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# The Bottle Imp

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**Stevenson on Style**  
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What is style? You do not have to be Fred Astaire or Audrey Hepburn for any man or woman to recognize it in the other in a heartbeat. Nor do you have to be a German or Italian designer to pause before a car shimmering with beauty. Yet try and define it, especially when applied to writing, and everyone becomes a little tongue-tied. It is almost like the storied quip about pornography—I may not be able to describe it but I know it when I see it. But do we? There are of course definitions, and in a case like this I invariably retreat to my quotation dictionaries, since I'm seasoned enough to still have them, and perverse enough to use them. Ben Jonson: 'a strict and succinct style is that, where you can take away nothing without loss.' Jonathan Swift: 'proper words in proper places.' And the proverbial remark by Buffon: 'The style is the man himself.' Admittedly these definitions tell us little, if they do offer a shrewd or core insight. But contemporary critics have no incentive to search them out, even on Google, for in the main they have about as much interest in style as they have in manual typewriters and rotary telephones. It is *so* last century, although for the sake of accuracy it is more like two centuries ago.

Yet anyone who reads Stevenson with care recognizes almost intuitively that a casual indifference to manner is a dead end for understanding. For better or worse, he was by the end of the nineteenth century the poster boy for style in literature, the one quality all the obituary writers could agree upon. Who could compete with him? Henry James, notwithstanding the luminescence of *The Portrait of a Lady*, was never known as a stylist until he settled into his late manner, and that manner, as every schoolgirl knows, is a subject unto itself.

As for George Meredith, he was Stevenson's most admired novelist but he never fronted the shop windows for the ease and fluency of his prose. The field was left to Stevenson. There were to be sure dissenters, a strain of criticism that viewed his prose as an emblem both of his personality and the aesthetic movement, dilettantish, precious, possibly even a bit effete. But that too is another story, for another time. By the turn of the twentieth century Stevenson's fictional style was modeled in 'how to' books aimed at a commercial audience, and his familiar essays were a staple in university composition classes. We need only add that his line about playing 'the sedulous ape' was famous for being famous, and I suspect sent more people to the dictionary to find out the meaning of 'sedulous' than back to the essay to study the import of the remark. Yet despite its renown Stevenson's style was neither imitated nor parodied, mainly because unlike the styles of late James or Hemingway it was never stylized. The writers Stevenson cites in the 'sedulous ape' paragraph—Hazlitt, Lamb, Thomas Browne, Hawthorne, Montaigne, among others—are all singular in their manners and highly imitable. Stevenson, on the other hand, for all his serving as a model that writers might study and 'emulate' (George Meredith's word) has never been seriously copied. This may have to do with the variety of genres he worked in, and it may reflect the difficulty of identifying a unique mannerism in the writing. Lucidity, clarity of expression, inventiveness of images—these are not qualities that are easily duplicated. In a way Stevenson resembles Scott Fitzgerald in this regard: his limpid prose is the visible envy of other writers, yet the secret of its composition remains elusive.

So we return to square one: Stevenson writes unsurpassed English prose, but we have no agreed upon description of what constitutes that prose. And to add to the mix, Stevenson's style, unlike Hemingway's, did not remain static over the course of his career. In the 'sedulous ape' essay, written in 1887, he talks about his apprenticeship as if he were sitting cross-legged on a cloud on Olympus, looking down at himself in an earlier life. Just two years before he wrote to William Archer querulously, saying that the critic had misread his work: 'It seems to me, in particular, that you have willfully read all my works in terms of my earliest; my aim, even in style, has quite changed in the last six or seven years; and this I should have thought you would have noticed.' Later in the same letter he writes with acerbity: 'I am vexed you should

not have remarked on my attempted change of manner: seemingly this attempt is still quite unsuccessful!' Consider: Stevenson's career is barely a decade old when he writes about his change of manner. By comparison, James had been writing for at least fifteen years before he entered on his second phase in the middle eighties, and it took another decade and a half to unveil the great late manner. If Stevenson could not get a sophisticated critic like William Archer to see that his style had changed, what could he expect from the proverbial common reader? Rather than leaving it in the hands of lesser critics, Stevenson becomes our cicerone to a world of literary legerdemain, disclosing to us how writing works, and why it is so hard. He writes an essay that is both analytical and theoretical, explaining the meaning of a technical device—style—and why it is central to art. True to his fashion, he gives it a title that in its matter-of-factness conceals the complexity of its argument:

Stevenson begins by noting the disenchantment that comes when we are shown the workings of any art, as if the magic of the performance were somehow dissipated when the magus reveals the secret of the trick. In a way, he appears to give credence to Wordsworth's famous line about the intellect distorting nature in its effort at understanding ('we murder to dissect'). But that is only a momentary thought. For Stevenson, talking about art is all hard intellect, and he takes the reader in a contrary direction from his poetic predecessor by suggesting that the disclosure of art's mechanics, however disillusioning, may instead lead to a greater appreciation of its singularity. If it is true that the artist can never know the wellspring of her creativity—it lies deep in nature and far back in the history of man—then the critical labour of deconstructing the text is our only path to retracing that creative impulse. In what is essentially a brief prologue to his essay, Stevenson addresses two distinct aesthetic issues: the matter of creativity, as he echoes Longinus and the Romantics in their conviction that the poetic imagination is a mystery of nature, and the formal practice of literary criticism, with its Aristotelian examination of the joists of a text in order to make out its overall design. For the remainder of the essay he is engaged in the latter practice, a molecular critique of style that would hearten a generation of critics that emerged a half-century after his death. But we should never forget that the primary aesthetic question—what is the source of our creative power?—is

immanent in Stevenson's being whether or not it appears in his discourse.

After the opening paragraph, Stevenson's essay breaks down into four unequal sections, each devoted to an aspect of style, and ending with a brief conclusion. The first, and shortest, is called simply 'Choice of Words.' These are the building blocks of the writer's subject, which in an inspired phrase Stevenson calls the 'dialect of life.' Words are accessible and comprehensible to all, and they are the reason writing has such immediacy and freshness. But they have another quality that complicates them for the writer. They are 'rigid' and 'finite,' to use Stevenson's terms, that is, they are bound and circumscribed by their meanings. And the writer has nothing else to work with. Unlike the painter, who can vary her effects by shifting equipment, moving from colour to line to form, the writer has no escape from the ubiquity of words. Rather than chafe over the disparity between the arts, Stevenson instead marvels over the way that crude 'blocks' of words, by selective choice and contrast, can be made to rouse the passions and express fine distinctions. It is as if before your eyes a butcher's cleaver were sprinkled with pixie dust and turned into a surgeon's scalpel. But words must be made to move in a 'logical progression and convey a definite conventional import,' that is, they must be understood and make sense, and greater writers may fall below lesser ones in this objective. For a writer who was a favorite of James Murray and all the dictionary makers, who trafficked in seas of lexicons himself, and who was accused by Leslie Stephen of being in love with words for their own sake, this section places words in the mosaic of the art, as constituents of the style, not the style itself.

The second section, 'The Web,' is the longest and densest of the essay. Stevenson separates literature, which deals with 'the affairs of men,' from the other arts, which he classifies either as 'representative' (sculpture, painting, acting) or 'presentative' (music, dance, architecture). I pause at these terms because they are revealing of Stevenson's modernity, a motif that runs regularly through these biennials. Stevenson chooses 'representative' (a word that became fashionable among theorists in the 1970s and 80s) over 'imitative,' casually discarding a verbal icon that Plato and Aristotle and everybody after pored over in rapt rumination. So much for the glory of Greece. And then he comes up with 'presentative,' a word with origins in metaphysics and psychology, and employed to mean the conveying of an idea to the mind. At

least that is one definition, but Stevenson is only the second citation in the *OED*, followed by two more dated 1954 and 2000, the last in a line about Imagist poetry. The point is simple: Stevenson's ideas about art deploy a language that is often in advance of the time, which implies that the ideas may be equally advanced. But lest we get carried away with a new way to make Stevenson modern, a caveat is in order: he also uses a theoretical language that is commonly identified as archaic or rare. The lesson is unsurprising: easy generalizations about Stevenson's views are likely to lead to lax readings. Returning to the subject of art, Stevenson's first major point is that all arts are made up of *patterns*: in music and literature the patterns of sounds and pauses are made in time, thus giving these two temporal arts a kinship. As if to emphasize the point Stevenson slyly remarks that if communication were the primary function of writing we could probably carry on in life with broken words, in nouns alone. But very quickly Stevenson cuts to the heart of his discourse, which is after all about writing, and there should be no doubt that this essay, several years before the James-Stevenson match-up of the late 1880s, is about nothing less than the art of fiction. Starting with the sentence as the principal unit, Stevenson states that every element is plaited together by the artist—*plaited* having an old meaning of complicated and involved—to form what he calls a *knot* or design, an intricate figure that is difficult to disentangle or explain but that somehow 'clears itself' by the end of the sentence and in the process reveals its meaning. Whatever Stevenson may mean by his own tangled figures of speech to describe figures of cloth and conjuring figures making up all of the above, one thing is clear: in an artful sentence the 'knot' will be noticed by the reader, anticipating successive phrases, her pleasure heightened by surprise, or suspended momentarily when a rhetorical device interrupts the march of the narrative, but convinced of the coming of the next comely phrase, and perhaps marginally aware of the sound that sustains and even balances the whole. The maker of these sentences, or the weaver to use Stevenson's image, must constantly vary his technique, at one time creating interest, at another disappointment, surprise, and perhaps even offer gratification. He must always be changing the 'stitch,' and yet always give the impression of 'neatness.' The writer is like a conjurer, cajoling the spectator to keep her eyes away from his hands and fasten

them instead on the oranges in the air. The reader, enticed and engaged, imagines himself navigating the shoals and rapids of the sentence, and oblivious of the hand that moves the tiller.

