

## STYLE AND VOICE

“When a reader fancies a particular author,” Ben Yagoda claims, “it could be for any of a hundred reasons. . . . But when one writer falls under another’s spell, it is generally because of the way the progenitor uses language to forge or reflect an attitude toward the world—that is, it is because of style” (2004, 105). Style, the linguist Peter Verdonk tells us, is “distinctive linguistic expression” (2002, 3). It is, therefore, diction (which words are chosen) and syntax (how those words are put together) and the mood and tone those words create. In fact, every decision a writer makes determines her style, right down to punctuation: using a colon rather than a dash, or a semicolon rather than a period. And style ultimately creates a writer’s voice, the “person behind all the *dramatis personae*, including even the first-person narrator persona. We have the sense of a pervasive presence, a determinate intelligence and moral sensibility, who has selected, ordered, rendered, and expressed these literary materials in just this way” (Abrams 1981, 132).

Emerson gets at the crucial connection between style and voice in his essay on Goethe: “Talent alone can not make a writer. . . . It makes a great difference to the force of any sentence whether there be a man

behind it or no. In the learned journal, in the influential newspaper, I discern no form; only some irresponsible shadow; oftener some moneyed corporation, or some dangler who hopes, in the mask and robes of his paragraph, to pass for somebody. But through every clause and part of speech of a right book I meet the eyes of the most determined of men; his force and terror inundate every word; the commas and dashes are alive; so that the writing is athletic and nimble,—can go far and live long” (1850, 756–757).

In a more recent assessment of style and voice, George Steiner said of the essayist Guy Davenport, “A Davenport sentence or short paragraph is instantaneously recognizable” (Schudel 2005, C7). And A. Alvarez contends: “Imaginative literature is about listening to a voice . . . unlike any other voice you have ever heard, [one that] is speaking directly to you, communing with you in private, right in your ear and in its own distinctive way” (2005, 17). If we sometimes criticize people for valuing “style over substance,” it is difficult to imagine a writer meriting our attention who has not developed something like a recognizable style of her own.

Classical writers divided style into high, low, and middle. Each had its appropriate time and place, but high style had the most prestige. Compositions were written to be read aloud as speeches, and through an effective use of style a speaker could impress, and sway, his auditors. Aspiring Greek and Latin authors worked toward achieving their own style by imitating their masters, a strategy young writers follow to this day. Longinus advises, “[W]e ourselves, when elaborating anything which requires lofty expression and elevated conception, should shape some idea in our minds as to how Homer would have said this very thing, or how it would have been raised to the sublime by Plato or Demosthenes, or by the historian Thucydides” (1899, 86). Of course, some beginning writers worry that if they copy someone else’s style, they will never find their own voice, and that fear is valid if the younger writer never moves beyond mere mimicry. But writers can develop their own style by taking what they admire from their idols and combining that with a quality that is essentially their own. Novelist Richard Ford says, “Anyone’s style is . . . just a natural incarnation of their intelligence. You can’t be someone else’s mind. You might learn a trick. But finally it has to heat itself to your own intelligence and make something worthwhile, or it’s useless” (Yagoda 2004, 107). And Natalie Goldberg counsels writers not to worry about copying their predecessors: “Writing is a communal act. Contrary to popular belief, a writer is not Prometheus alone on a hill of fire. We

are very arrogant to think we alone have a totally original mind. We are carried on the backs of all the writers who came before us" (1986, 79).

As Richard Lanham shows us, the ideals of style ebb and flow from one literary epoch to the next—from high to low, from opaque to transparent, from the elaborate hypotaxis of Henry James to the machine-gunned parataxis of Hemingway. Currently, in much of the writing done for school—both creative and expository—clarity is prized above everything. Yet Lanham reminds us that clarity really only means “‘success’ in communication; [and] this success almost always means a successful mixture of motives rather than a purity of purpose” (2003, 8). In other words, language, as the deconstructionists have made abundantly “clear,” is never as translucent as we want it to be, and no style worth the name ever achieves its effects through a single rhetorical strategy.

For millennia, achieving a distinctive style and voice has been a writer’s ultimate goal. Recently, though, writers have begun to distrust conventional ideas of authorship. Roland Barthes has declared “The Death of the Author,” revealing to us that what we thought was a solid flesh-and-blood human being is actually a social-historical construct that doesn’t exist outside language itself. Examining a sentence by Balzac, Barthes finds it is impossible to pin down just who is talking. Is it the story’s protagonist? Balzac the individual? Balzac the writer? Balzac trying to impersonate a woman? “Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (1968, 142). Barthes believes that a text is “not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (146).

In response to this bad news for authors, postmodern (q.v.) writers have turned to parody and pastiche—an appropriate technique for our cut-and-paste world. They make fun of style, although in the hands of someone like Mark Leyner, that tactic quickly becomes a style in itself. Their critique of voice as an artificial construct has more weight. After all, identity politics (q.v.) inevitably plays a huge role in who gets to speak, what they are capable of saying, and how what they have to say is heard. Yet if voice is a fictional construct, we nevertheless immediately recognize the “voice” of postmodern writers like Don DeLillo or Charles Bernstein

or Donald Barthelme, who defines style as “[b]oth a response to constraint and a seizing of opportunity” (Eder 2004, E.2:35). Indeed, writers who can do many different voices convincingly often receive the most respect. Shakespeare is preeminent here, but contemporary American novelists like Toni Morrison, T. C. Boyle, Louise Erdrich, and Joyce Carol Oates also excel at creating distinctive, individual characters. And they do this, of course, with style.

In any case, we often read writers primarily because we love their style. They may not have many new insights to give us, but the way they deliver what they know keeps us returning for more. Abraham Verghese claims that, typically, “when your mother starts to dislike your writing, that’s when you’ve really found your voice” (Eder 2004, E.2:35). Style from this perspective represents a rite of passage, a coming of age. Yet Dashiell Hammett claimed he stopped writing because he was repeating himself: “It is the beginning of the end when you discover you have style” (Yagoda 2004, 156).

So what’s a writer to do? The authors of this book have wrestled with that question: style has been a consistent concern for us. Sometimes we have allowed our individual voices to peep through in unexpected word choices or in idiosyncratic locutions. Once in a while we have even employed dialogue, narrative, and other techniques from creative writing. Our thinking has been that in a book with several different potential audiences, several different styles are warranted. Mostly, though, we have strived for the purportedly transparent voice of current academic scholarship. While in some chapters we have allowed ourselves to grow expansive, in this particular (and potentially colossal) entry, we have generally tried to follow Horace’s dictum: “Every word that is unnecessary only pours over the side of the brimming mind” (1903, 73).