A Hermeneutical Approach to Style

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This essay has two objectives. First, it aims to demonstrate that style in writing—everything from form, to point of view, to rhythm, to hyperbole—is interrelated with the content of the philosophical text.[[1]](#footnote-1) If style is inseparable from a text’s message, as I argue, then it follows that readers ought to consider how the style of a text affects their interpretation of it. My second objective is to suggest *how* we might take style into consideration. I describe a hermeneutical approach to style that I think offers the best account of how we might take seriously the consequences of style for our understanding of a text. After sketching out this approach, I briefly consider how style is interrelated with content in Foucault and Nietzsche and suggest how a hermeneutical approach to style might apply to them.

Why should we pay attention to writing style? First, political theory is conducted almost exclusively in the medium of the written word, so it is reasonable to spend some time thinking about the implications of *how* it is written. In addition, political theory has, in the past, been stylistically rich; even a narrow definition of the "canon" yields an obvious proliferation of style: essays, plays, novels, aphorisms, satire, dialogues, treatises. The contemporary practice of political theory, however, tends to a kind of stylistic monism, where discussion of even the most unorthodox topics is carried out within the accepted formal norms (Rorty 1983).[[2]](#footnote-2) The contrast between a stylistically rich past and a stylistically monotonous present should at least pique our curiosity. A stylistic monism may fail to appreciate philosophy’s stylistically diverse heritage, but worse yet, it risks squandering a diversity of modes of thinking about philosophical questions. Universalizing our own historically constructed attitude towards style might actually distort our understanding of philosophers who experienced it very differently, leading us, for example, to "read Descartes and Hume as if they were Kant" (Richetti 1983, 17). Furthermore, narrowly-drawn stylistic constraints may limit inquiries to the style of a dominant culture or institution, systematically excluding styles of inquiry that might characterize other traditions. Godrej (2011) points out that many attempts by theorists to explore the thought of non-Western thinkers remain bound within Western frames of theorizing. Recognizing stylistic diversity enhances philosophy's creative ability to investigate the limits of knowledge and experience and thus echoes Godrej's call for a methodological pluralism that, "avoids reproducing highly specific notions of what constitutes political theory, but also self-consciously seeks out modes of intellectual production that displace and even replace those very settled preconceptions" (23).

The most compelling reason to consider style, however, is that it plays a fundamental role in constructing (or deconstructing) our understanding of the text. First, style shapes understanding by fashioning the subjectivities of the author and the reader. Nussbaum (1990), for example, argues for a qualitatively rich, third-person narrative style that provokes an analogizing between self and other; such a style brings about a reader whose subjectivity is socially embedded, less individualistic, and more empathic. The intersubjectivity occasioned by the novel also influences the reader's ability to deliberate about justice because, transposing herself into the narrative complexity of fiction develops in her the ability to translate universal principles into practical situations. Thus it is that through style, authors seek to fashion the types of readers who might better understand their texts. In this paper, I consider how Foucault’s style attempts to shape the reader’s subjectivity as a field of diffuse, intersecting regimes of power, and how Nietzsche’s style arguably suggests that the reader create himself as an individualistic, self-styled fiction. These stylized subjectivities are not incidental to the reader’s understanding of the text—they suggest the type of person we ought to become in order to best understand and accept the text’s message.

Second, as Scott (1967) argues, style is epistemic; it provokes the reader into particular epistemological practices that are crucial for the type of knowledge that the text conveys. Nussbaum’s novels, for example, provoke the reader into analogizing between self and other—an exercise fundamental to the kind of ethical knowledge to be gained there. "[O]nly the style of a certain sort of narrative artist,” she writes, “can adequately state certain important truths about the world, embodying them in its shape and setting up in the reader the activities that are appropriate for grasping them" (Nussbaum, 6). Similarly, Colie (1969, 238) argues that the essay form requires that the reader pursue knowledge in a less formal way: “Crisp and aphoristic or loose and ramblish, the essayist spoke directly and personally to his readers; in exchange for the frankness with which the essayist appeared to present his thinking self, he was allowed certain liberties from logical rigour.” The essayistic style, in Colie’s view, promotes a congenial social orientation towards the text and signals a departure from formal logic in favor of a more meditative, reflective mode of inquiry. Nussbaum and Colie are just two examples of the importance of style to the experience of knowledge in a text. To engage in a text’s suggested epistemological practices—to analogize between self and other, to orient oneself to a social context, or to willingly follow an author in her philosophical vagaries, for example—seems integral to arriving at the kinds of truth at which a text aims. In the same way, Foucault cannot simply inform the readers that reified notions of truth need to be decentered, and Nietzsche cannot list the steps a reader must follow in order to create value for herself. These texts may be just as—if not more—concerned with *how we arrive at truth* as with the truth we arrive at, and style can influence the *modes* of our inquiries in a way that eludes the more direct, informative functions of language.

