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The Entity as Being: On the Ontological Aspects of Style

Abstract:

This article approaches style as an ontological aporia: the condition of appearing that cannot be grasped either as a property of an entity or as Being itself. Beginning from the etymological constellation of *stilus/stylus* and *στῦλος*, it reconstructs a tension between writing and architectural space, and shows how visible mappings of space (peristyle, hypostyle) articulate a schema in which things appear or withdraw. The argument then turns to Aristotle's *dynamis* and *energeia* in order to describe style as a "between" that precedes determinate traits as their condition of possibility. Finally, through Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche's "grand style" and Merleau-Ponty's reflections on expression, the paper clarifies how style both enables and destabilizes the ontic-ontological binary. Style is thus neither ornament nor a "third" thing, but the work of mediation through which appearing is possible.

Keywords:

style, aporia, appearing, ontological difference, dynamis-energeia, phenomenology, ontology

Between Aesthetics and Ontology

Most commonly, when the question of style is raised, the phenomenon is considered within the context of philosophical aesthetics, the theory and history of art, and literature. In such cases, the concept of style is more frequently associated with modes of expression and perception; consequently, it cannot be divorced from a reference to aesthetics understood as a reflection on sensory cognition and its forms of expression. Furthermore, style proves to be one of the fundamental characteristics of human behavior and thought, a measure of one's originality and distinctiveness precisely in expression – that is, from an external perspective (even if it is the subject themselves who is observing it).

On the other hand, metaphysical or ontological considerations of style provide rarer, though no less significant or notable examples. However, placing them at the center of attention still, in a way, depends on not overlooking the remaining aspects of this concept (or phenomenon). While these two perspectives may be interconnected, this does not imply their identity.

It seems, however, that it is at the level of fundamental metaphysics or ontology that style, as a concept, discloses the phenomenon concealed behind it in its most significant form. Moreover, once articulated, this concept proves to be one of the most important points of reference in this field, no longer reducible to mere ornamentation. For style can be shown here as the very principle of appearing, which is not reducible to the properties of that which appears, since it precedes them – as a condition of possibility.

In this sense, style is not some “third” entity situated between an entity and Being, but the very work of this “between” – that is, an intermediate instance that undermines the binary opposition present in both the ontic and the ontological difference precisely insofar as it discloses itself as an *aporia*. Here *aporia* is not a rhetorical effect but the name of a structure – namely, that the condition of appearing cannot be grasped either as a property of an entity or as Being itself. The present article is devoted to this very problem.

It therefore proceeds systematically rather than historically or doxographically. The thinkers discussed below each isolate a distinct aspect of style as a condition of appearing. Their sequence is governed by the structure of the problem itself.

Sources of “Style”

Style – as its very etymology testifies – is primarily associated with writing: both with the character of a text (literary qualities, etc.) and with the character of handwriting (in every sense of these words). The word *stilus* points to the source. The first among the meanings listed in P. G. W. Glare’s *Oxford Latin Dictionary* is: “a long, sharply pointed piece of metal, etc., a spike or sim.”¹ Given the kinship between *stilus* and *stimulus*, it may be associated with “a goad” (for urging animals), but also with “something that rouses to ... an action.”² It also signifies the “stem of a plant.”³

Only later does the sequence of the most commonly known meanings appear: “a pointed instrument for incising letters, etc., on a wax tablet, stylus”;⁴ then “the (use of the) stylus,” that is, writing as “the action or practice of writing,” especially as a branch of education; finally, *stilus* “as used in literary composition,” that is, “pen” – and, with reference to a mode of composition, “style.”⁵

Stilus becomes *stylus* through association with the Greek word *στῦλος*.⁶ This is precisely why its original meaning is modified – or rather, supplemented. *Style*, in turn, gains a second – which is by no means secondary, but equal – source, a Greek one. It can be said that it is in *style* that both sources merge.

But before we move on to this second source, it is perhaps worth introducing a short digression. It highlights both the phonetic and the functional similarity of the aforementioned Latin word *stilus* to yet another Greek word – *στίλος*. According to Liddell, Scott, and Jones’s *A Greek-English Lexicon*, which cites Hesychius of Alexandria, it is “a ram leading the flock.”⁷

By contrast, *στῦλος* – the second of the terms cited here, yet the earlier Greek one – refers to one of the most important architectural elements known from antiq-

1) Glare, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “stilus,” 2006–2007.

2) Ibid., 2007.

3) Ibid., 2006.

4) Ibid.

5) Ibid., 2007.

6) Ibid., 2006.

7) Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “στίλος,” 1646 (with the editorial caution that in Hesychius’ gloss the original reading may have been κτίλος rather than στίλος).

uity. It denotes a “pillar,” especially “as a support or bearing”; a “wooden pole,” specifically “tent-poles, uprights,” but also a “plank.” Greek speakers at Alexandria and in the East, however, mistakenly used the word στῦλος to denote a stile for writing on waxed tablets.⁸

If, then, what is at issue is a pillar or a tent-pole, we are dealing above all with elements that shape architectural space in ancient culture. In their presence, one becomes – in a sense – a person of ancient culture.

