Introduction: The New Stylism

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I

In a 2004-essay about Saul Bellow, James Wood writes:

> 'Stylists' are crowned every day, of steadily littler kingdoms. But of course, there are very few really fine writers of prose. This is not surprising, since a prose is a vision, a totality. Great stylists should be as rare as great writers. Saul Bellow is probably the greatest writer of American prose of the twentieth century.[i]

One can imagine the despairing scholar-teacher pushing Wood on this seductive bit of evaluation: "Greatest' *how*, James? By what criteria? According to whom?' Wood's response to the latter might be something like 'According to *me* of course! Who else?!', while his response to the first two questions is built into what he says next:

> Saul Bellow is probably the greatest writer of American prose of the twentieth century – where greatest means most abundant, various, precise, rich, lyrical. (Far more consistently fine than Faulkner, say.) This seems a relatively uncontroversial claim.[ii]

That 'probably' is a classic sleight of hand (as critics we love to insert faux hesitations to create a little wriggle room for saying exactly what we think), but it's the rush of qualifications, as if anticipating queries from evaluation-anxious academics, that interests me. Bellow is the greatest stylist when judged by James Wood against the things James Wood values most about style – abundance, variety, precision, richness, lyricism. All worthwhile qualities, valued by a certain kind of tradition. He caps this with another bit of rhetorical salesmanship: 'This seems a relatively uncontroversial claim.' But, wait, hang on …

This is all warm-up though. What matters is the next bit:

> The august raciness, the Melvillean enormities and cascades ('the limp silk fresh lilac drowning water'), the Joycean wit and metaphoricity, the lancing similes with their sharp

> American nibs ('he was meteor-bearded like John Brown'), the happy rolling freedom of the daring, uninsured sentences, the prose absolutely ripe with inheritance, bursting with the memories of Shakespeare and Lawrence, yet prepared for modern emergencies, the Argus eye for detail, and controlling all this, the firm metaphysical intelligence – all this is now thought of as Bellow's, as 'Bellovian'.[iii]

This, to my mind at least, is literary criticism at its catchiest, at its most stylish. Not scholarship as such, but evaluative criticism that has aesthetic appreciation at the top of its agenda. As if inspired by its subject, or perhaps in emulousness towards it, Wood's prose here illuminates through its own enormities, cascades, abundances, 'lancing similes' and metaphors. The critique is coiled in the style itself, weighing and measuring through example and mimesis.

Wood is a powerful stylist. But what does Wood's style know? How does it think? What are its ethics? Its politics? What is its positionality? Does Wood's style even know what it knows? Odd questions, perhaps, anthropomorphising style like this, though there is a rich body of recent scholarly work on literature as a kind of thinking.[iv] These questions make sense if we think of style as the interface between deliberation and intuition, maybe even between the conscious and subconscious. Style often knows more than the author knows, or at least *seems to*. Do Wood's adjectival-nouns – the Melvillean, Joycean, Bellovian – and their urge to make metaphysical and aesthetic qualities the compound of a unique authorial vision know that they draw the critic into an exclusively white male pantheon in order to make sense of 'greatness'? Possibly not. Do the self-consciously stylish phrases know that they are their author's own shot at 'great stylist' status, as if dizzy on Bellovian energies, aspiring to his lofty standard? Probably. Either way, style is always revelatory of *something*.

If Bellow is possibly 'the greatest writer of American prose of the twentieth century', unsurprisingly very few writers come up to his mark for Wood.[v] While his Bellow essay is a resounding celebration of the author as stylist, Wood has more often taken revered stylists to task for what he judges to be unearned coronations and diminutive kingdoms. Style is a problem. Toni Morrison 'loves her own language more than she loves her characters, and appears to view them as mere spokes of style, who exist to keep her lyricism in motion'; and Flaubert's 'very beautiful'

writing is nevertheless merely 'a stylist … being a stylist'. Flaubert is Wood's ur-author for obtrusive style. Flaubertian descriptiveness tells us 'how Flaubert sees the world,' not his characters, and this is Wood's main bone of contention with many contemporary novelists.[vi] As he says in an essay on Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) 'the suppression of obvious authorial style in the interest of a character's style' is 'the greatest style'.[vii] But what about Wood's essayistic style? He is of course working in a different medium from his subjects, a form where authority takes on a different complexion (indeed a form where we expect to be told how the author 'sees the world'), and as an essayist he is conveniently cleared of any responsibility to character. Nevertheless, there is a revealing doubleness to Wood's style. For Wood much contemporary writing cares too much about its own stylishness, as if by 'inventing brilliant metaphors, or by flourishing some sparkling detail, or by laying down a line of clever commentary', it can hustle us into awe;[viii] which is a risky line of argument for a critic so recognisable for his own brilliant metaphors, sparkling details and clever commentary. There is a puritanical strain to Wood's thinking that is potentially at odds with the baroque manner of his writing. This is part of what gives his essays their compelling friction. Susan Sontag, another captivating thinker on style, makes the point that we have to turn to style in order to discuss style, mostly because we rely on metaphor as one of our primary sense-making tools; and as Wood seems to know the stylistic sense is inextricable from the critical sense. But this doesn't mean that the two aren't in tension. The tension might be the point. It might even be the source of value.

