

Introduction: The Contemporary Problem of Style

This essay sets the parameters of this special issue on the contemporary problem of style. Noting that the critical term style has returned to discursive prominence in recent years, the introduction explores the peculiarity of its status in literary studies. Asking how style underlies our critical practice today, it tracks the partially conflicting genealogies of style and the variety of its disciplinary relations. It explores the problem of style now: in its modernist inheritances; its association to class and nationality, especially Englishness; its reconfiguration through world Englishes and the global novel; its coupling with new aestheticism and new formalism; its recasting as a problem of receptivity and attachment in the era of ‘post-critique’; its intimate connection to shame, affect and embodiment (given especial impetus by critical race theory and sexuality studies); and its persistent association with subcultures and the scandalous pleasures of ‘lifestyle’.

KEYWORDS new formalism; new aestheticism; modernism; weird English; stylistics; post-critique; shame

Coleman, the protagonist of ‘Prophets’ (2021) by Brandon Taylor, teaches creative writing at Iowa. This information offers unusual sustenance to the student of contemporary style. It allows that Coleman’s painful life predicaments are dependably enmeshed with the discourse of literary writing, that once privileged mode. Coleman feels personally rebuked by his students when they write ‘stories in the forms of Spotify mixtapes, research articles, blog posts, found footage...’. And he finds himself affronted by the ‘famous black writer’ who has come to give a ‘pyrotechnic’ reading of ‘experimental fiction that was really memoir but also a poem’. Coleman, too, is a black American writer, and gay, and he is harbouring a secret history of sexual abuse.¹

The title of Taylor’s story summons the vocation of the preacher who abused Coleman when he was a child, though ‘Prophets’ also insinuates the ‘famous black writer’s’ affectedness and the students’ foreknowledge of future aesthetic imperatives. But its most striking function – the reason we are noting it at the beginning of an essay about contemporary style – is to offer ironic commentary on the story’s implicit attachment to an alienated and withdrawn literariness. Coleman knows something he cannot find a way to articulate. And it is by means of this reticence, in the face of a series of challenging social conditions, that the story registers forces which are apparently intent on vanquishing it. Coleman glumly feels he has failed his students and that the famous writer is a ham actor and, perhaps, a liar. Did the man ‘with one leg’ begging for money say, ‘God bless ya’ll’, as the narrative originally recounts it, or did he utter a racist insult, as the ‘famous black writer’ claims afterwards? This question will not be resolved. If the writer is lying then it is further proof of his bad faith, but the trustworthy realism of the third-person narrative is equally at stake. Might Coleman’s apparent sensitivity have connived with narrative disavowal? Does literary reticence implicitly endorse the exclusionary

whiteness of a cultural space? In revealing this struggle to understand the impossible commitment to authenticity, suspicion of authorial self-exposure, wariness about the performance of identity and complicity with cultural capital, Taylor's story dramatises concerns germane to this special issue. The contemporary problem of style, we suggest, is a problem of sorting and identifying difference, of generational, technological and institutional transmission, of aesthetic judgment and affective response, of the interpretative tension between suspicion and pleasure, and of a creative practice in which historical content is constantly under erasure.

The discourse of modern style has always opened a messy space between the literary and the extra-literary. Consider the German Romantic riposte to Kantian disinterest; or Nietzsche's reproval of the art-for-art's-sake movement; or the persistent failure of modernist impersonality to defend technique against life. Style comes and goes, but it always returns as a problem, in all its taxonomic unruliness, straddling disciplines and jumping between technocratic and journalistic modes. Recent work by Jacques Rancière, Rebecca Walkowitz, Anne Anlin Cheng, Monica L. Miller, Ben Hutchinson, Mario Aquilina, Jeff Dolven, Daniel Hartley, Denise Riley and Jean-Jacques Lecercle suggests that style has returned once again.² But this emerging canon is not yet conversant with its own timeliness, nor has it fully considered the peculiarity of its disciplinary circumstance. In this special issue, we explore how style underlies critical practice in literary studies *today*, when the affective intensities of so-called 'post-critique' coincide with increasingly systematic accounts of world-literary production; when the enduring tensions between majority and minority languages compel us to ask whether 'translational' literature necessitates a renunciation of style; when the provincialization of an exclusionary class or nation-bound concept of English style (or 'fine writing') opens on to Englishes deliberately conceived as 'weird' or 'bad'; when critical race and sexuality studies oblige us to rethink the invisibility and incorporeality of narrative technique; and when new media technologies have reimagined authorship and further tested our ideas of originality and authentic difference.

Each essay on the topic of style in this special issue interacts with a disciplinary predicament. Michael Dango considers style in relation to genre and form. Given that the generic coding of affect and formal structures of taste are increasingly subject to algorithmic determination, Dango poses the necessity of style as a coordinating action and mode of collective adaptation. Barry Sheils establishes an historical association between literary style and the psychopathology of hysteria. The persistence of this association, he argues, helps

account for the coincidence of academic professionalisation and the apparently contrary turn to auto-theoretical writing. Noreen Masud explores the gendered psychodynamics of three contemporary books of poetry by women, asking after their ‘flat style’. This cultural emergence of flatness indicates a strategic interaction with the literary marketplace and the generic expectations of lyric; each poet deliberately disappointing the reader while also lending themselves to institutional over-exposure. Daniel Hartley’s study of Denise Riley’s work, specifically the impersonal lyric, frames the political valences of style as dependent on the ‘de-dramatization’ of linguistic utterance. Richard Robinson tests Bakhtin through a close consideration of the Elena Ferrante phenomenon: how can the underlying discursive principle of heteroglossia, equated to the frictional dynamics of style, survive the ‘middlebrow’ space of the born-to-be-translated global novel? And Shameem Black displaces the European discourse of literary style onto Indian traditions of Yogic practice. Accounting for difficult cross-currents and contemporary appropriations, Black’s essay centres on the Sanskrit term *svādhyāya*, or self-study, whose emphasis on recitation, repetition and revision suggests new ways of decolonizing style.

Together these essays offer a conspectus of style’s critical iterations, while recognising that intrinsic to style are forces and counterforces which, with Taylor’s story in mind, may be seen as *auguring* contemporary tensions in literary practice and interpretation. We might usefully acknowledge in this respect an example from the recent past: the reputation of ‘late style’ which followed in the wake of Edward Said’s last book. The abiding presence for Said was an Adornian insistence on aesthetic intransigence, the refusal of late art to harmonize or to ‘divest itself of its rights and abdicate in favour of reality’.³ However, as the response to Said has shown, *late style* was a problem too.⁴ The old romantic construction of lateness as autumnal, serene, transcendent and integrative may have been discredited, but the Adornian-Saidian attachment to unresolved conflict and formal recalcitrance also depended on teleologies of (male) greatness.⁵ Just as noteworthy is the fact that this scepticism about ‘late style’ tended to be more concerned with the problem of lateness than with that of style. The emphasis has largely been on how lateness disintegrates as a hermeneutic category in music and the fine arts, while style itself remains elusive. This introduction is, to some degree, a tribute to that elusiveness, tracking the value of style as a critical term, its partially conflicting genealogies, and the variety of its disciplinary relations. Style, we suggest, is forever attaching to other, more easily defined terms: form, genre, personality. Nonetheless, as we hope the following begins to demonstrate, it has a necessary life of its own.