Style as an Axis

The review of the history of the signs *stilus/stylus* and στῦλος (and, marginally, στίλος as well) reveals a tension between writing and space. This tension “works” ontologically, for ultimately what is at issue is Being or an entity appearing in the mode of Being.

To examine this “work,” I would like to begin with the fact that the word στῦλος and the structural element it designates give rise – among other things – to the *peristyle*⁹ and the *hypostyle*.¹⁰ The first, as the German historian of Hellenistic architecture Hans Lauter writes, “combines the idea of an inner courtyard enclosed on all sides with the colonnaded hall.”¹¹ By the latter – that is, hypostyle halls – “one understands squat rectangular to square buildings whose roof is supported inside by columns.”¹²

They shape the frames that, in antiquity, organize architectural space. But above all, they establish the structure of perceived spatiality as such. Władysław Tatarkiewicz points out that the classical art of the Greeks finds its own aesthetics in the reproduction of “*organic forms of nature*.”¹³ In architecture, such organicity appears as the most general schema of perceived space.

8) Ibid., 1657.

9) Gr. “τό περίστυλον” (Ibid., s.v. “περιστύλιον,” 1389). In Vitruvius, in the Latin version: “peristylum” (Vitruvius, *De architectura libri decem*, VI.7.3).

10) Gr. “τό ὑποστύλιον” (Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “ὑποστύλιον,” 1897). The closest functional and structural equivalent of the hypostyle in Vitruvius is the “*oecus aegyptius*,” the “Egyptian hall” (Vitruvius, *De architectura libri decem*, VI.3.8–9).

11) Lauter, *Die Architektur des Hellenismus*, 132.

12) Ibid., 156.

13) Tatarkiewicz, *Historia estetyki*, 80.

For rows of columns – repeating axes that order space so as to preserve access to natural light – the forest served as the model. It is therefore no surprise that one of these forms – the hypostyle – is described as a *forest of columns* rising around a center. Lauter points to this: “Soon, however, with the reduction of depth, an increasingly ‘concentric’ organization of the interior supports emerges, which, to be sure, often still fills the interior like a forest of columns.”¹⁴ This is no ordinary forest – Norberg-Schulz supplements Lauter’s observation by calling it a “sacred grove,”¹⁵ that is, a primary space.

The sacred grove – or forest – is also the subject of Bachelard’s reflections in *The Poetics of Space*.¹⁶ Such a forest offers a precise example of “*inner immensity* that gives ... real meaning to certain expressions concerning the visible world.”¹⁷ “Immensity is,” as the philosopher continues, “a philosophical category of daydream”¹⁸ – as a condition of possibility for grasping appearing without that which appears. This brings us

into a region of the purest sort of phenomenology – a phenomenology without phenomena; or, stated less paradoxically, one that, in order to know the productive flow of images, need not wait for the phenomena of the imagination to take form and become stabilized in completed images. In other words, since immense is not an object, a phenomenology of immense would refer us directly to our imagining consciousness.¹⁹

Merely by way of foreshadowing the philosophy to which I intend to turn in later parts of this text – and fearing that I might stray from the path set out beforehand – I must nevertheless note that Bachelard’s immensity, opening up in the *sacred grove*, resembles a *Greek temple*. It is this temple – open, moreover, precisely as a *peristyle* to all quarters of the world, where no wall stops the sun’s rays – that Heidegger evokes in *The Origin of the Work of Art*. In it too, one can experience appearing without phenomena:

14) Lauter, *Die Architektur des Hellenismus*, 157.

15) Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci*, 50.

16) Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 186.

17) *Ibid.*, 185.

18) *Ibid.*, 183.

19) *Ibid.*, 184.

A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing. It simply stands there in the middle of the rock-cleft valley. The building encloses the figure of the god, and in this concealment lets it stand out into the holy precinct. . . . His presence of the god is in itself the extension and delimitation of the precinct as a holy precinct. . . . It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being.²⁰

As Heidegger writes: “But men and animals, plants and things, are never present and familiar as unchangeable objects, only to represent incidentally also a fitting environment for the temple, which one fine day is added to what is already there.”²¹

We thus arrive at the experience of spatiality as the *immensity* of spatiality and presencing – an image of which is provided by the figures of the *forest* and the *Greek temple*, which in architecture open up through the structure of the *hypostyle*.

Its point of attachment and reference – rather than its opposite – is the arrangement mapped by the *peristyle*. It is within this arrangement that the Bachelardian figure of the *house* would appear, from which emerges an integral experience of spatiality as interiority. “For our house is our corner of the world. . . . It is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word,”²² Bachelard continues.

