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ENG 483

Summation of “Style”

What is “style” and its relationship to rhetoric? With each of the readings and the subsequent discussions for this class, we have looked at style from a new angle in an attempt to answer this question. Each new angle adds to the definition of style within this class as well as informs us of the ways others have defined style. The purpose of this summation of my reading and class notes is to try to define style in a way that synthesizes the different perspectives on style that we have explored.

The discussions and readings of Burke are some of the first entries in my notes that are concerned with style. “Four Master Tropes” shows the way Burke understands tropes as more than just literary devices, but ways the world is understood and described. These tropes are described as rhetorical and stylistic choices that determine the way a situation is understood. The critical readings of Burke by Weiser and Wolin demonstrate the many ways Burke is concerned with shifting perspectives. This topic helps us understand the use of style as a way to shift perspective. Style is then vital to Burke’s interest in falling on the bias. Due to our trained incapacity we understand the world in traditional ways that prevent us from understanding different perspectives. In order to break away from these traditional views and gain new perspectives, one must embrace a perspective by incongruity, which puts conflicting perspectives together and creates a new way of understanding language and the world. These changes in the way the situation is understood are essentially rhetorical and stylistic changes because they employ changes in the language used to describe the situation. These changes are impious because they are not the traditional ways the situation is understood. This impiety of style allows us to see the world from different perspectives, increasing our understanding of the world as a whole.

Burke continues the discussion of style in *Permanence and Change*. In his chapter on style, he discusses the myth of a neutral language and how people have tended toward this scientific language in hopes of making everything clearer in a diverse world. He uses the example of the flock of birds creating a uniform language to demonstrate this reasoning. He argues that this concern with clarity in language has led to the loss of style as ingratiation and as communication of more than simple ideas, but emotions and feelings as well. He uses the example of Shakespeare to show how poetic language works to describe complex human thoughts, emotions, and feelings. He also refers to Charlie Chaplin and his “accurate mimetic style” to demonstrate how the actions of the body can be a kind of style (52). He points out that scientific language is designed for machines, not humans (58). His purpose here is to express the necessity of a complex poetic language through style that can express the complexity of the human mind.

After Burke, my notes move to the readings and discussion of Lakoff. In *The Political Mind* Lakoff focuses on the way situations are framed by language, actions, emotions, etc. in order to support certain ideologies. Lakoff discusses the ways in which language is manipulated through stylistic choices that recreate certain narratives that support these ideologies. He uses the primary example of people in political power who use these narratives to ingratiate people to their thinking. These narratives become metaphors to live by with repetition and the support of certain ideologies. Lakoff makes the point that this style (way of using language) is important because the way we think shapes language and language shapes the way we think (231-41).

The discussions and reading of Butler’s *Out of Style* is the next section of my notes that is primarily concerned with the issue of style. Butler explicitly redefines the term “style.” Style is an integral part of rhetoric in his definition. He defines style as “the deployment of rhetorical resources, in written discourse, to create and express meaning” (3). He continues, “style involves the use of written language features as habitual patterns, rhetorical options, and conscious choices at

the sentence and word level” (3). This definition is the basis of his critique of the way style has been defined by people who wish to eliminate or rename it away from the field of rhetoric.

He emphasizes that the tropes are primarily stylistic devices that are used by writers for their purposes. He argues that reanimating stylistic study is important to the teaching of writing and analysis of reading. Butler argues that the teaching of stylistic analysis can create better writers through the process movement of teaching writing. Because making rhetorical choices is important in the process of writing, it helps to understand what the rhetorical choices are and how they can be used. The study of the sentence level rhetorical choices made by writers can help writers understand the ways they can use rhetorical choices for their purposes in writing. This issue is also important to how Butler sees style as inseparable from content. In this sense, readers can use stylistic analysis to understand what a text means as well as improve their own writing.

A large issue in Butler’s analysis is the topic of “clarity” in writing (21). Seeing style as nothing more than correct grammar and an economy of words is what Butler tries to fight against with his redefinition of style. He argues that “clarity” is a vague term. The concept of a transparent language is a misnomer because language is not transparent. The perception of a clear language depends on the audience, situation, and writer. The “clearest” language for a text would depend on the purpose of the text and the purpose for reading the text; therefore, there cannot be one uniformly clear language.

One of the most important ideas that Butler focuses on is style as invention. Butler points out the ways the style of a text can affect memory. The style of a text can evoke emotions which affect the meaning of the text and how the reader remembers that meaning. This use of style is important because it promotes the view of style as a way an author produces knowledge beyond the simple meaning of the text. An author creates more than just a story by the stylistic choices she

makes. This also provides support for Butler's assertion that style is inseparable from content because a change in style will affect the meaning and evocation of the senses in a text.

The readings and discussion of White in *Tropics of Discourse* and Berkenkotter in "Psychotherapist as Author" also bring insight into how this class has come to understand style. White discusses the issues that exist when historians make stylistic choices when they write about historical events or people. He makes the important point that all writers make rhetorical/stylistic choices based on certain ideologies, no matter how "clearly" or "simply" they think they write. He argues, like Burke and Butler, that there is no such thing as a transparent language, and this must be preeminent in the minds of scholars when they are writing about "true" events. Berkenkotter brings the issue of the lack of a transparent language to the issue of ethics. She and Ravotas make the important discovery that the ways in which psychotherapists describe their clients can have ethical implications that will affect the ways that client is seen in the eyes of other therapists, court rooms, and insurance companies. The language used in this instance, much like the language that historians use, always serves rhetorical purposes in defining the "truth." The historian's stylistic choices define the historical event or person in a rhetorical way, and the psychotherapists' stylistic choices define the person their client in a rhetorical way. All of these stylistic choices have ethical and ideological implications that affect the way the reader of the text will perceive the "truth" of the person or the event.

To synthesize what this class has come to see as "style," it is necessary to see where all of these ideas connect. Burke, Lakoff, Butler, White, and Berkenkotter all discuss style in different ways and with the use of different terms. Burke and Lakoff have the important issue of perspective to unite them. Both see language as the fundamental way we understand the world. They see the world in "frames", "orientations", and "narratives"; the language used to create these (style) is for the purposes of ingratiating the audience to certain ideologies. All of these terms define the ways

people can look at a situation and the ways situations have been described in order to create pious understandings. They both argue that the way to change perspectives is to make these definitions impious by changing the way we define and describe situations. Burke and Butler both discuss the issues of clarity in writing. Burke's "scientific" language is equivalent to Butler's "transparent" language, both of which they argue are not only not possible but not desired. I have already stated the connection of ethics and "truth" between White and Berkenkotter; but, it is also important to note that their connection to Burke, Lakoff, and Butler is in the application of stylistic/rhetorical analysis to demonstrate the ways authors use style to ingratiate an audience into their way of thinking about a person, event, or situation. They address how writers should have full knowledge of their rhetorical strategies and consider any implications these strategies might have toward our understanding of "truth" and "reality." And Butler would argue that the best way to have awareness of these rhetorical choices is through stylistic analysis of others' and your own writing.

Works Cited

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