read from cover to cover: many of the essays require more than ordinary attention and effort from the reader, who often must carefully savor each one to get the intended flavor and enjoyment of such an exercise. In sum, most readers, including professional scholars, will probably want to read this volume in a leisurely manner for maximum enjoyment and enlightenment (the sometimes-forgotten rhetorical goal "to teach and delight").

In Chapter 20 Stefan Collini examines Eliot's *Selected Essays 1917-1932* as providing "the view their author wished to encourage of his [own] critical achievement [...]" (336). These essays went well beyond 'the long nineteenth century' to become "possibly the most widely read critical book in English in the middle third of the twentieth century" (336). Collini gives us a magisterial accounting of Eliot's essays—the conditions, both public and private, from which they sprang, as well as Eliot's "construction of authority" (340), or what used to be termed *ethos*—a polyvalent word that in classical Greek context can indicate the relation between rhetor and audience or between author and reader, but which here does service for Hurley and Waithes's special notion of style. Collini's term for this mode or style of Eliot's criticism is "Vexing the Thoughtless," which is the title of the essay. Collini describes the "off-hand authority of [Eliot's]

provocativeness" in a lively and entertaining style: Eliot puts his readers to the test, "denying them the balm of smooth transitions" (333) as he tries to provoke the readers of his early critical prose "without being merely provoking, even though his writing is [...] constantly at risk of toppling over into irritating mannerism and chilling hauteur" (335). Further along, Eliot's "unqualified assertion" moves "with showy confidence from the brusquely apodictic to the loftily dismissive and on to the sonorously papal" (337), and his "strikingly performative prose" has "a high quotient of look-at-me dandyism" (338). Moreover, Eliot's "deliberate cultivation of difficulty" is one of various ways of "wrong-footing the conventionally minded reader" (339)—an entertaining turn of phrase that even excuses the 'verbing' of a substantive. As a result, Eliot's "spikily angular early criticism" provided him with a forum that contained both "mannered exaggeration" and "some of his most creative critical thinking" (344). As a result, "vexing the thoughtless [...] may be the only effective means available to demonstrate to the attentive what real critical thinking looks like" (345). In sum, Eliot puts forth a new vision of critical thinking and at the same time, through his style, implicates his own place within that vision. In effect, in *Selected Essays 1917-1932* Eliot constructs himself as critic, and he creates an image of what a critic can and should be.

An approach to style that differs considerably from Collini's approach to T.S. Eliot appears in Chapter 18, Simon Jarvis's "Christmas and the Superman: Chesterton's Levitations." Although both Collini and Jarvis approach their subjects with a good deal of wit, Collini approaches T.S. Eliot with a magisterial tone, while Jarvis engages in a more narrow precision of close reading in which he is as nimble and satirical as Chesterton himself, as he explores Chesterton's essays that (mostly) appeared in the *Illustrated London News*. His title is a bit puzzling: nowhere in the essay does "Superman" appear, and the story about "Christmas" is invoked from an historical episode that occurred well after Chesterton's death. We are invited to engage in "a thought experiment [...] by trying to imagine how [Chesterton] might have responded to an incident which occurred some years after his death": shortly after the end of World

War II the church authorities in Dijon decided to put an end to the “unchristian cult of Father Christmas” and were met with public outrage (309). There is little question of what Chesterton’s response would have been: “Popular errors are nearly always right” (310). Apparently “Superman” is invoked as an example of “levitation,” which includes a lightness of speech and touch and a way of moving (298), and which provides an opportunity to segue into a disquisition on “an opposition between modern *routine* and Christian *ritual*,” as well as an opposition between “two conceptions of personhood, a ‘modern’ conception of personhood as constituted by limitless self-transformation, and a Christian conception of the person as a constrained living individual” (299). Thus, Jarvis, like Chesterton, embarks on a satirical journey in which serious ideas and events are taken lightly, and frivolous ideas are taken seriously, in a roundabout effort to ‘bid farewell’ “to the ill-defined and scarcely definable concept of ‘modernity’ itself” (299). In the process, Christian baptism becomes “the lightest and most unself-conscious note for the most serious and most liberating truths. It matters very much how it is done. It is levitous [...]” (302). Although Jarvis doesn’t mention it, this is very much in the vein of Socratic paradox, and especially of Renaissance Christian humanist traditions preferring wise foolishness to foolish wisdom, as in Erasmus’s *Moriae Encomium*. The “style” of Jarvis’s essay mimics the style of Chesterton—casual yet examining important issues and ideas in a witty and satirical way that qualifies as “levitous.” These qualities and aims may appear less serious than a formal essay on T.S. Eliot, but they are not. One might argue that such qualities are more challenging and enlightening than formal scholarship; however, they are a different path to the same goal of understanding. Eliot creates a persona as critic, along with an ideal world for that persona to inhabit—a world that is magisterial, demanding, and exclusive; Chesterton creates a persona that appears easy and inviting, invoking common (and uncommon) sense—a world that is humane and inclusive. Perhaps the respective “styles” of both writers are reflected in their respective venues—literary criticism, and a popular newspaper column.