In a review of Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1989), Wood subscribes to Walter Benjamin's belief that 'criticism should speak the language of artists'.[ix] Wood's critical style is invigoratingly lyrical and above all authorial. He has a poet's handle on adjectives and adverbs, a jazz drummer's facility for the beat (he loves descriptive triplets and double-takes), and an aesthete's nonchalant ease with memorable turns of phrase. And his faux-hesitations, often couched in dummy subjunctives, are like the feints a boxer will throw before landing a powerful punch ('This is not magical realism but what *might be* called hysterical realism'

(my italics)).[x] The authority is in the idiosyncrasy. But Wood's idiosyncrasies reveal an anxiety about style that threatens to undermine their own authority; an anxiety that becomes a direct propositional one in many of his essays where he is drawn into making grand claims about style. Under Flaubert 'the novel discovered all that it could do, and collapsed out of fatigue into *style*'; we 'are always in a relationship with style; indifference to style is no longer possible, and is converted into dilemma';[xi] 'When a style decomposes, flattens itself down into a genre, then indeed it does become a set of mannerisms and often pretty lifeless techniques';[xii] and, as we have already seen, 'a prose is a vision, a totality. Great stylists should be as rare as great writers.' Style is at once elevated and queried in Wood's essays, typically on ethical grounds. If Bellow's 'greatness' lies in his style, it is because it is expressive of a moral vision that is open to surprise ('knowingness' is another of Wood's ultimate dislikes) and illuminates life's particularities (what Wood wonderfully calls Bellow's 'life-sown prose').[xiii] Problematic style, for Wood, does the opposite: it risks mannerism rather than perception, replacing human insight with self-amplification.

Wood's concerns about style and its ethical, human value find their most famous expression in his response to Zadie Smith's debut novel, *White Teeth* (2000), and what he called 'hysterical realism'.

> This is not magical realism but what might be called hysterical realism. Storytelling has become a kind of grammar in these novels; it is how they structure and drive themselves on. The conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, overworked. Appropriately, then, one's objections should be made not at the level of verisimilitude but at the level of morality: this style of writing is not to be faulted because it lacks reality- the usual charge – but because it seems evasive of reality while borrowing from realism itself. It is not a cock-up but a cover-up.[xiv]

Smith responded directly in an essay called 'This is How it Feels to Me' (2001) and continued to respond indirectly over the ensuing decade in a series of essays that probe the ethical value of literary style and the moral formalism of the novel (what she has described semi-seriously as her mock-PhD). Like Wood, Smith went in for grand statements about style that sound a little Woodian in their chic confidence – 'every variety of literary style attempts to enact in us a way of seeing, of reading, and this is never less than an ethical strategy',[xv] 'A writer's personality is his

manner of being in the world: his writing style is the unavoidable trace of that manner', 'you see style as a personal necessity, as the only possible expression of a particular human consciousness. Style is a writer's way of telling the truth'.[xvi] Smith's thinking on style in the 2000s culminates in a much-referenced essay, 'Two Paths for the Novel' (2008), where she schematically positions Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008) and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005) as diverging directions for the contemporary novel and its attendant questions of value, ethics and politics. *Netherland* represents Smith's main target, what she calls 'lyrical realism' and relates to an outdated liberal humanism ('A breed of lyrical realism has had the freedom of the highway for some time now, with most other exits blocked');[xvii] while *Remainder* stands for minimalism, absence, negation, and a more conceptual outlook that speaks to a post-humanist, Theory-enlightened age. Smith's essay appears to favour *Remainder* which signals a new way for the novel form and a necessary corrective to the exhausted tradition of lyrical realism with its politically naïve humanist assumptions – the kinds of thing, if one reads between the lines, that Wood might go in for.

'Lyrical realism' and 'hysterical realism' sound very similar, even if purportedly they signify differently. For Wood the crisis in realism is exhaustion; for Smith it's that realism is a deception. Accordingly, Smith's essay has been interpreted as a rejoinder to Wood's claims for the novel form.[xviii] Wood even critiques Smith's critique of *Netherland* at length in his own commending review of the same novel.[xix] But Smith's essay is subtly advocating a middle way, underlined by the awkward recognition that she would like to do something more like *Remainder* herself while her own novels, up to that point at least, feel a lot more like *Netherland*:

> It's a credit to *Netherland* that it is so anxious. Most lyrical realism blithely continues on its merry road, with not a metaphysical care in the world, and few of its practitioners write as finely as Joseph O'Neill. I have written in this tradition myself and cautiously hope for its survival, but if it's to survive, lyrical realists will have to push a little harder on their subject.[xx]

Self-critique insinuates its way into the essay in other ways and Smith's criticisms of O'Neill's style start to sound eerily like Wood's criticisms of her own:

> But in practice *Netherland* colonizes all space by way of voracious image. This results in many beauties ('a static turnstile like a monster's unearthed skeleton') and some oddities (a cricket ball arrives 'like a gigantic meteoritic cranberry'), though in both cases, there is an anxiety of excess. Everything must be made literary. Nothing escapes.[xxi]

Ironically, not only does the substance of Smith's criticisms start to resemble Wood's criticisms, the style does too.