‘The problem of style’

One of the problems of writing about style is how to invoke its multiple, competing and cross-disciplinary genealogies.⁶ This goes beyond an obligatory mention of the Comte de Buffon (*Le style, c'est l'homme même*), Sir Thomas Browne or Cicero in search of a foundational origin on which to build a unitary theoretical history. The critical tensions intrinsic to style are perennial and recur in different period costumes: style is not an end-directed narrative of progress. In the spirit of refusing singular genealogies, we comment briefly here on a small assembly of texts with the very same title. This sub-field cuts across some of the more familiar trajectories of style; still, it shows the extent to which the twentieth-century ‘problem of style’ was also recognisably a problem of modernism.

Let us start with Remy de Gourmont’s influential *Le Problème du Style* (1902), which demonstrates a determination to unsettle clichés about Flaubert.⁷ De Gourmont shows how the relationship between a lonely authorial personality and aesthetic impersonality is misconceived. His assertion that ‘we write as we feel, as we think, with the whole of our bodies’ insists upon the relationship between style and embodiment, and may be seen as bridging Schopenhauer’s notion of style as physiognomic to Benjamin’s sense of Proust’s lifework as a ‘physiognomic expression’ in which ‘sentences are the entire muscular activity of the intelligible body’.⁸ But de Gourmont’s dismissal of copying (‘never art’) also anticipates the schism in theories of modernist style: on the one hand, the avant-garde acceptance of copy, readymade, bricolage, collage, depersonalisation, utility and mass culture; on the other, the emphasis on authorial personality, on manner and autonomy. De Gourmont’s contention that ‘only the intellectual knows that the framing of pigs in a trough can make a superior work of art’ – the ‘people’ look for subject (or content), the intellectual for manner – underlines the social anxieties intrinsic to modernist aesthetics.⁹

Georg Simmel’s ‘Das Problem des Stiles’ (1908) locates the problem similarly in the tension between stylistic singularity and typicality. If we conceive of style as a law of form, as a period style – such as the baroque – then masterpieces do not have style. But we *do* speak of Michelangelo’s style: a style that is unique, ‘imperiously closed within itself’, a ‘being-for-itself’.¹⁰ Simmel allows that style adheres to the idiom of period design, but separates this from the style of artistic genius which transcends that of a specific culture. This tension between stylistic singularity and conformity had already emerged as a question of *fin-de-siècle*

aesthetics, contemporary with *Jugendstil* (later considered by Benjamin), and with Alois Riegl's concept of artistic volition (*Kunstwollen*), developed in *Stilfragen* (1893) – translated in English as *Problems of Style* and thus another companion of the sub-field.¹¹ Riegl's polemic was against the critical tendency to demean ornament and reduce material stylization to a secondary phenomenon. Rather, the appearance of a new motif – a tendril in Mycaenean pottery, say – is a guarantor that artistic agency has remained intact, pointing to an unbroken continuum of style-history. This volition is neither purely personal nor impersonal. There is an evolutionary tenor in such style-theory: Herbert Spencer, a social Darwinist, was another to attempt a taxonomy of style. The will to encompass style in totalising theories of culture is another of its problems.

John Middleton Murry's *The Problem of Style* (1922) reveals the critical tensions of style in the midst of high modernism. Style 'crystallises' a mode of feeling, thinking and seeing, communicating this to the reader with a sense of wholeness and inevitability. Flaubert is a presiding presence: style is a '*manière de voir*'; the author must immolate himself upon the description of the object-world. The sensuous experience of the poet, averting crudely personalised expression, is crystallised upon symbolic objects, compelling us to see as the poets see: Hardy's 'God-curst tree', Clare's snail, 'Frail brother of the morn'.¹² The sensibility of such lines harmoniously combines a 'maximum of personality with a maximum of impersonality'.¹³ Shakespeare draws upon an 'unparagoned' storehouse of fitting circumstances to guarantee a psychological sureness, enabling idiosyncratic language to produce in the reader a consistent, deeply felt mode of apprehension. Style thus cannot be hived off as a solely linguistic question: it 'is not an isolable quality of writing: it is writing itself'.¹⁴ And if there is a 'muzzy' emotionalism, emotions without an endorsed attitude, no amount of painful re-polishing of the surface will bring out style. Murry suggests the hold of Flaubertian impersonality upon conceptions of a disciplined, laboured-over style: style is 'not so much a triumph of language as a victory over language'.¹⁵ Thus he is suspicious of modernism which exuberantly (triumphantly) gives itself over to the signifier. Murry deplores additive style, ornamental excess, and the contemporary fetishizing of technique; in late Henry James, he finds an overly-luxuriant hypertrophy.

More recently, there is *The Problem of Style* (1966), a collection of essays edited by the American poet and academic J.V. Cunningham. Here a long tradition of style is constructed, beginning with oratorical style, as analysed in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, and including a stylistic analysis of the Gettysburg address. Cunningham summarises various axiomatic contradictions.

If style is a constant form, which the cultural historian construes as standing for an *inner* truth of a personality or civilization, then it loses its necessary sense of externality and shape. The originally lauded style of the classical rhetorician may become too bombastically noticeable in later iterations; while the self-concealing style may be a ‘hedging against failure’.¹⁶ Cunningham also reveals his colours as a practising poet of neo-classical form, a proto-new formalist during the counter-cultural apogee of free verse. Getting rid of (regular) form does not get rid of the problem of form, of the foundational metrical experience of poetry. Style accepts the burden of this problem. According to Cunningham, the antiformal poets have reached a point where they have nothing to vary from: ‘The last variation is regularity’.¹⁷ The anxiety of modernism, such as in Eliot’s writing on *vers libre*, still persists.

The almost exclusively male line-up of Cunningham’s style experts confirms an unignorable symptom of style studies. The disciplinary structures which underlie style before the advent of ‘theory’ in the Anglo-American academy – based on the conception of a struggle between the science or ‘pseudo-science’ of stylistics, on the one hand, and the growing retrenchment of the hieratic Leavisite literary critic, on the other – articulate the problem of style in an exaggeratedly gendered way.

Style and (post)modernism

Fredric Jameson’s outsized influence on the discipline of contemporary literary studies might most readily be associated with an emphasis on the ideology of modernist *forms*.¹⁸ But as Daniel Hartley has recently shown, the Jamesonian history of form also includes a preoccupation with style. Jameson follows Barthes’s *Writing Degree Zero* in arguing that style supplants rhetoric in the mid-nineteenth century: the modern style metanarrative inevitably leads back to its Flaubertian origin but this time to highlight an epistemic shift. Aristocratic rhetoric suggests a shared pre-capitalist language of collective communication, a classical education inculcating a fixed, class-based concept of oratorical high style which accommodates so-called temperamental difference.¹⁹ Middle-class style, a relatively recent historical phenomenon, emphasises the incomparable element of individuality and originality: the ideology of bourgeois individualism. The modern Flaubertian artist now toils over a distinctive style. To Jameson, this initiates in high modernism, with its ‘host of distinct private styles and mannerisms’, an obsessive and uncommunicative self-fashioning.²⁰

The endpoint of modernist style is Joyce's 'Oxen of the Sun', the chapter of *Ulysses* which Eliot said 'destroyed the whole of the nineteenth century [...] and showed up the futility of all English styles' and which brought Joyce 'au bout de l'anglais'.²¹ In his *Field Day* contribution, Jameson emphasises that 'Oxen' is a purposefully anti-imperialist evisceration of the 'occupying armies' of *English* styles.²² The early Joyce may have had a Paterian style, for instance, but in 'Oxen' shows how style disappears as a category related to an individual subject. It ushers in the postmodern mimicry of dead styles. In the age of late capitalism 'modernist styles' become 'postmodernist codes'.²³ 'Oxen' must do double duty: its language represents a rebarbative, archetypally 'high' or difficult modernist exercise, and is exemplary of the privatised, not to say narcissistic, regime of style; yet it also signals the final repudiation of style. In Jean-Michel Rabaté's view, 'Oxen' is the birth and death, or death and birth, of style: it is where the crime of masculine style's indifference to its object (the life-threatening labour of a woman) is made public, and a new and gendered parturition of style is suggested: '*Le style, c'est la femme même*'.²⁴

