

CHAPTER I

On Style: An Introduction

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In his 1885 essay on style, Robert Louis Stevenson declared that the ‘most perfect’ style is one that ‘attains the highest degree of elegant and pregnant implication unobtrusively; or if obtrusively, then with the greatest gain to sense and vigour.’¹ Stevenson shares a confidence common in the late-Victorian period that a single perfected style was conceivable. What is insightful and surprising about the remark is that Stevenson commends the attainment of ‘implication’ rather than something nearer to the centre of meaning, like ‘expression’. Style, he recognises, names a quality of language that communicates more than it directly states. Those qualities of expression that are lost to paraphrase, the subtlety and suggestion of fictional prose, are the results of style. Stevenson’s essay was written at a time when a theoretical interest in an ideal prose style flourished under the influence of aestheticism, fed by movements in France; but, as the chapters in this book indicate, Victorian fiction had in practice anticipated the late-century theory in revealing that style – not always finessed or refined, but multifaceted, variable and potentially irregular – denominated a quality of the writing that delivered a greater depth of meaning and feeling than a paraphrase of it would convey.

The immediate self-qualification in Stevenson’s assertion (‘unobtrusively; or if obtrusively . . .’) alerts us to the propensity of style to resist categorisation. Any attempt to catalogue the styles manifest throughout the Victorian period is doomed to approximation, just as any attempt to isolate a single style as superior will soon seem partial. Style may be elevated, excessive, proportionate, plain, performative, and showy or muted in its verbal effects. It may be ‘elegant and pregnant’, but it can equally be rough or spare. Just as there are different styles, there are different ideas of style, and these varied throughout the nineteenth century and since. Style may be considered decorative and ornamental, a mere adornment of expression; style may refer to a characteristic manner; or it may be verbal expression itself. Thomas De Quincey takes this last view, in

direct contrast to the first. Style, he writes, is not ‘a mere ornamental accident of written composition – a trivial embellishment like the mouldings of furniture, the cornices of ceilings, or the arabesques of tea-urns’.² Style, then, may be thought constitutive or it may be thought superfluous. This is the difference between the kind of style that is the subject of ‘stylistics’, namely the properties and techniques of language that give rise to meaning, and the style that can be in or out of fashion. Style may be the individuating characteristics of a particular writer’s body of work, an authorial style, or it may be adapted to each work at hand, a textual style. It may be, as it often was in the nineteenth century, a standard of excellence that could be taught and acquired; insofar as the standard changes in different generations, it becomes a period style. This book understands style to be sometimes exuberant and playful, but, even then, never simply peripheral. The chapters in this volume show concertedly – that is, in concert and in earnest – that interpretive readings of Victorian fiction cannot reasonably neglect style and that what the body of Victorian fiction asks us to do, is to think about what style *does* at least as much as what style *is*.

The distinction Stevenson allows between an unobtrusive and an obtrusive style takes us to the heart of one of the most profound and persistent preoccupations with style in the fiction of the Victorian age. The ideal of a clear prose, which communicates directly without any distraction or distortion from the verbal medium, is well attested. Anthony Trollope exemplifies the prominent view when he asserts that the language of fiction ‘should be so pellucid that the meaning should be rendered without an effort to the reader’.³ The late-Victorian writer Annie Matheson reinforces this ideal transparency when she praises George Eliot’s first novel in like terms: ‘Language as George Eliot herself uses it in “Adam Bede” has become so finished and flexible a medium of thought that it may be said to have attained to that highest perfection which effaces itself, so that the reader forgets there is any medium at all, in his active and immediate realisation of that which it conveys.’⁴ James Russell Lowell countenances the same verb to describe language that ‘effaces itself’ when he likens style in great works to a commanding social ease; such works have, he says, ‘that exquisite something called Style, which, like the grace of perfect breeding, everywhere pervasive and nowhere emphatic, makes itself felt by the skill with which it effaces itself’.⁵ There have been many challenges to such a view of Victorian realist prose; George Levine, for example, has dismissed the idea of a ‘simple faith in the correspondence between word and thing’ on the part of the Victorian realists.⁶ Yet the idea persists that this was at least the way

Victorian writers understood their own prose. Yael Halevi-Wise, responding to Levine, writes that ‘we cannot deny that nineteenth-century novelists strove to build an illusion of such correspondence’.⁷ James Williams puts the view well: ‘The great conceit of the realist novel is its attempt to remove language from prominence, to render the operations of words as invisible as a glass in which reality is precisely reflected.’⁸ Given the persistence of this model of realist prose as transparent and unobtrusive, certainly promoted by some of the major novelists themselves, it is not surprising that style has not always been closely heeded in scholarship on Victorian fiction.

