

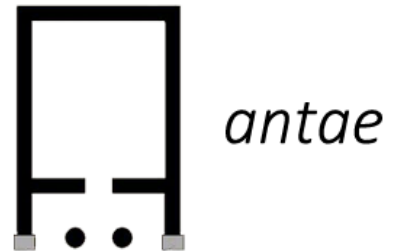
‘Style Matters’: *The Event of Style in Literature* Book Review

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‘Style Matters’:

The Event of Style in Literature Book Review

Elsa Fiott

Inherent to style is paradox, and any attempt at making absolute and comprehensive claims about style always point beyond the confines of the definitions that have been imposed on it. Though style is often thought of as a differentiating principle, the only categorical statement one can make about style, as Mario Aquilina immediately makes clear in *The Event of Style in Literature*, is that it is ‘resistant to definitional constraints and the security of a firm conceptual basis’.¹ To define style is less of a constative enterprise than an investigation into the way the ‘contrary dynamics’ of style play out their multifarious contentions and oppositions (2). Despite the fact that the individual manifestation of style is often thought of as a mark of distinction (both within and outside the scope of academic and intellectual discourse), style remains conceptually indistinct, especially when pressed for definition.

Traditional articulations of style are at odds with each other over its conceptualisation, but also, over its function and application. As Aquilina shows in his first chapter, style has been considered as an essential aspect of literature, a distinctive feature, if not the image of man himself, or at least key to facilitating expression. Conversely, style has also been argued to be superfluous, a hindrance to expression, and undesirable to various degrees when understood as a distraction from the expression of meaning, if not completely inimical to authenticity and truth.

And yet, Aquilina’s main argument is not that style cannot be anchored by definition because there is disagreement on what style is and what purpose it serves. Style in itself is characterised precisely by its elusiveness, which is why style cannot be thought of as a secondary feature, or as a vehicle for thought and content. It is, as Aquilina repeatedly states, non-instrumental and not teleocratically-oriented. This is the first hurdle that Aquilina’s reading of style deals with, and it is evident from the very beginning that *The Event of Style in Literature* does not attempt to iron out the inconsistencies in the discourse on style in favour of a neat synthesis or resolution. To engage with style is thus to navigate conceptually treacherous terrain, and Aquilina does so with both caution and elegance. His approach to style is marked by an incisive understanding of the challenge that discourse on style creates for the critic, as is evidenced by his consistently discerning reading of style throughout the whole of his book.

¹ Mario Aquilina, *The Event of Style in Literature* (Basingstoke and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 1. Further references to this work will be given within parentheses in the text.

Against normative conceptions of style, Aquilina reads style otherwise through the thought of Hans-George Gadamer, Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, amongst others, and makes a case for 'the non-teleocratic possibilities of style as a performative event' (87). With Gadamer, style is revised in order to account for the 'ontological valence' or the 'truth' of the work we engage with, and the reader's interpretative encounter with style is brought to bear on the temporality and unity of the work. In Blanchot, style comes across as 'an event that originates in a relation to the impossible', whilst reading style elicits our response to 'the foreignness of the style of the other' (92, 95). Derrida reinforces the conception of style as a performative event and accentuates the singularity and aleatory nature of style, both in his discussion of style and in his own use of style as he writes. Style, far from being external or secondary to meaning, is repeatedly shown to be 'world-making' (as in Gadamer), or inventive, as in Blanchot and Derrida.

To understand style as event entails a drastic revision of the hierarchical dichotomies involved in the conventional understanding of the relationship between content and form, meaning and expression, to the extent that writing, Aquilina reminds us, 'is through style' (133). Understood in this way, style is also shown to be anarchic as Aquilina traces how Gadamer, Blanchot and Derrida 'redirect attention from a reconstruction of the origins of style (man, ideology, reader, content) to a consideration of the eventhood of style in the presentness of the encounter', whereby the singularity of style and its implications is brought to the fore (71). Style may also carry a subversive or transgressive force in its being a 'refusal' as well as that which enables "'a new possibility" of thought', according to Blanchot (104, 108). Style can therefore be seen to carry radical political potential beyond Jean-Paul Sartre's narrow and instrumentalist formulation of *littérature engagée*, because 'literature,' as it is understood through Blanchot's reformulation of style, 'abolishes both the world and the writer', while through Derrida, style features saliently in the suspension of the law (99).

As nebulous as style is, the presence and significance of style is nonetheless definitive. 'Style matters'; to refer to the event of style means we cannot dismiss what style means by saying "it's just a matter of style" (210). More accurately, *The Event of Style in Literature* demonstrates how style is at the heart of the matter, and it does so by bearing witness to the complexity of the issues at hand without lapsing into gratuitous obfuscation. Aquilina's reading of style exhibits lucidity even as it sheds light on the dimly-lit corners that a nuanced engagement with style must certainly contend with.