This subsumption of style within the history of ideological forms compels us to wonder, however, whether style can survive modernism. Can it designate a singular artistic or literary 'event' once it has been commandeered as part of what Mario Aquilina has recently called the 'teleocratic' narrative?²⁵ Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero* recognises modernism has problematised style's collusion with the historical institution of Literature. Literature is a bourgeois object of consumption, a carcass which has been hollowed out by modernism. Barthes (following Blanchot) alludes to Mallarmé as a murderer of language, who like Orpheus can save what he loves only by renouncing it, and must imagine the world without 'Literature'.²⁶ But style is not entirely extirpated. Barthes's identification with the private, self-sufficient rituals of style ('the writer's "thing", his glory and his prison'), as well as its carnality ('the decorative voice of hidden, secret flesh', a 'germinative phenomenon') is contrasted to the impersonalised 'degree zero' of language, a necessary mode of writing beyond style.²⁷ *Écriture blanche* still allows the style of non-style: Camus's 'style of absence' is 'almost an ideal absence of style' – and vice versa.²⁸ Although colourless writing quickly imitates itself, risks becoming mere manner, the sign and style of neutrality, Barthes's restatement of the problem of style-lessness seems to offer a precarious and narrow path for the persistence of style.

At the same time, Adorno thinks of contemporary style as being 'liquidated', co-opted by the homogenising forces of administered societies. But Adorno also leaves room for a

negation of style which reverses dialectically into a radical dissonance, as in the music of Schoenberg, the poetry of Celan or the theatre of Beckett; although this is a hyper-elite late modernist canon, it is one which suggests a tiny residuum of stylistic resistance at the mid-century nadir of style.²⁹ Likewise, Susan Sontag defends the potential of a late modernism which can resist complicity under the sign of style. She emphasises how style is an alien deviation from the accepted aesthetics of the time and that hostility to *style* per se is historically produced. Thus, the ‘antipathy to “style” is always an antipathy to a given style’.³⁰ This is why the recurrent problem of style, immanent and universal, reappears in different period guises. To its detractors, *a* style stands in synecdochically for Style, which must be erased: ‘transparent art is one of the most tenacious fantasies of modern culture’.³¹ For Sontag as for Beckett, what is soon enshrined as a stylistic code, an image of style made acceptable in the market, a mask of style, an interpretation of style, no longer has the name of style. As the era of ‘dead’ postmodernist stylisations becomes established, Sontag clings to the late modernist utopia of stylistic autonomy. And her stylish mid-1960s essay – a ‘mere’ essay – sets itself against the bloodless scholasticism of pseudo-scientific analyses of the textual object.

English style

Class-bound debates about English style may seem quaintly anachronistic today, but their ideology of style remains unmistakable. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch addressed his Cambridge lectures on style during World War One to his ‘Gentlemen’. Yes, style cannot escape personality, but style must be free from its taint nevertheless. The first ‘sin’ is to allow personal style to obtrude; disinterest is a class-based marker of *sprezzatura*. The contempt for extraneous ornament is consistent with the imploring of students – whether in court, quad or trench – to steep themselves in the ‘catholic manhood’ of these ‘great masculine objective writers’. The Gentlemen must excise, mortify themselves, ‘*Murder [their] darlings*’.³² Good style is making ‘less ado’ – a death-driven kind of self-abnegation, a stylistic lessness which equates to an idealized English masculinity: not making a fuss.

In the 1950s, Nancy Mitford jokingly incorporated into an essay on the English aristocracy a distinction between ‘U’ and ‘Non-U’ speech drawn from sociological linguistics. Mitford satirised the upper-class attitude to the welfare-state society: that the counter-jumping lower orders, indulging their aspirations to decorum and making up for their cultural inferiority, were poor stylists, unable to call a spade a spade (jam was preserve, vegetables were greens,

napkins were serviettes). She was goading a reaction from those who railed against the rise of a petit-bourgeois style contaminated by euphemism, circumlocution, jargon and genteelism. At stake was the Englishness of English: Mitford's list includes '*Britain: non-U for U England*'.³³ Evelyn Waugh half-teasingly reproved Mitford for her 'socialism', diverting the debate in an anthropological direction: he disputed the existence of a univocal 'U' dialect, pointing to the atomized upper-class dialects of each family 'tribe'. No matter how ironic the aristocratic self-mockery, a dialectical reversal was performed, in which aristocratic style was good, blunt, and sometimes vulgar. It informed Orwell's disparagement of abstraction, ornament and double-speak, which could not be understood without his insider knowledge of those cryptogrammic 'aristocratic semantics', in George Steiner's conception, which were codes for recognition and exclusion.³⁴ English style would need to be protected from those protégés of what Waugh calls the 'École de ['Rab'] Butler' – those who had been directed towards 'Literature' (non-U), and were finding themselves critics, poets and novelists.³⁵

Style and Literature were for the few, not the many. In his guide to good writing, *Style* (1970), F.L. Lucas was another gatekeeper, declaring that 'at the university, English seems to be a good subject for a gifted few – perhaps as many as take Moral Science'.³⁶ The self-mocking title of Kingsley Amis's *The King's English* did not conceal this monarchically 'common sense' demystification of pretentious abuses of English style. The French had the *Académie Française*, but the English proudly lack a *constitutional* style. Still, the arbiters were there, concealing their little English under cover of a benign liberalism. Style was indeed an English code, though nowhere written down. Ever more expressive of class and imperialist anxiety, English style could not but be perceived politically. In the 1980s, for example, Seamus Deane was yet another to refer to the 'thorny problem' of style – in this case, as inseparable from the so-called 'Northern problem'.³⁷ Deane suggested that style itself, an inherited historical self-image, a heroic idea, 'is no less than a declaration of war': the political crisis was *stylistic*.³⁸ The subsequent dispersal into the proliferation of interlingual styles *in* English and *of* English has had the effect of provincializing 'English style', pushing it to the disciplinary margins.

English styles

As with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialised, minor literature, George Steiner's 'extraterritorial' writer may now be associated with an outworn postmodernism, concerning

the canonised virtuosity of interlingual stylists like Borges or Nabokov, or with a more desolate model of late modernism in Beckett or Paul Celan.³⁹ Steiner emphasised the polysemic potentiality of being without a linguistic *Geborgenheit*, at-homeness, relating this to the upheaval of mid-twentieth century history: extraterritorial writers, those ‘poets unhoused and wanderers across language’ were ‘an apt symbol for the age of the refugee’, which had ‘torn up tongues and peoples by the root’.⁴⁰

More recent critical models tend to modify Steiner’s figure of the extraterritorial subject. Evelyn Nien Ming Ch’ien’s *Weird English*, with its interventions on Nabokese, also wittily subverts dominant Eurocentric accounts of style which ignore the richly weird patchwork of world-Englishes. Thus, to Nabokov’s Pnin’s ‘I haf nofing’ is added Maxine Hong Kingston’s syncretic Chinglish: the stereotype of the laundry worker who says ‘no tickee no washee’.⁴¹ The intensities of the ‘uncool’ Deleuzian stutter are appropriated, ‘style becomes nonstyle’, and language is exposed as being foreign to itself. Unintelligibility is reconceived as necessary and affirmative. Ch’ien’s intervention also marks a disciplinary departure from postcolonialist discourse. To Ch’ien, the language of the ‘cloudy beyond’ where Homi K. Bhabha locates hybrid cultures may itself be a shield of weirdly institutionalised English, in which academic theorizing no longer stutters out the neo-colonial experience, but escapes into ‘postcolonialist’ abstraction.⁴²