An interest in style has often seemed of negligible significance to the mainstream of Victorian scholarship. In a textbook on the Victorian novel, Francis O’Gorman wrote that in the 1970s and 80s ‘those involved with stylistics . . . were aloof from the high-profile debates in Victorian fiction’.⁹ Certainly, stylistic analysis was frequently – though with notable exceptions – seen as a field distinct from the philosophical and cultural interests that stimulated much scholarship in those decades, even from meaning itself, but if the implications of hauteur and irrelevance in that claim are supposed to apply to studies of style per se, recent work has dismantled the notion.¹⁰ For, despite what some Victorian novelists claimed for themselves, what some theories of realism suggest, and what the expedient academic practice of paraphrase and summary may imply, the language continues to assert itself in Victorian fiction and, even when a plain style is achieved, the quiddity of the words demands attention. Since language is its only medium, a novel’s vision – its meanings, total or local – cannot be extricated from the contingencies of language, the unlooked-for associations, and the unexpected collocations that charge its expression in prose.

If the virtues of elegance and pregnancy, nominated by Stevenson as hallmarks of the best style, are elusive and vague, they are nevertheless susceptible to specification according to what his essay calls their ‘technical elements’. In contradiction of Lowell’s view that the great self-effacing style ‘eludes observation in particulars’, Stevenson’s claim about style, quoted here, itself demonstrates how style can be gauged at the level of the phrase, manifesting amongst other features alliteration (‘greatest gain’), balance (between the paired terms ‘elegant and pregnant’ and ‘sense and vigour’) and the most idiosyncratic of the prescriptions in his essay, the delicate modulation of ‘p’, ‘v’ and ‘f’ sounds (‘pregnant implication’ into ‘vigour’).¹¹ Equally, Victorian manuals of composition delineate accomplished styles by reference to their technical properties.¹² In fact, philosophies of style throughout the nineteenth century are frequently attended by a practice of close textual analysis.¹³ In remarking the various effects of prose styles in the

period's novels, this volume examines them at the level of language and technique. In doing so, it demonstrates that the novelist's meaning or vision exists only in and through the language in which it finds expression, so that to scale attention to the verbal detail is essential and not an accessory to a careful comprehension of Victorian fiction.

The range of effects and nuances of meaning that result from the operation of diction, syntax, punctuation, metaphor, acoustic effects, verbal play, and more, are all explored in the chapters that follow. The effects of such features of style may be estimated by measuring a phrase or sentence against a paraphrase of it, to reveal the merits (or demerits) of the wording as it is. The consideration of multiple facets of style moves us beyond the familiar dyad of sound and sense as competing demands upon wording because neither of those is a unitary criterion, so the style must choose between, say, the finish of alliteration and the preferable cadence of an alternative. Writers most fully responsive to their medium will take into consideration the range of semantic meanings a word may hold, etymological derivations, historical usages and associations of words; they will consider what Walter Pater terms the 'physiognomy' of words and their 'latent figurative texture', and there will be gains and losses in any choice.¹⁴ Style is where myriad competing priorities such as these are brought to bear. It is this complexity of the medium that makes possible tone, implication, counterpoint, reticence and tact, and sets any utterance within a hinterland of deselected possibilities. It is style that makes fictional prose what it is, a representation of and an invitation to thought, feeling, drama and experience, instead of merely a set of propositions. This book demonstrates that we need our conception of style to be alive to the multiple technical resources that constitute it, and, collectively, the chapters show what is gained in our reading, understanding and appreciation of Victorian fiction by remaining alert to style.

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Victorian fiction is more aware of its verbal artistry, and indeed its artifice, than some critics allow or than the ideal of transparency permits; such a self-understanding is helpfully writ large in novels that tell the story of a writer's development. George Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways*, published in 1885, is a novel about style and indeed about *its own* style. Diana is a novelist and the composition and reception of her first three novels are described for us. Those imagined novels test the rival merits of stylistic exuberance and achieved moderation; they bring to light the difficulties of writing to gain an audience, and the challenging politics of reviewery, all issues that troubled the composition and reception of Meredith's own

novels. The operations of the novel's own style are brought into sharper focus through the direct commentary on Diana's writing; in doing so, the novel interrogates different aspects of style that are important to many works in the period and that this volume will enumerate.