So what do we have here? The writer has designed a sentence composed of words, phrases, and 'a satisfying equipoise of sound.' Yet at no time has Stevenson mentioned the matter of the sentence, any more than he thought fit earlier to comment on the meaning of words. At this point it should be clear that Stevenson is building a case for art as form as systematically as the author of the *Poetics* did some years earlier. But the method, while Aristotelian in its empiricism and its focus on technical devices, also has a Kantian cast in that form is conceived as whole and complete in itself, self-contained in its organization. Stevenson's expression of form and function, of the design of art and its purpose, is thick with philosophical language that is held together by the image of the 'web' as a woven fabric. The writer's 'pattern, which is to please the supersensual ear, is yet addressed throughout and first of all, to the demands of logic.' The word *supersensual*, for which Stevenson is again cited, means beyond the power of the senses, higher than what is perceptible. And *logic*, which I earlier offhandedly glossed as 'sense,' is of course a branch of philosophy focusing on inference and scientific method. Thus in the act of reading our mind is intellectually engaged while our spiritual and/or emotional self is touched by the subliminal music of the lines. But one facet cannot be exploited at the expense of the other. *Pattern* and *argument* are joined, and the terms Stevenson uses for *argument*—brevity, clearness, charm—imply that ideas, no matter how complex, need to be plain in their presentation in order to meld with the fitness of the *pattern*, which must scrupulously avoid what Stevenson calls a *cheville*, a meaningless phrase added for balance in the sound of the sentence.

One of the notable qualities of Stevenson's fictional prose is its leanness and absence of excess. It is a quality that predominates in what I will call his late style, and it is implicitly prepared for in this theoretical discourse. It is a view of style contained in some of his famous offhand remarks: 'There is but one art—to omit!' 'Death to the optic nerve.' And perhaps the most telling, his admission in a letter to Henry James that he aimed for a style that was a cross between a ballad and a ledger book. This manner, which I earlier

saw as a forerunner of the kind of modernism practiced by Hemingway, is in fact modernism itself. *Falesá* is its most obvious expression, those spare evocative opening lines, and that final paragraph of perplexity, which but for the subject might pass for Sherwood Anderson on his best day. By the late 1880s Stevenson had lost all interest in the essay as a form, and he only agreed to write for *Scribner's Magazine* because Burlingame made him an offer he could not refuse. Despite those acclaimed pieces on life and death &c, Stevenson turned away from the form because it demanded a familiar tone and a style too loose for a writer whose fictional voices became the action and whose sentences had not an ounce of body fat. For Stevenson, 'style is synthetic,' employing another philosophical term, to proceed from principles to particular instances or consequences, in other words deductively. The artist needs a 'peg,' a general principle upon which to 'braid' his story, picking up elements along the way for contrast and combination that will enrich meaning. For Stevenson that peg was often a crime, either one committed in the past, as in 'Pavilion on the Links' and 'The Merry Men,' or one taking place in the real time of the action, as in 'Markheim' and 'A Lodging for the Night.' As I read his commentary on synthetic narrative, art has an aspect of the fortuitous about it, which may be a wry irony since Stevenson's essay is the most brazenly calculated description of the poetic process since Edgar Allan Poe's 'Philosophy of Composition.' Stevenson is fundamentally arguing for art as an intellectual activity that requires the deepest concentration and the most accomplished skill. It is not happenstance that Milton and Shakespeare are the exemplars for both prose and poetry in this essay. Under the cover of talking about style he is in fact talking about meaning. His descriptions of the skeleton of a sentence read as if he were tracing the moving parts of a Swiss watch. A postmodernist might even see it as the visible embodiment of his argument, that is, the complexity of the prose is a mirror of the art. Here finally is the coda to his definition of style: 'The web, then, or the pattern: a web at once sensuous and logical, an elegant and pregnant texture: that is style, that is the foundation of the art of literature.' A *texture* is both a woven fabric and a composed story, philosophical, graceful, and embedded with meaning, much of it obscure and beyond rational understanding. It is not simply the sinuous beauty of sentences but the entire manner of a piece of writing. Style *is* art.



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