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The Scandal of Style: Jeff Dolven Interviewed

"Most definitions of style pare away its contradictions in order to make self-consistent arguments. I wanted to own up to style's inconvenient range of meanings, to try to explain that range rather than resolve it."

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(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Dolven-photo.jpg)

I met Jeff Dolven this past spring at the "Double Take" reading series—curated by Albert Mobilio and hosted at apexart, in Tribeca—where he read a brilliant poetic essay about the colon as a punctuation mark. Because I've also written a poetic essay about the colon, hearing Dolven read felt like meeting a handsome stranger clad in a shirt you both own: an excited recognition of your shared sensibility, mingled with jealous admiration at how well he wears the shirt. As it turns out, Dolven and I have both thought a lot about how critics attire their prose. His most recent book, *Senses of Style: Poetry before Interpretation (https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/S/bo27315203.html)* (University of Chicago), uses the unlikely but fecund pairing of Sir Thomas Wyatt and Frank O'Hara to meditate, incisively, on aesthetic likeness. These meditations are written in the form of almost four hundred brief remarks, thematically organized around what Dolven calls style's "ironies" and "antitheses." Each remark presents an internally consistent argument about style, but the arguments of different remarks are often in deliberate tension with one another so as to point out the paradoxes and inconsistencies in our conceptions of style. Dolven has found a form perfectly suited to his book's contents, one that maintains scholarly rigor and philosophical acuity even as it expands criticism's possibilities.

Louis Bury

Organized as a series of numbered, often aphoristic, remarks, *Senses of Style* resembles a cross between Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia*. How did you come up with this structure?

Jeff Dolven

It seemed like it would be delightful to write criticism that way, and easy, a thought at a time, maybe one a day, but it turned out not to be true. There are so many writers—Maggie Nelson, for example—who make it seem effortless. I sweated over every section, writing them several times over, and discarding almost as many as I wrote. Some were too pedantic. Some too glib.

LB

That's a very sculptural method.

JD

Yes—a great waste of marble! But I stuck with it. I came to feel that the topic wouldn't benefit from the pretense of mastery. Most definitions of style pare away its contradictions in order to make self-consistent arguments. I wanted to own up to style's inconvenient range of meanings, to try to explain that range rather than resolve it. The book's fragmentary structure allowed me to take positions that I believe to be true, but not necessarily compatible, and give them each their due.

LB

Can you say more about style's paradoxical nature?

JD

I experimented with a few words—"paradox," even "antinomy"—but I finally decided on "irony." I wanted to capture the ways we play senses of style off against each other in ordinary life. So, one of the four ironies I identify is that of the individual and the group. Let's take those glasses of yours, Lou. They're a lot like mine—anybody watching us talk here probably figures, these guys get along. But they're not identical, the guys or the glasses. They share a style, but in a pinch, I could probably say why I would wear my glasses and not yours, and vice versa. We'd each be talking about style, individual style. The word covers the whole range, what we share and what we don't, and because I don't want to be assimilated any more than I want to be exiled, that range serves me well. You too I expect.

SENSES *of* STYLE

poetry before interpretation

JEFF DOLVEN


(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Dolven-cover.jpg)

LB

I'm curious how this function of style bears on questions of cultural appropriation. You write, "the styles most in demand often belong—is that the word, *belong*?—to people who do not have much else that others want, to borrow or to buy." What's an example of this dynamic?

JD

Here's one off the top of my head, though it's a little athwart the class politics of the sentence you quote. I've been listening obsessively to the rapper Anderson .Paak's song, "Come Down," which opens with a grainy sample of the Israeli national anthem, "Hatikvah." The melody goes away pretty quickly, but .Paak develops a bass line out of it that anchors everything. It's a song about getting high—so what's with the anthem? Political commentary? There's nothing in the lyric, I don't think, to suggest it. Pure love of the tune? That seems naïve. .Paak is half African-American, half Korean, whatever that tells you. The sample is a provocation and also a weird, giddy, illicit delight, traveling so far so fast and so casually. Maybe it is critical. Maybe it is defiantly irresponsible. Maybe it is appropriation, maybe reverse appropriation. The scandal of such moments is the pure pleasure of imitation—the pleasure of stylistic experiment for its own sake.

LB

Does it make sense to speak of a style as being "stolen" in the way we speak of material objects, such as the Elgin Marbles, as being stolen?

JD

Yes, for sure—if the thief is the one who assumes the value of the stolen object, leaving the original owner with none. That's certainly going on in Sir Thomas Wyatt's afterlife. He wrote for a coterie audience. His poems circulated in court, among aristocrats. But as soon as they got printed, and the books were bought by a middle-class readership, they lost that power of distinction. They were no good to their makers any more. We know that story all too well in this country, reversing the class polarity again—how blues music was monetized for white audiences. Once Elvis Presley got hold of it, it was a lot less good for expressing the solidarity of struggle among African Americans in Chicago or St. Louis. Again—the scandal of style is that you can get the sound of that music, really get it, and know nothing about where it came from. That's another reason why the concept of style makes us uneasy. Is imitating a kind of choosing? To paraphrase Freud: must I take responsibility for my style?

LB

Where did the idea come from to pair Sir Thomas Wyatt and Frank O'Hara, two poets who lived 400 years apart?

JD

I set out to write a book in the territory of my graduate training, about changing styles in sixteenth-century English poetry, but I wanted a way to broaden the audience, without leaving my love of that period behind. So, I thought I'd triangulate—Wyatt and somebody modern, maybe another coterie poet. The problem of coterie led me to the New York School. O'Hara's love of Wyatt was an unexpected discovery and sealed the deal.