However, “to have a corner” or “to have our lodgings in them” – Heidegger would add – does not necessarily mean dwelling.²³ The latter, the possibility of dwelling, is bound up with the essence of building.²⁴ And here, it seems, Heidegger would agree with Bachelard, namely, that:

The essence of building is letting dwell. Building accomplishes its nature in the raising of locales by the joining of their spaces. *Only if we are capable*

20) Heidegger, “Origin of the Work of Art,” 167.

21) Ibid., 168.

22) Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 4.

23) Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” 347–48.

24) Ibid., 361.

of dwelling, only then can we build. Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and sky, divinities and mortals enter in *simple oneness* into things ordered the house.²⁵

Bachelard's house and forest merge, for they are a force originating from a point of reference – and its fulfillment – according to the category of immensity, expanding as if in a daydream, without the necessity of encountering any objects on its path: “the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. The binding principle in this integration is the daydream.”²⁶

The house and the forest, the peristyle and the hypostyle, are not names that we investigate. They are mappings of something that lies behind them. Nor are they poles, even though they may be located at opposite ends of the same path. For them to be poles, each would have to appear as a thing. Instead, they are modes and the basis for the appearing of things: on their basis – or rather within them – things appear. Or they hide. For the path can lead in both directions – toward opening and toward closure.

Together they constitute the mode in which this path is traversed – along a direction, that is, along a certain axis. It seems we may call it *axis mundi* – an axis reaching as far as possible upward and downward, as if toward Heaven and toward Hell. And as its mapping, at the center of both systems of spatial mappings – the peristyle and the hypostyle – *στῦλος* appears: a column or a pillar. It is neither a thing nor a property of a thing. What, then, is it? And furthermore: is it, then, some thing?

Apparently, it constitutes the center around which the space of human life is organized. At times the peristyle and the hypostyle shared, without remainder, this capacity to establish that central axis, manifesting itself through columns. At the same time, they established its – the center's – outward form and the mode of any expansion around it.

This, moreover, is expansion as a movement experienced in a space not yet sedimented into formed phenomena. This movement is a pure experience of immensity

25) Ibid., 361–62.

26) Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 6.

beyond the perception of the one who experiences – a perception that is yet to emerge from the movement, and in which everything is already contained beforehand.

Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of motionless man. It is one of the dynamic characteristics of quiet daydreaming.²⁷

In this way, the visible mapping of space – in nature and in architecture – translates into the structure of the appearing of things, and consequently into every structure of their identity and expression.

Style of the Work

The Latin etymon *stilus* (*stylus*) is the most familiar trace for understanding style. Primarily, it is associated with designating a direction and leading forward, and furthermore – with a guiding thought that manifests itself through lasting traces. Particularly when such manifestation occurs as construction or shaping: in writing, drawing, painting, sculpture, in a musical composition, and in other *works*, as well as in the *ways of creating* and *forming* these works. In such instances, style is understood as *the style of the work*. This approach is thus characteristic of the treatment of art and literature from the perspective of philosophical aesthetics, as well as of various branches of semiotics or semiology (not to mention art history, and so forth).

This does not mean, however, that this perspective proves useless in investigating the ontological aspects of style. Quite the contrary: in certain cases, it may help point them toward the right track, as evidenced by the category of shaping – along with the building and the emergence of the work even as a world. It seems highly useful, therefore, to recall a series of observations linking style to the work, so as to quickly conclude that the work may prove to be an exceptionally capacious category.

27) Ibid., 184.

Umberto Eco is one of the authors who are particularly helpful here, as he links *style with the work*. And although he does so in the context of Luigi Pareyson's aesthetics – and thus primarily in relation to the work of art (including musical works) – he does not seem to close off the path to the realms of metaphysics and ontology in his interpretation of this movement. In his short text *On Style*, he says: “speaking of style means discussing how the work of art is made, showing how it gradually emerged.”²⁸

However, he provides more detailed analyses of this matter in *The Open Work*. There – in the spirit of Pareyson – he directly identifies *style* with “the way of giving form”²⁹ (“modo di formare”). Furthermore, forming is linked here with perception or interpretation: “The real content of a work is the vision of the world expressed in its way of forming (modo di formare).”³⁰

The one and the other – that is, the world and its description, both in seeing and in judging – thus meet, as it were, on one and the same path and, as it were, in the place of the maker. Hence he says: By “style” I mean a very personal, unrepeatable, characteristic “way of forming” – the recognizable trace that every artist leaves in his work and which coincides with the way the work is formed. Thus, the artist gives himself form in the work: to understand a work means to possess its creator in a physical object.³¹

Style – or *the way of forming*, that is, the “how” from Eco's remark “how the work of art is made”³² – possesses, in his account, the character of a genuinely Aristotelian *potentiality*: “A style is a *system of probability*, and the awareness of probability is latent in the listener,” enabling predictions about what follows from what has already occurred.³³ This, in turn, allows Eco elsewhere to link the organization of the artist's “entire personal

28) Eco, “On Style,” 163.

29) *Ibid.*, 162.

30) Eco, *The Open Work*, 144.

31) *Ibid.*, 165.

32) Eco, “On Style,” 163.

