

## INTRODUCTION

### *What Is Stylistic Virtue?*

One of the more estranging features of Victorian literary criticism is the widespread use of a virtue-based vocabulary for the description and interpretation of texts. At best, words such as “manly,” “delicate,” “lucid,” “sincere,” and “sweet” strike the modern ear as suggestive but insufficiently technical, while more troublingly, they imply the substitution of biographical content for the detailed analysis of form. For example, in his 1885 essay “Style in Literature,” John Dennis praises Henry Fielding’s style as “natural, vigorous, idiomatic,”<sup>1</sup> which might describe an affinity for plainspoken, unornamented speech. But rather than root his judgments in the observable features of a novel, Dennis continually explicates them through reference to Fielding’s actual personality. Arguing from the premise that the “style proclaims the man” (74), Dennis notes that Fielding’s “manliness is to be seen in his biography, and so also is the taint of vulgarity and coarseness” (74). His style, consequently, is “devoid of weakness and affectation” and yet “more homely than refined” – a literal embodiment of “its master” (75).

The biographical reductionism of Victorian stylistic criticism (along with much literary criticism before it) has helped give it a reputation for formal obtuseness, evidence of an aesthetically naïve “impressionism” that ought to be repudiated.<sup>2</sup> As John Guillory writes, stylistics remains “merely impressionistic” – that is, unsubstantiated and imprecise – when it attempts “to characterize style by means of figurative language, for example, by words such as ‘curt’”<sup>3</sup> or, in this case, “natural” and “manly.” However, the characterological terms of Victorian stylistic criticism often did double duty as descriptors with more precise, formalistic meanings – a mode of signification that has long been acknowledged in less obviously representational fields such as music.<sup>4</sup> For example, in a review of Thackeray’s *Henry Esmond* (1852), George Brimley celebrates the style as “manly, clear, terse, and vigorous,” not because the author was homely or truthful but because he “knows what he means to say, and does not give the public thoughts half-

worked-out, or thoughts on matters where clear thinking is impossible.”<sup>5</sup> In contrast to Dennis, Brimley draws on the non-biographical meaning of “manly” as it appears in classical and eighteenth-century rhetorical manuals, where it describes the strength of style that results from forth-right and deliberate argument. As Hugh Blair writes of Jonathan Swift in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), “His style is of the plain and simple kind; free of all affectation and all superfluity; perspicuous, manly, and pure.”<sup>6</sup> To be sure, the word “manly” could be equally used to denote the gentlemanly status of an author or the representation of masculinity within a work. But Brimley and Blair’s use of the word is more technical than literal, referring to a style of presentation that exists apart from the personal history of an author or the subject matter he represents.<sup>7</sup>

For another example of this terminological double valence, consider the word “chaste” as it was used in the controversy over Algernon Charles Swinburne’s “fleshy” poetry. In his scathing review of *Poems and Ballads* (1866), John Morley attacked Swinburne for possessing a genius turned “exclusively in the direction of libidinous song.”<sup>8</sup> Whereas, Morley writes, “the Greek poets in their most impetuous moods never allowed themselves to be carried on by the swing of words” (146), Swinburne provides passion without sobriety, engendering poems of “hot lustfulness . . . aflame with the feverish carnality of the schoolboy” (145). For his part, Swinburne defends his style by animating the alternative meanings within Morley’s own condemnatory lexicon. “Treated in the grave and chaste manner as a serious ‘thing of beauty,’” he writes of the statue in “Hermaphroditus,” “it can give no offence but to the purblind and the prurient.”<sup>9</sup> Here, Swinburne uses the word “chaste” not in its moral sense of celibate or sexually pure, but as Quintilian does in the eighth book of the *Institutio Oratoria*, as *sanctus*,<sup>10</sup> to indicate a style of ornamentation that is “natural and unaffected” rather than “artificial” (8.Pr.19). Swinburne concludes by averring that “adult art” is neither “puerile nor feminine, but virile,” being “noble and chaste in the wider masculine sense” (23), once again echoing Quintilian’s injunction that “healthy” ornament be “manly, strong, and chaste” to achieve “health and vigour” (8.3.6–7). Through this strategic use of the classical stylistic lexicon, Swinburne was able to rebut accusations of formal (and not just personal) degeneracy.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, two conceptions of style were circulating during the Victorian period: a referential or reductionist one, which envisions style as the embodiment of some predetermining material, and a more impersonal or autonomous one that ascribes to style an independent aesthetic character.<sup>12</sup>

