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Marielle Macé, *Styles. Critique de nos formes de vie*

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REFERENCES

Macé, Marielle, *Styles. Critique de nos formes de vie* (Paris : Gallimard, 2016), 368 p, ISBN 978-2-07-019764-4

- 1 The notion of style has long been recognised as both a key point of interest and a major source of dispute among specialists of aesthetics. In a growing body of literature, many have discussed its elusive semantic contours, failing to reach any consensus. Marielle Macé's pioneering essay both acknowledges and eschews the long-standing definitional debate, setting out instead to make sense of the very conflicts that surface whenever the notion of style is called forth. A mere look at the table of contents suffices to shed light on the methodological intent that initially stirred the project. Drawing on a significant array of critical discourses (Appadurai, Barthes, Bourdieu, Canguilhem, de Certeau, Foucault, Latour, Leroi-Gourhan, Lévi-Strauss, Mauss, Merleau-Ponty, Sahlins, Simmel, Uexhül...) and on an international corpus of prose and verse (Agee, Balzac, Baudelaire, Michaux, Naipaul, Ponge, Valéry...), Macé proves to be less interested in the theory of style these authors might help her sustain than in exposing the variety of morphological conflicts implicit in different practices of style. Engaging the issue from an interdisciplinary perspective, the author opens up an uncharted critical field: she calls for an extensive understanding of style in view of turning a somehow slippery aesthetic notion into a working concept for the human and social sciences as a whole.
- 2 The book is divided into five sections. The opening chapter—"POUR UNE « STYLISTIQUE DE L'EXISTENCE »"—serves as an introduction whereby the author circumscribes the object, method and limits of her study. A specialist of French literature, Macé first insists that she intends to reach well beyond the boundaries of aesthetic considerations so as to extend the study of style to all those commonplace manners, habits, bodily movements

and rhythms that are part and parcel of any form of lived experience. The author thus establishes a decisive contention, arguing that forms are not to be contemplated because they are grand or distinguished, but because life always presents itself as a site of morphological variations (“Le « style », en cela, ne s’oppose ni au banal, ni au commun, mais à l’indifférence” [20]). Yet, Macé maintains that literature is neither to be cast aside as a mere corpus of examples nor to serve as a methodological frame of reference: if the endeavour to consider forms (to describe them with justice, care, but also rage if need be) is defined as the collective task incumbent upon both social sciences and literature, the latter is praised as the invaluable medium whereby a genuine attention to the stylistic dimension in life can develop (“[La littérature] est une entrée en lutte contre toutes les façons, y compris savantes, d’être inattentif au « comment »” [50-51]). The author does not fail to account for her focus on the notion of style. Style is a polemical word. What is thought of as a stylistic form is neither neutral nor final. Identifying a style—a system of forms—suggests a double movement: it implies both paying and calling attention to *forms that matter*. In this respect, to recognise a style as such is necessarily a bias, a commitment of sorts, a source of dispute and, above all, of value. To speak of style (as opposed to another, epistemologically more stable concept) therefore brings into focus the fascinating gap that stands between the issue of forms and that of value. The following three chapters investigate three different morphological patterns, that is, three conflicting ways of looking at these forms that shape our existences, three “styles of style” (39; translation mine).

- 3 The second chapter—“MODALITÉS”—dwells on an extensive critical corpus including Jean-Christophe Bailly, Georges Canguilhem, Michel de Certeau, Bruno Latour, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Marcel Mauss, Adolf Portmann and Jacob Von Uexhüll. From Mauss’s anthropology of style to de Certeau’s analysis of daily practices, Macé shows evidence of a common form of thought that cares to pay attention to modes of being rather than essences (“non pas une foule de choses, mais une foule de façons d’être une chose; non seulement une foule d’hommes, mais une foule de manières d’être homme” [57]). “Manners,” “ways of,” “modes” all suggest an understanding of life as a self-editing corpus of variations—a milieu more than an environment. The nuance is critical to a modal understanding of style, for to acknowledge the existence of this plurality of modes is to prove able to contemplate novel, unthought-of morphological directions. In this regard, the sociologists, anthropologists and philosophers studied throughout the chapter rise above mere phenomenological observations to gesture towards a conception of style as a mode of ethical positioning. Macé lays emphasis on the poetry of Francis Ponge, whose verse she reads as an endeavour to give voice to such a plurality of ways of being—of being a man, an animal, a plant or a tree, but also an inanimate object. The poet’s aesthetic and ethical effort is shown to lie in his resolve to “qualify”—to describe with care and justice—the forms that stir the surface of the sensible world, his task turning out to be exemplary of a duty towards attentiveness. The bias implicit in this first conception of style is unambiguously expressed: modal modes of thought refuse taxonomies and hierarchies, finding value instead in plurality itself. A modal conception of style, Macé concludes, cannot be estranged from an acute consciousness of the fragility of forms of life that can disappear for want of care.
- 4 To recognise style as a phenomenon of distinction calls for a radical shift in attention. Where modal thinking values observation over analysis, the logics discussed in the third chapter—“DISTINCTION”—favour comparisons, hierarchies and taxonomies.

