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SENSES *of*

STYLE

*poetry before interpretation*

JEFF DOLVEN

The subtitle promises to treat “poetry before interpretation.” What that claim means will emerge over the following pages, but it can be said at the outset to derive from a fundamental desire to distinguish reading for the style from other kinds of reading. Such a distinction is impossible to maintain as an absolute, and the blurring of style’s boundaries with those of meaning, or beauty, or narrative is inevitable. This book is not least an exploration of the motives for such conflations and confusions. Nonetheless the claim *there are only interpretations* is as flattening as the claim *style is everything*, and to take either one as dogma is to sacrifice the distinct prospects afforded by the terms’ mutual independence. In that sense, the book might be said to be a critique of style, in the Kantian sense: an account of the word’s proper limits. But also an account of when and where the word is useful, and for what purposes, and what is at stake when its limits are tested, breached, redrawn. So, a pragmatist critique, if such a thing is possible, and one that chooses, when it must, philology over philosophy. Style means how we use it, if it means at all.

The remarks are numbered, and keyed to endnotes that provide citations, suggest other sources, and sometimes dilate on the remark’s topic. Early modern texts have been quoted from modernized editions. Where those are unavailable, the spelling has been modernized ad hoc, preserving original punctuation. In a book about style, that inevitably means a loss in time-feel, but one I hope is outweighed by the gain in comprehension for the reader unfamiliar with the vagaries of period orthography. The pervasive influence of intermediaries such as amanuenses, scribes, and compositors on Wyatt’s texts means little is lost of his language, or little that is not lost already. Titles, as well as early modern sources embedded in modern quotations, are given in their original spelling.

## CONTINUING

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### §1 Some Preliminary Contradictions

Style holds things together, things and people, schools and movements and periods. It makes us see wholes where we might be bewildered by parts. — But it makes us see parts, too. Say you are asked to identify or describe a style, to account for an act of recognition. (*That sounds like Gertrude Stein, or that looks like a Holbein.*) You might pick out a detail like a figure of speech or a quality of line, and you might well find a name for it, isocolon or crosshatching. Style, with all of this specialized language, is manifestly an art, a technical accomplishment with terms and rules that can be taught and learned. — Then again, can’t style feel like something you are simply born with? Something that is in your gait or your hands, something you couldn’t lose if you tried? A long habit, or even your nature, whether you like it or not. Style’s idiosyncrasy is the individual signature that modernity, and not only modernity, wants from every great artist. — And yet, is it not style that dissolves the artist into her time, his country or city, her circle of friends? Everyone and everything has a style, a style that is nothing more or less than location in social and historical space. None of us can escape that space, nor could we ever finally want to. — All the same,



even if everything has a style, isn't it true, or isn't it often said, that some people have style and others not? Far from being universal, style can make severe discriminations.

## §2 What to Do

Faced with these contradictions, it will be tempting to abandon the word altogether. Alternatively, and particularly if you are a philosopher, or a taxonomically minded critic, you might seek to impose some discipline. In the words of one art historian, "The first step is to restore limits and shape to the shapeless objects of verbal abuse; to rediscover the purposes to which the word in question was appropriate; and to demonstrate its present unacceptable uses." There is another option, too: a shrug, a wry smile, or a barely perceptible nod of acknowledgment, as though to say, *I already knew all that*.

## §3 Trying to Keep Going

"Oh," wrote Frank O'Hara to his friend Don Allen, in September 1961.

I've been going on with a thing I started to be a little birthday poem for BB and then it went along a little and then I remembered that was how Mike's Ode got done so I kept on and I am still going day by day (middle of 8th page this morning). I don't know anything about what it is or will be but am enjoying trying to keep going and seem to have something. Some days I feel very happy about it, because I seem to have been able to keep it "open" and so there are lots of possibilities, air and such. For example, it's been called "M.L.F.Y.," "Wherebye Shall Seace" (from Wyatt), "Biotherm," and back and forth, probably ending up as "M.L.F.Y." The Wyatt passage is very beautiful:

"This dedelie stroke, wherebye shall seace  
The harborid sighis within my herte."