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Why, then, if virtue terms are so liable to lead to confusion between these two different conceptions of style, did they supply the interpretive vocabulary for both? The answer to this question lies at the heart of what “style” and “virtue” meant to a nineteenth-century audience and which it is the purpose of this book to recover. In literary contexts, we often think of style and virtue as opposed: style deals with the formal qualities of language and deportment, virtue with the moral qualities of characters or authors; style can be examined in relative isolation from a text’s propositional content, virtue can only be considered with reference to a context for action. Consequently, approaches that yoke style and virtue together tend to be reductionist or moralistic in character, whether by delineating how stylistic choices reflect the overall “worldview” of a text or by revealing how different styles shape the moral imaginations of readers. These are compelling ways of thinking about style, which I shall consider in greater detail below, but they are not the focus of this book. Rather, I aim to show how style may be considered apart from the non-stylistic “content” of a text and yet still possess “virtues,” understood, following Aristotle, as qualities that render it an excellent specimen of its kind. This generic conception of virtue can help us to see how style has uniquely aesthetic dimensions that are no less “ethical” for being so.

Though scarcely remembered today, stylistic virtues are, in fact, among our oldest rhetorical concepts. First defined by Aristotle, they refer to verbal properties, located in small-scale units such as the phrase or sentence, that constitute a distinguishing feature of a text. Because classical rhetoric presumes a speaker behind any communicative act, stylistic virtues have often been regarded as indices to the ethos, or character, of an author, conflating style as a literary form and style as an expression of the self (the referential conception). But stylistic virtues also encode a way of thinking about style that endows it with autonomous qualities that either do not express the self (whether that self is literal or “implied”), or else that express the self *exclusively* in relation to the production of aesthetic effects. An awareness of stylistic virtue in this second, autonomous sense helps substantiate aesthetic “impressions” that do not necessarily align with that which is delivered by other components of a text such as plot development, subject matter, character interaction, or thematic ideation – those larger-scale units of meaning that have long dominated criticism of the novel. Instead, they ask us to register the interpretive significance of a text’s most ostentatiously non-mimetic features, in this way providing the foundations for more formalist approaches to fiction that are typically regarded as products of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, stylistic virtue remains an ethical category insofar as, within the framework of virtue theory, the aesthetic realization of character constitutes a substantive moral good. This idea, drawn from Aristotle and carried through the rhetorical tradition he initiated, widely influenced Victorian literature and culture and ultimately shifted the location of virtue from the production of style as the expression of individual genius to the appreciation of style as a meritorious act. If, as many writers argued, differences in character are inevitable and agreeable, and style is expressive of character, then the contemplation of style becomes a normative good linked to a range of values that have less to do with the expression of any *particular* stylistic character than with the fact that styles are expressive of character *per se*. In contrast to the philosophical tradition that sees aesthetic experience as either beyond ethics (“disinterested”) or servile to it (“instrumental”), the union of “style” and “virtue” provides a new way of conceptualizing the ethical value of formalism, rooted not in the separation of art from life but rather in their unembarrassed contiguity.<sup>14</sup>

