On Style: An Atelier

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In his lyric persuasiveness over Hades and Persephone, Orpheus—Pindar’s “father of song”—suggests an especially lovely instance of what Kathleen Biddick invokes as “master signifier.” The story of Orpheus likewise describes the break of Lacanian ligature. As dyad, Orpheus and Eurydice are most heart-breaking, not in their inseparability but in that inseparability’s irrevocable turn (another form of Biddick’s “swerve”) to irreparable singleness, the fact of bereft linkage. And as though this pathos of singularity were not enough, the Maenads rip Orpheus to pieces.

My sense is that the Orphic head, bobbing
down the Hebrus, was not smiling, though what if it were? Floating through Bracha Ettinger’s trans-temporal river, the smiling Orpheus enacts its own queer-optimistic gesture, its own invective against Lee Edelman’s wish for figuration at its least traherent. Less admonition or elegy of Orpheus read along and across such lines suggests that figuration achieves its own particular exquisiteness in a mythology of fracture. Bereft linkage and its compensations, Emersonian and otherwise, arise as well in the love we hold for Valerie Allen’s “ghostly audience of absent authors.” This is fracture less as bereavement than the wish to solder bereavement, to forge new repertoires of engagement along a Ouija board of stylist lines.

Aesthetic persons are not necessarily more whole than ideological subjects; rather, aesthetic persons catechize us in the lessons of non-traumatic fracture. The smiling Orphic head hypothesizes fracture’s nearness to trauma and grief as inevitable, only if frozen in that river which floods but doesn’t freeze. Lyric fracture marks the contingency of style (if we can reckon contingency and myth as compatible, and I think we can). Lyric fracture as style reminds me of Dickinson’s metaphorical errancies, the way in which scrupulousness brought to extremity loops into ostensible attention deficit disorder. One can’t always follow Dickinsonian figures, per se. Certainly not in the goosestep manner of following orders.

I think of style’s relation to fracture largely on account of Biddick’s beautiful account of the lap-
idary Daniel, smiling from the tympanum of the Cathedral of St. James at Compostela. The “stony remainder” smiles as though remainder were enough. The remainder, as having weathered and suffered, exceeds the neatness of division. The suffering of neatness, as its own innoculated style, is that to which one might aspire or into which one might feel coerced. Apropos the aspirational, we might think, following Biddick’s opening gambit on fashion, of Jil Sander or Narciso Rodriguez, for whom sartorial austerity is its own exorbitant architecture, which is to say that style’s extravagance can arise where least expected. There’s nothing nibbish, following Allen, about Rodriguez or Sander (whom Barneys NY, in a recent very personal email to me, advertised as “fabulously architectural,” a recourse to Hawthornian Romance to which we shall return).

Likewise, Allen reminds us that austerity can count as its own speciality, above and beyond the vitiating misnomer of our “specialities,” which invariably conjures a dusty CV rather than anything connotatively special, per se. “Our speciality” speaks less to our singularity than our declension into taxidermy. How can a word so full of possibility have migrated into its own melancholic wish to return to what truly we find special, which of course we ought. Alongside aspirational neatness, against figurative quarantine, we find a durability of style that speaks to the extremity of singularity wishing for ideal or gentle readers. A style, like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s brilliant theorization of kitsch, becomes beloved and admired
in the phenomenon of sympatico.

A style risks dismissal if not disapprobation in being lonely, in its weathering of itself. We return here to Allen’s understanding of a stylistic subjunctivity not only as mood, but as an inhabiting of possibility, of not knowing (following Dickinson) where we might go. To think of style, then, is to think of persons attached to the interpersonal no less than to the idiosyncratic. The personificatory and interpersonificatory resonances of style reverberate in Allen’s gestural account of words “arranged in certain ways,” as though words were asked, with or without cash-bar cocktails, to learn from and flirt with each other. Content makes these interactions less anxiogenic. *How’s the weather*, anent Allen—an especially non-stylish version of Allen’s opening citation of Aristotle. Style entails words themselves on a limb and, more importantly, words learning. Or as importantly, acknowledging the ethics in not understanding each other, let alone themselves.

