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THE FIRST LECTURE

THE MEANING OF STYLE

FROM THE BOOK

THE PROBLEM OF STYLE

BY

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INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

The Problem of Style was published in 1922 and is a collection of lectures given in 1921 at the school of English Literature at Oxford. As such, they do not completely lend themselves to the style of an essay as Murry states in his prefatory note. His main concern was that there would be some repetition over the sequence of lectures. This in itself would disqualify them from being an essay. Yet if some of them were to be published separately, we may be tempted to view them as essays. The defining qualities of each may not be as precise today.

In saying this, it is quite remarkable to notice the difference in approach and the presentation of the subject matter. No doubt today we would be pestered by everything technological with irrelevant slides appearing on a digital whiteboard, with nothing more than the notes that the speaker is already reading.

The speaker here is by himself, and he addresses a group of people who, for most, are interested in what he will have to say. They will listen and hope to gain some insight, no matter how small, from his expertise. Murry was no fool. He was a prolific writer, well known for his work. He wrote some sixty books and produced thousands of essays and reviews. He also became known as

the most hated man of letters. One may wonder why, yet apparently he was not interested or cared what others thought of him or his work. Likely because of his critical skills, of which not everyone was fond. However, his work was quality work and this series of lectures is no different.

Murry is a relatively easy writer to understand and does not make too many demands on the reader. His vocabulary is likely far better than the average then, and far better than the above average now. This matters not. The reader has the opportunity to learn a selection of new words, or at least some unfamiliar ones. If you read the work of others in the same period, it was not a matter of airs and graces. This was how they were taught. Makes you wonder what happened to our education systems over the past century. Education, indeed!

Rather than me offering the reader a review and summary of the entire book, I have opted to consider each lecture as a single entity. After dealing with all six lectures, I will then discuss the relationship between them. Hence, I will proceed to present a review and summary of Murry's first lecture, The Meaning of Style.

THE MEANING OF STYLE

As writers, or dare we say critics, we can often use words which we think are well-defined, but upon careful thought and consideration—they are not. In essence, this is how Murry begins, albeit with a little more flair.

It is of the utmost importance that we try to be as precise as possible with what we say and write to avoid being misunderstood. Yet the more we participate in the writing, the more we can forget the importance of being precise. It is this problem concerning Murry in this lecture.

As is appropriate to the period of time, Murry gives several examples which many today would not appreciate in content or significance.¹ One such example is with reference to the word decadence. It seems harmless enough, but its two distinct meanings leads to it being used incorrectly. The first is primarily historical, whereas the second is metaphorical. When it is used, the hint is at one or the other, but the reader is often left to determine which is the most appropriate.²

Murry continues his discussion by considering the two earlier definitions of style given by Buffon and Beyle.³ Buffon's definition:

le style, c'est l'homme même ⁴

which Murry states is utterly deceptive, and that of Beyle:

Le style, c'est ajouter à une pensée donnée toutes les circonstances propres à produire tout l'effet que doit produire cette pensée. ⁵

I am in agreement with Murry's: Much is concealed beneath that little word 'ought'.⁶ In fact, this statement is difficult to relate to the word style as in what we normally understand it uses to be.

Murry moves to provide three distinct meanings of style. In other words, there are three ways in which we use the word. He relates these to Saintsbury, Wilkinson and Marlowe.⁷ There is no need to give these particular examples as the matter of the definitions will be expounded here.

Murry's first meaning of style is that personal idiosyncrasy of expression by which we recognize the writer.⁸ Without a doubt, one must be very familiar with a writer's work to be able to identify it.

His second is style being used as the technique of expression of which he states that this use of the word is only properly applied to the exposition of intellectual ideas which apply to philosophers and essayist, but not to novelists or poets.

In the first place, novelists and poets, *qua* novelists and poets, do not really have ideas at all, they have perceptions, intuitions, emotional convictions; and secondly, the only evidence that they have true perceptions is the fact that they are conveyed to us in all their particularity. ⁹

Now whether or not you are offended by such a statement is inconsequential. The fact is that he is very correct in what he thinks. He is correct on the other point associated with technique of expression and that is grammar. The writer's grammar must be reasonably correct. Reasonably here means whether the offense, or perceived error has been committed for dramatic reason as in the case of Shakespeare.

¹ We can only blame our now education systems which wallow in a whole host of irrelevant topics.

² Page 2.

³ Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon was a naturalist, mathematician, and cosmologist. Marie-Henri Beyle, better known by his pen name Stendhal. Considered to be one of the early and foremost practitioners of realism.

⁴ Page 3. The style is the man himself.