In its analysis of Victorian style, this book remains largely agnostic as to the actual effects of individual texts upon the virtues of writers or readers, nor does it attempt to argue what virtues (stylistic or otherwise) a text ought to contain or express. Rather, I use the concept of stylistic virtue to show how the verbal properties it traditionally addresses make an important but overlooked contribution to the ethos of prose fiction in ways that are best understood as formal or aesthetic, and (as a secondary claim) that they have ethical value for precisely this reason. To make this argument, which requires considerable historical excavation, the book is split into two halves. In the first part, I provide an intellectual history of stylistic virtue to clarify the major terms of the study (such as style, virtue, aesthetic, ethos, and character) and show how their formalist conjunction shaped an array of practices across rhetoric, criticism, and philosophy. While stylistic virtues may prove useful to further inquiries into poetry, my focus here is on their foundational but neglected role in constructing a “prosaics.” In the second part, I use the recovery of what Caroline Levine calls an “historical heuristic”<sup>15</sup> — a portable way of reading rooted in the interpretive methods of the past — to provide revisionary readings of style in three major Victorian novelists. Although the writers I consider often draw on a well-established repertoire of stylistic virtues, my goal is not to revive an outdated vocabulary for its own sake. Rather, I use Victorian virtue terms as a way of understanding stylistic ethos more generally, elaborating a new and (I hope) workable methodology for

conducting stylistic analysis and interpreting the meaning of style within a work.

### **Stylistic Virtue: A History**

Today, the word “virtue” is typically associated with a pious moral culture and its rigid, theologically grounded codes of conduct – with the four cardinal virtues of temperance, prudence, courage, and justice, or the Mudie-esque imperative to inculcate virtuous habits in morally impressionable readers. But the word has a deeper history that underwrites this narrow usage, rooted in the Greek word *arete*, of which the Latin *virtus*, or “virtue,” is a translation.<sup>16</sup> According to Aristotle, *arete* – also translated as “excellence,” “strength,” or “merit” – describes the quality of something that makes it good at what it is supposed to do.<sup>17</sup> For example, rods and cones are virtues of an eye because they allow it to discern color and light, while vision itself is a kind of virtue because “it is by the excellence of the eye that we see well” (*Ethics*, 1106a). Sometimes called the “function argument,”<sup>18</sup> this generic notion of virtue judges a property as “excellent” if it helps realize the inherent purpose, or *telos*, of the substance to which it belongs, whether it be a body part, a machine, a human being, or a literary text.

Aristotle first joins the words “style” and “virtue” in his *Art of Rhetoric*, where he uses the conjunction to describe verbal properties that are “excellent” because they contribute positively to the *telos* of a speech. As Aristotle puts it, “the first virtue of style is to be clear (since speech is a kind of indication; if it does not indicate clearly it will not be performing its function)” (1404b). Clarity is a virtue – a verbal property that is excellent and effective – because it makes a speech perspicuous to its audience, which helps it to achieve its desired effect. Subsequent rhetoricians followed Aristotle in locating style (*lexis*) at the level of the word or sentence, larger systems of organization being treated under other headings. As such, he laid the foundation for the central classical virtues of “propriety” (the style must match the subject matter), “purity” (sentences must be idiomatic and correct), and “beauty” or “ornateness” (the verbal qualities of a discourse must interest and please its hearers), along with several others.<sup>19</sup>

Present-day scholars are more likely to have encountered the term “virtue” through Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he uses the word *arete* to refer to the morally valuable traits of character that constitute a person’s *eudaimonia*, or flourishing. *Eudaimonia* is the *telos* for human life, a condition that Thomas Hurka describes as occurring when the

“properties that constitute [our] nature are developed to a high degree.”<sup>20</sup> A person is said to flourish when his moral virtues (*ethikos*) and intellectual virtues (*dianoetikos*) become a habit (*ethos*), or settled disposition. As W.D. Ross notes in his translation of the *Ethics*, the word “morality” is an appropriate translation of *ethikos* insofar as it is “used not in the narrow sense of ‘right versus wrong’ but in the archaic sense of ‘pertaining to character or *mores*’”<sup>21</sup> – similar to the modern use of the word “ethos” to refer to a characteristic way of seeing or being. Hence, from the start, a parallel was established between the “virtues” of a person and the “virtues” of a text: just as judgments about moral virtue evaluate a character trait for its contribution to flourishing – to what makes a human being an excellent or fully-functional example of itself – so do judgments about stylistic virtue celebrate verbal or linguistic traits that help to realize the “nature” or “character” of a discourse.