This scepticism about how the romanticising of a globalised linguistic hybridity can marginalise the experience of language difference also lies behind Rachael Gilmour’s recent *Bad English*. Like Ch’ien, Gilmour concedes the important contributions in postcolonial studies to the politics of language: Rey Chow, for example, on how the foreign object of language, like a prosthetic, threatens even the supposedly ‘inalienable interiority’ of the subject.⁴³ The idealising of frictionless translatability places English as the *lingua franca* of an ethically suspect ‘enabling cosmopolitanism’, in John McLeod’s phrase, which may disguise neoliberal interests.⁴⁴ Gilmour brings out the ideological hostility of contemporary forms of normalised English – the English of a securitised, surveillance culture whose message is to ‘speak English in England!’.⁴⁵ Like Ken Saro-Wiwa’s ‘rotten’ English, or Ch’ien’s ‘uncool’ Chinglish, the linguistic misrule of ‘*bad English*’ (the old African-American slang ratified by *OED*) is a challenge to the intemperate guardians of correct English style. There should not be a single good style but rather a plurality of *bad* styles. Gilmour’s focus is on English as a ‘matrix language’ – not only an evolving but a devolving language – and on those intercultural and interlingual writers whose subject is language itself: who are, implicitly, stylists. The

predominantly thematic concern with race and identity in many accounts of black and Asian writers in Britain, Gilmour argues, cannot be approached extralinguistically: the problems of contemporary identity are the problems of language.

Novel style and world-style

To Bakhtin, genre-style resisted the idea that a will-to-style is finally individuated or made to belong to the author (although ‘the style will always give [the novelist] away’).⁴⁶ Thus he repeatedly referred to a ‘novel style’. It was not that Tolstoy had a style, then, but that ‘Tolstoyan consonance or dissonance had entered into the positive project of creating a style’: the novel’s styles were its dialects and its dialects its styles.⁴⁷ This model of the polyphonic novel has long been a theoretical *vade mecum* in the academy. Yet the rise of the translatable global novel has intensified questions about the ‘other languages’ of Bakhtinian heteroglossia, whether dialogism is conceived as linguistic presence or absence.

Translation is now to be considered not as something which the vernacular of the original text is subjected to *a posteriori*: rather, it is built into an intrinsically translingual and duplicable form: what Rebecca Walkowitz has conceived of as the ‘born-translated’ world literary text, subject to material questions of production, circulation and transmission. Style had long been used in canon-formation to designate the survival of a classic, demonstrated through the practices of molecular reading; but the style of the born-translated text is not a locked chamber. Rather it is porous, inside-out, always internalising the extra-textual conditions of its production and its movement between languages. Walkowitz clarifies Franco Moretti’s argument for the practice of a synthesized distant reading which aims to enfeeble the theological solemnity of close reading, and to expose the analysis of individual texts within national canons. Moretti’s distant reading within the Wallerstein world-system suggests the value of taking an isolable stylistic unit like a novel title, say Jane Austen’s *Emma*, and checking it against the thousands of other novel titles published in the 1810s.⁴⁸ This quantitative approach insists upon the transnational commerce of stylistic ink (‘Style, Inc.’) and understands style as a transmissible form. Walkowitz’s modifying notion of ‘close reading at a distance’ acknowledges that comparative distant readings still presuppose the close-reading expertise of a reader who brings out the rich localism of the text even while emphasising its transnational portability.⁴⁹ Attention to style is still required but is directed to showing the

dynamic linguistic force of foreignness; literary interpretation in the digital age must be of the texts of books, rather than the sacralised Text of the Book.

Other accounts of global literary production may minimise the problem of style. The Warwick Research Collective, for instance, when offering their version of a hyphenated world-literature, ‘one, but unequal’, discuss a twenty-five-year window (1835-60) in which the normalisation of commodity fetishism identified by Marx ‘takes centre stage [...] as the uncanny coloniser of consciousness and the puzzling substrate of the new bourgeois “common sense”’.⁵⁰ This constitutes an artistic ‘problem’ but, conspicuously, not one which is articulated (as it is for Barthes and Jameson) as the supplanting of rhetoric by style. The authors understandably wish to dispose of the critical obsession with the ‘writerly technique’ of western European modernism, but the absence of style is strangely felt. Style disappears within the morphology of systems and networks, of translated products disseminated unequally within international literary space. The question of the affective or corporeal intensities of the philosophy of aesthetics, which determines our understanding of style, taste and pleasure – including that of reading literature – is not significantly posed.

Aestheticism and style

Is the persisting problem of style, then, the problem of aesthetics? Under the bleak mid-twentieth-century conditions of Enlightenment now conceived dialectically as totalitarian, Western aesthetics was often seen to be moribund. It seemed impossible to preserve the utopian impulses of art, or to rescue ethical responsibility from the disinterestedly universal, reflective subjectivity imagined by Kant. But with the waning of postmodernism has come a reconsideration of the radical potential of a broadly neo-Kantian aesthetics. The new aestheticists argue that sensibility can still retrieve art from the misappropriation of art by technocratic power, and emphasise a historicist understanding of the conditions which, to Andrew Bowie, allows an art which questions ‘the possibility of art’s truth to the point of the destruction of art’.⁵¹ Prevailing de-subjectified aesthetic judgements, including those which develop a general theory about the ideological complicity of art, require individual people to make them: thus, as Bowie writes, a ‘regress of subjective accounts of the determined nature of subjectivity’ still implies the critical reflection of a ‘super-subject’ who speaks from a determinate position of knowing and judging.⁵² Following Adorno’s dismissal of the social

function of art, J.M. Bernstein emphasizes art's emptiness of function, lack of purpose, and status as an absolute commodity or 'mere' thing: art 'succeeds only by failing utterly'.⁵³ Isobel Armstrong tackles the caricatural idea that the aesthetic is 'unthought': rather, the interactive experience of art is potentially emancipatory, one in which 'the seductive power of affect [...] is actually the limit-case of thought in erasure'.⁵⁴ What is more, the imputation that the aesthetic is conceptually naive (at best) must account for the way poststructuralists themselves generate flagrantly aesthetic *and* cerebral texts.⁵⁵

It is still valuable, then, to ask how style relates specifically to Kantian and neo-Kantian aesthetics and to wonder at the way it, too, can escape being subsumed under the ideological conformism of determinate form. Kant develops the idea of subjective universality in the *Critique of Judgement*. He contends that everyone has his own taste, a private gratification of the senses, such as when drinking an agreeable Canary-wine. The pleasure in a beautiful object is disinterested, however, not bound up with the kind of pleasure which includes desire. The thing is not merely beautiful *to me*. This is an autonomous subjective judgement which nevertheless demands universal assent. What does not enter this aesthetic schema is cognition, logic, moral law: 'There can be no rule according to which anyone can be compelled to recognise anything as beautiful'.⁵⁶ Again and again, Kant insists that the beautiful is that which pleases universally 'apart from', without, a concept. Beauty is the *form* of purposiveness in the object: Kant is considering how the aesthetic experience implies abstraction from all content (content here standing for a conceptual 'end').