Here is O'Hara at his desk in the middle of things, ten years into his life in New York, at the end of a summer of gradual farewell to his lover Vincent Warren and burgeoning friendship with Bill

Berkson. What makes him happy is the going on and keeping on and still going, "enjoying trying to keep going," and his letter is a continuation of the poem it describes, carried along by the same glad parataxis. (Parataxis: the rhetorical term for the flat syntax of *and* after *and*.) The reader is invited into his writing life, how he almost always prefers making a new poem to revising the last one ("I don't believe in reworking"), his impatience with intermissions ("what's so great about *sleep*?"), his readiness to mingle art and life freely, in the interest of keeping them both moving along ("life and art, friends and lovers"). As he had written two years before in a poem called "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul," "The only thing to do is simply continue." The title itself allows barely a comma between goodbye and the next hello.

## §4 Continuing (1)

It is easier to have a style than not: ease and fluency are among the primary motives for style, and also avoiding the jeopardy of decisions you have not already made.

## §5 Wherebye Shall Seace

Which makes Thomas Wyatt's lines something of a surprise; they sound so abruptly different. They were likely written sometime in the 1530s, though the dating of Wyatt's poems is an uncertain affair, as is, often enough, his authorship. If Wyatt did write the lines, he might have done so at court, or on embassy in Barcelona or in Nice, or in prison. They are old-fashioned in diction, darkly suspended in syntax, and plainly melancholy. They are about a longing for finality, for a merciful, terminal blow. O'Hara knows how different they are and he warns Allen: "MLFY, I hasten to add, is not like that at all, so don't get your hopes up."

## §6 We Will Begin Again (1)

In the event, O'Hara called his poem "Biotherm." (Biotherm is a "marvelous sunburn preparation" favored by Berkson's glamorous, socialite mother.) The Wyatt lines nonetheless found their place

about two pages into the twelve the poem takes up in Allen's edition of the posthumous *Collected Poems*. By that time, its appetite for borrowed language is well established. It is jagged across the page, it interrupts itself, leaps and dodges, and quotes freely from books and conversation. It is in perpetual, unreciprocated conversation with a *you* who usually seems to be Berkson. After one of many interruptions O'Hara gathers himself to ask, "but we will begin again won't we," and then answers himself:

well I will anyway or as 12,  
"continuez, même stupide garçon"  
"This dedelie stroke, wherebye shall seace  
The harborid sighis within my herte"

Continue, stupid boy: the request is not any less urgent for being so offhanded. Wyatt's lines are an answer. But what kind of answer? Does the older poet oblige, offering another way of carrying on? Or does he intervene as the bad conscience of the poem's concatenate appetites, a rebuke to gallic nonchalance and a reminder of some more final finality? Either way, "Biotherm" does not cease here. Far from it. There is another "and" to start the next line, and ten pages left to go. What to make of the interruption, indeed whether it is an interruption, will depend on the sense of O'Hara's style: whether it is broken by Wyatt's lines or continuous across them, whether, when O'Hara writes with Wyatt, or even, as here, quotes him, he is writing like himself.

### §7 Continuing (2): Synchronically

If style is continuing, one mode of that continuing is across social space: synchronic style, the kind that affords a sense of being oriented in the present. In the poem "My Heart"—looking back six years, to 1955, when O'Hara, who worked the front desk when he first got to New York, had just returned to the Museum of Modern Art as an assistant curator—he explains that he wears work shirts to the opera. ("I / don't wear brown and grey suits all the time, / do I? No.") At the opera, there are other men in work shirts, in among the tuxedos and the suits and the women in gowns and dresses and

skirts and, here and there, in the middle of a well-dressed decade, smart pants. He and his friends are like one another, and they recognize each other by virtue of sharing a style. They are also different from other patrons. Aesthetically, socially, erotically, their distinctive continuity orients them in the world. Such social space can align with real space, with the cheap seats or, more broadly, with a neighborhood or a nation. It can also be the imaginary landscape of affinity that makes people who share a mixed space with others feel as though they are somehow particularly there together, situated or moving particularly in relation to one another, among other communities different and indifferent.

### §8 Everything Has a Style

Everything has a style. Take a shard of pottery, and place it in the history of Athens; take a safety pin, and stick it in your ear.