In Chapter 16, "Thinking Style," Hugh Haughton unpacks the 'lifestyle' of Oscar Wilde, which spills over into both his critical thinking as well as his works of literary art. While T.S. Eliot skillfully constructed his own critical persona with the publication of *Selected Essays 1917-1932*, and while Chesterton created a witty trickster or "levitous" persona in his essays for the *Illustrated London News*, Wilde's real-life persona, his criticism, and his works of art appear to form a seamless whole in which "Aesthetics are higher than ethics" (264): "In all unimportant matters," according to Wilde, "style, not sincerity, is the essential," and "Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style" (265). All three writers are engaged in a revaluation of values: Eliot raises the stakes for an authoritative criticism that demonstrates rigorous critical thinking; Chesterton wittily explodes institutional humbuggery while promoting the serious realities that institutions embody; and Wilde turns "many conventional 'middle-class' values on their head in the name of the pursuit of 'beauty' and 'form'" (269), with the help of "his signature literary style [...] incarnated in his characteristic use of aphorism, paradox, hyperbole, and inversion" (270). In his essay, Haughton regales us with fascinating titbits that are sometimes forgotten—Wilde's early "would-be professorial style, in the idiom of the Oxford scholar he then was" (271), for example, and along the way he also makes comparisons of Wilde with Chesterton (269) and with T.S. Eliot (271)—thus (inadvertently I assume) 'speaking to' the essays by Jarvis and Collini. Unfortunately, such cross-referencing between contributors in large, edited collections is impracticable if not all-but-impossible given the usual time constraints in most publishing projects, so that such a complex task falls to the editors of such collections or, that failing, to reviewers. In any case, Haughton's Wilde is the most far-ranging of the three essays up to this point—in its consideration of Wilde's 'lifestyle' as well as his essays, novels, and plays.

Thus far, the trajectory we have been tracing—despite the 'singularity' of Wilde (269)—takes the form of an expanding gyre, which is an appropriate segue to the cosmic dimension of Emerson's style, which Adam Phillips in Chapter 8 designates "Emerson and the Impossibilities

of Style.” After a page of describing Emerson’s style in terms of both knowledge and the new—as “experimental” and a talisman of “incessant growth” (135), Phillips (inadvertently, I assume) demonstrates how thoroughly he has digested Emerson in the following sentence: “And so, there was, abidingly, for Emerson, also the temptation of mourning, of a writing consumed and stalled by grief” (136). The measured pauses, which reflect a mode of thought that is deliberate and yet in process, recalls specific key sentences from such seminal works as the 1836 *Nature*, where we find, “Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration.” We find similar examples in Emerson’s protégé Thoreau, for example in the opening sentence of *Walden*: “When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only.” I have found that when a writer is thoroughly engaged with his subject, the subject *becomes* the style. Again, perhaps this is a version of what Hurley and Waithe designate “Writing *through* Style.” And again, perhaps this is an example of what Ramus was driving at: a style where words become things. I have found that writers who are completely engaged with their subjects are subsumed by them. As Emerson tells us, “The way to write, is to throw your body at the mark when your arrows are spent” (137). In a recent issue of *Nineteenth-Century Prose* that was dedicated to the works of Harriet Martineau, I noticed that several of the contributors were caught up in Martineau’s style to the extent that they had developed her [over]use of the semicolon—a kind of unconscious imitation that is the highest form of compliment. And Phillips’ style, which harks back to Emerson himself, suggests to me that Emerson is in good hands in Phillips’ essay: he pays due respect to Emerson’s indeterminacy of thought, which often matches an indeterminacy of style.

I believe that Emerson’s style, as his subject matter, is thoroughly existential. Phillips quotes Emerson’s journal, where he finds that style is

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"only in part under his control. It has its own proper tone & manner which *when he is not thinking of it*, it will always assume" (138, emphasis added). Moreover, Phillips adds that "To think about your style is to undermine it; it can be baffled or muted by your own self-consciousness [...]" (138). When you think about it, it's gone; when it's unconscious, it's there, but can only be recognized in retrospect. It brings to mind the old existential joke that asking who you are is like ringing your own doorbell: if you're outside ringing the bell, you're not inside to answer the door; if you're self-conscious, you're not yourself; and since one can only see what one *has been* and not what one *is*, which is a great possibility or impossibility, we can understand Emerson's aversion for the past, which is a form of stasis, while the waters of life flow and are forever in process. Phillips' two references to Nietzsche, "Emerson's follower" (145), are not inadvertent, but they could be more strongly stated: the influence of Emerson on Nietzsche, according to George Stack, "is so profound and pervasive that the word influence doesn't do justice to it," which "raises the question of whether it is Emerson or his Danish contemporary, Søren Kierkegaard, who is entitled to be called 'the first existentialist.'"¹ Indeed, Nietzsche's famous statement that "God is dead" has its predecessor in Emerson's Divinity School "Address," in which he describes some Christians who behave "as if God were dead." (Like Thoreau, Nietzsche sometimes amplifies Emerson.) Emersonian attitudes can be found throughout Nietzsche's works, so it's no wonder that Emerson's "style" is a reflection of illusive and contradictory attitudes toward existence. Hence the justice of Phillips' title, "Emerson and the Impossibilities of Style."

To recapitulate, we have traced a range of attitudes toward style that begins with the very specific and personal goals and reflections of T.S. Eliot's self-presentation, to Chesterton's presentation of a range of attitudes toward social institutions, to Wilde's undercutting of social expectations, to Emerson's existential shape-shifting that reflects the unfixed nature of human consciousness. Each one of these quite different tasks requires its own distinctive 'style.'

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Note

¹ George J. Stack, *Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), 3, 9.