My central claim is that if we fail to appreciate the importance of a text’s style for our understanding, then we fail to be open to the truth claims presented there. If we are to be open to the text, we ought also to be open to experiencing the kinds of subjectivity and epistemological practice that the text’s style suggests. I make the case for a hermeneutical approach to style that considers how readers might be “open” to the *style* of a text just as Gadamer (2004 [1975]) suggests that readers be open to the truth claims of a text.[[3]](#footnote-3) Below I sketch out what I take Gadamer to mean by “openness” and suggest how we might apply this approach to style generally before applying this approach specifically to Foucault and Nietzsche.

*Horizons, Openness, and a Living Relationship with Style*

The central imperative of the Gadamerian hermeneutical approach is to be “open” to the alterity of the text (271). Openness begins with the recognition of the historicity of being: we are each embedded in a horizon of intersecting traditions from within which we interpret the world. Because perception is always first conditioned by our prior understandings, what Gadamer labels “prejudices” or foremeanings, the hermeneutical perspective rejects the notion that we can perceive the world as pure fact or issue a neutral description of the raw data of experience. Openness, then, is not unbounded because openness begins in the horizon of understandings that allow us to gain purchase on a text in the first place. The historicity of understanding entails that each person, or each text, occupies a different perspective. Yet these differences do not amount to alienation. While no one person’s perspective will be totally commensurate with another’s, communication is possible, even inevitable, since our horizons of understanding overlap. The text is capable of speaking to the reader’s situation because the text itself is shaped by and shapes the traditions within which the reader lives. Because traditions bridge temporal distance, historical contexts are not prisons that hold texts and readers utterly separate.

Thus all understanding becomes possible only when it gains purchase in what is already intelligible. To this extent, the nature of understanding exhibits a tendency to recognize only what we already know and to learn that which reinforces our current interpretations. In the absence of critical examination, unexamined prejudices exercise an unchallenged tyranny over our understanding. The Gadamerian imperative to “openness,” however, is the hermeneutical task to counter our bias towards the intelligible by becoming sensitive to even the smallest fissures of unintelligibility in our horizon of understanding. Gadamer describes this as being “pulled up short” by the text (270). These encounters with unintelligibility act as foils—dialogic partners that spur us to alter our existing horizon of understanding and posit a new interpretation that resembles neither our previous understanding nor the dialogic Other, but a fusion of both horizons.

Most importantly, openness means that *we take the truth claim of the text seriously*. In other words, we sincerely expect the text to have something to say to us, and we are willing to transform our understanding as a result. Absent this expectation, we cannot be said to be interested primarily in *the text*; we might instead be reading to find out something about the text’s historical importance, or even the psychological motivations behind it. But to take the truth claim of the text seriously means that we expect the text to have something different and valuable to say to our *own* situation, and that we are willing to transform our own understanding as a result of our experience.

Finally, a hermeneutical approach respects the autonomy of the dialogic partners, even as it recognizes their historical interrelatedness. It resists a flippant attitude that would dismiss a text as having nothing to teach; likewise, it rejects an arrogance that would claim to have already understood its teaching. Either option would deny the text an autonomous existence and undermine its potential to be a transformative dialogic Other. On the one hand, the hermeneutic approach repels the Barthian coup that would install the reader as sovereign over the text’s meaning; such an exercise in subjectivism violates the autonomy of the text by assimilating it into our own uncritically accepted foremeanings.[[4]](#footnote-4) The omnipotent reader eventually confronts her pyrrhic victory in the dull, repetitive solipsism of her own projections. One cannot, as Warnke notes, “simply experience the other as one experiences oneself" (2004, 94). On the other hand, to claim that interpretations issue straightforwardly from the text or authorial intentions falsely reifies the text or author while at the same time ignoring the interpretive role of the reader. If we are to learn anything from the text, we must admit of the possibility that it is something *other* than us; otherwise the text fails to be an effective foil for our current understanding.

