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The politics of style: staying alive

Abstract

For the poet style is a matter of life and death. Far from being an adornment to an artefact, style is central to what is communicated by a poet. Aristotle identified the two tendencies in style, that towards a language of the people, and that towards an exotic, metaphoric language. The aims of these extremes of style, he suggested, are in turn clarity and dignity. There is a continuing politics and a continuing war between writers committed to one or the other extreme of style in literature. William Carlos Williams and TS Eliot were in opposite camps when it came to a stand on style. Annie Dillard and more lately James Wood continue the debate in their essays on style in prose fiction. William Gass and Raymond Carver provide examples of commitment to one or the other mode. Putting aside the debate over which camp a writer might belong in, I pursue the question of what might make a style 'work' or not work. Adapting ideas expressed by Christopher Alexander in his 1979 architectural study of the 'timeless' way of building, I propose that beyond the politics of style there is the question of whether one's style is 'alive' - and that this question is, for poets, at the centre of what they are communicating, and whether they can live as writers. I offer examples of writers from the absurdist Russian movement of the 1930s and from the romantic poet, Heinrich von Kleist who wrote an unfinished essay on 'The Gradual Production of Thoughts while Speaking'. Style, in this view, is not only a central element of communication but as a living and lived expression it must always itself be unfinished.

In the long winter nights, a farmer's dreams are narrow.
Over and over, he enters the furrow.
(Robert Hass, 2007)

Today I wrote nothing. Doesn't matter.
(Daniil Kharmis, 9 January 1937)

(to be continued)
(Heinrich von Kleist, 1804)

Good poetry respects the ethos
of the team & is blindly loyal &
has good taste. Good poetry would never
insult your mother & goes out of its way
not to be too smart or too wild, although
sometimes it has a drink, even two,
on a Saturday night. It never throws up
on your sofa.
(Chris Mansell, 2000)

Aristotle proposed in the *Poetics* that the two aims of style in poetry are clarity and dignity. Clarity, he suggested, comes from the use of the ordinary language of ordinary people, and dignity from the use of the exotic, metaphoric, and rhythmic in ways that cannot be achieved by ordinary words in their ordinary order (Aristotle [Bekker 58b] 1996: 36-37). Aristotle did not value one aim above the other, but threw the responsibility for whatever mix is achieved on the poet's natural talent, for this, he said, cannot be taught.

Aristotle's treatment of the choices or extremes of style continues to shape discussion and debate. The aims of style so neatly proffered, clarity and dignity, are however altogether too good-mannered and too limited to encompass what we could understand as style for the contemporary poet or artist. I want to pursue the idea here that far from being an ornament or enhancement to communication, style is inseparable from communication - that it is itself deeply communicative - when we understand communication to be not just the passing on of a message, but an emerging and developing encounter between alive human beings.

As writers we seek to establish for ourselves a style as a kind of signature. But this will always be too limited an aim: it is never the style itself that matters, for at this level style becomes confused with fashion; what matters is whether we can find a style that works. And what it might mean for a style to 'work' is a question I aim to worry at for the length of this essay. Pursuing a style we often do resort to rules and guides. In her influential 1982 essay on prose styles, Annie Dillard distinguishes what she calls the plain style from the fancy style among contemporary writers of fiction. In thus adopting similar divisions to Aristotle's, the limitations of this way of discussing style soon emerge.

Dillard identifies the 'fine writing' that came into its own with the modernists James, Proust, Faulkner, Beckett, Woolf, Kafka and Joyce. Fine writing is complex, grand, energetic, courageous and often opaque. This strand has developed a characteristic mode in high postmodernism. William Gass provides an example in a passage from his 1981 re-written version of *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*. Gass was educated in philosophy, and in an introduction to his work in the 1998 *Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Fiction* he is quoted as saying, 'When I'm writing fiction it's very intuitive, so that what happens or what I do, or how it gets organized, is pretty much a process of discovery, not a process of using some doctrine that you can somehow fit everything into' (1998: 66). This does not mean he has avoided making choices about style, nor does it mean he hasn't carefully re-worked his prose at some stage in the writing, but it does suggest that the questions raised by style are answered on-the-run as it were; they are part of a process, not aspects of an artefact.