Smith's essay champions the kind of novel (post-'realism', post-humanism) that does not accord with Wood's preferences or values, but it does so in a Woodian style; just as Wood's rejoinder to the over-energetic stylishness of hysterical realism is energetically stylish:

> The big contemporary novel is a perpetual motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity. It seems to want to abolish stillness, as if ashamed of silence. Stories and sub-stories sprout on every page, and these novels continually flourish their glamorous congestion.[xxii]

Note again the feints ('*appears to* have been embarrassed into velocity', '*seems to* want abolish stillness' and elsewhere 'their mode of narration *seems to be almost* incompatible with tragedy or anguish'),[xxiii] which here are part of the critique, I think, of how these big contemporary novels play disingenuously with semblance and realism. Style and critique are joined at the hip. But the risk is that the flourishing of 'glamorous congestion' he speaks of, the allergy to silence and stillness, the 'perpetual motion', all turn themselves back onto Wood's own style and therefore undermine the authority of his position, just as Smith's lyrical personal-essay style (a form that she is a modern master of and is itself embedded in a liberal-humanist tradition) is a tricky platform from which to criticise lyrical realism.

Both essays, then, are indicative of an anxiety *about* style and an anxiety *in* style. They are afflicted by a doubled style-consciousness. While being champions of style, they are emblematic of a style crisis – something that is everywhere in Wood's aspiration towards the very things he criticises (a kind of Flaubertian, authorial stylishness), and the sense that Smith is critiquing, consciously or not, her own style by critiquing the style of others (maybe even while emulating Wood, as if courting his approval at the same time as seeming to take an oppositional stance). This tells us something about the double bind of staking what matters about style through style itself.

Yes, style is a kind of thinking through, but it is also in that process an emulation – i.e. style is both innate and acquired, just as it is historically saturated. Nevertheless, there is a clear sense here that style *does* matter. For both Wood and Smith the value turns out to be ethical. In Wood's case it has to do with humanist convictions about the self and the human condition. Smith's essay shares something of Wood's humanism (as certainly other of her essays explicitly do), but she qualifies this with a more self-consciously political stance that explores limitations of humanism and the kind of universalism that comes with it.

II

One reason I have begun with Smith and Wood is because they represent a general anxiety about style that is evident across both mainstream and scholarly literary debate. Wood is in some ways a nostalgic critic using his considerable descriptive powers to excavate evaluative aesthetic appreciation and lyrical close reading and the moral claims that often attend these things. At once more personal *and* more political than Wood's criticism, Smith's literary criticism seems to be caught between an almost rueful sense that something has been lost and the feeling that to return to it would represent a kind of political and ethical naivety.

Attentiveness to style in particular has become the flash point for two prominent and not unrelated concerns that have exercised literary criticism since at least the late-twentieth century: a growing nervousness about the value of literature; and a deep engagement with its ideological and political implications. If in the late-twentieth century attention to aesthetic matters like style was likely to be regarded by emergent politically-motivated strains of literary theory as emblematic of an old-fashioned formalism, then it also meant naivety about the political and ideological significations of literature and its contexts; or, worse, complicity with flawed and exclusionary kinds of thinking through the over-simplification of complex concepts like beauty, truth and the

human. For scholars and critics on the other side of the debate who clung to the values and assumptions of an evaluative aesthetic literary criticism, a disavowal of the aesthetic dimension meant elevating socio-political contexts (as well as abstract theory) over literature itself and therefore losing touch with its singularity. It is of course superficial to divide the great heterogeneity of literary criticism into distinctive and warring factions like this. One has to erect straw-men in order to insist on any straightforward distinction between theory and the aesthetic, between cultural theory and evaluative criticism, and so on. Nevertheless, the shorthand is legible. We all have a sense of what kinds of criticism might be referred to by 'Theory', even if we want to challenge the validity of such a label. Likewise, names like Wayne C. Booth, Martha Nussbaum and Elaine Scarry might call to mind a certain style of humanistic criticism that is weary of a perceived anti- or post-humanist strain in literary theories that dispute the aesthetic. No matter the validity or non-validity of such divisions between formalist and theoretical critics, humanist and postmodern critics, and evaluative critics and cultural theorists, they existed (and to some extent still exist) in the scholarly imaginary.

But at the turn of the century, out of the shifting intellectual formations of a turbulent discipline, where the emergent diversity of Theory had become the dominant and a once-central aestheticism risked becoming residual, there came the suggestions of a synthesis. To take just one example, *The New Aestheticism*, a 2003 collection of neoformalist essays, set the stage for a return to aesthetic considerations in philosophical and literary studies; a return that was pitched as a response to (though not necessarily a rejection of) the era of high 'Theory'.[xxiv] Likewise, the 'new formalism' arrived in two broad varieties – what Marjorie Levinson in 2007 called activist formalism (a response to the sense that formalisim was too ignorant of context) and normative formalism (a response to the sense that new historicism and cultural studies were too ignorant of the literary). 'In short,' wrote Levinson, 'we have a new formalism that makes a continuum with new historicism and a backlash new formalism'.[xxv] That same year, in his polemic *The Death of the Critic*, Rónán McDonald wrote:

> This [recent] openness of theory to questions of aesthetics signals a new rapport between theories of criticism and questions of value. In the coming years, if this trend continues to develop, it will bear fruit in a pragmatic, focused criticism, where experts do not just theorize about particularity and specificity, but also evaluate the aesthetic dimension of particular and specific literary works.[xxvi]

McDonald's prediction has not only come true, but his sketching of a burgeoning literary criticism that marries critical theory with aesthetic evaluation (or at least queries the value of the aesthetic) has in fact become one of the major trends in twenty-first-century literary scholarship. But while McDonald, Levinson and the contributors to *The New Aestheticism* speak of the aesthetic and of form, a new wave of literary critics has honed in even more specifically on the seemingly old-fashioned and donnish topic of style.