### §9 Continuing (3): Diachronically

Style also continues across time. Its diachronic continuity applies to institutions, neighborhoods, and nations, which retain their identity by the persistence of stylistic self-resemblance, continuing to be more or less like they used to be. It applies likewise to individuals, who remain recognizable to others and to themselves in how they act and what they make. "My ship is flung upon the gutter's wrist / and cries for help of storm," O'Hara wrote when he arrived in New York City in 1951, in a sonnet sequence that he eventually called "A City Winter." They are proper sonnets, in rhymed pentameter, the sort of inherited form he would mostly abandon as time went on. The startling imagistic juxtapositions, however, reflect his early exposure to poets like Mayakovsky and the French surrealists, who interested him throughout his writing life. They are among the ways O'Hara always sounds like himself. Wyatt counts among such lifelong continuities too. "A City Winter" is the first of many poems that owe a debt to the sonnet that begins "My galley charged with forgetfulness," with its conceit of the self as a ship on a storm-tossed sea. The connection stretches across O'Hara's career, and across a much longer span of time, too, back to

Wyatt and to Petrarch before him. The archaic-sounding “cries for help of storm” is part of O’Hara’s advertisement of an open traffic with the past.

### §10 Parties (1)

Style continues inside occasions, too: conversations, parties, giving them their particular feeling, at the time and afterward even more. There is a silent count at a good party, maybe the music helps or maybe it’s just the talk, everybody keeping it going, noticeable sometimes only when it’s broken.

### §11 Style as History (1)

Not that synchronic and diachronic style are ever truly separable. The past is present in the present—where else would we find it? It has social meanings, defining affinities and differences among communities now. To choose to sound like the past is to place yourself among the people who know it or care about it, whether they are antiquarians, nationalists, nostalgics, reenactors, or poets. O’Hara was never one to reject the history of his art. Quite the contrary: “all of the past you read is usually quite great,” he told the readers of Allen’s 1960 anthology, *The New American Poetry*. “Quite great”: that sounds particularly like O’Hara, deflationary camp with a stubborn seriousness in it, and the puckish atavism of his good manners, always at his disposal, whether or not he chose to use them.

### §12 Continuing (4)

Sir Thomas Wyatt’s word for continuing is “remain.” He often uses it to talk about love, in the idiom of unrequited longing he learned from translating Petrarch. (He was one of the first poets to bring Petrarch into English.) “I was content thy servant to remain,” he complains, vowing to leave a woman who repaid him with cruelty; “I your thrall must evermore remain,” he complains, vowing to stay by another. He uses the word for his injuries, too: “But yet, alas, the scar shall still remain,” he wrote after a period of imprisonment.

That was in 1536, after his release from the Tower of London; or perhaps it was 1541, after his release, again, from the Tower of London. To remain, at all events, is not exactly to continue. The word has for Wyatt a sense of stubborn integrity, but also weariness, and fear of being left behind. Its constancy is often a protest against what he calls “newfangledness,” against fashion and change of fashion. There is in his “remain” a Stoic determination that was part of his education, as a reader of Seneca and Boethius and an early English student of the humanists’ Latin canon. But there is also a helpless allegiance to virtues that have gone out of date, and perhaps a certain grim pleasure, or pride, in endurance. (“Restless to remain, / Against my will, full pleased with my pain,” his admirer, self-proclaimed inheritor, and elegist Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, would later write.) What the word offers above all is a constancy of posture, dependable if not comfortable, a way of being, and certainly a way of writing.

### §13 Style Is a Way

If style is a way, perhaps that is because there are many ways to the same destination, as there are said to be many styles for the same subject. Style can be a way without a destination, too, and then there are even more ways, and they can continue indefinitely, in any direction. *Way* is one of the basic style-words in English, along with *how* and *like*. Some antitheses might be said to be *thing*, *what*, and *different*, respectively, or perhaps, instead of *different*, *love*.

### §14 Remaining Despairing

Among Wyatt’s translations from Petrarch is the sonnet O’Hara so admired, “My galley charged with forgetfulness.” It ends:

The stars be hid that led me to this pain.  
Drowned is reason that should me comfort  
And I remain despairing of the port.