*The hermeneutical approach to style*

A hermeneutic approach to style means that we take seriously the importance of style for textual interpretation. We need not only be open to the *content* of the truth claims, but we ought also to be open to the extra-lingual orientations and practices that style actively suggests for the reader in order to make its truth claims convincing. The text appears in its most intelligible light when the reader embodies the orientations a style suggests. Hume’s content, for example, does not merely explain empiricism, but it *fashions the reader into an empiricist* (Box 1990). His style presents facts and small experiments for the reader to check against the world, and his inclusion of textual aporia prompt the reader to do so himself. The reader who refuses to become Hume’s empiricist by failing to follow the stylistic suggestions for empirical reflection might well find Hume’s text a feckless stimulus. In the same way, a blithe attitude might cast Montaigne’s reflections in their most plausible light, or a legalistic remove might find Kant most convincing, but to approach either with the tone appropriate to the other may handicap the texts’ dialogic power even before we begin to examine the truth claims of the text. Style limns the subjectivities of both author and reader and suggests the epistemological constraints and affective orientations within which we experience the text’s truth claims. Openness requires a willingness to engage the epistemological practices and subjectivities that style implies because only from within these orientations does the text become for us an effective foil, an autonomous dialogic other.

As these examples suggest, the text and the reader are embedded in traditions that signal to the reader *how* to read a text, in other words, how the reader is to react to certain stylistic elements, so that style becomes a signal to the reader to think in certain ways, engage in certain epistemic exercises, think with certain emotions, or assume certain identities. Richetti (1983) points out that Hume’s literary style in the *Essays Concerning Human Understanding,* for example, preserves a familiar cultural and moral order, linking author with reader in such a way that they might remain socially connected despite radical philosophical breaks. Winegrad (1974) notes that Montaigne's style invokes the oral tradition common to the literary climate in sixteenth-century France. Montaigne’s intended a style that would likely have led Montaigne’s contemporary audience to intuit an insouciant attitude appropriate to philosophizing in his loose, essayistic manner. The stylistic traditions embodied in Hume’s and Montaigne’s texts act as footholds for the readers’ understanding, or at least for the reader who is situated, even peripherally, in that stylistic horizon. Lang (1975) articulates the historical character of style when he writes:

“[T]he perspectival field of space and time which composes a point of view, are not merely symbolic…they articulate the philosopher's world—more precisely, the world of his work. The persona of the philosopher appears as a moment or unit of force on that space-time grid—and the question left over by *every* philosophical work is whether and to what extent the analogous framework from within which the reader reads, which defines *his* point of view, can be linked to that other framework" (275-6).

The hermeneutically-trained consciousness approaches a text with the understanding that we are prejudiced, and so recognizes that style may connect the reader and the text in a horizon of mutual intelligibility. However, the same awareness of traditions leads us to be sensitive to the ways in which style can disrupt intelligibility. Stumbling upon a style that strikes us as different or evokes cognitive dissonance causes us to reflect back on our own prejudices, to resituate ourselves in relation to the text, and to come to see more clearly the text's relation to ourselves (Gadamer 2004, 327). Being open to the dissonances created by style is one way to maintain philosophy’s critical ability, as Rorty (1983, 562) puts it, "our ability to engage in continuous conversation, testing one another, discovering our hidden presuppositions.” In this way, style can be a recognition of our historicity and also a spur to critical reflection and interpretation.