Leaving aside the question, much debated by philosophers, of the extent to which there is an Adornian misprision of Kant (Kant read through Hegel), it is significant that Adorno finds an overt contradiction in Kant's concession that a judgement of taste still has reference to the understanding: the aesthetic 'norm of intuitability', that singular universalism, is a false and gapless synthesis of spirit and sense which conceals the mediating process of intellection. For Adorno, it is true that if 'art were totally without the element of intuition, it would be theory'.⁵⁷ And yet, though there has to be a sensory and affective response, it must accommodate thought, which is always at work: the *Eroica*, for example, is intellectual. It is just this Adornian sense of 'gapped' aesthetics which distinguishes the 'new aesthetics' from the Kantian old. And this bears on contemporary style. Behind those journalistic commonplaces which adorn book covers, praising Hollinghurst as the best stylist since Waugh, lurks the mangled apparatus of the old Kantian subjective universal. The reader is pressured by this extra-logical demand for universal assent, the idea that the super-sensibility of the other subject imputes agreement of

taste ‘without a concept’. There is no possibility for a conceptual law to be debated, as this does not enter these aesthetic considerations, and in any case disinterested impartiality is assured: the reader is not being told that another reader liked the Canary-wine. No: like the beautiful, the lauded style is presented as an object of *necessary* delight.

Form and style

A return to the problem of style as aesthetical must also be situated in relation to recent debates about the problem of form. ‘What happened to the radical gesture of [...] formalist intervention?’ asked Susan J. Wolfson in 2000.⁵⁸ Formalism was damned by its association with the New Critical delight in ambiguity, its refusal to grasp a moral position or to acknowledge the external forces of social antagonism. Its dismissal, as arid or reactionary, had become so automatic that it had been forgotten why formalism came about in the first place: that by attending more observantly to art one can apprehend the hidden power structures which routinise reality, and can thus question their historical condition as pre-given. The new formalism confirmed the crudeness of a formalist-historicist divide: the best historicising critics were precisely scholars of form, and the best formalists scholars of the history of that form. To Wolfson, ‘reading for form...was to read against formalism’; to Geoffrey Hartmann, there ‘are many ways to transcend formalism, but the worst is not to study forms’.⁵⁹

The reconsideration of form has carried with it a reappearance of style, its *semblable*. In Angela Leighton’s work on aestheticism and form in modern poetry, for example, form is not only to be looked at but looked *for*, within newly conceived trajectories of literary history. Here aesthetic inutility, not just localized in the *fin-de-siècle* slogan ‘art for art’s sake’, emerges as congruent with style’s Flaubertian association with ‘nothing’: the form of an artwork is not ‘for something’; it is non-committal and synonymous only with its style. In his essay on style, Walter Pater directly considers Flaubert’s martyrdom to style in relation to Buffon: ‘if the style be the man [...] it will be in a real sense ‘impersonal’. All varieties of style, be they reserved or opulent, are expressive and absolutely sincere, but only in their aspiration to the ‘perfection of nobody’s style’, to an aesthetics of impersonality.⁶⁰ The Paterian refusal of style as sentimental self-expression may suggest its harmony with impersonal form, but Leighton notes that there is a post-Romantic branching off between style and form too. The Victorian aestheticist association of beauty and form, indeed the beauty *of* form, gives bodily presence to form and

makes it desirable. In this case, style is consigned to the thinness of manner or affectation, the ideal of ‘nothing’ now lacking form and beauty.⁶¹

However, there is an aestheticist legacy traceable throughout modernism which twins the Flaubertian and Paterian, and which emerges as a genealogy of both style *and* form. Despite the baroque manner of Pater’s prose which can be found in early Joyce, Woolf and Proust, Pater is opposed to what he calls ‘surplusage’ of style, to the ornamental (‘removable’), and otiose.⁶² There is a kind of will-to-nothing in aestheticism as well. And Leighton, studying form but transcending formalism, shows that this late Victorian lineage is still visible even in the poetry of the older Wallace Stevens. In Wildean vein, Stevens writes that ‘the poets who have little to say are, or will be, the poets that matter’; that ‘a man has no choice about his style. When he says I am my style the truth reminds him that it is style that is himself’.⁶³ The aestheticist/modernist reversal implies that style is not self but self is style – and style alone. For the artist, there is no personality outside of this style to express; she is ‘nothing’.⁶⁴

Although the literary histories of style and form intersect in such ways, they remain ambiguously separable, each approached as a sub-category of the other. On the one hand, formal components need to be agglomerated in order to conceive of a unified style, both that of an individual artwork or a period style. To decide on what constitutes baroque, we must resort to elements of form; we must pass through form to arrive at a singular yet unified style. On the other hand, *everything* material has form, in the sense of shape, design, pattern, texture, colour: thus, style appears as a species of form. Style can surely not be appreciated adequately without attention to form, but form can be analysed without an appreciation of style. Style is human intervention and imprint upon form, the making which presupposes the maker. Paul Valéry wrote that ‘even before the hard, cutting point had given way to the supple tip of a sharpened quill, the *name* style had passed from the instrument to the hand that guides it, and from the hand to the man from whom the hand derives its way of doing’.⁶⁵ Style is bound up with volition whereas form can be inert: even the style which says ‘I am not here’, which proclaims itself as impersonal, as art-object, is not reducible to an ideal of form, because it bears a ‘way of doing’. The novels of Robbe-Grillet, for example, may aspire to form but have an increasingly recognisable style.

The theorising of form as subsidiary to style or vice versa is particularly conspicuous in art criticism. Jeff Dolven considers Richard Wollheim’s ‘formed style’: the idea that we are interested in the paintings of painters prompts us to think of formal details in terms of a psychologically unified *Gesamtkunstwerk*.⁶⁶ Formal elements may be identified and

aggregated to support the claim of a shared style – such as in the school style of a Giotto, for example – but this is not equivalent to the fully formed style, the psychological reality, the ‘generative’ style of the individual Giotto.⁶⁷ Form serves style, but the relationship can be reversed. To Dolven, form has a dignity and dependability on which style relies. The will-to-stylelessness is a manifestation of the constancy of form, the ‘form that subtends all styles’, that disrupts the regime of style, that suspends the disreputable interests of style.⁶⁸ And thus ‘formed style’ is said to have a greater respectability than ‘styled form’ – the styling here connoting a modish and transient individualism.

Arthur Danto’s conception of style as basic action, on the other hand, disfavours the static impersonality of form.⁶⁹ Danto suggests that you can paint in the style of Rembrandt, but not reproduce his spontaneous and expressive ‘way of seeing’ the world; you can paint a tie like Picasso – it has the same form – but it would be self-conscious and mannered; similarly, a fugue-writing machine would not have Bach’s style. For Danto, style can still be found in pop artworks, at the very extremity of modern art’s insistence on the replicability of form, mode and function, and its refusal of creative expression and psychologised content. For example, Roy Lichtenstein’s *Portrait of Madame Cezanne* reproduces – or plagiarises – a diagram of Cézanne’s painting by Erle Loran, which outlines Cézanne’s compositional dynamics, most notably how the ‘axial tipping’ of the main figure leads the viewer’s eye. To Danto, Lichtenstein *transfigures* rather than transforms the representation of the portrait genre. It thus has an attitudinal style or way of seeing which comes after Cézanne, and also after compositional analysis of Cézanne. Similarly, Warhol’s *Brillo Box* transfigures a commercialised objective reality – its ‘brash metaphor’ bringing to consciousness the structures of an artwork which require an engagement with the forms of contemporary (mass) culture. Pop artists, as artists have always been, are a sum of expressive systems: that is their style. Danto sees Warhol’s work as both ‘externaliz[ing] a way of viewing the world’ and expressing ‘the interior of a cultural period’.⁷⁰ If we imagine that the age of the individual brushstroke has been overthrown, (post)modern and conceptual art still retains for Danto its inevitable style.