33) Eco, *The Open Work*, 176.

world” (and, through it, “an entire historical context”)³⁴ with certain external influences: novelty “consists of a set of suggestions that both a cultural tradition and the physical world have offered.”³⁵ He then adds after Pareyson that, in the work, the artist forms “his concrete experience, his interior life, his unique spirituality, his personal reaction to the world,” and that “he reveals himself in it as a way of forming.”³⁶

It appears that the emergence of the work happens in the same manner as the realization of an entity we have discerned (how – and whether similarly – this appears in Aristotle, when he presents the transition from potentiality or *dynamis* through *energeia* to *entelecheia*, we shall examine in further parts of the text).

Style of the Whole

Originally, style – as Umberto Eco emphasizes – concerns the word: “the term indicates literary genres that are highly codified, ... style is a way of writing dictated by rules, usually very prescriptive rules; and it was accompanied by the idea of precepts, imitation, and close adherence to models.”³⁷ Only later does it translate into all modes of expression. First – naturally – it spreads across the entire field of art, as that which creates a space for the creator’s self-expression. Finally, the concept of style becomes key to describing the originality of what is subjected to such expression: style becomes the measure of uniqueness itself.

Usually we think that it is only with mannerism and the baroque that the idea of originality and genius becomes associated with the notion of style – and not only in the arts, but also in life, since with the Renaissance idea of “*sprezzata disinvoltura*” (effortless nonchalance) the man of style will be he who has the wit, courage (and social standing) to behave in violation of the rules – or to show that he has the privilege to break them.³⁸

34) Ibid., 166.

35) Ibid., 165.

36) Ibid.

37) Eco, “On Style,” 161.

38) Ibid., 161–62.

Beyond the specificity and originality of expression and behavior, other attributes of style must also be noted. For the concept is linked with the consistency, coherence, and depth of what is, as it were, externalized – and thus with what style both expresses and is. At the same time, style begins to play the role of a general, integral characteristic of a phenomenon, becoming the measure of its whole.

It is for this reason, among others, that Hegel, in his *Aesthetics*, contrasts style with artistic manner, which he links to particularity:³⁹ “For manner concerns the particular and therefore accidental idiosyncrasies of the artist, and these, instead of the topic itself and its ideal representation, come out and assert themselves in the production of the work of art.”⁴⁰ Style, on the other hand, is to correspond to the essence itself in its whole, including the human essence: “Le style c’est l’homme même”⁴¹ (“The style is the man himself”) – having called it a “familiar French saying,”⁴² the philosopher refers to the words of de Buffon from his *Discours sur le style*.⁴³

A similar approach can be found in Susan Sontag’s essay “On Style” – a text that is perhaps one of the most metaphysical among literary-critical reflections on this subject. Sontag notes that “To speak of style is one way of speaking about the totality of a work of art.”⁴⁴

Furthermore, she challenges the claim that style is a form opposed to content:

Indeed, practically all metaphors for style amount to placing matter on the inside, style on the outside. It would be more to the point to reverse the metaphor. The matter, the subject, is on the outside; the style is on the Inside. As Cocteau writes: “Decorative style has never existed. Style is the soul, and unfortunately with us the soul assumes the form of the body.” Even if one were to define style as the manner of our appearing, this by no

39) Ibid., 173.

40) Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 291.

41) Ibid., 293.

42) Ibid.

43) Leclerc, *Discours sur le style*, ix–x. Cf. Eco, “On Style,” 162.

44) Sontag, “On Style,” 22.

means necessarily entails an opposition between a style that one assumes and one's "true" being... . The mask is the face.⁴⁵

And further:

Most critics would agree that a work of art does not "contain" a certain amount of content (or function – as in the case of architecture) embellished by "style." ... What is left of the notion of content when we have transcended the antithesis of style (or form) and content? Part of the answer lies in the fact that for a work of art to have "content" is, in itself, a rather special stylistic convention.⁴⁶

Finally – Sontag observes – a work without style does not exist (which cannot be said of what she calls stylization). The so-called "white style," described by Jean-Paul Sartre in his review of Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, or the "zero degree of writing," written about by Roland Barthes, can by no means be reduced to a situation in which style vanishes or becomes absent. On this occasion, Sontag invokes Walt Whitman, who "in the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, expresses the disavowal of 'style.'⁴⁷ Whitman aims to speak "for precisely what it is" – without "any elegance or effect or originality."⁴⁸ It turns out, however, that he is unable to escape style: it can neither be avoided nor removed.

It is therefore worth summing up how style discloses itself in writing. First, it concerns originality and – possibly – the unrepeatability of a work or a mode of behavior. For the work itself proves to be a dynamic process, that is, a process of potentiality, and thus non-closed.

Second, it concerns the whole and coherence. Above all, style pertains to the work as a whole, not to its individual elements or particular properties. Moreover, what is at issue is the coherence of content and form. In this sense, on the one hand,

45) Ibid., 23.

46) Ibid., 25–26.

47) Ibid., 22.