The hermeneutical approach to style does not recognize *one* correct interpretation of a text’s style. On the one hand, openness to style means that we do not dismiss the style’s significance for our interpretation—we recognize that style has the potential to transform our understanding—yet we cannot access directly the stylistic intentions of a text or author, as our interpretation of a text’s style will always be mediated by in our own stylistic traditions. Nor can we uncritically impose our own stylistic assumptions while still maintaining the text as an autonomous dialogic Other. The hermeneutic approach posits a living relationship in which our interpretation of style is always evolving; consequently, the implications of a writer’s style will vary from reader to reader as we are more or less situated within certain traditions. Cavell, for example, argues that Beckett’s minimalist, fragmentary prose is an affirmation of the audience's ability to create meaning; for Nussbaum, it represents a nihilistic denial of the ethical value of life (Cavell 2008, 115-162; Nussbaum 1990, 288) Both Cavell and Nussbaum interpret Beckett’s style from within certain traditions—Cavell’s affinity for modern art, Nussbaum for Nineteenth century novels—but the hermeneutical approach does not ask which experience of style is more correct, but rather which styles are more or less plausible against the backdrop of our traditions of stylistic interpretation.

One issue raised by insisting on the importance of style is that style can imply freedom for the reader, but it can just as often imply a relationship of domination or even violence. A style may seek to impose its own authority of interpretation on the reader to the exclusion of the reader's own judgment. How can we be “open” to a style that aims to crowd out every semblance of the reader’s interpretive autonomy? For example, in the discussion between Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thebaud in *Just Gaming* (1985), Thebaud remarks that the style of Lyotard's *L'Economie libidinale* allows very little negotiation with the reader, such that its take-it-or leave-it quality excludes the possibility of dialogue. Lyotard concedes that, "insofar as it does not lend itself to dialogue, it perpetrates a kind of violence" (4), but Lyotard objects that his style in fact denies dialogue, explaining that he writes in a different interpretive tradition that is in fact not a violent denial of the reader’s freedom, but its opposite:

"In the writing of the *L'Economie libidinale*, there is a reversal with respect to [the Platonic] tradition: the regulating of dialogic discourse, even of dialectical discourse in the Platonic sense, seemed to me to be associated with power, since ultimately it aims at controlling the effects of the statements exchanged by the partners of the dialogue; I was trying, on the contrary, to limit myself to the delivery of a mass of statements barely controlled in themselves, and, insofar as the relation to the addressee is concerned, they were drawn up more in the spirit of the bottle tossed into the ocean than in that of a return of the effects of the statements to their author" (4-5).

Thebaud, however, is not convinced. What one interprets as a violent style, the other interprets as challenging the violence of a previous style. Ultimately, their perspectives on freedom and style are irreconcilable because they do not find common ground between their two competing horizons of stylistic understanding. Their discussion demonstrates that an openness to style needn’t mean that we assimilate ourselves to the way they author interprets the style of his or her text. A living relationship with style recognizes Thebaud’s autonomous stylistic interpretation; he is not bound to interpret Lyotard’s style as a reaction against the power of the Platonic dialogue, as Lyotard himself suggests. But openness to style also compels Thebaud to be open to a stylistic interpretation that is not merely a reflection of his previous stylistic prejudices. Thebaud has not necessarily misinterpreted Lyotard’s style, but, in light of their conversation, he might try to re-approach the text, this time trying to experience the style as a spur to interpretive freedom. If Thebaud still finds that Lyotard’s style perpetrates a kind of epistemological violence on the reader, he may put the book down and read another. The hermeneutic approach, however, would recommend that he not put the book down too conclusively; the living tradition of style in which Thebaud moves may some day lead him to approach Lyotard’s style differently.

*Foucault*

Foucault is helpful in demonstrating the ontological implications of style because he makes a conscious effort to write in such a way as to construct certain subjectivities for the reader. Foucault suggests at least two ways in which style shapes subjectivity. The first is as a negative construct intended to posit an origin and truncate the proliferation of meaning. The second is as an ethical, aesthetic “technique of self” through which one emancipates oneself through one’s own speech and is mainly elaborated in his later lectures at the *College de France* (2010). In elucidating these subjective implications of style, I also demonstrate how a hermeneutical approach to style might apply to Foucault.

In his 1969 essay, “What is the Author?” (reprinted in Foucault 2010, ed. Rabinow) Foucault critiques the kind of text whose style effaces any indication of an historical person at its origin, implicitly laying claim to a sacred status or, alternatively, a purely aesthetic character. The obfuscation of authorial presence in favor of a transcendental anonymity effects a reification, not a decentering, of subjectivity. Foucault is most concerned, however, not with the suppression of the author-figure but with its *presence*. The author-figure has become a way to contain meaning, to corral the proliferation of discourses by tying them to an historically limited identity. The unifying mythology of the author-figure posits an origin where there is only an interplay of representations and so becomes “a point where contradictions are resolved” and a truncation of the potential plurality of selves (111). “The author,” he writes, “is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning” (118).

