

**Style Exercises outside Blanchot's Space(s):
Mario Aquilina, *The Event of Style in Literature*,
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It is not the first time that Mario Aquilina, who lectures at the Department of English in the University of Malta, has asked himself the question, 'Does style matter?'. His book, *The Event of Style in Literature*, is his second major contribution to the field, after his thought-provoking essay, "'This song to come, this reader to become": Reading Blanchot's Style of Paradox in René Char', included in the volume *Style in Theory: Between Literature and Philosophy*, edited by Ivan Callus, James Corby, Gloria Lauri-Lucente (Bloomsbury, 2012): a remarkable collection that contains a series of engaging reflections on style manifested in literature or philosophy. In addition to this, his specialism in the area was recently consolidated with another study on style in Shakespeare's sonnets, published by *Oxford Literary Review*.¹

Mario Aquilina's innovative book, *The Event of Style in Literature*, is a profound and erudite guide to style that mainly proceeds through a discussion on Derrida, Blanchot and Gadamer, coming to a brilliant close reading of Paul Celan's poetry. This occurs in spite of the author's modest claim that he does not intend 'to propose a more effective or reliable procedure to use in analysing style', but to make us aware 'of what it means to think of style in a way that is attentive to the singularity of the poetic and that responds to its performative force'. (7)

Chapter One, 'Traditional Theories of Style', draws on Roland Barthes's claim that 'style is never anything but metaphor', to follow Laurent Milesi's view that 'metaphora is always already, in our western heritage, another name for transport of trans(-)lation' (8) and to go back to the disagreements between Classical and Renaissance rhetoricians and logicians in order to see why philosophy 'often defines itself, precisely, on the basis of an opposition with style' (19). Here Aquilina reveals that both Derrida and Blanchot used a style that veered 'towards the poetic', in a practice that furthered their attempt to surpass 'the rigid generic borders between philosophy and literature or poetry' (19).

The second chapter, dedicated to Gadamer, focuses on normativity and unity, recurrent concerns of the philosopher, since '[s]tyle begins as a normative term but then becomes also descriptive of unity' (57). Developing his hermeneutic approach towards the 'fusion of horizons', Gadamer did not think of a work as having a necessarily self-

¹ Here, Aquilina sees style in Shakespeare's sonnets as 'an event rather than simply rooted, teleocratically, in its source and origin' which 'does not mean that there are no strategies of appropriation. The poet signs repeatedly both for himself and for the fair youth. However, the signing is subject by countersigning for its very existence; it is inscribed by moment of dispossession and defacement. The force of the literary – at work in the event of style in the sonnets — is not the effect of a monumentalisation of the name into the work through style. It is more the effect of an internal re-mark that opens that which is unique and irreplaceable to an infinity of further countersignatures. [Mario Aquilina, 'The Event of Style in Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Oxford Literary Review* 37.1 (2015): 135.]

containing style, since ‘the work cannot be conceived as a static object for our consumption and detached analysis – a text with a content and a style that we can dissect and classify through scientific observation – as that would involve “rais[ing] ourselves above the course of events”’ (58). At this point, Aquilina quite rightly investigates how Gadamer’s hermeneutics, which holds on to tradition, can be compatible with creation and invention, ‘including stylistic innovation’ (63) and concludes that the philosopher’s openness is similar to Heidegger’s towards ‘surprise’, with the difference that Gadamer never abandoned a constant concern with ‘the reader, audience or anyone who encounters the work’ (64). As far as the translatability of a text is concerned, literature opposes dialectical philosophy precisely for its ‘sliding scale towards translatability’ (65), because it ‘suspends a referential relation to truth’ (67). That a literary text must be read in ‘its singularity’ becomes both obvious and contested in Gadamer’s reading of Celan’s poetry, which Aquilina finds consistent with his general ‘problematization of expressive theories of literature’ (79).