48) Ibid.

we ask how one corresponds to the other; on the other hand – whether the boundary between the “inner matter” of the work and its “form” is blurred. This strange bond, not confined within any fixed, concrete frame, thus proves to be dynamic: it persists in continual development, remains non-closed, and yet does not lose its identity.

And this is the third peculiarity: a work of art cannot be fully defined, although it can be thematized by being described as a whole. This applies to any *work* and – if the conclusion is generalized – to a certain kind of entity. It is, as it were, an entity that nevertheless remains entirely elusive and variable: an entity in dynamism, open in its development to different scenarios.

Style of Transition

Sontag – like Eco – when writing about style, does not place it exclusively within the context of art, nor does she confine it to the question of human originality, even if neither of them says so explicitly. For their approaches to style can, however, be expanded beyond the boundaries within which they appear, at first glance, to move – beyond semiology and literary criticism. If one were to recall at this point a sentence from Nietzsche’s loose notes, collected under the title *Toward the Teaching of Style*, such caution in the analysis of writing could be clarified by his remark regarding something that precedes writing: “Writing must be an imitation.”⁴⁹ In that case, the very style of writing becomes, for each of them, an imitation and a metaphor for some broader phenomenon.

As metaphors, both the Roman and Greek etymologies of style prove to be equally eloquent and universal in their juxtaposition. They create a tension between the hand, which leaves written and horizontal traces, and the unique center and vertical axis, with an open expanse around it (by no means necessarily walled in). Style thus proves to be both the movement of inscription and the stability of support. Style understood so broadly testifies not only to an original way of building – linked with reception – a verbal expression, to the application of the brush to canvas, or to the flow of tonal colors and silence, but also to the shaping of space – in the aforementioned peristyle and hypostyle, as well as in all other possible combinations of

49) Nietzsche, “Zur Lehre vom Stil,” 244.

supports, arches, and openwork screens, escaping upward or rooting into the earth: a space that, moreover, something – a little – fills, and perhaps even traverses, insofar as dynamism is never able to abandon that something.

Such a style, finally, by joining the shaping of expression and the opening of space, becomes at once movement and its direction, guided and set, as it were, from a single center. This center – neither a place nor a movement – establishes the place or position in which movement becomes a transition into another place or a taking up of a stance toward it. Movement is not secondary, for it can consist in taking up a position. Nor is it primary, for movement requires a starting position. Movement and position occur at once.

Such a position and such a movement, originating from a single center, may call to mind the body to which they are proper.

And through this, we arrive at a context in which the concept of style appears differently than before, yet essentially refers to the same. We may examine it, among other things, through the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. And although – in all fairness – it should be said that in this case, too, it may concern aesthetics, its character – due to the original Greek meaning of the term, returning here and there in the history of philosophy – is decidedly different. It is a phenomenology which, as is well known, starting from epistemological questions, can consequently lead toward ontological dilemmas.

One of these dilemmas, which Maurice Merleau-Ponty only alludes to in *Phenomenology of Perception*, is particularly intriguing here: “The movable object, as the object of an indefinite series of explicit and concordant perceptions, has properties, while the moving object merely has a style.”⁵⁰ This “moving object” is, in the original French, *le mouvant*⁵¹ – that is, something that, strictly speaking, is as yet neither an object nor a thing; it is “something that moves.”⁵² Immediately thereafter, he clarifies that he is referring to this “something” (calling it *quelque chose*⁵³) and the movement proper to it: “Movement does not necessarily presuppose a movable object, that is,

50) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 287.

51) Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 316.

52) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 287.

53) Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 317.

an object defined by a collection of determinate properties; rather, it is enough that it contains 'something that moves,' at the very most a 'colored something' or 'something luminous' without any actual color or light."⁵⁴

Furthermore, in that same work, the philosopher links *style* with the concepts of *motive* and *transition*; he speaks of that which is *something* only as long as it remains in motion, as long as it is happening. The motive precedes the situation of realization. And it is precisely here that the ontological dilemma reveals itself. It is likely Merleau-Ponty's own dilemma, much more clearly recognized and formulated in his last work – *The Visible and the Invisible*. Yet already here, he clearly names this "something" without "determinate properties" as something, precisely: "It is not I who recognize, in each point and in each instant passed through, the same bird defined by explicit properties; rather, it is the bird in flight that accomplishes the unity of its movement, it is the bird that changes place, and it is this feathery commotion still here which is already over there, in a sort of ubiquity, like the comet and its tail."⁵⁵

On the other hand, he says: "If we want to take the phenomenon of movement seriously, we must imagine a world that is not merely made up of things, but also of pure transitions. The something in transit that we have recognized as necessary for the constitution of a change is only defined by its particular way of 'passing by'."⁵⁶

It is significant, perhaps, that such passing – as the movement of something that has not yet realized itself in distinct contours, yet is already in motion – is linked precisely with style. Without invoking, for now, *the grand style*,⁵⁷ through which Heidegger interprets Nietzsche's will to power, I shall invite only the author of both concepts, Friedrich Nietzsche, with another aphorism from *Toward a Teaching of Style*, concerning style, or a movement that fulfills itself in life as a whole: "Richness of life betrays itself through richness of gestures. One must learn to feel everything – the length and brevity of sentences, punctuation, the choice of words, pauses, the sequence of arguments – as gestures."⁵⁸

54) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 287.