The parallel between moral and stylistic virtue has long shaped the rhetorical tradition. On the one hand, a close alignment between style and character undergirds the referential conception of style that interprets the former in terms of the latter – the conception that reads style as reinforcing the impression (*poios*) that a speech projects as furnished by its speaker, subject matter, or “thought” (*logos*) (*Rhetoric*, 1403b). For example, the virtue of propriety, which requires that the style “be neither mean nor above the prestige of its subject matter” (1404b), asserts the classical pre-eminence of matter over manner. Similarly, throughout the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle uses the word *ethos* in a moralistic way to describe one of three modes of proof (the others being *pathos* and *logos*) that appeal to the “character” of the speaker, presenting him as virtuous and therefore “worthy of credence” (1356a).<sup>22</sup> Although Aristotle views style as an essentially artificial construction – a shaping design to be imposed upon *logos* or used to bring *ethos* into being – later rhetoricians assumed a more organic unity of expression and underlying character. Quintilian, for example, argues that excellence in speech is only possible if the orator is a *vir bonus*, or “good man,”<sup>23</sup> while Seneca the Younger, when asked why “certain periods [have] seen the appearance of a corrupt style of speech,” responds simply, “As are men’s lives, so is their speech.”<sup>24</sup>

However, the rise of stylistic organicism has sometimes eclipsed the extent to which Aristotle invests style with a considerable degree of autonomy, suggesting that it possesses an *ethos* independent of the speaker’s virtue. For example, “frigidity” is both a stylistic vice (its antonym is clarity) and an aesthetic type, occurring whenever a discourse draws undue attention to itself through the use of poetical devices such as

compound names, exotic words, and inappropriate metaphors. If “by speaking poetically men produce an absurd and ridiculous effect through the inappropriateness” (1406a-b), then frigidity refers neither to the cold-heartedness of the speaker, nor to the banality of an argument, but to the intrinsic properties of the stylistic devices, which signify poeticism and artifice whenever they occur in a prosaic context. The “frigid” style may be vicious because it lacks congruity with other parts of a speech, but that very incongruity reveals its capacity to generate a tonality independent of the speaker’s established character, making “character” less a property of persons or ideas than a predominantly linguistic quality.

In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle notes it was poets who “first began to develop the study of style and delivery” (1403b), and that “this sort of enquiry has just as much to do with rhetoric as to do with poetics” (1403b). But the treatment of style in the *Poetics* is relatively scanty, which means that the rhetorical account of style as “ethical” – that is, as linked to the expression of ethos or character – became the dominant paradigm for stylistic criticism well into the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> Because the line between moral and formal character was never sharply drawn, ancient rhetoricians advance various admixtures of the two. For example, the Greek rhetorician Demetrius identified four “types” (*charakteres*) of style (the elevated, the elegant, the plain, and the forcible), each with a corresponding anti-type (the frigid, the affected, the arid, and the graceless).<sup>26</sup> Each type is defined by its unique constellation of “thought,” “diction,” and “appropriate composition” (89), combining thematic considerations with formal abstractions such as the rounding of periods (93) or the use of expletive particles (97). Later, Cicero and Quintilian would describe how the grand, middle, and plain styles – designations based on propriety – achieve a kind of independent embodiment in the “characters” of Atticism and Asianism.<sup>27</sup> Such conceptual hybridity reached its apex in Hermogenes of Tarsus, whose *On Types of Style* was one of the most influential texts of the Renaissance. Hermogenes begins by arguing that the style of a text must flow from its semantic content, asserting the primacy of content over form (“first of all, and the most important, is the thought”).<sup>28</sup> But he also claims that style itself conveys a kind of content, classifiable within seven virtues (clarity, grandeur, beauty, rapidity, character, sincerity, force) that he elevates into full-fledged “types” (*ideai*). As Annabel Patterson notes, “Hermogenes uses the term ‘idea’ to mean both ‘characteristic style’ and ‘essential nature,’”<sup>29</sup> suggesting that there are certain formal protocols that reliably indicate a stylistic character even when detached from a specific person or argument. “Character,” for example, which Hermogenes