‘Blanchot and the Anarchic Anachrony of Style’, the third chapter, is a profound and lucid guide to the French writer’s work that traces sources of Blanchot’s practice of ‘literature’ as a form of philosophical thinking. This review gives significant space to consideration of this part of the book both because of its centrality to Aquilina’s argument and also because of *Word and Text*’s ongoing conversation with Blanchot’s work across various contributions over this journal’s issues. The chapter starts from Blanchot’s ‘problematic relation’ to literary studies and from this identification, variously, as a ‘critical essayist’, an ‘experimental author’ or a ‘philosopher’, which places him ‘in the strand of continental literary theory’, alongside figures like de Man, Foucault, Derrida, Heidegger and Nietzsche (87). As Blanchot’s texts on Barthes or Kafka show, the French thinker did not conceive style as ‘the proper expression of the writer, someone’s property by choice or necessity’ (90). In *The Infinite Conversation* Blanchot imagined the neutral that represented ‘the erasure of the self in writing in terms of a movement from the personal “je” (“I”) to the impersonal “il” (“he” or “it”)’ (91). However, the neutral voice, Aquilina warns us, is ‘not an objective, detached style or an aspect of the work appearing as an autonomous aesthetic object that integrates style and content, but a suspension of the power to say “I”’ (91). Aquilina takes further Michael Holland’s claim that Blanchot’s later texts are a ‘language of the fragment, both in theory and practice’ to demonstrate that actually the French thinker’s fragmentary style can be better described as ‘anti-theoretical [rather] than as something which Blanchot searches for’ (93-94). Besides, and as several others have exposed, not least Jean-Luc Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe,² Blanchot’s fragment originates in the tradition of Romanticism, a literary trend that Blanchot regarded as ‘a promising way of opening up new possibilities of thought’ (94). After engaging with Blanchot’s readings of René Char’s fragment, Aquilina goes on to describe Blanchot’s style of ‘unresolved oppositions’ as ‘paradoxical anachrony’ (96). Otherwise, the relation between poet and poem is ‘an impossible future becoming’ (97), and ‘the fragmentary’ conceived in ‘its performative eventhood’ ‘problematizes, while not completely excluding, any would-be

² Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism Intersections* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988).

stylistic identification of the writer of the fragmentary' (98). Blanchot's neuter was resistant to categorization especially in his later work, and his problematisation of genre especially as far as the *récit/roman* dichotomy is concerned was a way to push 'towards a thinking of style in terms of singular performativity or eventhood' (109). Moreover, Aquilina suggests that 'the fragmentary style, a language of self-contradiction without a fixed centre, takes philosophy towards poetry' (113).

A major text that was examined in detail in this issue, *The Infinite Conversation*, partially responds, in its formal hybridity, to the question of style – the 'how to write'—and this is precisely connected to 'fragmentary and plural speech' (115). After all, we must turn to the last pages of the book to discover that Blanchot witnessed the absence of the author of this magnificent *entretien*:

I would like to state that this book, in its articulated-inarticulated, mobile relation—that of its play—brings together texts for the most part written from 1953 to 1965. This indication of dates, referring to a long period of time, explains why I take them to be already posthumous, that is to say, regard them as being nearly anonymous.

Thus belonging to everyone and even written, always written, not by a single person, but by several: all those to whom falls the task of maintaining and prolonging the exigency to which I believe these texts, and with an obstinacy that today astonishes me, ceaselessly seek to respond, even unto the absence of the book they designate in vain.³

In Aquilina's view, '[t]he fragmentary style, in resisting development, thus returns to the poetic, to the literary as a guest for the non-essential essence of literature, steering away from the logical and clean style expected of philosophical discourse' (117). This is reflected upon in relation the aphoristic credo that Blanchot puts forward in *The Infinite Conversation*:

To identify by separating, speech of understanding,
To go beyond by negating, speech of reason,
There remains literary speech that goes beyond by redoubling, creates by repeating, and by saying over infinitely, says a first and unique time even this word too many where language falters.⁴

Blanchot's reading of Celan, which Aquilina defines as having a 'magnetising and yet distancing effect' (129), proves to be the perfect answer to the question of how one can 'discover the obscure without exposing it to view'.⁵ This is in consonance with the dynamics of the poet's work, where Celan's poetry can be read alongside the explanatory prose which is 'often a theoretical discussion' of or 'application to his own poetry' (126).

Chapter 4, 'Derrida and Counter-Institutional Style', takes the case of the French philosopher whose writing, similarly to Blanchot's, 'responds to the singular demand of the other *with* style and *in* style' (130, Aquilina's emphasis). For Derrida, the 'necessity of style' is otherwise, Aquilina claims, 'a simple yet radically subversive challenge to certain kinds of philosophical thought' (131), which is the very key to understanding

³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. and Foreword by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 435.

⁴ Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 344.

⁵ Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 51.

why Derrida's thinking 'of' or 'in style' led to some critics taking him for 'a postmodernist thinker who replaces meaning and truth with style' (132). For Derrida, the essence of the sign was 'conditioned by a structural iterability that always "splits the identity of the sign a priori"', a view which made his position different from the traditional approach according to which the sign was ideal and 'immune from the variability of the particulars' (135). Its iterability made it precisely 'open to the necessary possibility of citation and thus contingency and eventhood' (135).