Nehamas (1998) observes that Foucault’s broader goal is not so much the destruction of the author (or the reader), but the refutation of a desicatting historicism that denies the proliferation of discourses by tying them to a monolithic authorial point. Historicism seeks an economy of interpretation, and so makes style into an indicator of an historically limited personality occupying an historically limited discourse. In this way, style can become a harnessing, constraining force, constructed to suppress discursive practices. In his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (2010 [1969]), for example, Foucault identifies “a mode of statement” and writing style as rules of formation that coalesced medicine from a heterogenous group of traditions into a corpus with a distinct identity.

Idiosyncracies in writing style, then, are construed to validate our intuition that there *is* a subject behind the words, and these subjects are posited as essences or origins that limit the pluralities of meaning. But Foucault’s style is designed to disabuse us of this notion of a unitary subject. He writes in a passive voice. He avoids pronouns. Without an “I” or “We” or “One” upon which to hang a thought, Foucault denies his sentences the clarity of a unitary subject, and communicates a diffuse field of subjectivity both for himself and the reader. Exposing the author-figure as a myth woven by intersecting disciplines suggests at once their artificiality *and* possibilities for their alteration, which for Foucault is their emancipatory potential. In the introduction to *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault himself makes the link between his writing style and the effacing of subjectivity:

“What, do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think that I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing—with a rather shaky hand—a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary, in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again. I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and so not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write” (17).

Foucault “writes in order to have no face,” so as to decenter our norms of authorial unity and our own subjectivity. Foucault’s style, then, is crucial to the point he is making; the disorientation, cognitive dissonance, or the loss of self effected by his labyrinthine style *is* an emancipatory mode of unmasking.

There is a different, more positive approach to style to be gained from Foucault, however, one that links our experience of aesthetics to the possibility of value-creation, ethical self-formation, and political agency. This approach harnesses style as something that might make visible the germ of discontinuity contained in every statement (2010, 28). Potential for freedom exists because the style in which a text is written can decenter our discourses, opening up the possibility for intervention in and transformation of those discourses (29). Hawes’s (1996) Foucauldian analysis of the Puritans’ “manic” writing style identifies how this style was pathologized as part of a broader elite hegemony, but the manic style decentered religious hierarchies, socio-economic privilege, and their concomitant hierarchies of discourse (2). Biesecker (1999) argues that a Foucauldian framework suggests that rhetoric may become a site for that “technique of self” that is the substantive practice of freedom: writing style can make visible the possibilities for emancipation by decentering the subjectivity of the reader and author, thereby opening the space for a new form of subjectivity. Nehamas (1998) notes that in Foucault’s later years, he develops a theory of self-creation based on the Greek concept of *parrhesia. Parrhesia* is a courageous act of speaking truth to someone in a position of power over oneself, but Foucault is most interested in *parrhesia* as a capacity for ethical self-creation, a way of caring for the self so that we might become ethical agents capable of engaging in politics. This private practice, then, has public significance. Foucault’s evaluation of *parrhesia* promotes the idea that we must develop in ourselves the aesthetic, creative capacity if we are to contribute to the creation of communal values, that is, politics (180). *Parrhesia* is part of Foucault’s turn from power being exercised *on* individuals to power being exercised *by* individuals on themselves. It is an invitation not to imitate the author, but to create one’s own self for oneself (10). Where political values are bound up with the private, aesthetic, ethical task of shaping oneself, style becomes the symptom of a political subjectivity in the making, a harbinger of auto-emancipation.

Style is clearly one mode through which Foucault accomplishes his unmasking and reaches emancipatory ends. How might a hermeneutical approach to style treat Foucault? First, a hermeneutical approach is open to being “pulled up short” by the style of his text, which is often jolting or disorienting. The hermeneutically-trained consciousness is alert to Foucault’s unusual, sometimes difficult style. Rather than dismiss the style as valueless or cast about for sentences with a more familiar, intelligible style, the hermeneutical approach to style critically reflects on what this initial stylistic unintellibility could mean for our understanding. A hermeneutical approach to style means being open to the ways in which style pulls us up short, and compels us to interrogate further these fissures of unintelligibility.