identifies as a “type,” refers simultaneously to the ability of a style to evoke the *ethos* of a speaker and to four stylistic sub-types (simplicity, sweetness, subtlety, and modesty) that possess an “essential nature”<sup>30</sup> or character of their own.

The stylistic history most directly relevant for this book begins in the eighteenth century, when the distance between matter and manner dramatically narrowed. Although the neoclassical period is often remembered as a time when style and content were separate – “Language is the dress of thought,” as Samuel Johnson says<sup>31</sup> – as early as 1675, the French philosopher Bernard Lamy describes how “[t]he Idea’s present to our Mind . . . are the Soul of our Words,” with “the Sounds form’d by the Organs of our Voice” being their “material part” or “Body.”<sup>32</sup> According to Archibald Alison, “matter is not beautiful in itself, but derives its beauty from the expression of mind,”<sup>33</sup> which resembles Adam Smith’s claim that “the style of an author is generally of the same stamp as their character.”<sup>34</sup> Here, we see the vehicular or “mechanical” role of style that had been privileged in classical rhetoric give way to the more “organic” unification between style and subjectivity that became central to romantic and post-romantic aesthetics. On this view, language is no longer the dress of thoughts but, as Thomas Carlyle puts it, its “flesh-garment” or “body,”<sup>35</sup> an idea perhaps best encapsulated in de Buffon’s famous pronouncement of 1754 that “the style is the man himself.”<sup>36</sup>

Buffon’s dictum became an apothegm of the Victorian age, but it is not as simple as it is often made to appear. In his “Discourse on Style,” Buffon first defines style as “simply the order and movement one gives to one’s thoughts,” implying that whatever virtues the style possesses reflect the author’s underlying mental processes or habits of thought: “If [the thoughts] are connected closely, and rigorously compressed, the style will be firm, nervous, and concise. If they are allowed to follow one another loosely and merely at the lead of the diction, however choice this be, the style will be diffuse, nerveless, and languid” (171). However, Buffon also argues that while the “knowledge” conveyed in arguments is essentially fungible, capable of being delivered in a variety of ways, style somehow remains constant: it “can be neither detached, nor transferred, nor altered by time: if it is elevated, noble, sublime, the author will be equally admired in all ages” (178). According to W.C. Brownell, Buffon’s claim here is less that “the writer’s personal temperament leaves a deep impression on his style” than that his style is “within his personal control in a sense in which data and discoveries are not.”<sup>37</sup> That is to say, style is less an expression of personal mannerism than a particular *manner* of expression, consisting of

semi-autonomous “types” that are impersonal (though linked to an author) and trans-historical (though deployed at a particular point in time).

We would be right to call Buffon’s discourse “belletristic” insofar as the character-based words he uses to describe style – words such as “firm,” “nervous,” “elevated,” and “languid” – were massively popularized by the rhetorical criticism of the eighteenth century known as belletrism.<sup>38</sup> Further evidence of the psychologization of rhetoric, belletrism paid careful attention to the way in which the external features of an author’s writing correlate with the internal features of his character or disposition. As Blair explained it, “words being the copies of our ideas, there must always be a very intimate connection between the manner in which every writer employs words, and his manner of thinking; and that, from the peculiarity of thought and expression which belongs to him, there is a certain character imprinted on his Style, which may be denominated his manner” (I:368). This notion of style recalls Dennis’s statement (itself modeled after Buffon’s) that the “style proclaims the man” and anticipates Matthew Arnold’s assertion that styles have a “physiognomy, which are an essential part of their author, which stamp an indelible impression of him on the reader’s mind.”<sup>39</sup>