LB

You were trained as a Renaissance scholar?

JD

Yes, at Yale in the 80's (as an undergrad) and the 90's (back again as a grad student). The Yale of my dissertation advisor, John Hollander, and critics like Geoffrey Hartman, for whom interpretation was a sacred act, the highest form of literary love and knowledge.

LB

Given your book's reluctance to interpret—its subtitle is "Poetry before Interpretation"—I'm struck by how you just characterized your training as a critic.

JD

I was trained to pay special attention to intertextual allusion, moments when you catch a poet reading, and rewriting, a predecessor—catch the poet in the act, by an echo, a verbal connection between two particular moments. But I came to feel that such connections were not the only or even the main way poets relate to one another. I'm fascinated by the instant, almost intuitive impression of aesthetic affinity: hey, that sounds like Donne, or Dickinson. Not like any particular line, but like the way they write.

LB

Who are some predecessors with whom you feel a sense of affinity?

JD

Wittgenstein has been an enormous conceptual and stylistic influence; sometimes too much, I fear. There's the ambivalence of style again: I want to be like, but not *too* much like!

LB

You preface the book by saying that you're more philologist than philosopher.

JD

As could be said of Wittgenstein.

LB

A line from your book stands out with regard to critical style: "The question becomes what kind of literary knowledge can be had only by entering the room and joining the party; by letting the distance go, the critical distance, if only for a time." What kind of knowledge can be had by letting go of critical distance?

JD

Part of stylistic knowledge—and knowledge is barely the word for it—is the sense that, when you encounter a text, you recognize where it comes from, when it comes from, where you are. The undergrads I teach often have an acute sense of historical, regional, ethnic difference with music. They may not be able to describe the music in technical terms, but they know the map of what they like. They're natives there. I love that kind of knowing, knowing your way around.

LB

What about the technical vocabulary we have for literary style? You write, "Style is an ever-less-technical concept over the course of the twentieth century, its more formal departments increasingly *arrière-garde*."

JD

The relationship, the tension, between an aesthetic impression and the technical description of that impression preoccupies me. Not everybody hears something new and craves its name. But I do, kind of helplessly—not to reduce the one to the other, I hope, but because, as the poet James Merrill says, everything worth having is worth having both ways.

LB

Are there downsides to having things both ways when it comes to style or criticism?

JD

I think the book is inconvenient to the kind of reading to which academic monographs often lend themselves. *Senses* has an architecture—it moves through four ironies, and another four antitheses—but its episodic character means you can't easily flip to the summary paragraphs.

LB

It doesn't easily yield to paraphrase.

JD

Yes—quite particular to this project, for me. In other situations, I can work pretty hard to present a stepwise and self-consistent argument. There's an intellectual generosity to stating your position. "This is what I think, reader!" *Senses* is not entirely compliant with that demand.

LB

At the best Modern Language Association panel I ever attended, on non-traditional criticism, the writer and academic Michael Clune claimed that criticism without propositions isn't criticism.

JD

Senses makes lots of propositions; it's just that they don't necessarily cohere. That said, it makes a meta-claim about how the word "style" manages problems of identity and community. Style's specific conceptual incoherence *is* its usefulness.

LB

What's an example of that usefulness?

JD

A good example would be the plain style of "Whoso list to hunt," Wyatt's sonnet: "Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind, / But as for me, *hélas*, I may no more." Listen to the aggressive carelessness of the first line, the confessionalism of the second. Throughout the poem, Wyatt manages a delicate balance between saying to his confidant, *You and I are friends* and *You and I are competitors*. The plain style holds together moments of self-assertion and moments of offhand aristocratic intimacy.

LB

You can be great frenemies, if you get the style right. A word neither of us can use without irony!

JD

Yes, yes—that word should stay in the interview! I think both of us are a little uncomfortable with it. And why? Too young? Too Facebook, or Instagram? I don't even really know! But it's not me, or I don't want it to be me, and I can tell you feel that way too.

LB

What about your own prose style in the book? Your vocabulary is precise, your sentences well-wrought, and your sense of pacing—from sentence to sentence, remark to remark—is graceful and considered. All qualities that make you someone unlikely to use the word "frenemies."

JD

Yes. There are great critics who move freely across stylistic registers from the demotic to the academic. I'm uncomfortable with that boundary, but I observe it—even as a kid, or maybe especially as a kid, I needed a refuge from popular culture. You could call it a precocious criticality. I wasn't buying what the Top 40 was selling. You could call it self-embarrassed bookishness. You could call it snobbery. None would really be right, or I hope not, especially the snobbery—but "frenemies" touches a nerve, and one of the book's personal motives is exploring the discomforts of protecting or policing your own style. For what? From what? Against whom?

LB

Maybe we can end with what the book calls the "limits" of style, things such as death and passion.

JD

I'm interested in the prejudice against style, the sense that it is negligible or superficial. So I tried to identify its limits: when we're uncomfortable speaking about it. Styles of grief, or styles in nature, or styles of madness. God's style. Each limit is different, but all make us hesitant to use the word. Of course, everything has a style, doesn't it? That's just to say that it has a place and a time and

gives itself away. But observing its limits is part of what I mean by doing philology rather than philosophy. You know style by its situations. When we use the word confidently, and also when we are abashed—that's what makes it mean what it means. Or better, work how it works. Though the work shouldn't show!

Louis Bury is the author of *Exercises in Criticism* (Dalkey Archive) and Assistant Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY. He writes regularly about visual art for *Hyperallergic*, and his creative and critical work has been published in *Bookforum, Brooklyn Rail, Los Angeles Review of Books, Boston Review*, and *The Believer*.

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