Meredith is a distinctive, extravagant stylist whose prose routs the ideal of self-effacement, so his work constitutes a limit case for a study of fictional style in the period. His highly figurative aesthetic, rich in metaphor and imagery, provides an elevated register that combines with the patient detail and careful verisimilitude of realist prose; but there are moments when a novel such as *Diana of the Crossways* will call a halt to its own stylistic excess or exuberance, as when the concerns about the separation of an elevated and a lowly style that trouble Diana become manifest in the narrative itself. At the start of chapter four, Meredith offers a metaphorical flourish before turning to a more down-to-earth phrasing. The Dunstane residence in the Surrey hills is introduced; there, the vantage 'gives distantly a tower to view, and a murky web, not without colour: the ever-flying banner of the metropolis, the smoke of the city's chimneys, if you prefer plain language'.¹⁵ The house has been put up for sale and the advertisements state the fact in bold, brash language, in the auctioneer's own 'dialect', which Diana calls 'the plush of speech' (37). Despite the reassurances of 'the grandiloquent man of advertizing letters' (38), Lady Dunstane, in her delicacy, objects; we read, 'She withdrew the trumpeting placard'. Meredith continues, 'Retract we likewise "banner of the metropolis"'. That plush of speech haunts all efforts to swell and illuminate citizen prose to a princely poetic' (38).

Similarly, chapter 17 opens:

London, say what we will of it, is after all the head of the British giant, and if not the liveliest in bubbles, it is past competition the largest broth-pot of brains anywhere simmering on the hob: over the steadiest of furnaces too. And the oceans and the continents, as you know, are perpetual and copious contributors, either to the heating apparatus or to the contents of the pot. Let grander similes be sought. This one fits for the smoky receptacle cherishing millions, magnetic to millions more. (160)

Here, the vernacular image, the down-to-earth style, is given as more apt to the scene described – smoky London, as before. Meredith's novel is willing to 'swell and illuminate citizen prose', but it is ever watchful and wary of the delusions of grandiloquence. Not all novels advertise their procedures in this way, but the process staged here – the controlled pitch of image and metaphor – exemplifies how consequential phrasing can be.

These stylistic shifts between the elevated and the commonplace are more than technical showiness or what one early critic called ‘laboured ingenuity’;¹⁶ they form part of this novel’s extended reflections on the real and the ideal, on the connection between the lofty and the lowly, that is of immediate concern to the emotional lives of its characters. Redworth is best able to see Diana as she truly is: he is able to see her as at once an object of adoration and a true friend. Redworth’s practical, prosaic nature is shown to be romantic, playful and poetic. Diana has to learn that he too is a combination of prose and poetry: ‘a plain brother of the poetic’ (366).

Meredith’s image-rich, poetically heightened prose, though still prose, finds its own union between the elevated and the plain, the performative and the practical, alert to those moments where it lapses into solely one or the other, providing a model of the marriage of ideal and real, of spiritual and earthly, that is profoundly at the heart of this novel. This is an ethics of style where the style itself responds to the philosophical quandaries posed by the novel.

Among the novel’s various stylistic concerns, there is a principled and practical interest in soundplay as a facet of a poetic style. A synecdoche of style itself, sound is the property of language most likely to be considered independent of sense, so that a ‘stylised’ passage of prose may be deemed to compromise meaning, or to be superfluous, as often as to assist or reinforce meaning. The opening account of the diaries recalling the scandal that will form the basis for the ensuing novel is full of assonantal chimes: Meredith writes of ‘deliberate syllables’, ‘smart remarks’, ‘fummy dubiousness’ and ‘burly . . . mercifulness’ (1–3). Since these diaries do scant justice to Diana, we might suspect these acoustics in the prose to reflect the complacency or self-involvement, and consequent inexactitude, of the accounts in the diaries. A similar worry accompanies the most extended acoustic play in the novel’s own prose.

After the breakdown of her first marriage, Diana visits Italy and, one morning, gathering flowers in the mountains, she rediscovers a sense of her childlike self in a way that to her, at first, seems miraculous but which the novel regards as making her vulnerable to Percy Dacier, who is there too, while later questioning the reality of its revivifying power. This is Dacier:

He mounted his path to a level with inviting grass-mounds where water circled, running from scoops and cups to curves and brook-streams, and in his fancy calling to him to hear them. To dip in them was his desire. To roll and