Education

Buses like great orange animals move through the early light to school. There the children will be taught to read and warned against Communism by Miss Janet Jakes. That's not her name. Her name is Helen something - Scott or James. A teacher twenty years. She's now worn fine and smooth, and has a cough. For she screams abuse. The children stare, their faces blank. This is the thirteenth week. They are used to it. You will all, she shouts, you will all draw a picture of me. No. She is a Mrs. - someone's missus. And in silence they set to work while Miss Jakes jabs hairpins in her hair. Wilfred says an axe, but she has those rimless tinted glasses, graying hair, an almost

dimpled chin. I must concentrate. I must stop making up things. I must give myself to life; let it mold me: that's what they say in Wisdom's Monthly Digest every day. Enough, enough - you've been at it long enough; and the children rise formally a row at a time to present their work to her desk. No, she wears rims: it's her chin that's dimple-less. Well, it will take more than a tablespoon of features to sweeten that face. So she grimly shuffles their sheets ... There go her eyes; the pink in her glasses brightens, dims. She is a pumpkin, and her rage is breathing like the candle in. No, she shouts, no - the cartoon trembling - no, John Mauck, John Stewart Mauck, this will not do. The picture flutters from her fingers. You've made me too muscular. (Gass 1998: 74)

The intrusion of a writer-narrator, the literary self-consciousness, the foregrounding of the artifice in fiction, the intrusion of the surreal, the love (and the parody) of detail over character, the movement forward in the text by poetics of association, are all typical of this elaborately exotic postmodern style. The prose becomes more real than the world being described. And yet Miss (Mrs?) Jakes does come alive in this passage as vividly as any character in Dickens. This prose can be irritatingly attention-grabbing, though it can also offer the reader the pleasures of an extended fireworks display and the kind of vividness to which that so-called realism in fiction aspires.

Other modernist and contemporary writers have rejected such baroque forms of writing. Among these are Chekhov, Flaubert, Borges, Hemingway, Carver, Eudora Welty, Henry Green, and more lately Richard Ford. Here is the way Dillard describes such writing:

This prose is, above all, clean. It is sparing in its use of adjectives and adverbs; it avoids relative clauses and fancy punctuation; it forswears exotic lexicons and attention-getting verbs; it eschews splendid metaphors and cultured allusions. Instead, it follows the dictum of William Carlos Williams: no ideas but in things. (Dillard 1982: 116)

An example might be the opening to Raymond Carver's story, 'A Small Good Thing':

Saturday afternoon she drove to the bakery in the shopping centre. After looking through a loose-leaf binder with photographs of cakes taped onto the pages, she ordered chocolate, the child's favourite. The cake she chose was decorated with a space ship and launching pad under a sprinkling of white stars, and a planet made of red frosting at the other end. His name, SCOTTY, would be in green letters beneath the planet. The baker, who was an older man with a thick neck, listened without saying anything when she told him the child would be eight years old next Monday. The baker wore a white apron that looked like a smock. Straps cut under his arms, went around in back and then to the front again, where they were secured under his heavy waist. He wiped his hands on his apron as he listened to her. He kept his eyes down on the photographs and let her talk. He let her take her time. He'd just come to work and he'd be there all night, baking, and he was in no real hurry. (Carver 1983: 331)

This writing is relaxed, sure of itself. It seems not to have tricks, or at least trickiness. It moves with such empathy for its subject that the characters themselves seem to infect the prose as it moves along. The attention to images made in icing, for instance, is a mother's attention. The repetition of 'apron' reinforces the salience of this detail, for he is the baker his apron makes him. The final, colloquial phrase, 'in no real hurry' seems to arise from the baker himself as the kind of language he might use. These people, the prose tells us, are genuine in their way, and utterly ordinary.

Plain prose, Dillard observes, comes into its own when extreme emotions are being handled or evoked, for it avoids the over-written. It is, she notes, a way of playing safe. In submitting to the world instead of overpowering it, there is a modesty and humility to plain prose, qualities that make it attractive to many readers. It can be precise and direct, though it can also be flat, banal and narrow in its range.

There has been a history of struggle and antipathy between these modes of writing, a struggle Aristotle glancingly refers to when he dismisses the poet, Arphrades (from whom no work has survived) for his single-minded commitment to ordinary speech. They are not simply choices in the abstract, or equally valid approaches to finding meaning in the world or in the patterns words can make. It seems that clarity can be at odds with dignity. Style embodies values, attitudes, loyalties and politics. In 1946, William Carlos Williams wrote of 'how diametrically I am opposed (in my work) to such a writer as Ezra Pound - whom I love and deeply admire' (cited Martz 1969: 145). Williams, like Aristotle and Dillard, identifies two kinds of writers. The first consists of those who 'think in terms of the direct descent of great minds', those who find in literature a 'mind to mind fertilisation'. These are the literary writers for whom style can be an elaborate, allusive and richly detailed process. Even when such writing asserts itself as original, it is only because it deviates from past models and past influences. Williams proposed there is another kind of literary source, one that develops 'from the present', where style can 'arise from the society about him of which he is a part' (cited Martz 1969: 145-46). Williams placed himself among those who listened to the present, and even transcribed it directly. Indeed, one of his short stories is titled 'Verbal transcription' (Martz 1969: 139).