55) *Ibid.*, 288.

56) *Ibid.*

57) Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 140.

58) Nietzsche, "Zur Lehre vom Stil," 244.

Style – *Tertium*

One may therefore ask whether Merleau-Ponty describes an entity – even a highly singular kind thereof – or rather how it happens? Heideggerian motive remains present and invariably important in his thinking, so we may reformulate this question by introducing perhaps the most significant among them – the motive of the ontological difference, along with the insidious temptation to reduce it to a dichotomous scheme, to an “either... or...” division.

Could it be then – such is the new form of this question – that in this difference an intermediate instance would appear here, or could appear: not an object, but a “way of ‘passing by’”⁵⁹ (or a mode of transition)?

This issue develops further: does such a particular kind of transition – or change as such – concern not objects, that is, that which – it is worth repeating – “as the object of an indefinite series of explicit and concordant perceptions, has properties”?⁶⁰ Does it perhaps concern what Merleau-Ponty points to by means of the pronoun “something” – and thus, nonetheless, entities? And does this indeed create a basis for uttering the heresy: “*tertium datur*”?

Apparently, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty not only does not settle any of these issues but almost passes over the question itself. Almost – for it does not seem that he treats the issue as insignificant – since he perhaps alludes to a reading of this division that is not entirely dichotomous. In fact, he says so, though not quite explicitly, and he does not seem to carry his argument to its ultimate conclusion, as though he were merely considering such a possibility: “Only the explicit negation of the moving object would be contrary to the principle of the excluded middle.”⁶¹ He adds: “The logician excludes this tertiary hypothesis: the rays of the circle must be either equal or unequal, the movement must either have a movable object or not.”⁶²

Finally, in the closing parts of the book, he speaks of the “movement of transcendence” of subjectivity and temporality.⁶³

59) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 288.

60) *Ibid.*, 287.

61) *Ibid.*, 288.

62) *Ibid.*, 287.

63) *Ibid.*, 454: “The subject is being-in-the-world and the world remains ‘subjective,’ since its texture and its articulations are sketched out by the subject’s movement of transcendence.”

Such a “something,” not being a hypostasis with stable properties, would prove to be a highly peculiar entity, revealing itself, as it were, in the stratification of the primordial unity of experience. Like an entity, it can at least be an object of perception and articulation, while at the same time bearing the dynamics of happening, of coming to pass. It appears as “something” – or rather, it *becomes* it – because it undertakes its creative movement. It would thus be a performative coming-to-pass, coupled with its formation – or its appearing – as “something.” The only certainty in this context would remain that – to repeat for the third time – this “something” would carry something proper only to itself: style.

As I mentioned above, in *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty speaks much more clearly on this subject: he invokes the *ontological difference* as a point of reference – or rather as a point of demarcation – for while inspired by it, he does not repeat the Heideggerian *Seiendes/Sein* scheme. He links both titular categories to existence, and style plays a key role here, becoming closer not to the perception of things, but to the very ontology of visibility.

And at the very center of this ontology is something Merleau-Ponty calls *la chair* – “the flesh”: “To designate it, we should need the old term ‘element,’ in the sense ... of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being.”⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty does not perceive what we are looking for in this element, in the general thing. Rather, he – and we with him – perceive it only through what we are looking for. For the style of being, in bringing it as an “incarnate principle” – by bringing it forth and incarnating it – allows us to perceive it; it makes it visible.

Is style something through which we see it? But it is certainly not what we see. It proves to be the invisible, incarnating matrix of the visible, incarnated world, allowing us to recognize it as coherent. It is an invisible visibility.

Consequently, one may ask whether Merleau-Ponty unequivocally situates this “style of being,” which “brings ... wherever there is a fragment of being” a “sort of incarnate principle,”⁶⁵ on the side of the ontological difference opposite to incar-

64) Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 139.

65) *Ibid.*

nation. This would mean that he revised his intuitions rather than the specific conclusions regarding style reached in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Apparently, however, he maintained and deepened them in his last book – or rather in the working notes for it.