An excellent discussion on plagiarism as 'a particularly pressing question in the context of the contemporary university' (140) follows, a debate that starts from Emily Apter's interpretation of Derrida's arguments that made her conclude that 'one would arrive at the conclusion that there can be no such thing as artistic robbery since all texts are essentially thievable pieces of language' (141).⁶ Taking into account Claire Colebrook's point of view in 'On the Uses and Abuses of Repetition',⁷ Aquilina describes Derrida's style 'as a kind of *informed* plagiarism, whereby the writing of the other is echoed, inhabited and redoubled in a way that preserves the voice of the other as other while also carrying it away in singular directions' (141), yet 'a style that reiterates the style of the other without trying to present itself as an original is not a form of plagiarism [...] but an acknowledgment of being "within" language and hence always already countersigning and asking to be countersigned' (141-142). Aquilina brings further arguments from 'Signsponge', where Derrida's understanding of Ponge's signature 'can be read as a critique of attribution studies' (143). As far as Derrida's 'critique of institutions' is concerned, Aquilina's demonstration goes in the direction of emphasizing the word 'invention', which he regards as marking one of Derrida's main contributions to the theory of style, meaning that 'invention should not be thought of simply in relation to an origin located in a specific point in time but, like the signature, also in relation to the (future) countersignatures that it demands' (146). Aquilina investigates a Derridean response to other texts, notably *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, as well 'the way in which the French philosopher questioned the relation to the law or the institution, in the comments on [Kafka's] 'Before the Law' (153-154).

Derrida's reading of *Romeo and Juliet* is an illustration of 'writing in fragments or in aphorisms that perform time differently' (155). In 'Aphorism Countertime', Derrida disclosed that:

Each aphorism, like *Romeo and Juliet*, each aphoristic series has its particular duration. Its temporal logic prevents it from sharing all its time with another place of discourse, with another discourse, with the discourse of the other. Impossible synchronization.

⁶ Within the actual academic context across Europe, Aquilina's debate is very challenging, since we cannot forget that nowadays, with very few exceptions, most countries implemented, similarly to Great Britain, if not A Research Excellence Framework (the successor of Research Assessment Exercise), at least similar research exercises according to which universities are graded and given 'stars' within national frames according to the research and especially the originality and impact of the research they produce. According to REF, universities' submissions are evaluated in terms of originality, significance and rigor as follows: four star (world-leading items), three star (internationally excellent items), two star (recognized internationally), one star (recognized only nationally) or they may be unclassified, because their quality falls below the standard of nationally recognized work.

⁷ Claire Colebrook, 'On the Uses and Abuses of Repetition', *Angelaki* 14.1 (2009): 41.

I am speaking here of the discourse of time, of its marks, of its dates, of the course of time and of the essential digression which dislocates the time of desires and carries the step of those who love one another off course.⁸

Aquilina's reading of what he calls 'the temporal structure of style' argues that while this is 'linear and teleocratic', it allows the reader 'to think style non-teleocratically'. This something that can be seen reflected better in the original French text, as the very title of the translated essay, where Derrida's *contretemps* becomes 'countertime', 'thus suggest[s] going *against* time, but in both English and French "contretemps" also suggests unexpected accidents, which may impede your progression, mishaps of the type that recur in Shakespeare's play.' (155) The non-teleocratic may suggest that 'Derrida's aphorisms may be off-beat, out of joint, proceeding at an inconsistent tempo, varying in length, focus and direction' (155). Yet, when one looks at Derrida's engagement with Shakespeare's plays, one can see that he approached *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, all open to interpretation and inspiring a *performing* of style. What Aquilina says about 'Aphorism Countertime' – namely that it 'is located (im)possibly in a series of singular aphorisms, which are also countersignatures' (156) – is also available in the case of texts such as 'The Time is Out of Joint'⁹, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une traduction "relevante"?'¹⁰ and even the fragments on *Hamlet* from *Specters of Marx*.¹¹ One need only think of the way in which terms like 'spectropoetics' or 'hauntology', so central to *Specters of Marx*, have become influential markers of the Derridean encounter with Shakespeare.

Another question that preoccupies Mario Aquilina is the question of translation, since, not unlike Blanchot's texts, Derrida's work, especially in his interpretation of works belonging to writers such as Ponge or Joyce, has also always been a challenge to translators. As Derrida asserted repeatedly, he both cultivated and did not cultivate 'the untranslatable':

Not that I am cultivating the untranslatable. Nothing is untranslatable, however little time is given to the expenditure or expansion of a competent discourse that measures itself against the power of the original. [...] In a sense, nothing is untranslatable; but in another sense, everything is untranslatable; translation is another name for the impossible. In another sense of the word 'translation', of course, and from one sense to the other – it is easy for me always to hold firm between these two hyperboles which are fundamentally the same, and always translate each other.¹²

Aquilina emphasizes that the recurrent 'dynamics of singularity and of the signature/countersignature' questions translatability itself.¹³ Derrida's thoughts on

⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Aphorism Countertime', in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 418.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'The Time is out of Joint', in Anselm Haverkamp (ed), *Deconstruction Is/ in America* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1995), 14-38.

