

Style

Paul Valéry

Translated by Ralph Manheim

STYLE—so pure is the word in sound and aspect, it would be a delightful name for some choice being, a rare bird, a character in a fairy tale. It is one of those names whose musical quality suggests a language whose words would sound out their meaning.

But not at all. *Style* was first of all an engraving tool. In the hands of a Virgil or a Tacitus it incised in thin black wax the illustrious verses, the celebrated prose, a part of which has miraculously come down to us. Later, the stylus became a pen and the wax became paper. But even before the hard, cutting point had given way to the supple tip of a sharpened quill, the name *style* had passed from the instrument to the hand that guides it, and from the hand to the man from whom the hand derives its way of doing, and power to do, whatever it does.

It is these successive transitions of one and the same term from idea to idea that imperceptibly develop the intrinsic poetry of language.

Thus *style* signifies the manner in which a man expresses himself, *regardless of what he expresses*, and it is held to reveal his nature quite apart from his actual thought—for thought has no style. It is in the act of expression that the man distinguishes himself. Here we find his characteristic rhythms, the temperamental constants of his character, his verbal

resources which may or may not be very original, his habitual methods, and the enthusiasms or doubts that recur amid the diversity of his written or spoken discourse. All these elements constitute his *style*. But in among them, it should not be forgotten, there slips the curiously insinuating and active faculty of simulation or dissimulation which sometimes becomes dominant.

Thus what makes the style is not merely the mind applied to a particular action; it is the *whole* of a living system expended, imprinted, and made recognizable in expression. It is compounded of consciousness and unconsciousness, of spontaneity and effort; and sometimes calculation enters in. A work of art or an action may be executed with science or skill without disclosing style. A certain negligence does no harm in the matter of style; but neither does care, even excessive care, do away with it. In some men the will breaks through and reveals the sustained energy of their designs; in others indifference is manifest and it too is style; and there are still others who cultivate their carelessness, not unaware that it can take on the value of a style.

But a man's characteristic manner of doing things, *his style*, is not always praiseworthy. There are bad styles. Properly, the word means something more than manner of being or doing, and this "something"

is not easily defined. I believe that a good style implies a kind of *organization of originality*, a harmony that excludes the excesses of the imagination. Extravagance and eccentricity burst the bounds of a good style. Untempered caprice is unbecoming to it. Everyone agrees that a tiger has a very different style from a monkey: it has magnificent balance; the monkey is all instability, futile gambols, aimless leaps.

Good style should suggest a very perceptible but indefinable law, which tempers the individual character of acts or works and lends them the dignity of a type or model. A personality then acquires the interest of an original, of a unique specimen which stands out from among the collection of similar beings that is the human race; it becomes a kind of deviation toward the ideal.

Nothing is more devoid of style than a product of mechanical or imitable fabrication. Consequently I deplore (though it is too late) the use of our word to designate an epoch or a school of architecture or of ornamental art, for styles of this kind are definable and imitable; commercial abuse of this verbal abuse has even given us the expression “*meubles de style*” (period furniture), and we know what that means.

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