Allen’s invoking of Heidegger’s understanding of lexical moodiness is gorgeously generous. Whether in the musical or psychical register of Orpheus, the moodiness of words opens us to the possibility of style as its own phenomenological terrain, and vice versa. *Living in style*, some more ennobling version of the glitzy accounts of life as *Real Housewives of Whatever City*. Insofar as narcissism produces its own interpersonality, some styles are happy to reflect on themselves. Others—or rather, even those narcissistic ones—hope, secretly and otherwise, for companionship.
Style describes less Orphic eloquence than Orphic risk, the moment of turning simultaneously away and toward, in relation to oneself and whom one loves more than any other. And following Whitman: those by whom one might be loved without even knowing.

The *do I dare* or *double dare* of stylistic venture can be heard in Kłosowska’s penultimate gesture toward Fourier’s nectarine. Nectarine, as queer love-child of nervousness and desirability: J. Alfred Prufrock’s *dare I eat a peach*, reconciled with a plum’s alluring plumminess. The result is both peachy and plummy all at once, as though Prufrock’s amorous equivocating required a supplement to understand its playful relation not to a plum, but to itself. A word finding a cognate in the divagations of its own vernacularization, its hesitant relation to what it nearly could become. We’ve returned, in nectarine-as-remainder, to a particularly sanguine supplementarity, the narcissism of a word’s self-enabling, its own foray into lexical fruitiness. T.S. Eliot’s poem extends a meditation on affect and its absence, the contemplation of what it would *mean* to feel.

Prufrock is affectively compelling even in his vitiating distance from his own affective possibilities. Which is to say that style in Eliot is in fact an historical method, a mode of supplemental auto-affection, compensation, and the sublimation of affective discomfiture into stylistic bravado. At the same time, one might say that style *is* affect: a text’s stylistic abdications as a fantasy’s affective abstaining, the degree to which critical affect’s
vulnerability dovetails with that of critical *style*. Prufrock cozens the collapse of affect into ideas, the salubrious blur of queer acts and queer desires. Prufrock’s action *is to desire*. His ontologically saturated *peach or not to peach* renders the distance between the two as asymptote.

Etymologically (which is to say, in a fashion, historically), the asymptotic speaks to a “not falling together”; whereas on the level of style, of affective turn, the asymptotic falls together, like Orpheus and Eurydice, in the subtle tenterhooks of a pre-lapsarian counterfactual. If style isn’t affect, it is asymptotic to affect, rendering all the more salient element’s relation to desire. This is why we disavow, flirt with, adore or abjure. As they said in elementary school, if he bullies you, he might likely be infatuated. The over-protesting of a “given critic” in relation to the “problematic” inimitability of another critic unsurprisingly opens the possibility, to differently paraphrase Shakespeare, of too much protestation.¹

What do we critique, by what are we embarrassed, what do we love (sometimes or often) as guilty pleasure? We move, here, from Klossowska’s fruity meticulousness to Evans’s ebullient spinning of Lacan’s *poubellication*, the *litter-ature* of literature, which is to say trashy reading. Trashiness, in this context, makes me first think of bodice rippers, avec Fabio (would Lacan in a

pirate shirt have the same effect?), a Harlequin. 

*Nota bene*: I first hoarded Harlequins as a child from the laundry room of my grandparent’s apartment complex, the closest I could get to loins or manhood being the cheap paperbacking of them. The trash of stylistic difficulty isn’t so different if we think of the cheap romance as analogously contingent on its audience. I got something from those musty, curled paperbacks that I wouldn’t necessarily get now. But, on several registers, I once got it. And plenty of people continue getting it.

The erotics of stylistic impenetrability—versus the exorbitant euphemisms of Harlequin’s penetrabilities—suggest that textual interiority never completely can be separated from exteriority. Were I inclined toward further graphicism, I could more fully describe the happy *frisson* between the two. As it is, style is what lures one in and out at once. I have to admit, in this airport bar, where I wrote the previous line, I conjured a high school jock’s gesture for both whacking off and doing, as they said, the deed. Style does the deed, and Evans, like Kłosowska, makes luminous the false distinction between doing the deed and gesturing it, all the more so, when the latter is an efflorescence of the former’s distillation, the former’s own Hawthornian version of ghostly auto-affection. Style is full of phantom limbs. Hawthorne spends a life assaying the threshold of the Actual and the Imaginary, and this, perhaps, is where style lies. In as many ways as you wish.