The clarity of ordinary speech or the strangeness of an exotic imagination can be extreme political acts when bureaucrats, police and governments become concerned with the meaning of style. The modernist Russian poet Nikolai Oleinikov was put to death by firing squad for writing poems that seemed to the Stalinist authorities to be the poetry of their class enemies. One of these poems for which he was executed goes:

I was madly in love with a fly.
O friends, it was so long ago,
When I was happy and young,
When young and happy was I.

I would pick up a microscope,
Observing her studiously:
Her cheeks, her eyes, and her forehead -
And then I'd direct it at me!

And I saw that the two of us
Were complementary to no end,
That she was in love with me too,
My glittering, many-legged girlfriend ... (Oleinikov 2006: 199)

Some thought there was a coded meaning in such poems, there for the encouragement of terrorists. But mostly one suspects it was the frivolity, the embrace of pointlessness, the refusal to be both grand and submissive about high literature and its purposes that offended the government so deeply.

Still an intense debate continues. James Wood, for instance, the prominent British contemporary critic, has condemned the high stylists of postmodern fiction for their hysterical bent, their lack of interest in character and their eschewing of the modernist tradition of realism in his 2008 collection of essays, *How Fiction Works*. The work of Thomas Pynchon, for example, suffers from the weakness of being in love with 'rapid, farce-like, over simplicities ... his mockery of pedantry which is at the same time a love of pedantry ... his vaudevillian fondness for silly names, japes, mishaps, disguises, farcical errors and so on' (Wood 2008: 115). In this fiction, Wood writes, there is 'no real menace because no one really exists' (2008: 115).

Annie Dillard ends her essay with the observation that most writers fall somewhere between these extremes of choice, a territory where artifice and sincerity (dignity and clarity) seek a balance. But there is the fact that writers and artists do move towards extreme positions as they seek that distinctive and elusive aspect of communication: their own style.

The test of the success of a piece of writing cannot be how well the writer has found a balance between extremes or achieved both clarity and dignity but, I want to argue, how close what has been produced comes to a quality we could call *aliveness*. The balance to be sought, I would argue, is not between an elaborate and a plain style, but between a style that communicates tinglingly versus one that is so enclosed it dies before it begins to communicate with us.

To tease out the meaning of this quality of aliveness, I return to the question of communication as a process broader than language or linguistics. In the early nineteenth century a young soldier and poet, Heinrich von Kleist, wrote a small essay titled, 'On the Gradual Production of Thoughts whilst Speaking', where he suggested that if there is 'something you wish to know and by meditation you cannot find it, my [Kleist's] advice to you, my ingenious old friend, is: speak about it with the first acquaintance you encounter' (1997: 405). Your acquaintance does not even have to be intelligent, or interested, or offer you an opinion. We speak, von Kleist held, in order to instruct ourselves - to make clear what was dim in the workshop of the mind. Kleist's essay breaks off mid-point, with a final statement in brackets: 'to be continued', followed by an editor's footnote that tells us, 'No continuation has been found' (1997: 441).

In Kleist's version of communication, it is language that hurries thought forward into consciousness, and it is the presence of listeners that ensures language will say something with clarity and insight, and perhaps even solve a problem.

As poets and writers we know from experience that language can lead us when our minds are a blank or a muddle. If the aim of speaking (writing) is to communicate, then the paradoxical situation we find ourselves in is that it is often only through 'mindlessly' speaking (writing) that we can discover what it is we are capable of communicating. Clarity and dignity will always remain important elements but they are only won, in Kleist's version of thinking, by entering into a process that accepts uncertainty, ignorance and unpredictability: the indignity of confusion.

If language can be the prompter of thought, it is also more than that for the writer. It manifests a style - that way of being that includes voice, feel, texture,

a certain way of structuring, an artfulness, a rhythm. Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), the Russian linguist who could lecture in six languages ('unfortunately all of them Russian,' his colleagues used to say) spent many years scrutinising those linguistic patterns in poetry that contribute to its effects, but might not be noted consciously by a reader. 'He was fascinated [for instance] by the difficulty of separating a poet's life and work, not because the life explained the work but because the life was largely structured like another work' (Leitch 2001: 1257). Jakobson gave the concluding paper to a 1958 conference on style in language (published in 1960 as part of an anthology from the conference edited by Thomas Sebeok) where he proposed that every utterance is conveyed with some elements of style or poetics. And style deals with the question, 'What makes *this* a work of art?' In our case, 'What makes this written document a work of art?' Famously, Jakobson named six factors at work in any act of communication: the basic triad being addresser-message-addressee. The message in turn must have a shared context, it must operate through a code common to addresser and addressee, and finally there must be a mode of contact such as speech, signs, text, phone, video, public address system.