Taking Foucault’s style seriously, moreover, means taking seriously its implications for our subjectivity. I have outlined above two interpretations of Foucaultian subjectivities; seeking to experience these subjectivities seems fundamental to being open to Foucault’s style. Without challenging our own self-perception as a unitary individual, without experiencing the free-floating disorientation of a subject-denying style, we are not engaging with the text in a way that allows its truth claims to appear to us most convincingly. Refusing to experience the decentering effects of an unorthodox, labyrinthine, self-effacing style is also a refusal to let Foucault’s text be the integral dialogical Other that it could otherwise be for us. Openness to the subjective experience occasioned by Foucault’s style means we take seriously the text as an autonomous Other capable of transforming our understanding of ourselves.

One possible objection, however, is that engaging with the text in this way might relinquish the own interpretive autonomy by dissolving our selves in the decentering Foulcauldian subjectivity. If we were to conceive of openness as merely a conscious, linguistic phenomenon—that is, an openness to *content* only—we might more reliably preserve the critical distance that guards us against assimilating ourselves to the text. An openness to style, however, seems to make a further demand on the reader: that we also allow ourselves to engage experiences that are occasioned by the text, but which are not in fact language. Just as Thebaud feared Lyotard might crowd out the reader as a dialogic partner with the text, we might justifiably fear that truly inhabiting Foucault’s decentered subjectivity could leave us without an “us”. The reader who assimilates completely to the Foucauldian effacement of subjectivity potentially finds herself without the agency to be an effective Other to the text.

The hermeneutical approach, however, being committed to a dialogic understanding, does not embrace completely and uncritically the text’s stylistic implications. The experience of style is always in service to the maintenance of an open, interrogative orientation towards the text. Embracing style is part of the hermeneutical approach in so far as it brings out the text’s strengths as an autonomous foil for our understanding. But this embrace ought to be tempered by our critical reflection on the integrity of or own autonomous interpretive power. Gadamer insists that we approach a text with a presumption in its *favor* so that it may better highlight and dispel our own prejudices (Warnke 2004).

What is more, Foucault himself seems to realize later in life the impossibility of a subjectless existence as he begins to elaborate the positive, emancipatory potential of subjectivity (see Foucault 2010, *Government of the Self and Others*). This is the second interpretation of Foucault’s subjectivity outlined above. In this view, the self is an autonomous dialogical partner. Style becomes the idiosyncratic signal that the speaker is engaged in an interpretive process of his own, and an implicit invitation for the reader to style herself—not as an imitation of the text, but in the course of her own individual creative process. This second Foucaultian subjectivity is a thoroughly hermeneutical approach to style; first, it affirms style as a positive textual affirmation of the speaker’s self-styled autonomous subjectivity, and secondly, it implicitly preserves the interpretive autonomy of the reader as a dialogic Other. This style does not aim to overcome and assimilate the reader to itself, but it leaves the reader to weave her own interpretation of her own subjectivity. The text invites a fusion of horizons.

*Nietzsche*

Nietzsche’s style is interesting for its epistemological effects: the way we encounter his style has profound consequences for the kind of knowledge we expect to find n his texts, and for the way we go about seeking that knowledge. Take one of his most obvious styles: the aphorism. His aphorisms are short, sometimes shocking, always chthonic, often interrogative, and disconnected from other aphorisms. What are we to make of this style?