On Style: An Introduction

7

shiver braced by the icy flow was the spell to break that baleful incantation of the intolerable night; so he struck across a ridge of boulders, wreck of a landslip from the height he had hugged, to the open space of shadowed undulations, and soon had his feet on turf. Heights to right and to left and between them, aloft, a sky the rosy wheelcourse of the chariot of morn, and below, among the knolls, choice of sheltered nooks, where waters whispered secrecy to satisfy Diana herself. They have that whisper and waving of secrecy in secret scenery; they beckon to the bath; and they conjure classic visions of the prudency of the Goddess irate or unsighted. (151)

The passage is full of acoustic play: alliteration from start to finish, from ‘cups’/‘curves’ and ‘dip’/‘desire’ to ‘beckon’/‘bath’ and ‘conjure’/‘classic’; internal rhyme – ‘heights to right’; assonantal drift, pronounced sibilance and even a run of anapaests in ‘wreck of a landslip from the height he had hugged’. The sound effects acquire meaning by the context the novel creates for them, as the passage rises to an unusual poetic height, highly alliterative and redolent of Romanticism. But this is delusive and trance-like and not adequate to the world’s demands.

Such acoustic superabundance is not characteristic of the novel’s style, but a more subtle wordplay is. The novel offers a commentary on a brasher kind of verbal wit. Lady Wathin reluctantly allows an ‘impromptu pun’ at her dinner parties because her guests find them humorous (but ‘nothing else impromptu was acceptable’, 162) and, on the rare occasions he does read fiction, Percy Dacier reveals his shallowness through his fondness for ‘puns and strong flavours and harlequin surprises’, attributes that Diana’s more chaste style does not allow (288).

Yet there is one pun writ large across the novel: that is, on the word ‘Crossways’, the name of Diana’s home. It is used with a lower case c by numerous characters to suggest a figurative crossroads or point of decision. The pun is curiously naturalised and, as if the characters accept this overarching symbolism as a condition of their world, it never registers either the shock of surprise or a wry smile at the conspicuous cleverness.

Typically, the wordplay is more modest. When Redworth visits Diana at the Crossways to plead with her not to flee the scandal but to face it, he is struck by and long remembers the image of her as she tends the fire. We are told that he has a strong faith in Diana: ‘Nevertheless it required the superbness of her beauty and the contrasting charm of her humble posture of kneeling by the fire, to set him on his right track of mind’ (89). In the contrast between the ‘superbness of her beauty’ and the ‘charm of her humble posture’, seemingly an instance of the unity of ideal and real in this woman, we take ‘superbness’ to mean the ‘splendour’ of her beauty. But in

a kind of etymological pun, ‘superbness’ is derived from the Latin *superbus*, for pride, establishing a more exact contrast with the humility of her posture.

Redworth encourages Lady Dunstane to learn Latin in the novel. This might help her understand the precise quality of his style of expression because it is again the perspective of Redworth that is involved when the narrative turns out another play on Latinate etymology, this time of a more complex nature. In the third chapter, after Diana has been dancing with a captain at the Irish Ball, Redworth reflects on this, disinterestedly, as he thinks:

In the character of disengaged and unambitious philosophical bachelor, he reviewed the revelations of her character betrayed by the beautiful virgin devoted to the sanguine coat. The thrill of her voice in speaking of soldier-heroes shot him to the yonder side of a gulf. Not knowing why, for he had no scheme, desperate or other, in his head, the least affrighted of men was frightened by her tastes, and by her aplomb, her inoffensiveness in freedom of manner and self-sufficiency – sign of purest breeding: and by her easy peerless vivacity, her proofs of descent from the blood of Dan Merion – a wildish blood. (31)

The word ‘sanguine’ refers to the soldier’s red uniform, but a second, common meaning of ‘hopeful’ is also activated by the immediate contrast with the ‘unambitious philosophical bachelor’. The soldier seems to have more reason for optimism. The origin of the word in relation to ‘blood’ echoes a couple of sentences later when Diana’s charm is described as inherited in her blood. In this way, the influence of the word radiates out through the paragraph. Once set on this train, it is difficult to know where the significance closes. For example, does this moment anticipate the fact that Diana’s happy marriage will in the end be to a man named *Red-worth*?