Style and Reading

The disciplinary problem of style is not the same as the disciplinary practice of stylistics. Indeed, the latter may be hypothesized as an attempt to expunge, or at least re-set, the belletrism often associated with the former. The new stylistics of Roman Jakobson – distinct from that of

earlier philologists like Charles Bally and critics like Leo Spitzer – was an attempt to place the reading of literature on a more systematic footing. Drawing on Russian formalists and New Critics alike, Jakobson delivered a paper at the 1958 Indiana Conference which led to *Style in Language* (edited by Thomas Seboek), a book which Graham Hough acknowledges in *Style and Stylistics* (1969) has ‘a few articles of merit’ but also ‘contains more nauseous jargon than any similar work known to me’.⁷¹ This catches the tone of an ongoing debate, as does Stanley Fish’s ‘What is Stylistics and Why are they Saying Such Terrible Things About it?’, in which he argued that the study of style can have no rules if its conceived as a set of discovery procedures.⁷² Despite Fish’s essay being generously included in a *Stylistics Reader*, a sense remained that a methodological entry-permit was required: textual style as such should belong to applied linguistics and narratology.⁷³ The long-running journal *Style*, for example, holds together narrative theory, narratology, discourse analysis, models of communication and cognition, and discussions of rhetoric, fictionality and characterology. Space is sometimes made for orthodox ‘literary criticism’ but the dominant mode has been narrative analysis supported by the vocabulary of structuralist linguistics. The invoking of style in *Style* now seems to be quite scarce. Discrete stylistic choices tend not to be considered in relation to the wider social, cultural, sartorial or corporeal theorising of style.

Another way of narrating this history would be to say that an attempt to protect literary studies from its susceptibility to the mystique of genius and bourgeois charisma has symptomatically underestimated the unruly pleasures which have always constituted the literary field. Indeed, it might well be that style is not so imperilled by bourgeois self-possession as we often, rather grandiosely, like to think. As Trevor Ross has argued, for example, individual style emerged, in the eighteenth century – in advance of Flaubertian modernism – as a move towards democratic literacy. The corresponding shift from literary eloquence into ‘plainness’ developed through an interestingly unstable relation with the history of property rights. Copyright in the late eighteenth century did *not* protect writing style; in the words of one contemporary author, ‘meer pleasure is not the object of the legislature’.⁷⁴ Style designated individual difference – here as a locus of pleasure – but this did not assume property. As Ross explains it, authorial difference was not deemed alienable to the same degree as original content; one could mimic the accident of someone else’s style without finally expropriating it. In this reading, style is generative within, rather than symptomatic of, the dominant legal structures of bourgeois modernity.

Because it emerged through a philosophy of democratic plainness (the plainness co-opted by the U-speech of twentieth-century English aristocrats), modern style marked both the confounding of social distinction and the assertion of individual difference. Such a literary and social enigma was also a hermeneutic problem. As Frances Ferguson recounts it, drawing on Rancière's work, a modern discourse of style meant no longer taxonomizing literature (good/bad; high/low) and instead inaugurated a critical labour of transcoding the reticent text into direct speech – *what does it say; and what is new or different about it?*⁷⁵ Confronted with modern style, the critic was newly compelled to articulate on the text's behalf, expanding the work of philology to include consideration of what wasn't written down. This discourse of style, identifying texts which do not say what they mean but which demand a plethora of critical articulations, demands a significantly different interpretative mode from modern stylistics.

In recent years movements towards affect, queer formalism, and revenant psychotherapeutic modes of thinking have shifted some of the critical focus away from articulating the historical conditions of textual production towards the affordances of literary works at the point of their reception. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential distinction between paranoid and reparative reading, the paranoid character of intellectual performance is explicitly tied to an essay on style: Richard Hofstadter's 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics'.⁷⁶ Hofstadter's identification of a particular style of mind in 1960s America was concerned to adapt to political sociology the methods of art history: 'a distorted style [of thinking] is then, a possible signal that may alert us to a distorted judgment, just as in art an ugly style is a cure to fundamental defects of taste'.⁷⁷ Thinking about style allows Hofstadter to displace the question of veracity onto the question of receptivity, 'the way in which ideas are believed and advocated'. Paranoia is a disorder of truth; it is not simply that one truth can obscure another but that all truths have an unsettled temporality manifest through the difficulty of their conveyance in language. It might be said that Hofstadter is also discerning within the paranoid style a fundamental lack of style: the paranoid spokesperson, he tells us, tends towards witless repetition, pedantry and the invigilation of the sex lives of other people. It is this hygienic separation of himself from the cultivators of paranoia which leads Sedgwick to label Hofstadter a complacent de-mystifier – a centrist with the good taste to know better than to be a prude.

Yet Sedgwick detects the politics of cold war America in the academic study of literature, especially through the 'strong' theories of literary history, which are characteristically defended, suspicious, and reliant on spotting the 'telling details'. It is not that the strong theorists are wrong, rather that they perform a discourse of knowledge characterized

by the failure to be surprised. ‘Of course’, ‘doubtless’, ‘needless to say’ are frigid relics of a paranoid style, exuding the temporality of a knowledge economy that does not want to be surprised. They also present as tics of prohibition which render ‘inadmissible’ reparative motives ‘because they are about pleasure (merely aesthetic) and because they are frankly ameliorative (merely reformist)’.⁷⁸ The weakening of theory associated with Sedgwick can arguably be read as a reacquaintance with style through slow, imaginative close readings (though it must make sure to avoid backsliding into Hofstadter’s common-sense centrism). Sedgwick’s work is also a re-temporalizing of literary criticism, strategically confusing the terms of production and reception. Whereas theoretical emphases upon the historical conditions of literary production tend to assume an institutional theatre of exposition, more reparative and therapeutic approaches to language and its transferential pleasures discern in such theatrical unveilings of ideology an absurdly repetitious quality.

It is striking in this context that for Rita Felski, prominently associated with the contemporary turn to post-critique, style is a question of interpretation more than of creative writing.⁷⁹ Though underpinned by Actor Network Theory and Gadamerian hermeneutics, Felski’s readings are strategically weak, forgoing the temptation to explain theoretical perspectives in order to dwell on the textures of response. She attaches ‘memoirs, novels and first-person essays’ to privilege readerly conviviality over the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’.⁸⁰ Certainly, Felski can seem less harassed by the possibility of deception than critics working through other, more *gauchist* interpretative paradigms. This might suggest a critic less concerned with the ideological implications of her work, but it also demonstrates a less heroic mode of reading, one not dependent on transgression and cover-up, and a less fraught hermeneutic overall. Indeed, it may be because her reading does not depend on cover-up that Felski can be indiscreet about her reading pleasure.

Reading for pleasure without the seduction of another scene – ideological or sexual – can be said to have a *whatever* quality, leading to what Sianne Ngai calls, after German romantic Friedrich Schlegel, the ‘merely interesting’ (a re-inflection of Kantian disinterest). Entering into critical dialogue with Jameson’s claim that style ‘can no longer be a legitimate way of doing history’ (29), Ngai argues that stylistic variety *is* the contemporary style.⁸¹ Stylistic proliferation (a multitude of styles none of which are stabilized within historical periods or geopolitical sites) focuses a reckoning with style as the variable element of any artwork – any element of a work which interests us signals its style. Again, it is the weakness of this claim which is key. Although Ngai’s project aligns with Jameson’s critical vocabulary,

she is concerned to read the persistence of the ‘merely interesting’ as historically meaningful – even if one of the things this vernacular aesthetic points to is uncertainty about the significance of any particular style. Being *merely* interested shares a heritage with modern style’s original ‘plainness’ (Ross) and ordinary democratic character. And it also contains the seed of an admission: to be interested is, at some level, to choose: ‘in a sea of stylistic variety the act of choosing becomes more important than ever’.⁸² The viewer or reader marks a point of difference when they choose. But they also declare an interest and become vulnerable as a result. Style wrested from the context of production emerges as a surprising vulnerability in the act of reading.