I am suggesting little more here than that in contemporary literary criticism a new structure of feeling has emerged, to borrow Raymond Williams's resonant phrase. Style consciousness – what I am calling a new stylism and will describe in a moment – has become pervasive. Whether in the literary mainstream (in literary papers and magazines and trade-published works of non-fiction) or in the academic sphere, to theorise style and to stake its value seem more than ever urgent matters. Certainly literary scholarship has gone full style-conscious. If style retreated from critical view in the late-twentieth century, dated by politically-conscious forms of theory, it has re-established itself as a central critical concept, evidenced by a proliferation of monographs with style in their title – *The Value of Style in Fiction* (Garrett Stewart, 2018), *Thinking Through Style* (eds. Michael Hurley and Marcus Waithe, 2018), *Senses of Style* (Jeff Dolven, 2018), *Novel Style* (Ben Masters, 2017), *The Politics of Style* (Daniel Hartley, 2016), *Late Style and its Discontents* (eds. Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles, 2016), *Anthony Trollope's Late Style* (Frederik Van Dam, 2016), *Reading Style* (Jenny Davidson, 2014), *The Event of Style in Literature* (Mario Aquilina, 2014), *The Sense of Style* (Steven Pinker, 2014), *Archaic Style in English Literature* (Lucy Munro, 2013), *Answerable Style* (eds. Andrew Galloway and Frank Grady, 2013), and *Dickens's Style* (ed. Daniel Tyler, 2013) – not to mention many other important style-focussed monographs of slightly earlier years, such as *Cosmopolitan Style* (Rebecca Walkowitz, 2006), *Style is Matter* (Leland de la Durantaye, 2007), *Style*

and the Nineteenth-Century British Critic (Jason Camlot, 2008), *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style* (D.A. Miller, 2003), and *On Late Style* (Edward Said, 2006, published posthumously). The discussion therein is diverse and has generated numerous conceptualisations of style: style as knowledge, style as thinking, style as morality, as politics, ideology, personality, sensibility, technique, activated language, commitment, otherness, and so on. One can sense in such work a collective desire to grasp the particularity of style, indeed to treat style as a more particular qualification of form, even though this particularity turns out to be, paradoxically, diverse. Style remains a slippery term – on the one hand technical and compositional, on the other abstract, even metaphysical – and the purpose of this special issue is not to pin it down but to identify and anticipate approaches.

But before I turn my attention fully to the work of literary scholars who are querying style I want to stay a little while longer with public-facing discourses on literary style, because the ubiquity of debates around style might not only tell us something about its overarching importance at this particular moment in time but also about the shifting boundaries between the creative and the scholarly, even the popular and the specialist. This is reflected in the work of writers who straddle public and academic spheres (indeed like Smith and Wood who both have prestigious university roles in the US) and writers who blur the distinctions between them. Robert Macfarlane, both a university professor and creative writer, has written eloquently about style in his scholarly work as well as in literary journalism, and in creative works of genre hybridity like *Landmarks* (2015), a book about 'the power of language – strong style, single words – to shape our sense of place.'[xxvii] The novelist Adam Thirlwell has written a playful book, *Miss Herbert* (2007), largely conceived and produced during a fellowship at the University of Oxford, which reflects stylishly on style and translation ('A style creates multiple, universal singularities'; 'style is a quality of vision'; 'Most style is exclusive, it learns what to leave out').[xxviii] And Ali Smith, once a scholarly researcher and university lecturer, has returned frequently to the question of style, most notably in *Artful* (2012), a category-defying book that crosses the novel form with the lecture, art history, lit crit, and the lyric essay to meditate on the ethical and social power of style. She has continued the

conversation in public lectures and essays too, like a 2012 paper delivered at the Edinburgh World Writers' Conference, later printed in the *Guardian*, called 'Style vs Content?' Here she writes: 'style is integral to a work'; 'Style is never not content'; 'style proves not just individual human existence, but communal existence', 'Style is what happens when voice and form meet and fuse into something more than both', and wonders whether there is 'a sense, too, in which some writers use style as a marker of existence? A proof we're here? But good working style is powerful whether it's bullish or showy or quiet. Style's existence is a matter of verbal precision, nothing else'.[xxix] Style might start to sound like everything and anything all at once, but it is certainly *something*.