¹⁰ See Jacques Derrida, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une traduction "relevante"?', *Actes des quizièmes assises de la traduction littéraire (Arles, 1998)* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1999), 21-48.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Magnus, Bernd, Cullenberg, Stephen (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

¹² Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 56-57.

¹³ For a very interesting account on the untranslatable, see also the recent contribution of Marc Crépon, 'The Invention of the Idiom: the Event of the Untranslatable', in *Paragraph*, 'Translation and the Untranslatable', ed. Michael Syrotinski, 38.2 (2015): 189-203.

translation and style make Aquilina compare him with Blanchot, in the sense that the former ‘echoes’ the latter’s view of reading as a necessary aspect of the structure of the work and of translation as not a secondary, derivative “task”, but an inherent demand lodged within the eventhood as commentary’ (161). A final discussion in Chapter 4 is dedicated to what Aquilina calls ‘the style of interruption, as caesura, as the performative event that arises from the lacunas, temporal suspension and moments of inversion’ (176). This is a style that Aquilina finds very similar to that marking Celan’s poetry, where ‘punctuation, white spaces, syntax and paronomasia’ do not ‘function on the basis of a correspondence between signifier and signified’ (178). It could be remarked that Aquilina could have resorted also to Derrida’s essays on Mallarmé in this demonstration, yet his focus on Celan’s texts does offer a consistency and clarity that compensates for such a lack.

Chapter 5, ‘Stones and Flowers: Non-Teleocratic Readings of Style’, contains a series of readings of the style of modernism, via Jameson who analyses ‘the modernist commodification of style’ in Conrad’s work (185), and provides us with a rare critique of cognitive stylistics through a consideration of Gadamer’s, Derrida’s and Blanchot’s works. Carter and Stockwell, the two pillars of cognitive stylistics, withdrew from Gadamer’s theory on hermeneutics the assumption that “readers come [to interpretation] with existing memories, beliefs and both personal and social objectives,” thus “condition[ing]” “the actualisation” of literary texts,’ yet they missed a fundamental issue in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, which is ‘the emphasis on the singularity of the poetic that defies universally applicable methodology’ (191). The move from the specific to the general that Carter and Stockwell propose is thus incompatible with Blanchot’s or Derrida’s reading of, for instance, Celan. Celan’s metaphors cannot be classified by means of conceptual metaphor theory, and ‘even if style is identified as the peculiar way in which a particular poet presents or extends previously existing conceptual metaphors, style is still seen as a conduit for content, ultimately unimportant except as in its teleocratic triggering of schemata within the reader’ (201). And indeed, in Derrida’s view, as I mentioned before, Celan, similarly to Mallarmé and Blanchot, among others, was ‘sensitive to the crisis of the literary institution, to “the end of literature” [...] beyond Celan’s “absolute poem” that “there is not” [“das es nicht gibt”].’¹⁴

Aquilina’s proposal to think about style ends with reflections prompted by what he terms the event of the style in Celan’s ‘Flower’. Celan’s poetry can be interpreted only via ‘a singular reading’, as those of Derrida or Blanchot; Celan’s ‘Flower’— ‘a citation, a name, a title – at one and the same time, represents and brings into being the world-building of language that is the very heart of the poetic’ (203).

Before we close the book, Aquilina asks us, via a subtle paraphrase of Blanchot’s essay on Beckett,¹⁵ ‘what now?’. What shall we do about the future of style, and how to

¹⁴ Arleen Ionescu, ‘Spacing Literature between Mallarmé, Blanchot and Derrida’, *Parallax* 21.1 (2015): 59.

¹⁵ Maurice Blanchot, ‘Where Now? Who Now?’, in *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 210-217. Incidentally, in my own essay, ‘Waiting for Blanchot’, I used the same paraphrase, transforming it into a similar question with addressability to the future of waiting and related to Fredric Jameson’s ‘The End of Temporality’ that served as a similarly inconclusive conclusion of my thoughts on waiting with Beckett and Blanchot: ‘no further beginnings being foreseen, it can only be the end of something else.’ (Fredric Jameson, ‘The End of Temporality’,

conclude if we are to believe that we are experiencing a crisis of style, questioning whether the event of style remains relevant in the future of theory. There are in his opinion a short answer and a secondary one. Firstly, yes: it would be still relevant 'because style is ineluctable in any discussion of the relation between the specific and the general, the unique and the repeatable'. Secondly, it would be relevant because one has to 'pre-occupy oneself too much with programmability, thus foreclosing the force of the event of style that may or may not arrive in every singular instance, differently' (212). In making these two points on the relevance of style convincingly, Aquilina's book acquires the pertinence that it does in contemporary literary studies.

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Critical Inquiry 29.4 (2003): 695-718.) [See Arleen Ionescu, 'Waiting for Blanchot: A Third Act for Beckett's Play', *Partial Answers* 11.1 (2013): 82-83].