This study not only engages with style in a thorough and rigorous manner, but it also engages the reader, who is continuously shown to be 'structurally inherent in style as an event' (88). As we move away from 'the logic of the proper' and understand style anarchically, the possibility of plural readings of a text becomes more important; or in Derridean terms, style as signature becomes 'open to future countersignatures' (136, 140). The interpretation of the text is never final because every reading or encounter is singular: style is not the 'property of the [...] author, the text, the genre', but rather, as Aquilina shows through his reading of Derrida, style is 'always being haunted by the style of the other and the ear of the other to come' (77, 130). Style is shown to be that which enables

an encounter with the other through what Aquilina proposes to call ‘an ethics of reading the event of style’ (74). In contrast to the conception of style as an exercise of power or as an extension of the self, style with Derrida disarms and disorients, with the openness to the other in and through style being in itself ‘an ethical responsibility’ (159, 151).

As Aquilina reads Gadamer, Derrida, and Blanchot *on* style, he also pays careful attention to how these writers write *in* style. Aquilina’s discussion of Blanchot’s fragmentation or Derrida’s aphorisms, for example, consolidates the notion of style as an event that is open to the futural, the aleatory and the Other. Taking this a step further, *The Event of Style in Literature* also observes these thinkers’ styles as they engage with that of Paul Celan. To think of style in Aquilina’s work calls for a rethinking of how we engage with style, since the idea of linear transmissibility that is traditionally associated with style, present even in Harold Bloom’s theory of ‘the anxiety of influence’, is quickly dispelled.² As Aquilina shows in his discussion of Derrida and Blanchot on Celan, style and influence is less about *agon*, or struggle, than it is about the possibility of openness that style presents us with: style as ‘openness to an encounter or event still to come’ (92).³ Rather than thinking style through ‘the anxiety of influence’ framework, the response to another writer’s work entails ‘inhabiting—but not mastering’ that style, which might also necessitate, according to Blanchot, fragmentation and interruption (94). The work is always singular, and for this reason, futural, as it changes with every reading; but as is typical with the logic of paradox and collapsed binary opposites in the thought of *The Event of Style in Literature*, style is also that which ‘creates its readers performatively’ (88).

Aquilina also contends with the contradictory nature of style in its being both singular and iterable. He demonstrates that, despite the fact that ‘nothing can really escape the logic of exemplarity and remain an absolutely singular “case”’, one should still resist reading style with a view of developing a re-applicable or transferable theory of style, and *The Event of Style in Literature* steers away from this tendency. The discussion of Celan’s poetry, Aquilina argues, is not made to serve as a ‘test-case’ for the reconceptualisation of style that the book expounds, as this would ‘go against the grain’ of the thought of Gadamer, Blanchot and Derrida (183). Rather, Celan’s poetry, which is ‘poetry of singularisation’, ‘demands’ that we read style as an event (86, 78). The singular resistance to interpretation of Celan’s poetry, the ‘tarrying with’ that it calls for, as Gadamer argues, creates the ‘possibility of future reading’ or readings. Derrida similarly shows how Francis Ponge’s work ‘presents itself as a signature but ‘the performativity of his poetry and its openness to readability disperses the absolute singularity and propriety of style’ (145). Once again, and as Derrida’s understanding of the idea of invention suggests, the singularity of style equally demands its own repeatability and future countersignatures, with Derridean undecidability playing a crucial role in the performance of style as a non-teleocratic and anarchic event.

² See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³ See Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1994) for his use of the notion of *agon*.

True to the spirit of his reflections on style, Aquilina avoids reaching any facile conclusions, foregoing the security offered by conclusiveness in favour of a practical manifestation of what it means to think of the anarchic eventhood of style non-teleocratically. Style in Aquilina's work is thus unbound, and yet, this does not prevent Aquilina from attesting to the depth and range that thinking through - and in style - calls for. To speak of the multifariousness of style is not just to name the multitude of definitions and functions of style. To speak of style, itself uncategorisable, is also to bridge different categories and to render rigid borders malleable. As Aquilina observes, style is relational and ubiquitous. Thus, the reconsideration of what style means proposed by Aquilina's work permeates definitional enclosures, implying conceptual revision of a number of dichotomies, such as the form and content one, as well as other, more general matters, such as what we mean by language and signification, the literary and the poetic, the idea of singularity, iterability, and translatability. Rethinking style entails, for example, the de-monumentalisation of the text, which can no longer be thought of as stable but rather as 'constantly in flux' (157).

The Event of Style in Literature also displays an indispensable meta-critical awareness and, in the conclusion, it re-angles the futural element of style by asking **what the place of discourse on style might be in future thought**. *The Event of Style in Literature* follows the example of Derrida and Blanchot in showing that academic discourse, by avoiding teleocratic conclusiveness and the fossilisation of thought, can take on the role of *l'arrivant*, and Aquilina's work evidences a willingness to let critical thought perform. Style is *not* the answer to everything, as Charles Bukowski claims, and *The Event of Style in Literature*, which is impeccably written with style throughout, truly finishes in style by not claiming to have the last say on the matter.⁴

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⁴ See Charles Bukowski, 'Style', *The New York Quarterly*, 31 (1985), p. 60.