These are just a few examples of British writers, best known for their own creative work, meditating on style in critical forms. Many more could be pointed to from elsewhere. They are also writers whose formal literary educations took place in the era of high theory (Wood and Ali Smith towards the start in the 1980s, Macfarlane, Thirlwell and Zadie Smith at the tail-end in the 1990s) and who emerged as writers during a time of collective hungering for something not necessarily other than the theoretical, but something that modifies it. But my suspicion is that this renewed concern with style across popular and scholarly literary debate tells us something about the larger culture and not just the ripple-effects of academia. If influential thinkers saw style as a hollowed-out value in the postmodern era, just as style has always had to contend with charges of superficiality, writers and scholars in the twenty-first century have come to see style as one of the most value-charged concepts in their creative and critical arsenal. As Ali Smith argues in another public lecture, this time reproduced in the *New Statesman*, 'If [fiction] intends anything to do with truth, it's to help us get to truth, maybe truth that's difficult to articulate, and for which reason has had to take another shape.'[xxx] The shape is the style, but the style is itself the truth too. It is the opposite of 'a fraudulent thing' and should not be dismissed as 'not the real thing, blocking us from what it's trying to say even as it says it.'[xxxi] Zadie Smith covers similar ground in her essays. 'Style,' as we've already seen, 'is a writer's way of telling the truth.' The idea of style being a kind of truth rather than a deception or manipulation – whether a conscious expression of truth or an

inevitable reflection of it – solidifies in the commentary of twenty-first-century writers, as if anticipating (and eventually channelling) the concerns and debates of the post-truth era.

Grand claims about style have been made by scholars in recent years too. According to Jenny Davidson, 'Style is not extraneous, style is everything'; for David James 'style is the place where impressions of solace catalyse a process of thinking through its viability'; for Rebecca L. Walkowitz 'the concept of style more broadly conceived – as attitude, stance, posture, and consciousness – is crucial to many of the other, non-literary practices of cosmopolitanism'; for Sianne Ngai 'It is impossible to grasp the full cultural significance of any aesthetic category without considering how its functions as judgment and as style relate to each other'; for Leland de la Durantaye, glossing Nabokov, style is 'a global conception touching every aspect of the work of art'; and in my own work I have called novelistic style 'its own kind of truth: enactive rather than propositional, rehearsive rather than final, assaying rather than predetermined.'[xxxii] The critical applicability of style has proliferated, and the curious temptation to describe and potentially generalise that most idiosyncratic and peculiar of things carries on.

In corralling some of these strong statements on style I have deliberately been moving between different arenas and registers. Distinctions between the scholarly and the popular, and the critical and the creative, are becoming increasingly problematic. This is why I find *structure of feeling* such a useful concept, allowing as it does for the crossovers, hybrids and synergies of cultural and intellectual formations, which are always in flux, never quite categorical. This kind of hybridity is even evident within the academy itself, where the rise of creative writing studies in the past two decades is reflective of (and no small contributor to) the re-emergence of style as a crucial critical concept. If Theory took academic literary studies further away from the aesthetic dimension, the rise of creative writing has brought them closer together again. As McDonald suggests, 'another way in which 'Eng. Lit.' could profitably reconnect to its evaluative roots is to move closer to creative writing programmes' – something that we see happening by virtue of the ever-closer relationship between creative writing studies and literary studies, which in most universities are

partnered in the same department.[xxxiii] The view that creative writing studies has reopened a space for evaluative and personal responses to literature in the university, where 'literature is treated seriously as an end in itself, not just as an aperture to social or political context' of course perpetuates an opposition between the aesthetic and the theoretical, but the connection between critical studies and creative studies has not always been an easy one.[xxxiv] This is especially true in the UK where the proximity of writing programmes and literature departments is a much more recent phenomenon than in the US.[xxxv] Nevertheless we appear to have reached a point where the position of creative writing as a university discipline is comfortable and assured. That creative writing and literary studies might enrich one another is no longer such a controversial idea.

This is important when it comes to how we conceptualise style. The idea of 'having a style' is essential to the thinking of creative writing studies. Not only is it implicit to how a student of creative writing will read exemplar texts or workshop the writing of peers, style is also taught as a discrete topic.[xxxvi] One of the great benefits of this is how creative writing studies has helped demystify this most abstracted of concepts. The creative writing student approaches style not only as the effect of an aggregate of different techniques but as a series of choices. Style is of course sensibility too, which might largely feel intuitive or temperamental (though it is also the product of numerous social and institutional factors), but writing is a volitional process of decisions, some more conscious than others. Style, then, is not innocent. And if style relates to choice, it inevitably relates to ethics and politics, which is the logical next step that the literary scholar would make in their critical enterprise. In my experience of teaching both disciplines, there are certain questions that come up in both literary and creative writing classes. For example: What does this style know? The creative writing class might focus on *who* knows (is this the thought of a character, narrator, or the implied author? Whose point of view are we inhabiting and what is the significance of this?) or what does style enable the reader to know (i.e. thinking about the functioning of narrative effects like revelation, suspense, plot and, perhaps more important than anything else, emotive force and aesthetic pleasure.) Ultimately, the significance of style in such a context is its affect and its effects.

A literary scholar is more likely to focus on the political or ethical affect of style, the values and ideologies it encodes, and its historical dimensions (the idea that styles are contingent, historically saturated, indicative of the values and concerns of particular times; and, if we chart their deep-time stratifications and evolutions, revelatory of historical process.) I have of course just outlined diverse ways of thinking about style, with different aims and agendas, but they are not as far removed from one another as they might once have seemed, because the concept of style is forming a bridge between dichotomies.