Derrida’s (1979) estimation of Nietzsche’s aphoristic style is that there is no aphoristic style: style requires context, but because aphorisms are isolated, they therefore have no context to reference. Aphorisms, for Derrida, cannot even be "fragments" because that would be to conceive of them as part of a totalizing whole. Nehamas comments on Derrida’s position, “fragments also lack style, for style depends on the existence of interconnections among pieces of language that, insofar as they are interconnected, are no longer fragments in his sense” (Nehamas 1998, 17). The hermeneutical approach, however, recognizes that the text is not the only source of context. Derrida’s deconstructionism neglects to see that the reader, too, brings context in the form of the horizon of understanding in which she stands. Aphorisms do not lack style because the reader brings with her a tradition of style within which even fragments find a connection. The reader always brings an interpretive orientation, and while the aphoristic text may be inscrutable, it is not utterly so. “I have forgotten my umbrella”—perhaps Nietzsche’s most talked about and most unintelligible marginalia—yields no meaning and has no style, according to Derrida. A hermeneutical approach to style, however, does not dismiss this statement as styleless; the hermeneutically-trained consciousness is aware that we already bring an interpretation of style to it, and while these interpretations may vary, or even be at variance (Straightforward? Purposely enigmatic?), we should at least be aware that we bring an interpretation of style to the text. Derrida’s mistake is to assume that the style of the text emanates directly from the text, and thus style becomes an endless chain of references to more text. To fail to reference, then, is to fail to have style. This is not the case, however: the reader is her own reference, and as long as the text is read, it cannot fail to reference the reader’s own horizon of understanding. In so far as we label a text as style*less* we allow our own latent traditions of stylistic interpretation to pass unnoticed, but the hermeneutically-trained consciousness makes itself aware of our stylistic horizons. Moreover, when we dismiss the stylistic value of a text, we forfeit a portion of its ability to serve for us as a dialogic Other. The style cannot pull us up short, as Gadamer would say. Without style, style cannot be for us an instance of intelligibility that beckons us to further interrogation. To evaluate a text as “styleless” fails to recognize our own horizons of stylistic interpretations, thereby naturalizing the latent interpretations we do apply to the text. Furthermore, such a perspective forfeits the ability of style to be for us an autonomous Other.

Others suggests that in fact Nietzsche’s aphorisms have style, but they are hardly united in defining that style. Nehamas argues that the aphorisms have a hyperbolic quality that demands attention, but standing out also has the effect of causing them to stand alone; thus separated, they might bracket the ideas within, denying them the ability to become a narrative or a premise in an argument (1985, 23). Similarly, Walter Kaufmann argues that Nietzsche’s aphoristic style is meant to express his anti-system tendencies, but is also grounded in a wholistic experimental mode: the short stabs at wisdom mimic hypotheses to be tested, and their abrupt endings leave the reader to evaluate them (in Nehamas 1985). Sara Kofman argues that the metaphoric style of Nietzsche’s aphorisms is meant to be an obscurantist code that would exclude the vulgar but include elite members of a certain class (in Nehamas 1985). What is the “correct” approach to Nietzsche’s style, then? Ought we to approach it as an experimental mode? As an aristocratic exclusion? A hermeneutic approach to style does not recognize any one stylistic interpretation as “correct.” It does, however, appreciate the importance of style for our interpretation. Moreover, it recognizes that a text’s style is not purely a function of the text itself, but also of the traditions of style we inhabit. Both Kaufman’s and Kofman’s interpretations of Nietzsche can be valid, but we would do well to recognize that they are not conclusive. The recognition that they are interpretations of style rooted in particular traditions, moreover, has the consequence of causing us to be open to new and different interpretations.

What if the style of a text is actually meant to deny us an interpretive ability of our own? Merrow (2003), for example, argues that Nietzsche’s rhythmic style is calculated to overpower his audience’s reason by imbuing his prose with a sense of an occult ritual: "Rhythm has a physiological basis as a pulse or beat that over time was transposed into more abstract forms. This is the source of its compelling power, first in ritual and dance, later in poetry and prose" (298). In Merrow’s view, Nietzsche's rhythmic style is a negation of freedom, a method of brainwashing by engendering, "an unconquerable urge to yield and join in; not only our feet…but the soul" (299). To take the claims of Nietzsche’s style seriously, need we submit ourselves to hypnotization? Ought we to allow ourselves to be swept along with this undeniable occult compulsion? If being open to style means being willing to inhabit the affective mode that style suggests for the reader, or engaging in an epistemological practice that requires us to forgo reason, this seems to make us dangerously vulnerable to manipulation. The hermeneutical approach, however, recognizes that to be hypnotized by style is also to destroy its potential for transformation. It can only ever engage a hypnotic style partially, never allowing it to deny or obliterate the autonomous interpretive power of the reader. The hermeneutical approach wants most of all to be open to the text, and in so far as the style actively mitigates against this goal, the reader ought to reject it. Even if we agree with Merrow that Nietzsche’s style evokes an “unconquerable urge to yield,” this does not equate to an imperative to let ourselves be hypnotized. Similarly, if we agree with Kofman that Nietzsche’s style is a method of aristocratic exclusion, we ought not eliminate our (plebeian) selves from the pool of possible interpreters, or, alternatively, collaborate in his elitism. The hermeneutic approach only suggests that we embrace a text’s stylistic suggestions in so far as it makes the text a more effective dialogic partner.