What is significant for us: Merleau-Ponty confirms this in a way that not only introduces style as the principle defining perception and expression – joined within the flesh – but also establishes it, along with the world it encounters, in a highly peculiar position: “Thus the body *stands* before the world and the world upright before it, and between them there is a relation that is one of embrace. And between these two vertical beings, there is not a frontier, but a contact surface.”⁶⁶

Style here is neither verticality nor Being: “What I call the *vertical* is what Sartre calls existence, – but which for him immediately becomes the fulguration of nothingness which makes the world arise, the operation of the for itself.”⁶⁷ In this way: “The circle does not exist – Existence is inexplicable.”⁶⁸

Merleau-Ponty, however, moves in a different direction: “The circle exists, inexplicable, as soon as I take into account not only the circle-*object*, but this *visible* circle, this circular physiognomy which no intellectual genesis nor physical causality explains, and which has the very properties that I do not yet know.”⁶⁹ Existence thus reveals itself, as it were, along this circle, through it, threaded through it. It aligns itself along it as if along an axis. It develops upwards and downwards – from layer to layer – according to a single principle that creates, positions, and connects it, and which is not itself identical to them. It is, however, a principle enabling their encounter in existence: as “a relation that is one of embrace,” “a contact surface,”⁷⁰ between the point of reference and immensity.

It is thus something that exists not as a “circle-*object*,” but as a “circular physiognomy,”⁷¹ which “in fact ... exists”⁷² and enables the *visibility* of the circle.

66) Ibid., 271.

67) Ibid.

68) Ibid.

69) Ibid.

70) Ibid.

71) Ibid.

72) Ibid.

The disclosure of entities lies in setting them in position to enable encounter – for the style that positions them vertically enables horizontal encounters. Such a style, which stands at the foundation of an entity’s appearing, is indeed grand.

Style of Contradiction

Merleau-Ponty, however, provides no ultimate resolution of the problem. He writes about style, and his thread breaks off mid-word – much like the book as a whole, which is left largely to the reader’s exegesis of the notes. Yet this is not an ellipsis dictated by the circumstances in which the philosopher’s fate comes to light. This is a biographical thread that has nothing to do with the issue of style, nor with the background setting the dilemma upon which this issue demands resolution – indeed, decision. However, to meet these expectations – this desire for decision – we must remain far from biography and as close as possible to the most fundamental structure that allows us to see the manner of an entity’s appearing (which, of course, does not deny the correlation between the two levels, yet establishes an incontrovertible hierarchy in which the latter invariably takes precedence).

What structure is this? It is one that, in fact, introduces difference: “either ... or ...” It is here that the dilemma emerges, posing the question of style: what it is and what it is not. It leads, finally, to a radical formulation of the question: style either is an entity or it is not. Or – even more radically – it is or it is not. And nothing in between.

This structure, which introduces the necessity of a resolution, was recognized by someone else. Should we not, then, seek the solution to the question it poses – after the path we have traveled – at its very sources? And we may assume that there are two of them, just as there are two sources of the word “style.”

The first – seeking to forbid us even to think the middle. It is Aristotle.

The second – drawing a boundary at which the middle itself seems unthinkable. It is Martin Heidegger.

The first introduces the dilemma into the entity. The second – between Being and the entity.

The only way to reach a resolution here is to make use of the means provided by both authors. That is, to reach for the deepest contradiction – or rather, to make them reach for it, without necessarily setting them against themselves. And, it seems, both are willing to oblige, consenting to such an artifice.

This would, then, be in keeping with Heidegger's thought. In the first volume of *Nietzsche*, in the section "The Grand Style," where he states that "everything named in the word 'style' belongs to what is most obscure,"⁷³ he also says: "art places the whole of Dasein in decision"⁷⁴ (Ger. Entscheidung). Furthermore, "decision (Ger. Entscheidung) presupposes divergence (Ger. Scheidung) between opposites; its height increases in proportion to the depths of the conflict."⁷⁵ And this is reconciled in the tranquillity of art, for "Art in the grand style is the simple tranquillity."⁷⁶

Does this very being placed into decision not recall the "motionless man" described by Bachelard?⁷⁷ It is an *aporia* in which the *grand style* would be the same as "such mastery is unconstrained disposition over that yoke, which is as equally removed from the paralysis of form in what is dogmatic and formalistic as from sheer rapturous tumult."⁷⁸

Yet we shall find an ally even in the figure of Aristotle – who was not particularly favored by Heidegger.

Style of Potentiality

The Stagirite examines what we may relate to the phenomenon of style in the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*. Among the aspects of his account – presented above – that might be attributed to style, one might probably name, following Aristotle, ἦθος (*ēthos*, "character"), ὄψις (*opsis*, "spectacle"), and μελοποιία (*melopoiia*, "song"), but above all διάνοια (*dianoia*, "thought; way of thinking, etc.") and λέξις (*lexis*, "diction; linguistic form, etc.").⁷⁹ Aristotle sets these last two in opposition to one another, whereby the latter establishes the principle according to which the work is produced, determining the form of expression in speech and in writing: "Wherefore people who excel in this in

73) Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 124.

74) Ibid., 125.

75) Ibid., 126.

76) Ibid.

77) Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 184 (as cited in the section "Style as an Axis" of this text).

78) Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 128.

