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Response to the paper of J. D. Mininger:

The Style Unto Death: Meditations on Untimely Late Style in Philosophy

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Abstract

In this response I first look at the various interpretations of *style* Professor Mininger provides in his paper. Then I show how, in Mininger's reading, the topic of negativity, eminently, *death*, may become a truly constitutive element of style, producing *late style* in philosophical writing. Finally I argue that Mininger brings us to an exceptional insight: the interaction between two texts may ultimately result in a gesture of performance. There is a moment for each medium when the mode of presentation, the very staging, turns back on itself and this is the point from which it is no longer explaining its main topic, it no longer wishes to be 'about' something. I claim that we are able to experience this performance if we allow the various functions and registers and styles of language to play themselves out simultaneously.

***Response to the paper of J. D. Mininger: The Style Unto Death: Meditations on
Untimely Late Style in Philosophy****

In J. D. Mininger's paper, the questions, as well as the angles, tangents, positions from and with which it seems possible to suggest answers are highly relevant to our topic today: the registers of philosophy. One of Mininger's central questions is: "Is it even possible to isolate and highlight style in philosophy as something singular, which divulges [i.e. 'is telling, characteristic of'] the individuality of the writer?" It is the word *singular* in Mininger's question that especially touched a cord of resonance in me, involving a lot of what, I am convinced, is at stake. In Mininger's context, *singular* is, of course, not the antonym of *plural*: I think we are both for plurality and variety in all areas of enquiry. *Singular* in our contexts means, first and foremost, 'unique', but also 'strange', 'unusual', even 'unusually high quality'. The implicit expectations behind the question are manifold.

One is the desire of identification, perhaps even that of classification: is it possible to tell, after having read but a few sentences from an author, to identify him as, for example, Martin Heidegger, or Ludwig Wittgenstein, or to say, for instance, "ah, this is typical of the analytic approach", or "oh, this is characteristically continental"? In literary criticism: "this is an obviously New Historicist way of reasoning", or: "this is precisely the method of psychoanalytic criticism". When reading (primary) literature: "Oh, this must be Shakespeare", or: "This is surely Coleridge, not Wordsworth". We find these moves, I think, legitimate, which testifies to their possibility: after all, when we wish to outline, or even catalogue – for historical or other purposes – certain trends in philosophy, in literary criticism, or when we find a text without a name, this is how we usually go about the matter and this is what we are inclined to say.

However, as Mininger is also aware of this, even referring to style for identification is not without problems; in fact we may encounter, in dealing with such relatively simple matters all the difficulties at the root of the problematic of style. An eminent difficulty involving style is whether it belongs to the *form* of the text or not. There is a popular conception of style which treats it as if it was a mere 'ornament', or an 'embellishment'. Mininger's argumentation is toward the opposite: not only is the *form* of a text inseparable

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from its *content* and, if we have to choose, style is rather content than form, but style may be considered as being the ‘heart’, the ‘soul’ of content. Let me substantiate this even further with an example: how one may conclude that style is only ornament, separable from ‘content’, and how we may argue against this position.

Exponents of the style-as-ornament view wish to establish first that there is a relatively stable ‘cognitive content’ which can be said ‘in several different ways’ without any loss or gain of meaning. This is, of course, the principle of ‘translatability’, coming from the analytic tradition, and/or its predecessors. The analytic tradition had to – and still has to, in one form or another – stick to this principle because one of its main endeavors has been to translate propositions into logical notation – after all, into another language – maintaining that the gist of the semantic content of the proposition has not been altered when the proposition was turned into a logical formula. This was usually done through *identifying* the semantic content with the logical form itself. That in fact the above operation is nothing else but translation was, I think, first pointed out by W. V. Quine, in his epoch-making article “Two dogmas of empiricism” (originally published in 1953), to whom there is reference in the first paragraph of Mininger’s paper, in the form of a question.