III

Style as a concern, then, has become the location for critical syntheses and dialogues. What I am calling the *new stylism* responds to the exhaustion (though not rejection) of certain kinds of poststructuralist- and postmodern-influenced theory through its close focus on aesthetic matters. However, it also implicitly moves beyond the perceived political naivety of Theory-sceptic aesthetic criticism by attending to possible social and political contexts. New critical discussion of style is where problematized considerations like technique, authorial intention and aesthetic evaluation are restored to critical centrality through their meeting with the political, ethical and social. If contemporary literary scholarship is both sceptical of and responsive to these seemingly diverging trajectories, it is attention to style that offers productive ways forwards. In a rather metamodern sense, contemporary criticism of style oscillates between seeming opposites. Viewed broadly, it demonstrates an ambivalence and doubleness towards the old established positions (and this ambivalence should not be mistaken for disengagement or indifference), as if the new attentiveness to style is one possible defence against dogmatism.

This is especially conspicuous in the field of ethical criticism, where what Dorothy Hale calls the 'new ethics' signals, through its rapprochement of Theory and the aesthetic, an intense preoccupation with the value of literature. The new ethics locates:

> the ethical value of literature .. in the felt encounter with alterity that it brings to its reader. It is the untheorized understanding of the form of the novel as inherently politicized that establishes a bridge between the poststructuralist ethicists and the "pre-Barthesian" [Martha] Nussbaum.[xxxvii]

For critics like Hale, David James, Namwali Serpell and myself – not all strictly new ethicists, but critics who have sought to offer new directions for ethical criticism in part by bridging some of its internal divisions – style *is* morality (to use Martin Amis's alluring phrase), just as it is political affect, thus bringing together the legacies of critics as diverse as Nussbaum and Booth on the one hand, and Judith Butler, Derek Attridge and Gayatri Spivak on the other. This ubiquitous concern with the value of literature often emphasises the peculiarity of literature – its singularity (see Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* (2004)), novelness (see Ray Ryan and Liam McIlvanney's *The Good of the Novel* (2011)), and peculiar ways of knowing (see Michael Wood's *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge* (2005)). Moreover, recent re-championings of the practice of close reading show that if attention to the compositional elements of literature has in the past evoked weightless aestheticism, such attention is now the pre-requisite for an ethically and politically charged criticism, such that James in his introduction to *Modernism and Close Reading* (2020) refers to close-reading's 'political currency'.[xxxviii]

Uniting many of these studies is a phenomenological approach to style. Embedded in theories of affect, style is posited as evental; a transformative encounter that calls attention to political and ethical formations *in action*. We see this in Alex Houen's idea of 'potentialism' which 'builds practical imagination largely through a literary performativity of affect' and '[turns] textual possibility into affective force', and Hale's 'aesthetics of alterity', which triggers an apprehension of our own apprehension of otherness and therefore offers unique insights into questions of relationality and positionality.[xxxix] Style emerges as an inherently political matter, then, not just

because it is integral to representation but because it is a kind of relationality. Much of the work on style in the first two decades of the century calls attention to how style simultaneously reflects on *and* calls into being transformative relationships. This is powerfully felt in more explicitly political engagements with style, such as Ngai's blending of Marxist and aesthetic theory in order to critique late-capitalist styles, Walkowitz's idea of 'critical' cosmopolitanism which treats literary style 'politically, as a supple and disputed concept',[xl] and David Marriott's work (including in this issue) on the relationships between style and race.

What I am calling the new stylism, then, takes stylism away from its negative connotations (superficiality, shallowness, naivety) towards political and ethical engagement. It asks philosophical questions about the ideological and ethical valences of formal decisions and their affect, while modelling a self-reflexive form of evaluative criticism – i.e. a criticism that qualifies and deconstructs its own value judgements as it measures and weighs the power and consequence of style. However, the new stylism is not a methodology. Indeed the contributors to this issue are not proponents of a movement – we have not discussed or agreed the term 'new stylism'. It is simply something I am using here to identify a shift in contemporary literary criticism. This issue demonstrates and generates diverse approaches to the question of style, particularly in modern and contemporary literature. It does not seek to delimit style and critical discussion of it, but instead to bring together some of its current interpreters as we move into the new decade.

Michael Hurley's article, 'Wrestling with Gerard Manley Hopkins', places questions of intention and technique in the centre of the critical frame in order to analyse the thinking of Hopkins's style; i.e. the 'peculiar characteristics of Hopkins's own mind as displayed in his verse'. For Hurley, 'the dynamic activity of Hopkins's compositional process reflects his dialectical turn of mind', and it is the simultaneously intellectual and aesthetic process of 'wrestling' – a metaphor that Hurley plumbs for interpretative possibilities and traces through Hopkins's drafts and commentary – that 'fundamentally define[s] and enable[s] what readers recognise as peculiarly

Hopkinsian'. Style, then, becomes more than a mediator for pre-verbal thought but a dynamic thinking *through*.

Technique and intention are pursued, while complicated and problematized, by Marta Figlerowicz and Matylda Figlerowicz in their article, 'Multilingual Style'. Here the intimate relationship between language and style is shown to negotiate fraught interchanges between the self and larger formations. Like Hurley, they figure style as a kind of wrestle, but whereas Hurley presents Hopkinsian style as personal and individual, here style is shown never quite to be our own. Through their attention to multilingual style they foreground how stylistic norms (deriving from monolingual and national styles) and individual, idiosyncratic expression grapple with one another to problematise the very notion of personal style. How far is multilingualism expressive of freedom, choice and self-fashioning, and how far is it a traumatic entanglement? As Figlerowicz and Figlerowicz say: 'To write as a multilingual stylist is to confront one's global identity at its most creative, but also at its most vulnerable'. Vulnerability becomes the point as they argue for:

> the value of this vulnerability as an analytical tool. Entering the conversation with the worldliness of multilingual stylists, our readings would not search to control a text or crack its code. Rather, they reach towards a similarly polyphonic understanding of ways of reading, engaging with multilingual ambiguities, equivocations, and imaginativeness, allowing texts to hold paradoxes and puns but also loose ends and dead ends.

