

REVIEW ESSAY:

THE STYLE UNDERGROUND

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Refiguring Style: Possibilities for Writing Pedagogy. Edited by T.R. Johnson and Tom Pace. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2005.

Gary Tate's 1977 and 1987 volumes of bibliographic essays on work in composition provided state-of-the-art surveys of resources available to teachers and scholars. Edward P.J. Corbett's essays on style provided rich discussion on the topic, and offered further resources, including bibliographies, for locating recent work. Style seemed poised for expansion, even as theorizing raced to incorporate social, cultural, and political involvements in rhet/comp research and teaching. It is one of the paradoxes of the discipline that when style was most needed to understand the way language works in the variety of human endeavors it went underground — called on, but not by its name, employed unwittingly and very often without rigor.

T.R. Johnson and Tom Pace have assembled a collection of essays in hope of restoring style to prominence in teaching. The title, *Refiguring Style: Possibilities for Writing Pedagogy*, promises new ideas for writing teachers. Divided into four sections, the book offers views on style's recent history in composition, on style theory, and on teaching style. The editors' introduction asserts that style has been absent from professional discussion and from classrooms for twenty years, and it's past due for a return — for style is "an exciting tool for meaning making and a focus for critical thinking" (x). This last may indeed be news for the editors and the authors, and it may need to be said; the sharp decline of published work focused explicitly on style in the past twenty

years must have resulted in the capacities of style eluding many in our profession. It's refreshing to hope that style's near exile from publication venues in composition may experience a reversal.

The first section of the book, "What Happened: The Rise and Fall of Stylistics in Composition," elicits expectations of definitive statements. In "Style and the Renaissance of Composition Studies," Tom Pace reviews the work and reception of three rhetoricians whose thinking on style was prominent from the mid-sixties to the mid-eighties: two are based in linguistics, Francis Christensen's generative rhetoric and Winston Weathers' Grammar A and Grammar B; the third is Ed Corbett's revival of classical rhetoric. In "Where Is Style Going? Where Has It Been?" Elizabeth Weiser reports on the demise of articles on style in the NCTE journal *College Composition and Communication* and finds a steep drop-off from a high point in 1981. She attributes the decline to the social turn, which emphasized politics and forbade the textual analysis that is the stylistician's grounding. Weiser is on the mark, but for whom is this news? (An answer: for those who were in graduate schools in the 90s, as Robert J. Connors noted in his 2000 *College English* essay, "The Erasure of the Sentence," the audience the editors and many of the authors seem to take for their audience.) It would have been better had Weiser overviewed more journals than *CCC*, a journal whose editor in the 1980s chose not to publish linguistic-based research. It would have been good at least to mention that compositionists paid little attention to functional stylistics, if not to speculate on why they didn't, which developed during the 1980s and could have given the years of social/political theorizing a pragmatic textual and contextual grounding.

Why did the valuable tools of functional stylistic analysis have almost no impact in composition? A partial answer follows in Rebecca Moore Howard's defense of functional stylistics, one of the best essays in the book. Howard usefully traces the political divide between textualists and contextualists in composition. Yet, even here, the work in functional stylistics that has been growing since David Birch and Michael O'Toole's 1988 ground-breaking

collection, *Functions of Style*, receives no mention despite its easy relevance to teachers and scholars. In view of Corbett's long, in-depth inclusion of style research in his state-of-the-art reviews, I was left wondering after reading these three essays whether style's demise is more attributable to the antagonism to work in other fields (linguistics, philosophy of language, literary studies) than to the social turn.

Part II, "Belles Lettres and Composition," seems (unwittingly?) to confirm this guess. While Johnson and Pace propose in their introduction to refigure style as "a kind of bridge by which we can lead our students—and each other—beyond counterproductive binaries, such as those between form and content, composition and literature, and between teaching writing as a service course and as a tool for critical thinking" (x), the segregation of pedagogy drawn from literary writing from Part III, "Teaching Prose Style," seems an odd solidification of binaries. However, three of the most interesting and useful essays in the book are three in Part II, all by writers—fiction, non-fiction, and poet—who draw on their knowledge of craft to teach students. Allison Alsup turns back from argument to the centrality of the craft of persuasion to teach effective shaping of argument. Melissa Goldthwaite offers classroom lessons for "playing with echo"—learning to craft effective and powerful varieties of repetition. J. Scott Farrin shares his methods for teaching voice, which is probably the most important aspect of style to teach and the most difficult for even experienced writers to get right. These three essayists detail workable and effective lessons I am eager to try in my classes. They alone are well-worth the \$26.95 paperback price.