Although first and best theorised in Pierre Bourdieu's seminal work, distinctive understandings of style are shown to thread from the early-nineteenth-century novels of Honoré de Balzac to the sociology of Georg Simmel or Erving Goffman. These tend to interpret styles as unequivocal, binary systems of forms that make sense no longer *in relation* to one another but *in opposition* to one another. As to forms themselves, they become positioning forces on a social exchequer of dominating and dominated classes—forms, that is, of nothing but social violence. Bourdieu's examination of style, in particular, turns it into an object to be suspected—indeed, to be accused and tracked down—due to its unambiguous siding with the dominating classes. Macé is particularly convincing in arguing that distinctive thoughts stand as another morphological bias, but one that tends to ignore or to disqualify (to accuse of deference or ingenuity) any other thought on the issue of forms. As could be expected, this chapter is by far the most critical in the whole essay. Right from the start, Macé makes it clear that she does not aim at debunking the concept of distinction as such, but rather at questioning its intellectual monopoly over humanities in general and social sciences in particular. What drives the critical stance here is a belief that intellectual monopolies do tend to confiscate any sort of reflection on an object. As it happens, the author analyses how similar understandings of style as a force of estrangement from the commonplace have developed in the advertising discourse. Because they turn style into a value in itself, both distinctive theories and the advertising discourse have become modes of confiscation of the stylistic debate. Dismissing a form of naïve search for “authenticity” as an alternative, Macé argues for more nuanced modes of attention (“Car ce n'est pas parce qu'il y a des gestes qu'il y a des postures ; ce n'est pas parce qu'il y a du sens qu'il y a des signaux ; et ce n'est pas parce qu'il y a de la valeur qu'il y a du classement” [167]). She turns here to the prose work of British writer V.S. Naipaul, which she praises as a dutiful exercise in this subtler grain of attention. For Macé, Naipaul endeavours not to identify, not to recognise an object too promptly. Rather, he allows for uncertainty and hesitancy into his prose. Literature accordingly surfaces as a precious ally, for it proves able to occupy with patience the discrepancy that stands between what is said of a worldly object and the complexity of the object considered.

- 5 The fourth chapter—“INDIVIDUATIONS”—swerves from a conception of style as a strictly defining feature to dwell on the philosophical category of individuation. Neither identifying nor comparative, style is to be understood, from an individuating perspective, as forms of singularity that exceed the biographic subject. Gestures, manners and rhythms are no longer to be thought of as signifiers of identity or as signs addressed on a social scene, but as temporary practices that can be appropriated and dis-appropriated, and, therefore, that question the very notion of a secure identity. Macé insists that implicit in this line of thought is the divorce from aesthetic practices such as dandyism, which tend both to superimpose forms and identity and to turn style into an absolute, grand value. In short, individuation is more concerned with a practice of the world and of the relationship between the self and the world, than with a practice of the self (“Le style ici ne désigne pas une œuvre originale, distinctive [...], mais une « relationnalité » neuve, autrement dit une nouvelle façon d'entrer en rapport avec le monde et avec soi” [212]). Throughout the chapter, Macé points out evidence of individuating thoughts and practices in James Agee, Arjun Appadurai, Roland Barthes, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Marshall Sahlins and Paul Valéry. She also regularly analyses the work of French poet Henri Michaux. Unlike Ponge, who is interested in a variety of ways of being, Michaux contemplates singularities as forces of

alteration. After breaking his right arm, he writes for instance of his “left style” as another, more clumsy, uneducated way of inhabiting his own body. Such a “crisis of style” is shown to be a genuine individuating experience, for it allows the poet to temporarily experience unfamiliar modes of being. Individuating thinking therefore defines forms as points of struggle for a subject, who is invited to appropriate a style while rejecting another. It follows that individuation is a fundamentally ethically-engaging stylistic bias.

- 6 The closing chapter—“D'AUTRES FORMES POUR NOS VIES”—offers a series of acute observations on the ethical dimension implicit in any reflection on style. The author broaches in particular the relationship between style and anger. Building on her previous developments, Macé argues that the urge to contemplate and to describe forms rarely is divorced from a form of rage, that is, an explicit or implicit call for others forms of life. Whilst standing firm against backward-looking postures, the author still praises Theodor Adorno, Pier Paolo Pasolini or the later Charles Baudelaire’s angered musings for their alertness to forms (“c’est à mes yeux une vertu que de savoir être blessé par les formes si c’est être acharné à les voir, à dire quels genres de vie elles installent et quels genres de vie elles détruisent” [301]). Insofar as rage defines a world of forms as being habitable or inhabitable, it always voices a form of ethical concern. Heading towards her concluding remarks, Macé phrases the overall critical intent implicitly carried out throughout her study: to denounce all forms of confiscation of the issue of style—“external” (learned, commercial), but also “internal” (this peculiar form of confiscation that is carelessness and disregard). She follows for instance Jean-Christophe Bailly in his questioning the concept of “non-place” (Marc Augé), which tends, in its critical sweep, to disqualify a great many forms of life (“Il n’y a pas de non-lieux, il n’y a pas de vies nues : il y a des lieux mal qualifiés, et des vies mal traitées, à regarder pour cela en face” [297]).
- 7 Marielle Macé’s finesse and insight command admiration. Inquiring into the fascinating gap that stands between the issues of forms and value, style and ethics, *Styles* opens up a whole new field of interest. The author is masterful in dissolving the boundaries that stand between social sciences and literature, and, despite the variety of critical thoughts considered, consistent and nuanced analyses are offered throughout. Hers is a careful, rare essay that rises well above its methodological ambitions to offer a major contribution to a renewed understanding of style. It also carries out a valuable re-examination of the significance of literature in the humanities, revealing that specialists of prose and verse can speak not only *about*, but also *with* literature.

INDEX

Keywords: style, stylistics, gestures, manners, rhythms, modality, distinction, individuation, literature, social sciences, philosophy

Mots-clés: style, stylistique, gestes, manières, rythmes, modalité, distinction, individuation, littérature, sciences sociales, philosophie

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