Jakobson suggested that when the set of the message focuses on the message for its own sake, then a *poetic* function comes into play. The palpability of words is then promoted, and the dichotomy between word-as-sound and object-in-the-world is at its widest. To misquote, slightly, the poet Paul Valéry (1871-1945), style in language is a 'sustained hesitation between the sound and the sense' (Leitch 2001: 1256) - and this phrase itself in English translation manages to give us a memorably sustained sense of language as noises with their own rhythms that somehow contribute to the experience of communication.

Jakobson's model presumes there is a message against which the sensual qualities of language can act as an aesthetic counterpoint. Kleist's model of communication on the other hand suggests that the process can be more fluid and more muddled as communication emerges without the prior necessity of a message one intends to 'send'. Furthermore, where Jakobson's model separates meaning from the 'poetic', Kleist makes room for communication that gives equal weight to meaning and style (poetics), even allowing style to be the point of an act of communication - for style conveys information about attitude, choices, values, aesthetic models, immersion in the present moment, awareness of the past, and the presence of a vision. Once we focus on it, there can seem to be little else but style to each of us. We are all working at being works of art these days.

Jakobson's model comes close to delineating the communicative nature of style I am pointing to when he writes of those communications where the expressiveness of the speaker (addresser) is the point; then what he calls the 'emotive' function of a message becomes important. Jakobson described the experience of an actor in a workshop conducted by Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938). The actor was asked to devise forty different emotional situations where the expression 'this evening' might be used, and to perform each of these, making changes to the sound and shape of the phrase each time, in order to convey the different contexts and different meanings. More is always going on than the bare words would have us believe. And that more is central to what is communicated.

What does Robert Hass's two-line poem titled 'Iowa, January', quoted above, communicate beyond the 'meaning' of its words? How does it communicate? The long first line with the pause at the centre of it as if the line itself needs a rest before it reaches its own end brings with it a sense of burden, a suggestion of exhaustion; the final word, 'narrow' is unexpectedly physical, impersonal,

lacking the expected gesture towards psychology or emotions - though in its association to an image of a narrow bed there is an implied story of a life; then the second and final short line with its repetition of 'over' - what effect does this brief sentence have? - that is, what tone is created here? What I find is something like a shared despair between the implied speaker of the words and the farmer, something like aridity, something like the killing effect of a job too repetitious, both too large and too limited to offer the farmer more than this endless narrowness. It is not just about farming of course. The isolation of the poem on a page to itself, the long vowels of the 'o' sound repeated including the rhyme on '-ow', suggests nights and days repeated, and offers us the wider idea of the furrows as our own lives of 24-hour furrows. Furlongs. The wider, more ominous communication the poem seems to make is part of and also apart from its words. The words gather the sound of 'o' more insistently as they go, in a process that seems to build on itself, taking up what comes to hand as the words emerge from something vague that needs the clarity and *aliveness* offered by expression.

In 1979, in a book called *The Timeless Way of Building*, the American architect Christopher Alexander asked the question, what makes the difference between a piece of work that is good and a piece of work that is bad. He wanted to be able to distinguish between a good building and a bad building. One thing was clear, that you do not necessarily need an architect in order to create beautiful buildings or beautiful townships. And another thing was clear, that there is no single way to produce the beautiful. Nevertheless, 'at the core of all successful acts,' he wrote, '... and at the core of all successful processes of growth, even though there are a million different versions of these acts and processes, there is one fundamental invariant feature, which is responsible for their success' (Alexander 1979: 8).

This feature - this quality - Alexander insists, is ordinary and common though it is almost unnameable: 'The word which we most often use to talk about the quality without a name is the word *alive*' (1979: 29). We use this word in this way knowing that a living man can be lifeless and that nonliving things can be full of life. 'Beethoven's last quartets are alive; so are the waves at the ocean shore; ... a tiger may be more alive, because more in tune with its own inner forces, than a man' (1979: 29). The word is of course a metaphor, and this is where it fails to truly name the quality we are talking about - because you can only understand a metaphor (make the leap of understanding it requires) if you already comprehend the quality that it stands-in-for. Similarly, the words 'whole', 'comfortable', 'free', 'exact', 'ego-less', and 'timeless' go some way to describing this quality, but always fall short. The best Alexander can do at the end of a long discussion trying to get at the quality that makes some buildings 'good' and some 'bad' is to say, 'It is a slightly bitter quality' (1979: 40). For Alexander, a sense of mortality pervades this timelessness.