However, the influence of belletristic rhetoric was paradoxical, for in reviving the technical study of style, which had for some time been considered inferior to the more “rational” parts of rhetoric such as logic and argument, it also elevated style as an object of independent aesthetic attention.<sup>40</sup> For example, Blair begins his lectures by identifying how sentence-level properties, such as precision, unity, and harmony, relate to the way an author discovers and arranges his ideas (I:183–271). Yet he then examines how different mixtures of these properties combine to create an impression of “general characters of style” (I:368) that apply less to a single individual than to a larger formal class. To distinguish between styles that are diffuse and concise, styles that are feeble, nervous, dry, and plain, and styles that are simple, affected, vehement, and neat, Blair considers whether they are rapid in pace, glowing in tone, or gaudy in texture, features that reveal less about an author’s mental organization than whether the discursive presentation interests the imagination or pleases the ear. As Blair confesses, “these distinctions carry, in general, some reference to an author’s manner of thinking, but refer chiefly to his mode of expression” (I:368). Styles, in other words, may go some way toward revealing the man “in his own natural character” (I:390), but they also convey a distinctive *aesthetic* character defined by verbal relations internal to a community of texts.

Influenced by Aristotelian theory as well as eighteenth-century rhetoric, the virtue terms of Victorian criticism reflect this rhetorical paradox. On the surface, words like naturalness, delicacy, sincerity, sweetness, and grace seem to suggest an impoverishment of formal analysis, relying upon general “impressions” of the underlying ethos that style is construed as representing. And, to be sure, nineteenth-century readers were fascinated by the idea that verbal forms could serve as a window to some underlying spirit or idea, whether it be the biographical personality of an author, the historical conditions of an epoch, or the *Weltanschauung* of a nation or culture.<sup>41</sup> When we say that Iago’s style is obfuscating and therefore pernicious or that Trollope’s style is transparent and therefore sincere, we produce moralizing stylistic analysis in this vein. But virtue terms were also employed by belletristic rhetoric for more formalist descriptions of prose, enabling critics to evince their sensitivity to how a style’s literary or aesthetic character could be virtuous in intrinsic and non-referential ways. The disimbrication of form and content may be an ontological impossibility and yet their conceptual distinctiveness remains an analytical necessity; as Tzvetan Todorov has observed, “the fact that we find them together does not prevent us from distinguishing them.”<sup>42</sup> Hence, it becomes necessary when discussing the Victorian criticism of literature to speak of two kinds of character – personal or moral or thematic character on the one hand, and aesthetic or technical or expressive character on the other – as well as to clarify the complex relations between them.

In its attempt to characterize aesthetic procedures in “ethical” or characterological terms, William Archer’s essay of 1885, “Robert Louis Stevenson: His Style and His Thought,” offers a typically Victorian illustration of how this might be done.<sup>43</sup> Archer begins his essay by noting the increasing prominence enjoyed by style, which he defines in an Aristotelian fashion: “We hear much in these days of an occult literary virtue yclept style: which term, by a figurative process whose name I forget, has come to include within its content the idea of excellence.”<sup>44</sup> Neither simple grammatical competence nor expository prowess, style involves “an added grace, a supererogatory strength” that “is the result of the writer’s individual sense of beauty and power in the collocation of words” (581). However, “so far, but so far only, was Buffon right in saying, ‘Le style est l’homme même,’” for aside from the author’s capacity to transform ordinary writing into something “literary,” his real-life personality may have little bearing on the content of his art (582). Archer specifies: “The style need not truly proclaim the man, but it infallibly announces the artist, or in other words, one side,