

STYLE. *Style* is the way something is done or made: not the what, but the how; not the method, but the manner. This rudimentary definition has been current for millennia, but the word commands interest not least for its contradictions. It has been used to define the distinctive voice of an individual and also the common features that identify the works of particular places, times, groups, or schools; for the holistic charisma of first impressions and the scrupling analyses of stylistics; for the highest artistic achievement (having a style) and the season's passing fashions. That range is a challenge for theory and suggests (as such contradictions do) how much cultural work *style* does, defining how we recognize likeness and difference, community and individuality, present and past in our works and in one another.

In the Western trad., style was treated first as a department of rhet. *Style* for Aristotle consists of those aspects of lang.—*syntax, *diction, *figuration—that can be adapted to suit a persuasive occasion. He bequeathed this emphasis on decorum to Cicero, whose *Orator* codifies the flexibility of style in three *genera dicendi*, or kinds of speech: high, middle, and low. The high style, “forceful, versatile, copious and grave,” suits affairs of state; the low, “refined, concise [and] stripped of ornament,” is “clear rather than impressive” and serves for explanation and familiar talk. The middle is a compromise (never as clearly defined as its neighbors, in Cicero or in the trad. that followed him). This tripartite scheme offers a set of rhetorical strategies that may be taught to anyone, and though variations were proposed (like Hermogenes's 2d-c. *Seven Types of Style*), it remained central to rhetorical instruction through the Middle Ages and into the Ren. Its flexibility encourages a conceptual distinction between manner and matter, as though a single subject could be dressed (a common metaphor) in a variety of styles. Similarly persistent was the promise of a normative or best style: Cicero himself held that role for many Ren. humanists, and it was the characteristic aim of 18th-c. rhetorical manuals.

Cicero might also be said to be the source of a rival strand of the trad. His *De Oratore*, written ten years before the *Orator*, asks, “Do you not expect that we shall find almost as many styles of oratory as orators?” Here is style as the mark of an individual, a signature (to take up the metaphor implicit in the Latin *stilus*, or pen). The idea of individual style, cultivated or innate, was a persistent undercurrent in Eur. letters through the 18th c. and became a critical preoccupation in the 19th. Style simultaneously developed into a central category for historical understanding. Ren. *historicism arguably began in the recognition of stylistic difference, as eds. of cl. texts learned to date them (and to unmask forgeries) by changes in lang. over time. Art historians of the 18th and 19th cs. elaborated taxonomies of style to define periods and schools. Indeed, style, understood as the recognition of origins, might be said to be the most vivid way that historical stratification is present in daily life (Ginzburg): we are surrounded by things that look like the time and place they were made or pretend to have been made.

In the 20th c., ling. and technology transformed the study of style for literary analysis. The revolution of Noam Chomsky's generative grammar gave rise to a subdiscipline of stylistics that considers stylistic variation in relation to deep structure. Computers permitted ambitious statistical portraits of texts, providing evidence for dating and even attribution to individuals. In breaking texts down into features (like relative letter frequency) that no reader could be expected to notice, much less quantify, computer-assisted stylometrics has moved far away from the immediate power of style. That extension from total impression to incidental, telltale element has been a provocation to theorists, and philosophical thinking of the last 50 years has centered around a few recurring questions. Do texts, objects, or people have specifically stylistic features? This question is a version of the matter and manner problem: can we separate the subject of a poem, say, or its form, from what defines its style? Mod. opinion has tended to reject any a priori distinction—saying in advance what features of a text can and cannot count as stylistic—but there have been many attempts to set criteria. Stylistic features may be those, e.g., that express or solicit an affective response (Bally) or that express the psychology of the maker (Wollheim, Gilmore) or that convey the way something was made (Walton). Another common question is whether style requires a choice among possible alternatives. Would style be intelligible if there were only one style; is having a style necessarily a conscious choice? Other theorists have treated stylistic difference as the deviation from a norm, so that style, choice or no, is necessarily supplementary to the usual or the merely useful (Barthes, Todorov). The unity of style has attracted comment, too, much of it engaging the work of Spitzer. If a novel has a style, is that style necessarily present in each of its details? Is unity—which the critic discovers by traveling Spitzer's hermeneutic circle, moving from detail to whole and around again—the criterion of style?

Such theoretical questions coexist with a popular conversation about style that makes its social aspects particularly obvious. Style defines communities of people who dress similarly and read similar books, as well as communities that make similar poems. Having a style affords all of them a certain ease or at least a way of knowing what to do or how to do it. That goes for membership in a group as well as for individual style, insofar as a poet with a recognizable style can be said to imitate him- or herself. (The word's adaptability both to singling out and to collecting allows for delicate calibrations of affiliation and independence, in art and life.) In a social context, it becomes clear that the affiliations we perceive when we recognize a style are more than merely formal. We also register something like charisma: style impresses us when we see not only a way of proceeding but how someone might want to act or dress or make that way (whether we ourselves would want to or not). Much of our life with works of art involves such negotiations of imitative desire, as we map the stylistic variety of our world, its communities

2 STYLE

and its hist., and define the boundaries of *taste within which we will live.

For all this attention and interest, the concept of style, still vital in art hist. and musicology, has been relatively peripheral to lit. crit. of the last 50 years. The *New Criticism often treated stylistic description as a distraction from the interpretive challenges of the particular text. Neither *poststructuralism nor historicism found terms for reviving its currency. But the bearing toward the world that style names is perdurably important to literary experience, and reading for the style—for who wrote the text, where it comes from, but also for what the writer's life might be like and what it might offer our own—is arguably far more widespread than formal *interpretation. Style has great promise for contemp. crit. as a neglected connection among form, society, and hist.

See ESTILISTICA.

■ W. Pater, "Style," *Appreciations* (1889); L. Spitzer, *Linguistics and Literary History* (1948); C. Bally, *Traité*

de Stylistique Française (1951); S. Ullman, *Language and Style* (1964); S. Sontag, "On Style," *Against Interpretation* (1966); E. Gombrich, "Style," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1968); G. Hough, *Style and Stylistics* (1969); *Literary Style: A Symposium*, ed. S. Chatman (1971)—see esp. R. Barthes, "Style and Its Image," and T. Todorov, "The Place of Style in the Structure of the Text"; R. Lanham, *Style: An Anti-Textbook* (1974); N. Goodman, "The Status of Style," *CritI1* (1975); D. Russell, "Theories of Style," *Criticism in Antiquity* (1981); W. Sauerländer, "From Stilus to Style," *Art History* 6 (1983); *The Concept of Style*, ed. B. Lang, rev. ed. (1987)—see esp. K. Walton, "Style and the Products and Processes of Art," and R. Wollheim, "Pictorial Style: Two Views"; G. Genette, *Fiction and Diction* (1993); C. Ginzburg, "Style as Inclusion, Style as Exclusion," *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, ed. P. Gallison and C. A. Jones (1998); J. Gilmore, *The Life of a Style* (2000).

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