Implicit to both these articles is the triangulation between style, language and thinking, raising the possibility of a peculiarly literary thinking. David Marriott, in 'Nègre, Figura', approaches the relationship between style and thinking – indeed styles of thinking – through a reading of Edward Said's reading of Fanon. In doing so he shows the style/thought relationship to be one charged with ideological and ethical complexity, specifically in relation to race. This means conceiving style as a multivalent possibility (Marriott talks of styles of exile, 'revolutionary violence as style', style as identity, to take a few powerful examples), which raises the question whether there is an 'idea of style' different from style itself, or is style always an idea? As Marriott writes:

> The question of authority brings us back to the question of rule, or how a critic's idea of style – the propriety and property of critical judgment – itself relies on codes of order, coherence, and intelligibility that are institutional, cultural, and ideological (even if, as readers, we often confuse the significance of what is said for the form of its critical discernment).

By unravelling Said's reading (or failure to read) the multiple registers of style within the Fanonian text, Marriott asks generally how we might think of postcolonial criticism as a style, but more specifically whether there is 'a "blackness" of style' – a question that he suggests Said's style of thought has struggled to come to terms with. In so doing, Marriot addresses a series of related pressing questions: 'What is Fanonism? What is its style? Is it enough to describe the Fanonian text as a refiguring of European texts? What, then, of Fanon's blackness? Does blackness have a style, a late style, whose essence is that of Europe?'

Just as Marriott queries a dominant postcolonial style of thinking, Rebekah Scott's article, '"The dreadful done": Henry James's Style of Abstraction', asks questions of dominant critical styles in ethical criticism. Scott takes the mainstream of ethical criticism – exemplified by its attraction to Henry James as the ethical-stylist par excellence – to task for reducing James's work to neo-Aristotelean virtues like particularity and singularity. Through her own close readings of seemingly anti-social or ethically problematic affects in James's late style (obscurity, obliquity, withdrawal, generalisation, vagueness, intangibility, preoccupation, distraction, bewilderment, and engrossment), Scott shows how 'James pursued forms of creative abstraction' – thus distinguishing him from the particularising of ethical criticism – in order 'to achieve something closer to entanglement: that is to say, deep involvements between characters and between readers and texts.'

This recurring idea of entanglement suggests a sociality of style and again resonates with the 'aesthetics of alterity' and the idea that literary style can apprehend or even generate transformative kinds of relationality.[xli] This takes on especial importance in Alex Houen's 'On Inner Voice, Free Indirect Style, and Lyric', which explores innovative adaptations of free indirect style in lyric writing to imbricate the personal and the social, the individual and the collective, 'inner voice and social discourse'. For Houen, if free indirect style tells us something about the dynamics

between individual positionality on the one hand and social relationality on the other, then not enough has been said about 'how a person relates to their own inner voice'. This implicitly draws Houen into the realm of ethical criticism and its concern with attending to others. For Houen:

> Literary studies have often expounded too limited a view of alterity precisely because they have subscribed to ethical theory like that of Emmanuel Levinas which demarcates ethics as being based on the relation of singular self and other. Yet the contours and dynamics of that relation only emerge for an individual when that person's already interpellated within and by language that frames selfhood with multiple subject positions, both singular and plural.

To apprehend this multiplicity takes on political and ethical urgency, because styles of inner voice and self-address might become 'a matter of learning new ways of listening and speaking to each other, new ways of negotiating how even the intrapersonal speaks and identifies with others'. This comes into sharp focus in Houen's reading of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* (2014) and how Rankine 'fosters an approach to social and racial identifications […] that entails 'a dramatization of the effort required' to identify with others, 'with all its hazards and limits''.

In introducing the articles in this order I have moved from ideas of self-styling (Hurley, Figlerowicz and Figlerowicz) to styles of reading (Marriott, Scott) to how literature might style a reader or ethico-political subjectivity (Houen). In the afterword to this issue David James argues that 'style is never not imbricated in critical practice' and he alerts us to the 'methodological consequentiality' of 'critical discovery that comes with examining style'. For James style is:

> both the conduit for and enactment of a work's expressive mediation of our apprehension of and involvement in the emotional and social worlds it brings into being. Behaving as such, style invites us to contemplate its efficacy as an avenue of contention and contestation.

Running throughout this issue, then, are affective approaches to style, particularly the idea that style is active, a call to action or agency. This is something that I explore in my own article, 'Adjustment-Style: From H. G. Wells to Ali Smith and the Metamodern Novel'. Like Scott I revisit James and the literary ethics that surround his work, arguing that the tenuous divide between the aesthetic novel and the political novel that has emerged from the infamous James-Wells debate is

being bridged by metamodern writers like Smith who treat style as both ethico-political reflection and ethico-political prompt; a way of thinking through paradoxical binds.