This question is whether we would find “illuminating connections between Quine’s philosophical designs and his privileged Harvard life” (p. 1) in the way we at least think to find backing for certain turns in Wittgenstein’s thinking in the story of his life. I cannot go deeply into this here but I suspect – as it will be hopefully clearer below – that style is the ‘inner, hidden self’ of a person. We have as much access to this self as that person is willing to, or is capable of, giving expression to it. Therefore it is not so much the biography which can be revealing for a person’s philosophical style but how the events of his or her life are reacted to (how one relates to her own story), and people will react very differently even to the – at least – seemingly same or similar events. Quine, exactly 20 years Wittgenstein’s junior, worked for the military intelligence during World War II, Wittgenstein served as a ‘soldier-in-the field’ practically all through World War I as an artillery officer: did the attitudes they developed during the respective, and very different wars have an effect on their philosophy? In 1932-33, Quine travelled with a Sheldon Scholarship to Vienna and met the same Vienna Circle Wittgenstein had several conversations with outside of the Circle’s regular meetings. In 1995, during a Fulbright scholarship to Harvard, I learnt from Professor Quine personally that he had sought the acquaintance of Wittgenstein but they missed each other both in Vienna and in Cambridge, England. Perhaps one single conversation with the other may have turned their respective philosophical convictions into other directions. Or

maybe not. Quine's tutor at Harvard was Alfred North Whitehead, who, as the co-author of *Principia Mathematica*, was still in Cambridge, England when Wittgenstein appeared on the scene in 1911 and thoroughly disliked Wittgenstein but was very much fond of Quine. Yet that Whitehead was more and more the Whitehead of process thought than Whitehead the mathematician. Wittgenstein also had a very privileged upbringing and a privileged life in Trinity College, although he wished to keep up a puritan life-style until the very end. It is an excellent question why there has always been such a passionate interest in Wittgenstein's biography. But I do not think that a biography itself would explain much of a philosophy. A biography contains events and then it is largely a matter of speculation to establish connections between certain turns of fortune and philosophical ideas but it is often hard to guess what the significance of a certain episode, affair or incident was in the philosopher's career, even if the philosopher left behind some documents about this significance. Even if a person keeps a diary, many times an event, on the particular day it happened, looks very significant and later falls into oblivion but the person may not care to 'set this right'.

Anyway, Quine in "Two dogmas of empiricism" – making references to "brick houses on Elm street", which is a well-known street in Cambridge, Mass., not very far from Harvard Yard: is this biographically significant? – shows that the synonymy of *bachelor* and *unmarried man* is absolutely fundamental to the notion of analyticity. *A bachelor is a bachelor* is a genuinely analytic (tautologous) proposition, whereas *A bachelor is an unmarried man* is likewise analytic if and only if we suppose that *bachelor* and *unmarried man* are "cognitive synonyms". Before Quine introduces this term, there is a telling sentence: "Now let us be clear that we are not concerned here with synonymy in the sense of complete identity in psychological associations or poetic quality; indeed no two expressions are synonymous in such a sense"¹. It is clear that what is 'beyond' or 'above' meaning in terms of "cognitive synonymy", Quine ushers out of philosophy into the realm of psychology (for a long time the arch-enemy of philosophy both in the phenomenological and the analytic traditions) or into poetry (literature: something that is nice but without any value for philosophy). Thus the difference between *bachelor* and *unmarried man* becomes something one wishes to see, "from a logical point of view", as precisely a 'merely' stylistic difference. We may, for a moment, compare this with one of the most extreme versions of the 'continental tradition', Derridean deconstruction, where even the slightest difference in meaning will count; one of the basic principles of philosophical practice is that it is impossible to say the 'same thing'

¹ Willard Van Orman Quine, "Two dogmas of empiricism" in: *From a logical Point of View. Logico-Philosophical Essays*, New York: Harper and Row, [1953] 1961 (pp. 20-46), p. 28.

(call it ‘cognitive content’) in ‘two different ways’. If, therefore, we keep the word *style* to express ‘difference’, in deconstruction it is the investigation of style which becomes central to philosophical enquiry, i.e. the many ways in which various (usually metaphorical) meanings dismantle cognitive contents. Cognitive content is supposed to have, in the analytic tradition, a relatively stable conceptual status and serves as a more or less sound basis for referential functions.