The source is “*Passa la nave*,” a poem that concludes with the onset of despair: “I begin to despair of the port [*tal ch’i’ ncomincio*”

*a desperar del porto*].” Wyatt, by contrast, ends in the middle, and his remaining despairing is a kind of continuing. He is not exactly enjoying trying to keep going, as O’Hara would have it, but not exactly not, either.

### §15 A Minor Puzzle of Literary History

Frank O’Hara was constant to Sir Thomas Wyatt throughout his writing life. He likely first read Wyatt’s poems at Harvard, where he studied on the GI Bill after a tour in the Pacific. (He served, appropriately enough, as a sonar operator.) Among his teachers was Hyder Rollins, who had prepared a modern edition of the 1557 miscellany where many of Wyatt’s poems were first printed. Rollins knew the texts and also the wilderness of manuscript and print from which they had to be rescued. Wyatt first appears in O’Hara’s writing three years after Rollins’s course, in the poem “After Wyatt.” (O’Hara had just arrived in New York; it was the fall of 1951.) Soon he was at work on “A City Winter,” with its debt to “My galley.” That poem is the one his friend and protégé Ted Berrigan spoke of years later when he observed that O’Hara’s “models are impeccable and he returned to them time and time again, Wyatt being one of them . . . a particular poem of Wyatt’s, one particular poem, will lead Frank to writing a number of different poems until he eventually comes up with a poem like “To the Harbormaster.” It is a minor puzzle of literary history, this affinity between the gay curator-poet from the New York City of Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, and the courtier-poet of the court of Henry VIII, supposed lover of the king’s consort, later wife, Anne Boleyn. It is not a matter of a one-poem stand, nor a few scattered allusions, but something more like a way of writing, even a way of living; a way, for O’Hara, of continuing. And of course a way of continuing for Wyatt, too, whose poems have another life in O’Hara’s.

### §16 Reaching You (1)

The end of “To the Harbormaster” plays a variation on the final suspension of “My galley”:

I trust the sanity of my vessel; and  
if it sinks, it may well be in answer  
to the reasoning of the eternal voices,  
the waves which have kept me from reaching you.

This not-quite-reaching-you is O’Hara’s version of remaining despairing of the port. The eternal voices of the waves postpone the final union, and the poem ends in refusing an ending. It refuses its “you” as well, who was Larry Rivers in 1954 but also, half remembered, Petrarch’s Laura. It does, however, choose Wyatt. It chooses him not as an object, but as a model. If not love, then likeness.

## PART AND WHOLE

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### §17 Style and Likeness (1)

I like you; I am like you. The coincidence in English, of liking and likeness, is the heart of the matter; though it is open to question whether style should be said to have a heart, or a matter, for that matter.

### §18 The Other Enemy (1)

Frank O'Hara, writing in his college journal in 1948:

I must take pains not to *intend* anything but the work itself, to let the work take shape as it comes. . . . I must think only of and for the emergent work and not allow messages or ideas as such to displace the validity of the work with their sham importance and subtle derangement of emphasis.

Here is a basic attitude to which O'Hara would be loyal all his life: a suspicion of whatever a poem might be about, messages and ideas, what one might call (for its traditional distinction from style) *content*. After making this proclamation to himself, he begins a new line in the notebook: "The other enemy: style."

### §19 Style and Likeness (2)

Likeness is a place to begin, not least because it has already begun: to experience something as *like* is to have experienced something like it before. (So, style is already continuing.) That experience does not necessarily entail recollection of a reference point. A hunch, an intuition, a little *déjà vu* will do. Nor is it always easy to say where the likeness is, even when two like things are side by side. If it is sometimes obvious enough (*they are both red!*), likeness can also be elusive, a feeling that things just go together, matching, like parts of the same outfit or pieces of furniture from the same room, like but not obviously resembling each other. The problem is puzzling to reflection. You could find yourself saying, *no two things are truly like*, convinced that proper scrutiny discloses only differences; or you might say that *all things are like all other things*, which is equally true, since any two things are both things, only the first of the commonalties that could be proposed. In such speculations it is possible to chase away the original feeling for their likeness, that sense of a shared style, altogether. Style can be like that.

### §20 The Time of Style (1): Already

Style is already.