

**Michael D. Hurley and Marcus Waithe (eds.), *Thinking through Style: Non-Fiction Prose of the Long Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 359. £60. ISBN 9780198737827.**

Gerard Manley Hopkins once lamented a friend's failure to realise that 'the style of prose is a positive thing and not the absence of verse-forms'. It's comforting to think of oneself as being in a position to share Hopkins's impatience, but who in practice doesn't warrant its censure? How many readers, faced with an anonymised passage of prose, would be able not only to suggest who wrote it but to justify their choice? Certainly, little time is devoted to prose style in contemporary university courses; it is hard to teach – it requires the training of sensibility rather than the imparting of ideas. And yet a commitment to considering the *how* as well as the *what* of the words on the page is perhaps the closest thing to a unifying principle that literary study has. If reading goes on with little sense that it matters that the work being read is made out of words, then it begs the question why limit one's focus to literature at all. *Thinking through Style* is to be welcomed for its demonstration of the centrality and amplitude of style as a critical concern. It furnishes an advanced and eloquent education in the kinds of thinking and attention involved in a literary study of prose.

The collection gathers perspectives on twenty writers of non-fiction from the Romantic period to the early twentieth century. The 'through' of the title indicates that it is concerned with how style works – with what style means and how it operates for the writers in question; and that it is preoccupied in particular by the fusion of style and ideas (the book's special interest, say the editors, is in the way words 'shape, refine, or generate' thought). It is engaged with the life in writing and the role of writing in life. Everywhere contributors think 'through' style to the world with which it engages and the mind it reveals. The essays are refreshingly sensitive to matters of literary expression, but they also illuminate the ways of knowing, understanding, apprehending the world that literary expression enables.

The book is abundant with demonstrations of how style, in Vernon Lee's words, makes available a writer's 'temperament' – how it subdues the 'Reader into living for the moment [...] in modes of life which are the Writer's' (294). James Williams, for instance, conducts an imaginative and richly-informed enumeration of the 'theological virtues' of 'faith, hope, and charity' alive in Darwin's prose. The point is not to recast Darwin as an unwitting Christian but to amplify our understanding of the workings of those virtues and to locate in Darwin's style an exemplary suppleness and resilience of mind and manner: his voice 'finds its shape in pressing against' (158) the ideas it opposes. Adam Phillips shows how the principle of 'incessant growth' that animates Emerson's style ('every sentence fraught with the burden of progressing towards an unknowable destination' (139)) embodies his responsiveness to the dilemmas of the 'American need for the new' (136). Dinah Birch finds in the 'fluid relations between clarity and vagueness' (176) that characterise George Eliot's writing a model blend of humility and authority central to its educative power: 'she pays her readers the compliment of assuming that they will value the opportunity to benefit from what she has learned' (180).

A conception of writing as the medium rather than the 'dress' of thought is one hallmark of the Romantic imagination; and while of the twenty writers included here only four are firmly planted in the period, there remains a good deal for readers primarily interested in Romantic matters to get their teeth into. James Engell gives a nimble and magisterial survey of the 'expansive, unformulateable' (15) quality of Coleridge's prose, illuminating what Woolf called the 'androgyny' of Coleridge's styles as they 'play a game of perpetual leapfrog' (11) with his thinking; he extols Coleridge's prose writings as a record of 'how rich, devastating, triumphant, and trying one life is' (21). Matthew Bevis tours the signature combinations of wit and seriousness through which Charles Lamb keeps his reader

on their toes; the verve and acumen of his essay bears out its proposition that style for Lamb 'is a type of behaviour, rather than a property; or better, it's a kind a contract or relationship' (41). Michael O'Neill inhabits the 'drama of mind and heart' (79) animating Shelley's prose, demonstrating with unmatched bite and sensitivity its mobility as an agent of Shelley's agile, wittily self-aware thinking. Freya Johnston responds to the nervous, turbulent immediacy of Hazlitt's manner in prose which, as it describes the way Hazlitt's writing 'both gathers and unleashes itself in long, snowballing constructions that gain in mass and momentum in their observant, restless career' (61), answers in its movement and visual power to that of its subject. It would be nice to see equivalent attention trained on the looping, self-adjusting arguments of Wordsworth's 'Preface', say, or the cut and sparkle of Byron's letters.

In his essay on Coleridge, Engell ventures a distinction between prose writers who 'achieve closure', who 'tamp down' and 'brace with logical trains and qualify with crisp statement', and those who, in a spirit of 'openness', 'inquire and expand as they declare' (27). The distinction itself is sketched in prose which, in its branching categories, preserves 'openness' even as it seeks to establish principle. It is a characteristic moment in a volume which both in its arguments and style of arguing affords bountiful instruction in the appreciation of prose style as 'a positive thing'.

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