Being at variance as regards attitudes to language is where I think the fundamental differences between the analytic and continental traditions can be detected. Until recently, the two ‘schools’ (both very much divided, of course) did not talk much to each other: Derrida’s famous or infamous attack on Austin is an exception. But the rise of ‘Humanism’ in Early Modern (“Renaissance”) Culture is often considered to be a revolt against the Latin style, a particular *use* of Latin that scholasticism had made wide-spread because of its insistence on logic. I can see some similar tendencies in deconstruction: to liberate the language of philosophy from a kind of rigor which makes it impossible to tackle certain traditional questions of philosophy (often questions of traditional metaphysics: ‘being’, ‘death’, etc.) and thus to make *style* central to philosophical enquiries precisely in the conviction that ‘form’ is inseparable from ‘content’.

Yet even if it is accepted that content and form are just two facets of the same phenomenon, Mininger’s approach wishes us to realize that far more is at stake with respect to style. Style “divulges the individuality of the writer”, which should not only mean that it is expressive of the personality to characterize him or her for the sake of identification. Style is more than a ‘name-card’ or one’s ‘signature’: it is the means to express the very inner self that a person happens to have, and no one else has, because no Other can have the personality I have. For each personality, each point of view in space and time, each particular stance the individual has, will be – at least slightly – different. Thus, the language one uses, the way one approaches and handles questions, the very stance one happens to take is not external, but fully internal to one’s personality: it *is* her personality.

Here one of Wittgenstein’s notes, jotted down on the 1st of April, 1949, might be helpful. Wittgenstein’s remark goes:

“Le style c'est l'homme.” “Le style c'est l'homme même.” The first expression has a cheap epigrammatic brevity. The second, correct, one opens up a quite different perspective. It says that style is the picture of the man.²

This is a reference, of course, to the proverbial saying of the famous French scientist, the Comte de Buffon, reminding us that that the original version was not “Style is the man” but: “Style is the man himself”, in less sexist language: “Style is the human being herself”. Wittgenstein reads *self* as *picture*: as putting on display, showing up it-self.

I think it is in this sense of style-as-picture that Mininger distinguishes between “timely” and “untimely” *late style*³, and we get a panorama of examples of varying length: Shakespeare, Edward Said, Jacob Taubes, Deleuze and Guattari, Martin Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, and, most importantly, Spinoza. From among the five possible ways that style can be made a helpful guide to lead philosophical analysis – style as a poetic category, style as structural and topical organization, style as the methodology of the investigation, style as the “staging of thought” and style as truth-revealer – I find it is concentrating on the forth possibility which is the most fruitful. This is “style as staging thought”, and here style is like a stage manager responsible for the articulation of a play; this, I think, has the most picturesque power to remind us that style is style when it refers to the philosopher’s deeply personal and fundamental attitude, position, basic stance to the world, the Other and herself.

This way, as the paper argues, the topic of death, for example, may become a truly constitutive element of style, producing *late style*. It is important that death, through style, may be present in the text when death *as a topic* does not make the slightest appearance in the text and the other way round: death may be the sole ‘surface’ topic of a discourse but it may be ‘missing’ from the text in a more authentic sense. This, as I am reading Mininger, is shown through the example taken from Adorno. When Adorno analyses Beethoven’s late style, he notices, that it is the *absence* of subjectivity in the music which calls attention precisely to this subjectivity. Death therefore gets interpreted as a kind of lack, a kind of absence and through this negativity it becomes a part of, a constant presence in life, a kind of *memento mori* without which life could not be understood.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen / Culture and Value*, [MS 137 140a: 4.1.1949], eds. by Georg Henrik Von Wright, Heikki Nyman and Alois Pichler, trans. by Peter Winch, Oxford: Blackwell, [1977], 1998, p. 89.

³ „*Timely late style* refers to examples of works composed late in life and which fulfill what one would typically think of when confronted with the term ‘late style’. *Untimely late style* contains examples of philosophical late style characterized not by maturity in years as experience, but conditioned only by the thought of death” (p. 2, italics in the original).