Martha Nussbaum, one of the most prominent advocates of Henry James as moral stylist, says 'style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters'.[xlii] This sentence ignited my own scholarly fascination with style when I first encountered it as a student. At the time I took it to mean that literary form and style are inescapably expressive of an author's (or text's, or culture's, or institution's, depending on which side of the aesthetics/Theory argument you come down on) commitments and priorities, their values and ideas. But of course 'matter' could take on a canny double sense, whereby matter doesn't just signify importance or priority but an active sense of how style *works*, such that in writing and reading we are involved in a process of *mattering*; of bringing things into matter, merging the practical and the imaginative. Much of the recent criticism of style certainly makes me re-read Nussbaum's line in this fashion, just as recent criticism convinces that style doesn't only express its sense of what matters, but that in the work of art it is the very thing that matters itself.

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[i] James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), p. 246.
[ii] Ibid.
[iii] Ibid.
[iv] See, for example, Antony Uhlmann, *Thinking in Literature: Joyce, Woolf, Nabokov* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011); Michael Hurley and Marcus Waithe, eds., *Thinking Through Style: Non-Fiction Prose of the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); and, not quite so recent, Michael Wood, *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
[v] My discussion of Wood here builds on ideas initially expressed in an earlier article of mine (a review of Wood's *The Fun Stuff* [2013]), 'Bangs a Drum', *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 February 2013, p. 21.
[vi] James Wood, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), pp. 242-2; Wood, *Irresponsible Self*, p. 73.
[vii] Wood, *Irresponsible Self*, p. 226.
[viii] James Wood, *The Fun Stuff and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), p. 309.
[ix] James Wood, 'Literature Its Own Best Theory?', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 June 1991, p. 14.
[x] Wood, *Irresponsible Self*, p. 168.
[xi] Both quotes Wood, *Broken Estate*, p. 50.
[xii] Wood, *How Fiction Works* (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 175.

[xiii] Wood, *Irresponsible Self*, p. 247.
[xiv] Ibid., p. 168.
[xv] Zadie Smith, 'Love, Actually'. *Guardian*, 1 November 2003, section Review, p. 4.
[xvi] Both quotes from Zadie Smith, 'Fail Better', *Guardian*, 13 January 2007, section three.
[xvii] Zadie Smith, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), p. 71. Here the essay is retitled 'Two Directions for the Novel'.
[xviii] For further discussion of Smith's essay see: David James 'In Defense of Lyrical Realism', *diacritics* 45, no. 4 (2017): 69–91; and Christopher Holmes, 'The Novel's Third Way : Zadie Smith's 'Hysterical Realism'' in Philip Tew, ed., *Reading Zadie Smith: The First Decade and Beyond* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 141-54.
[xix] See Wood, *Fun Stuff*, pp. 102-16.
[xx] Smith, *Changing My Mind*, p. 80.
[xxi] Ibid., p. 78.
[xxii] Wood, *Irresponsible Self*, p. 167.
[xxiii] Ibid., p. 169.
[xxiv] John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas, eds., *The New Aestheticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).
[xxv] Marjorie Levinson, 'What is New Formalism?', *PMLA* , 122:2 (2007), 558-569 (559).
[xxvi] Rónán McDonald, *The Death of the Critic* (Continuum, 2007), p. 146.
[xxvii] Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2015), p. 1.
[xxviii] Adam Thirlwell, *Miss Herbert: An Essay in Five Parts* (London: Vintage, 2009), pp. 430, 277, 278.
[xxix] Ali Smith, 'Style vs Content?', *Guardian*, 18 August 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/aug/18/ali-smith-novelists-approach-art#:~:text=A%20story%20is%20its%20style,of%20one%20sort%20or%20another [accessed 24/05/21].
[xxx] Ali Smith, 'The Novel in the Age of Trump', *New Statesman*, 15 October 2017, https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2017/10/ali-smith-s-goldsmiths-prize-lecture-novel-age-trump [accessed 25/05/21].
[xxxi] Ali Smith, 'Style vs Content?'
[xxxii] In order: Jenny Davidson, *Reading Style: A Life in Sentences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 12; David James, *Discrepant Solace: Contemporary Literature and the Work of Consolation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 56; Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 2; Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 29; Leland de la Durantaye, *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 193; Ben Masters, *Novel Style: Ethics and Excess in English Fiction since the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 173.
[xxxiii] McDonald, *The Death of the Critic*, p. 147.
[xxxiv] Ibid.
[xxxv] On creative writing as a discipline in the US, the classic text is Mark McGurl *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).
[xxxvi] For example, I have written units on style as a concept myself for the Open University's MA in Creative Writing.
[xxxvii] Dorothy J. Hale, 'Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century'. *PMLA*, 124:3 (May 2009), 896–905 (899).
[xxxviii] David James, ed., *Modernism and Close Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 3.
[xxxix] Alex Houen, *Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing since the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 241; Hale, 'Aesthetics and the New Ethics', passim.
[xl] Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style*, p. 56.
[xli] On the aesthetics of alterity and a similar metaphor to entanglement see Dorothy J. Hale, 'Fiction as Restriction: Self-Binding in New Ethical Theories of the Novel', *Narrative*, 15:2 (2007), 187-206.
[xlii] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 3.