⁵ Page 3. Style consists in adding to a given thought all the circumstances calculated to produce the whole effect that the thought ought to produce.

⁶ Page 3.

⁷ George Saintsbury was an English critic, literary historian, editor, teacher, and wine connoisseur. Louis Wilkinson was an author, lecturer and biographer. Christopher Marlowe was an English playwright, poet, and translator of the Elizabethan era.

⁸ Page 4. Once again, Murry's references are to known writers of his time, or at least in his current reading.

⁹ Page 6.

Murry's third definition of style is very, you could say, metaphysical in its nature and expression. This being it is a complete fusion of personal and universal. This absolute style being the realization of a universal significance in a personal and particular expression.¹⁰

Now Murry does not expand on this definition with any great clarity, and it is left to the reader or listener to determine, and then perhaps appreciate his definition. His example being the comparison between Marlowe and Shakespeare does not add to the understanding, but it seems to relate closely to his first definition pertaining to the writer. It remains for us to say that this final definition is quite grandiose in what Murry might set out to achieve, albeit unclear how it is to be done. Here Murry has lost the reader in his build up of emotion, at least with his respect for Marlowe's ability. This, I believe is the first instance in this lecture where Murry has failed in adequately or clearly explaining what he means.

Summarizing Murry's definitions:

1. as personal idiosyncrasy
2. as technique of exposition
3. as the highest achievement of literature

We still find that the third is not as clearly defined as the other two and it comes down to a matter of personal opinion at what highest achievement of literature means in real terms. I find that Murry diverges from the point of style and launches into quite a lengthy discussion about criticism. Whereas this may have some relevance to style, it is not particularly relevant to the definition of style. He does correctly state that the different meanings of the word style do play havoc with both critic and reader.

Murry's diversion is somewhat entertaining and appropriate—to a point. The university culture at that time and even more so today is prone to much the same, and that is the point of irrelevancy to support an argument. It all sounds impressive, but results to very little in substance or support.

His argument continues as if style is some uncontrollable beast that has its own personality

to influence others—taking on a life of its own. In some instances, his lecture takes on a rather melodramatic appeal with his continuance into metaphor being a further distraction from style, but this does allow for the possibility of the topic being revisited in a later lecture.

He later comes to the conclusion that:

By accepting the view that the source of style is to be found in a strong and decisive original emotion, we can get a closer grasp of the intention that lies under the use of the word as meaning a writer's personal idiosyncrasy.¹¹

but he still leaves it to the reader to decide whether style is the expression of genuine individual feeling or not. The continued banter about style as personal idiosyncrasy, is rather irrelevant since having been addressed before, we have a relatively good understanding of what he means.

What is of interest is his reference to false idiosyncrasy, which I believe still healthily survives today, and so comes down to a mere imitation or artificiality. Murry does make his case about the artificiality of style. We may say that some are artificial and others normal. But what does this really mean? I cannot see how it is possible to make a clear distinction between the two or if there are two. The difference would be minimal as to imply that one is only a slight variation of the other.

The result of all of this is that there is a direct relationship with emotional and intellectual experiences regarding a writer's style. This makes a great deal of sense for any individual since the way they write develops, we hope, with time and exposure to other stimuli, even if there is a trace of artificiality.

Interestingly:

Some of the most absurd and most rigorous conventions are those imposed, not by society, but by the individual upon himself.¹²

¹⁰ Page 8.

¹¹ Page 15.

¹² Page 19.

The final few pages will likely mean little to the reader of today and their inclusion here is what differentiates the lecture from an essay. This form of diversion would not appear in an essay. However, there may be some hint of interest for those of whom consider themselves Wordsworthians.

As for a meaning of style, there is no definite or precise one given, and we are left swimming in the vocabulary of the possibilities provided, yet the link to emotional and intellectual experience is of prime importance to develop a true style.

In all fairness to Murry, this is his first lecture, so he is at liberty in revisiting and possibly clarifying what has been discussed. He must be admired and congratulated for his approach and daring to discuss the concept of style and to put forth opinions which may not be met with great approval.

His second lecture which will be reviewed later is titled The Psychology of Style which begins in clarifying the nature of a writer's activity.

OF INTEREST

Murry had quite an extensive vocabulary, and it is interesting to see some of what may be unfamiliar words today.

- opprobrium (page 2): harsh criticism or censure
- solecisms (page 7): a grammatical mistake in speech or writing
- jejune (page 8): dry and uninteresting
- hypostatizations (page 9): ideas or formulations to be regarded or treated as real
- verisimilitude (page 22): the appearance of being true or real

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