Yet the most spectacular case can be found in Spinoza's *Ethics* because it is literally spectacular: it is visualized, performed in the very text itself. As Mininger shows, "in contrast to the placid, measured tone of the axioms, definitions, propositions, and demonstrations" there are the so-called "scolia" in Spinoza's book (p. 10). A *scolium* is a kind of gloss literally on the margin of the main text, "a second stream of text alongside the 'main stream'" (p. 10). I could not help thinking of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, to which, in 1816, some 18 years after the first publication, the poet-philosopher added marginal glosses, which, in their clumsy prose and often imprecise formulation, are, at least at first sight, very far from being revealing, or even helpful in any way. Thus they create the impression of a kind of marginal blurb composed in ordinary language, shooting arrows into the body of exceptionally powerful poetry, as if the Ancient Mariner had had not only an arrow to kill the Albatross, but several ones to get the story of his own shipwrecked. One possible interpretation is that Coleridge's *marginalia* play a similar role to Spinoza's *scolia*. It makes death sinisterly present on the very surface of the text as well, making the poem doubly articulated, as it is this quality which Mininger identifies as the expression of truth in Spinoza's work:

The philosophical truth articulated by the untimely late style of the *Ethics* is its irreducible double articulation: the two-headed style doubles the dual-aspect concept of infinite substance expressed through its affections in the form of modes (p. 13).

Moreover, as Mininger notes, "the language [of the *scolia*] is dipped in imagery, coating the examples in rich tropes of simile and metaphor" and "they provide multiple examples drawn from practical and common experience to which the reader can easily relate" (p. 10). Coleridge's method seems to be the opposite: in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, it is the text of the poem which is "dipped in imagery", and the glosses are so ridiculously prosaic and simple, verging on stupidity, that they rather alienate one from the "tropes of simile and metaphor" of the exceptional poetry.

The very significant point seems to be that it is some identifiable stylistic device which may carry the idea of death into a text, but then the stylistic device outflows its role as a mere device and becomes a ghastly presence in the whole work by impregnating each and every word, serving as a self-reading of the work. It presents the first interpretation, the first reading of the work as it is reading itself; it becomes the poem's, or treatise's, or whatever's picture of

itself. A self-portrait, which is simultaneously painted of the painter-and-the painting while the picture is being painted.

Finally, this insight, to my mind, has a far greater significance than one would realize at first sight. I think Mininger was able to identify the above feature of the *Ethics* because he dealt with late style, ultimately the presence of death in a work about life, even a life full of joy. The negativity making its appearance through a stylistic device, while being in contrast with, and dismantling the main message of joy, precisely amplifies, in a kind of subjunctive mood, the need, the desire, the memento that life should be fully enjoyed.

But there is even more to that. Mininger, to me, provides us with the insight that the interaction between two texts as “double articulation” (a term, by the way, identified as one of the most important features of every human language by linguistics) results, ultimately in a gesture of performance. There is a moment for each medium when the mode of presentation, the very staging, turns back on itself and this is the point from which it is no longer explaining its main topic, it no longer wishes to be ‘about’ something. But it wishes to show up, to perform, with itself and by itself, the very thing it has so far been and is about. Instead of descriptions, argumentations, leading the reader through abstract cognitive, or even trope- and image-relations, it offers itself as a body, as a very particular incarnation. This ‘body’ is not to be thought about and cognitively understood but is to be seen, looked at, experienced without starting to interpret it (our usual move in philosophy and literary criticism) because any kind of interpretation would put us back into the position of ‘aboutness’, which necessarily implies an external relation. There is a point when we should stop thinking and speaking and just allow ourselves to experience and participate in the performance: the work performing itself. Language, logic, thought, idea, imagery, metaphors, similes, allegories, so all kinds of languages and semiotic systems will be absolute prerequisites of the performance: the ‘media’, like the rungs of a ladder, will lead us up onto the top of a ladder, which is here performance. And we may reach the top of the ladder if we do not oppose various kinds and registers of language, insisting that language has this or that function only, or this or that is its main function, or that one or the other function should be suppressed at the expense of the other. Rather, we should allow the functions and registers and styles of language to play themselves out simultaneously, and then we may have the experience. It will be the plurality of styles and registers which may give us the experience of the uniqueness, the singularity of meanings.