Meredith’s is a style alive to the nuances, resonances and etymology of words, not only to their sounds. Throughout the period, fictional styles – including those less elaborate than Meredith’s – work by mobilising these various resources of language. Through all the attributes I have been tracking – register or pitch, soundplay, wordplay – style provides something superadded to plain sense. Meredith’s puns open up a widened understanding of his represented scenes, his soundplay overlays the writing with an uncertain additional atmosphere, his planted adjustments of simile would not have been preferable had he effaced the process and presented only his last alternative because the represented uncertainty of expression serves theme and ethics and ultimately shows the intractable difficulties of

phrasing. Style does not simply deliver the content of a novel; it is itself part of that work of imagination, representation, scrutiny and suggestion. Joseph Conrad acknowledged these attributes of prose composition when he wrote to a correspondent, 'You do not leave enough to the imagination. I do not mean as to facts – the facts can not be too explicitly stated; I am alluding simply to the phrasing'.¹⁷ In recognising that instead of stating things flatly, it is desirable for phrasing to suggest and imply, these two sentences are an admirable philosophy of style.

Despite the multifariousness of any style and its effects, the long search for an adequate definition of style has often associated itself with a striving for a single, harmonious model of style, narrowing the range of possible effects. In his book *The Problem of Style*, John Middleton Murry productively suggests that style is 'writing itself', but his essay reduces the fullness of that recognition, for he writes that 'Style is perfect when the communication of the thought or emotion is exactly accomplished'.¹⁸ The idea that style is best when it is perfectly apt is unnecessarily limiting, but it is common. In a sentence that is echoed by – and perhaps gives rise to – Middleton Murry's title, Pater writes: 'The one word for the one thing, the one thought, amid the multitude of words, terms, that might just do: the problem of style was there! – the unique word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, essay, or song, absolutely proper to the single mental presentation or vision within' (27). Pater reiterates the point that the ideal expression is one that is 'absolutely proper' in its correspondence to an apparently internal and pre-existent idea when he declares the 'specific excellence' of literature to be achieved in 'the absolute correspondence of the term to its import'.¹⁹ But this leads to a restriction of the meaningfulness of style, tying it to a contained pre-existing vision – to 'the *single* mental presentation or vision within', rather than recognising style's ability to suggest, to hint, to imply, over and above, around and beyond, any apparently originating thought or claim or vision.

The ideal of perfect aptness is a vague one, not least because it seems less relevant to satire and parody, where the gap between the pitch of the idea and the pitch of the language is central to the effect. Nor does it allow for the play of the medium and the ability of style to be conscious of its mediating functions. John Henry Newman said that 'style is a thinking out into language', and in that process the supposedly original thought may become widened to contain an awareness of its own communication, its own phrasing, its own wordedness.²⁰

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Charlotte Brontë's 1853 novel *Villette* provides a classic case of prose that suggests more than it states because there is so often something hinted or implied or suggested over and above Lucy Snowe's matter-of-fact account. Susan Sontag suggestively proposes that 'Stylistic devices are also techniques of avoidance. The most potent elements in a work of art are often, its silences', and *Villette* is exemplary of this quality of avoidance and tacit implication.²¹ Here we begin to witness the delicacy of style over and against its exuberance and brashness. Often style imbues prose with reticence, reserve and a sense of things that go unspoken.

Lucy's voice is typically measured and cool, with only occasional interruptions of feeling in the form of exclamations. A broader range of emotional and moral responsiveness becomes apparent around the edge of her words. The novel employs a range of linguistic resources and a responsiveness to language to generate a breadth of meaning and effect that exceeds the semantic content of the prose. Consider Lucy's account of Madame Beck's regime of surveillance when she first finds her employer rummaging through her private belongings. For much of the novel, Lucy is disposed to view this behaviour from a detached position of mere observation, unwilling to jeopardise her employment. She describes Madame Beck's careful inspection, during the night, of all her belongings in turn. With a touch of willing understatement, Lucy reports: 'The end was not bad, but the means were hardly fair or justifiable. In my dress was a pocket; she fairly turned it inside out'.²² That slide from 'fair' to 'fairly', meaning first 'just' or 'right' and then 'thoroughly', draws attention to the fact that Lucy refrains from moral judgement at the point of describing the pocket being inspected. There is an important sense in which the pocket is unfairly turned inside out, but Lucy conspicuously does not say this.

So too after the careful description of this process of inspection, she observes: 'All being thus done decently and in order, my property was returned to its place, my clothes were carefully refolded' (69). The inspection has been carried out in one sense and one sense only: 'decently and in order'. Lucy refers of course to the care and method of Madame Beck's examination, but her ironic choice of words draws attention to the stripping away of moral judgement from the sentence. This action, we know, has not been 'decent' in the fullest sense of the word – it has been, as we might say, out of order. The truths that go unexpressed are registered by the careful use of polysemous language here. Brontë uses words with a range of signification to point to an understanding beyond that which is directly asserted. Style hints and implies.