Style and Shame

Historically, the terms style and shame have been connected in interdependent, often gendered opposition.⁸³ Despite a pre-Romantic-era association with decorative femininity, style exhibits, etymologically, and according to authorial associations, a masculinist attitude: *stūlos* in Greek meaning pillar or column (verticality); *stiletto* in Italian, the rapier, knife or blade. On the other hand, shame is more likely to be feminised: in the Freudian hypothesis, it is attributable to genital deficiency.⁸⁴ If only men are truly capable of being shameless, as Freud surmised, is this to say that only men are capable of being stylists? Unlikely! Indeed, the way in which style and shame mirror each other in the modern period reminds us that style is never free of pathology, and the question of style (and stylelessness) always intersects with questions of gender performance and corporeality.

Let’s take for our example, Flaubert’s well-known 1852 letter to Louise Colet in which he dreams of a book ‘held together by the strength of its style [...] a book which would have almost no subject’.⁸⁵ This fantasy book ‘dependent on nothing external’ is not far off the activated gesture of self-sufficiency which mid-twentieth-century psychologist Silvan Tompkins says accompanies the shame affect: ‘The innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest or joy’.⁸⁶ Both Flaubert and Tompkins describe self-involving gestures which, in spite of themselves, through the power of their self-reflective negativity, relate to the world, presenting themselves obliquely for the other’s apprehension. This is why Flaubert’s ‘almost’ is so necessary: it is his failure to purify his language which means it gets read, and which also means that style and shame come into contact, or even combine.

D.A. Miller brilliantly exploits this ‘incomplete reduction’ in his virtuosic reading of Jane Austen’s style. To Miller, Austen’s style stands for an absolute impersonality, a godlike and dematerialised voice which appears as if from nowhere. This is offset by her protagonists, such as Elizabeth and Emma, who trade style for their marriage settlements. Miller’s is a work of auto-theory in so far as his topic of the effeminacy of style and ‘the shame that style at once incurs and inflicts’ is both bio- and bibliographic.⁸⁷ Aligning Austen’s impersonality with a secret, queer style, leads him to focus on Elinor’s censure of ‘unheterosexual’ Robert Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*. Ferrars stares broadly at the Dashwood sisters in the jewellery shop while also taking a fussy interest in tooth-pick cases. Miller detects something *de trop* in this passage. Austen’s style is momentarily positivised through an identification, her envy half-declared, figuring the shame (incomplete reduction of interest) that inevitably transforms the relation between reader and writer. It is important, suggests Miller, that Austen hates her style as an ‘arch mode of abjection’ vexatiously bound up, at least transiently, with the male entitlement of Ferrars’s carefree effeminacy – a phenomenon she cannot only disdain. Austen’s interest is piqued and this further provokes her stylistic asperities.⁸⁸

Though style suggests such a relation of interest between writer and reader, it is under no obligation to be relatable, as anyone taken hostage by Karl Ove Knausgaard’s personal itemisations in *My Struggle* can attest. The final volume (over 1000 pages) tests the principle of the ‘merely interesting’ to the point of breaking. ‘I would have to write beginnings and endings, bridges and transitions, move and delete sections, but that wouldn’t be hard’.⁸⁹ Knausgaard’s slapdash style derives from his loss of faith in literature, declared in the early volumes through a Felski-like preference for ‘diaries and essays, the types of literature that did not deal with narrative, that were not about anything, but just consisted of a voice, the voice of your own personality, a life, a face, a gaze you could meet.’⁹⁰ The rejection at the heart of Flaubert’s ambition for style is recast here as a nauseated production of selfhood. We might term Knausgaard’s an anti-style: replacing the refinement of matter with vulgarity; originality through revision with repetition; the completed artwork with the open-ended banality of the series. And yet both Flaubert’s style and Knausgaard’s shame privilege a narcissistically mediated relation to the historical world. In both cases the *almost* nothing, that which resists being only nothing, offers an indirect communication to the world.

Lifestyle

The ethics of style draws the reader to a life that is in retreat from the work, leaving them at risk of being humiliated by their interest, perennially exposed to the fake even as they search for signs of authentication and necessity. This is a dilemma encoded in the word ‘lifestyle’. Though the term may yet conjure a Nietzschean integration of letters with life, it is more likely these days to designate a consumerist fantasy of choice and the reproduction of social value through symbolic capital. And yet, if the ‘merely interesting’ in Ngai’s understanding draws attention to the importance of choosing from a variety of ‘whatever styles’, it also attempts to retrieve the contemporary lifestyle vernacular from its pejorative characterization as commodity fetishism.

An antecedent work here is Dick Hebdige’s 1979 *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, which treats style as a youth-culture phenomenon, deriving its inspiration from the ‘against nature’ ethos of literary decadence. Style for Hebdige is a breakdown of generational communication manifested through gesture and dress. It is an attitude withheld from technical accomplishment, whose destabilizing force within the social order embodies a ‘counter hegemonic’ commitment to enacting difference.⁹¹ Admittedly, this can seem like a naïve conception, forever vulnerable to incorporation within an economy of exchangeable cultural images, as well as enduringly reliant upon a caste of interpreters, like Hebdige himself, to transcode attitude and gesture back into meaningful speech. Yet Hebdige advocates for the impurity of subcultural styles – mods, punks, Rastas etc. – insisting that what different subcultures are said to represent remains to be subverted by the precarity of the materials they use. So, the low production values of the punk manifesto issues in the late 70s, ‘their typing errors and grammatical mistakes,’ remind us that their meaning is as ‘memos from the front line’, monuments of ‘indecent haste’.⁹² Punk models style as a kind of formal distress, continuous in this fashion with Joyce’s characterisation of his misprints as ‘beauties of my style hitherto undreamt of’.⁹³ Hebdige also points out overdetermined objects, most specifically a tube of vaseline in Genet’s *The Thief’s Journal* which proclaims ‘[the author’s] homosexuality to the world’. For Hebdige such ‘tokens of self-imposed exile’ are central to the dissonances of style.⁹⁴ The object is more than symbolic property. It designates the value of a pleasure subversive to the economy regulated by the police, just like the punk’s pin, or the mod’s painted shoe – or even Robert Ferrars’s toothpick cases. Equally, the tube of Vaseline in Genet recalls the object-world of *Madame Bovary*, the various fetishes which allow Flaubert to reflect the fundamental reticence of his characters, such as Charles’s cap and riding whip. The important

difference is that for Flaubert the displacement of erotic investment, through various objects that speak on the characters' behalf, is tragically ironic. The transgressive promise of adultery is rendered as empty and banal as marriage itself.⁹⁵ For Hebdige, and much contemporary queer scholarship that follows, the displacement of interest through various objects, gestures, and forms of material distress, represents a non-tragic affirmation.