These three essays implicate a truer view into what happened to style: folks often do not, and did not, recognize what style encompasses. James Moffett ostensibly underplayed style, yet his curriculum sequences were based on shifts in point of view and acquiring the strategies for voice. Social turn theory also depended on voice, and more generally depended on the methods for analyzing "the way language works," as James Berlin put it

when advocating social epistemic rhetoric. Essays in Part III and Part IV continue to reclaim more of the traditional territory of style as the way language is used. Nicole Amare returns to a traditional distinction between grammar as formal description and style as usage in particular instances. Lisa Baird relates how she teaches three kinds of style—contemplative, classic, and reflexive—to give students a range of approaches suited to a variety of situations, to help “with analyzing texts in terms of language use,” and to distinguish the how of saying from content (179). William J. Carpenter provides a quick overview of some basics to M.A.K. Halliday’s functional grammar, on which functional (or critical) stylistics is based, and presents both lengthy and short options for teaching analysis of experience, agency, relationship, and meaning in writing.

Peter Clements writes the most cogent view of what happened to style in the field of composition and how style fits easily and well within genre theory. He also provides a well-thought out description for helping students learn to recognize genre features in text, and to understand implications of genre so as to write more skillfully with genre features in mind. His essay may have fit better in Part I, switched with the last essay there, which is not on style history but is a teaching application. I recommend reading what Clements lays out before reading the narrower historicizing in the Part I essays, if you want a clearer and more complete view of what happened to style as composition rose to disciplinary status and ousted linguistics as irrelevant to its work.

I wish I could report that the promise of the book’s final section, “New Definitions of Style,” came to fulfillment. Only one of the four essays actually attempts a new definition: “Style as a System: Toward a Cybernetic Model of Composition,” by Drew Loewe. The essay is intelligent, drawing on updates of the 60-plus-year-old field initiated by Norman Wiener. Unfortunately, viewing style as a system is equally old, as developed by European structuralists and advanced in the forties and fifties by scholars like Leo Spitzer and Roman Jakobson who forged the New Stylistics.

Clements returns to the communication triad dismissed by some of the preceding essays for not taking into account social and political contexts. Loewe adds feedback loops to the text, writer, and audience dimensions to account for a two-way flow of influencing forces. A longer view of the history of style might have sharpened what Loewe's view has to offer. As it is, I do not see that the piece makes an advance on late twentieth century thinking by scholars such as Paul Ricoeur, Samuel R. Levin, Wolfgang Iser, Umberto Eco, and a host of others.

The same can be said for the other essays in Part IV. An essay by Dion C. Cautrell locates ethics in stylistic choices. As with Loewe, after sorting through a mass of postmodern theorizing, Cautrell's conclusion is as old as Aristotle: ethics must be evident in the words of a speech, and its obligations are good will, moral character, and prudence. Likewise, an essay on teaching tropes by M.Todd Harper leaps over structuralist work on metaphor and metonymy to claim it for post-modernist theory, which rejected the dominance of those two major tropes to favor an irony and synecdoche aimed at metaphor. Harper's focus on metaphor at the core of inquiry in the disciplines surely requires attention to at least some of the body of work accomplished by other major thinkers besides Paul Rabinow, such as Charles Bazerman, Mikhail Bakhtin, Hayden White, and Paul Ricoeur. After a long reprise of Rabinow, Harper has this to say: "In conclusion, as writing teachers we must begin to understand and teach the rhetorical nature of inquiry. If we don't we risk returning our students and ourselves to positivistic notions that maintain a 'language as transparent' attitude" (p. 266). Is he himself unaware of the long line of thinking that in the rhetoric of inquiry? Does any one any more believe that language is transparent, least of all savvy students raised on hip-hop, TV, and advertizing? But then, Harper ends by saying writing teachers don't have the understanding of the disciplines to teach what he has to say to students anyway.

This book is not for those working in the area of style. A central weakness is the failure by most authors to consider the

work on style done in the past two decades. Another is the omission of a controlling definition of style and a treatment of the debates over what constitutes style study. The character of the research by these young scholars throws into stark relief how very inadequate our bibliographies are, how much more needs to be done so that what's been done can be found. It also means that past work in more journals, such as *FEN/Composition Studies*, needs to be made available online, as JAC for example has done. Nevertheless, teachers of composition and scholars who are new to the study and teaching of style will find much to admire, use, and ponder from among these essays. And those who are new to the topic will find some excellent classroom strategies for helping students understand what style is and write with greater awareness. *Refiguring Style* may not have refigured what style is, or even defined it, but the publication of a collection of essays that returns to a major and long-suppressed dynamic of writing, and with such energy and commitment by young scholars, is to be celebrated.