Nehamas (1985) has a more favorable interpretation of Nietzsche’s style, concentrating less on the impact of one of his styles, and more on the general presence of multifarious styles. Nehamas argues that the proliferation of Nietzsche’s styles is actually a method for resolving a central problem in his work: how to preach against dogmatism without being dogmatic himself. Nehamas writes:

“[H]e wants his readers to accept his views, his judgments and his values as much as he wants them to know that these are essentially *his* views, *his* judgments, and *his* values…[He desires] to have as readers only those who will always be aware of the nature of his views, and of all views in general” (35).

The obviousness of Nietzsche’s styles has the effect of making all of his writing appear only as an interpretation, so the reader might come to the conclusion that all views are only interpretations, yet still avoid accepting Nietzsche’s view wholeheartedly. In other words, Nietzsche uses style as a method for drawing attention to the historicity of all interpretation, and as an implicit invitation for the reader to create her own. From this perspective, Nietzsche is himself a model for a hermeneutic approach to style.

We need not agree with Nehamas that Nietzsche embraces a hermeneutical approach to style in order to approach Nietzsche’s style hermeneutically ourselves, however. Some styles may embrace hermeneutical understanding: granting both author and reader historicity, allowing space for a fusion of horizons. Yet we can do this with every text, even those that would desire to overpower the reader or to relinquish all of it.

*Conclusion*

I have suggested that we ought to be aware of how style shapes our understanding of a text. Furthermore, if we are to be open to a text—that is, if we approach a text with the presumption that it has something to say to us, and with the desire to let it do so in its most effective, convincing light—we ought also inhabit the subjectivities and engage in those epistemological practices that the text suggests for us. To resist these suggestions completely may diminish or deny the text its ability to be for us an effective dialogical other. In other words, we might deny the text the ability to challenge our understanding if we refuse to approach it in the manner its style suggests it ought to be approached. In some cases, however, the style of a text may seek to overwhelm the reader’s interpretive autonomy. The imperative to take on a text’s stylistic suggestions does not extend that far. A hermeneutical approach to style suggests that we take into account the text’s style for our reading, but not to the extent that it undermines our own interpretive ability. This perspective implicitly assumes, however, that there is a range of subjective and epistemological orientations that are appropriately considered philosophical, and that by inhabiting different subjectivities and engaging diverse epistemological practices we might expand the scope of our understanding without relinquishing our critical ability.

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1. By “style,” I refer to all those elements that one might learn from Strunk & White or from high school English teachers: diction, syntax, form, tone, imagery, hyperbole, active/passive voice, punctuation, point of view, etc., which an author inevitably (consciously or unconsciously) includes in her writing. I understand the term “style” to be synonymous with the term “rhetoric” when the latter is broadly construed as thetraces of interpretation inherent in the elements of language. Still, I have deliberately avoided the term “rhetoric,” because that term is generally attached to the persuasive, public functions of political debate. My interest here, however, is with the experience of a reader vis-à-vis the text, which, while political, is more concerned with the micro-level processes of self-formation than public debate. Also, I am not interested primarily in persuasion, but in the ontological and epistemological effects of style that structure the rationality in which persuasion becomes possible. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nussbaum (1990, 20) notes that contemporary philosophy, far from having a consciousness of style and form, tries to transpose scientific styles of writing onto questions of an altogether different quality, mindlessly conforming to the, "Anglo-American fastidiousness and emotional reticence, and above all [to] the academicization and professionalization of philosophy, which leads everyone to write like everyone else." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. "[A] text is not understood as a mere expression of life but is taken seriously in its claim to truth" (296). The imperative to be open to the text’s claims to truth means that we do not first assume it to be compromised by an underlying psychosis or bound by an historical irrelevance. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Barthes (1977) in his essay “The Death of the Author,” argues that the author is dead, and that the reader is the sole origin of interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)