Towards the end of *Subculture*, Hebdige encounters a significant problem which resonates powerfully today. He wonders if his study, based mainly on white working-class youth, applies equally to Black Britain. Could the impure, intermittent manifestations of subcultural style cross over to a community 'formed in centuries of the most naked oppression imaginable?'⁹⁶ Allowing that the generations align and intersect differently in black communities, and therefore that styles of subversion and sites of erotic transfer are bound to be different too, Hebdige remains optimistically integrationist. Yet, his question returns in different ways today: how do explicitly racialised imaginaries intersect with the invisibility of narrative authority? For example, is Barthes's *écriture blanche* in fact a practice of cultural whiteness austere holding onto the power of representing the other? Or might we more productively recall the Bakhtinian truth that literary style, whatever its apparent impersonality, cannot escape utterance – its half-life an unbidden confession that, even when it doesn't enter direct speech, communicates a particularising necessity? In this latter sense, though it appears as a symbolic choice, style marks a linguistic surplus, an unincorporated something – a necessity, most often dramatized as carnal.

Admittedly, the historical association of embodiment and style, from Schopenhauer to de Gourmont and Proust, implies terms of difference endowed with a measure of personality. It is precisely this aspect of personification which the racial schemas described by Franz Fanon, Hortense J. Spillers and others withhold from the black body. Performative control of self-presentation is prescribed by racist ontology.⁹⁷ This means the racialised writer is subject to a doubled necessity: not only the fact of being a body that speaks (and writes), but a body overwritten in terms that prohibit speaking and writing except in the most predictable ways. It is by now a familiar source of indignation in postcolonial and critical race theory that black and Asiatic bodies functioned as fetish objects within the dominant white culture: these are racist objectifications which demand an overt political response. Yet despite a profound and understandable suspicion of style emerging out of this painful history, some scholars have retained the term's significance, using it to mark a space of contestation which pre-exists the force of political declaration, and which potentially outlasts it. Monica L. Miller narrates a

history of black dandyism, for example, describing a connection between the idiosyncratic pathologies of nineteenth-century style discourse and the dehumanising legacies of slavery; while Anne Anlin Cheng, in the context of orientalism and Asiatic femininity, poses the provocative question: ‘what does it mean to live as an object?’⁹⁸ In other words, what does it mean to live beneath agency, without the resources of political articulation? There are aesthetic modes of survival, suggests Cheng, operating within regimes of objectification, which use style and ornament to challenge the hierarchies of the dominant culture, redrawing the line between human and nonhuman, personified and non-personified life.

Understanding in this context how symbolic difference (and originality) interact with material necessity requires that we engage with that messy space between the literary and the extra-literary. We must also acknowledge, however, that there is seldom a straightforward correspondence between bodies, their material conditions and writing style. Take this instructive passage from Irish Republican Bobby Sands’s prison diary: ‘Naked, I rose. [...] The stench of excreta and urine was heavy and lingering, I lifted the small water container from amongst the rubbish and challenged an early morning drink in a vain effort to remove the foul taste in my throat’.⁹⁹ It is likely that Sands was surrounded by shit when he wrote the word ‘excreta’. He wrote much of his diary on toilet paper in the midst of a dirty protest. But does this obvious hankering after the dignity of ‘literature’, a combination of poeticism and euphemism, mean only that his work lacks style? Or does style remain legible in the rumour of the distressed material, which persists beneath his pretence at lapidariness – a discernible brittleness that in retrospect can only indicate the author’s own body which would go on to die on hunger strike? In many ways, Sand’s mannered prose is the opposite of the middle-class academic’s visceral poetics written out on a MacBook Air. The discrepancy reminds us that there will be no easy equivalence between literary experimentation and political subversion, nor correspondence between lived experience and a given style.

Indeed, style seems most consistently to attest to the difficulty of establishing a stable correspondence between life and literature. We shall end our introduction by emphasising this difficulty. Often, for instance, amidst processes of social and symbolic valorisation of particular linguistic expressions, a concern for style leads the literary critic to the material obduracy of a word fallen beneath symbolic meaning. We encounter this *fall* in the mistake, which the distressed symbolism of punk shares with the modernism of Joyce. We encounter it too in the critical practice of molecular close reading when texts are broken down into ever smaller units

of significance – sentences, words, letters – until finally it seems as if the critic’s subjective preferences are the only means of preserving coherence.

In 2019 the novelist Garth Greenwell wrote the following in a tweet:

often enough a writer makes explicit the gender ideology lurking behind strictures about style. When Vonnegut calls semi-colons “transvestite hermaphrodites,” for instance, I think: What an asshole; also, What a beautiful description of their queer unsettling force.¹⁰⁰

That the most elementary and arbitrary sound, pause or diacritic can be given symbolic value testifies to the investments of style. But it also reveals style as pressed up against what is outside meaning. This is a linguistic predicament made most conspicuous through the discourse of psychosis. The artists and writers described by Annie G. Rogers in her Lacanian study, including Robert Walser, Emily Dickinson and Joyce, are afflicted by language as ‘strange and disturbing, imposed at the place where there is nothing’ – this is language charged with ‘significant nonsense’.¹⁰¹ Such ‘outsider artists’, says Rogers, are not engaged in making art or literature; nor do they find words to best represent life experiences. Language, rather, is the very place of experience. Their writing is an urgent, ongoing and inscriptive task of accommodation, their stylistic choices revealing a necessary means of holding bodies and lives together, of forestalling a shattering *jouissance*. They are ‘creating new bodies in language’.¹⁰² As for Greenwell’s affection for the semi-colon: in one sense this is a choice, his useful metaphor for sexual fluidity or ambiguous embodiment, and a way of arguing against Vonnegut’s obvious repulsion – ‘Sam’ in Beckett’s *Watt*, too: ‘How hideous is the semi-colon’.¹⁰³ But it also indicates a non-exchangeable necessity, a material fact that isn’t up for debate with any other writer, and which presents itself ineluctably for identification. The semi-colon *really* matters. This perhaps more than anything else is what modern style discourse, in its historical association with literary modernism and the difficulty of language, makes plain: style is a means of living in proximity to the unbearable.

¹Brandon Taylor, 'Prophets', *Joyland* No.4 (April 2021). Accessed on 3/4/2021 < <https://joylandmagazine.com/fiction/prophets/> > On the importance of Iowa as creative writing school and institutional site for the production of literary style, see Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

² See Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitanism and Style* (Columbia University Press, 2007); Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), Monica L. Miller, *Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke, 2009), Ben Hutchinson, *Modernism and Style* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Mario Aquilina, *The Event of Style in Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014); Jeff Dolven, *Senses of Style: Poetry before Interpretation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Daniel Hartley, *The Politics of Style: Towards a Marxist Poetics* (Leiden: Brill 2017); Riley, Denise, 'On the Lapidary Style' in *Differences* 28:1 (2017) 17-36; Jean-Jacques Lecercle, 'Three Accounts of Literary Style', *CR: The New Centennial Review* 16 (3): 151-172.

³ Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p.9. Said is quoting Adorno on late Beethoven.

⁴ Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles (eds), *Late Style and its Discontents: Essays in Art, Literature, and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵ See, McMullan and Smiles, p.13.

⁶ Jeff Dolven has discussed the *problem of style* as topos and recurring title and how it tends to express style in terms of freedom or boundedness. *Senses of Style*, p.57.

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⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *On Style. The Art of the Writer: Essays, Excerpts, and Translations*, ed. and trans. Lane Cooper (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1952); Walter Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p.197, p.210.

⁹ De Gourmont, np.

¹⁰ Georg Simmel, 'The Problem of Style', in *Theory, Culture, Society* 8:63 (1991) 63-71, pp.66-7.

¹¹ Alois Riegl, *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament*, trans. Evelyn Kain (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2018).

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¹⁴ Murry, p.70.

¹⁵ Murry, p.85.

¹⁶ J.V. Cunningham (ed.), *The Problem of Style* (New York, NY: Fawcett, 1966), p.13.

¹⁷ Cunningham, p.280.

¹⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London and New York: Routledge, 1981), pp.194-270.

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²⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p.17.

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