When Alexander asks what makes some cities, towns or local regions work as organic wholes, and what makes some chaotic on an inhuman scale - centres of deadness - he proposes again that expertise from designers is not the answer. How does an organism grow to be itself; does it have a plan tucked under its arm before it begins? All it has is DNA which is a series of small selections made at the minute level of protein molecules, 'almost random, sieved and harnessed, so that what they create is orderly, even though the product of confusion'. In just this way, those works of art that 'work' can be created as a 'history of happy accidents' (1979: 510). There is no way of knowing ahead of time what way these accidents will fall. By accidents, Alexander means decisions made without fully realising their implications, but made with an alertness to the opportunities these accidents open up. I wonder, did Robert Hass begin his small poem with the intention of ending on the word, 'furrow',

making him sieve through many alternative before he arrived at the interesting choice of 'narrow' for the first line's end-word, or was it the narrowness of the farmer's life that led Hass to the image of the furrow in the second line? - whichever it was, I expect it was this kind of opportunism, of letting one thing suggest another. It is a process that is unpredictable, for it draws its order from its surroundings.

Style then is what *will* happen if we write enough for long enough while remaining open to the unexpected. Style will happen because we do make choices, and those choices will cohere as a recognisable style partly because they express a personality and its set of values, partly because, as we keep writing and keep receiving feedback we gain the experience that makes our choices more of a whole, and most importantly it will be a living aspect of our work. Each writer's style will take to itself its own rules of thumb, and hopefully each style will remain open to the happy accidents that must be what gives creative work its aliveness. Just as Heinrich von Kleist believed that by merely speaking we uncover thoughts, by writing (with that balance between being active but also passively receptive to accidents and opportunities) style will emerge.

Kleist was drawn to an image that for him became an emblem. It is an image of communication, one so primal that the question of style might seem to be an artificial discussion in its light. On a journey by coach through the Alps in 1793 a man climbed stealthily on to the back of the cab in which Kleist, then sixteen years old, was a passenger. The coachman stood up on the box of the carriage and lashed the man repeatedly until he fell off:

Then in a terrible fashion the man began to scream. Imagine the mountains, us all alone in the middle of them where every sound is double, and the man screaming in that frightful fashion. It didn't seem like one voice, it seemed like 20 for the crying came back off every mountain twice as loud. The horses were frightened and bolted, and the coachman, still standing up on the box, fell down, the man continued roaring after us - until one of us caught the horses' reins. Now we drew our swords ... and asked him what exactly he wanted; but his only reply was screams, rage and noise. The coachman drove on fast and we could still hear the man shrieking far behind. (Kleist 1997: 417)

As an emblem for Kleist, the man in the mountains draws something to himself that we might call style. In any case, it is larger than language if it is communication.

Kleist was a soldier unhappy with soldiering, and a playwright whose family was unhappy with him being a writer. By the age of twenty-five he was, in his own writing, seeming to stand in the middle of a landscape, screaming. In 1801 he wrote:

Truly, considering that we need a lifetime to learn how we ought to live, that even in death we still have no idea what heaven wants with us, if nobody knows the purpose of his existence nor what he is intended for, if human reason is not adequate to comprehend us, our souls, our lives, the things around us, if even after thousands of years we are still doubtful whether there is any such thing as *right* - can God ask of such creatures that they be *responsible*? (Kleist 1997: 422)

In a less romantic, more restrained but equally baffled style, Robert Hass looks to heaven when he begins his poem called 'A poem' with "'You would think God would relent," the American poet Richard Eberhardt wrote during World War II' (2007: 66).

In 1811, at the age of thirty-four, Heinrich von Kleist met and fell in love with a woman who was dying of cancer of the uterus. He wrote to his fiancée, 'My soul, by touching hers, has become wholly ripe for death ... my one triumphant concern must be to find an abyss deep enough to leap into with her' (1997: 425). Together they committed suicide beside a lake in West Berlin.

If style is a matter of aliveness, then the life and the work of an artist do become difficult to separate; and even suicide, or the image of a lone man screaming in the Alps, can be part of that always-unfinished business. Kleist's death, by the logic of his love, his exuberance, extremism, frustration and ecstasy, makes his statement at the end of his essay - 'to be continued' - not a promise but a commitment to a style - a statement of an enduring, living condition of incompleteness.

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