79) On the enumeration of the constituent parts of tragedy ("ταῦτα δ' ἐστὶ μῦθος καὶ ἦθος καὶ λέξις καὶ διάνοια καὶ ὄψις καὶ μελοποιία") together with their definitions, see Aristotle, *Poetics*, 6, 1450a9–15.

their turn obtain prizes, just as orators who excel in delivery; for written speeches owe their effect not so much to the sense as to the style” – “διὸ καὶ τοῖς τοῦτο δυναμένοις γίνεται πάλιν ἄλλα, καθάπερ καὶ τοῖς κατὰ τὴν ὑπόκρισιν ῥήτορσιν: οἱ γὰρ γραφόμενοι λόγοι μείζον ἰσχύουσι διὰ τὴν λέξιν ἢ διὰ τὴν διάνοιαν.”⁸⁰

The use of the concept of style here is, of course, anachronistic, since *stilus* and *στυλος* – though joined in essence – have yet to assume their verbal form in the later spoken and written tradition. Let us note, however, that the criterion for the power of impact or effectiveness of what we thus anachronistically associate with *style* is the speakers’ capacity to obtain prizes, which in this quotation is expressed by the phrase “τοῖς τοῦτο δυναμένοις” – that is, “those who have the potentiality” or “those possessing the power.” We thus find here a direct reference to another – and, as it seems, a far more important – concept in the entire corpus of Aristotelian philosophy: *δύναμις* (*dynamis*).

In light of this – and of the essence of what we are concerned with regarding style, insofar as it concerns the difference at the ground of the entity – we must seek it not in the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*, but elsewhere – in the *Physics* and especially in the *Metaphysics*. For it is there that this difference is at stake. The question remains, however: is it a difference that separates entity from Being, or one that, in a very peculiar way, splits the entity itself, as it were, into two parallel levels irreducible to one another? Or perhaps both at once? Or perhaps some other difference altogether?

In both of these works, the Stagirite opposes *δύναμις* (*dynamis*) to *ἐνέργεια* (*energeia*) and *ἐντελέχεια* (*entelecheia*). Given the rather limited scope of these considerations, let us treat *energeia* as almost interchangeable with *entelecheia*, constituting its concrete and unambiguous realization. We would thus be concerned with that which corresponds to every concrete, finite, and describable – because possessed of properties – full realization of an entity: its *actuality*.

It is otherwise with *dynamis*, that is, *potentiality*, which – insofar as it is an entity – is in every respect different from *actuality*. In the *Physics*, he defines the difference between them by means of the concept of motion (*κίνησις*, *kinēsis*): “We have distinguished in respect of each class between what is in fulfilment (*entele-*

80) Aristotle, *The “Art” of Rhetoric*, III.1, 1404a16–19.

cheia) and what is potentially (*dynamis*); thus, the fulfilment of what is potentially, as such, is motion.”⁸¹

It is significant that both *potentiality* and *actuality* allow for the definition of entities or their existence: “The same things can be spoken of in terms of potentiality and actuality”⁸² (“ἄλλος δ’ ὅτι ἐνδέχεται ταῦτὰ λέγειν κατὰ τὴν δύναμιν καὶ τὴν ἐνέργειαν.”) – says Aristotle in the *Physics*. In the *Metaphysics*, he defines actuality with maximal ostension: “Actuality means the existence of the thing, not in the way which we express by ‘potentially’”⁸³ (“ἐνέργεια τὸ ὑπάρχειν τὸ πρᾶγμα μὴ οὕτως ὥσπερ λέγομεν δυνάμει.”) Yet earlier he says: “For of non-existent things some exist potentially; but they do not exist because they do not exist in fulfillment” (“οὐκ ἐντελεχεία ἐστίν.”)⁸⁴

Such a potentially existing thing is pure dynamism – as *motion* – no less than it is *energeia* fulfilling itself in *entelecheia*. Yet only finite motion, that is, “that in which the end is present is an action,” is an act, or *energeia*.⁸⁵ However, as has been said, motion itself is not confined to this – it can be without limit, and may endure indefinitely.⁸⁶ This is precisely why motion occurs in connection with both potentiality and its realization, only “not at the same time or in the same respect.”⁸⁷

Finally, Aristotle introduces another important distinction. He presents *dynamis* as something identical – or as a principle of identity – in reference “to one primary kind” (“πρὸς πρώτην μίαν.”) He contrasts this, however, with the *actualizing* (or *actual*) entity, which occurs “in another thing or in the same thing *qua* other” (“ἐν ἄλλῳ ἢ ἢ ἄλλο”) and “by another thing or by itself *qua* other” (“ὑπ’ ἄλλου ἢ ἢ ἄλλο”):⁸⁸

81) Aristotle, *Physics*, III.1, 201a10–12. Motion, moreover, unfolds within an opposition which – still in the *Physics* – Aristotle articulates by distinguishing “what comes to be” from “what is becoming” (Aristotle, *Physics*, I.7, 190b10–12). He adds that the latter “may be understood in two ways: either as a subject or the opposite”; the first is what is formed, the second what is unformed. And he then places this opposition – as it were, a casket within a casket – within a further contrast: “on the one hand there is something that has come to be, on the other something that is becoming” (Aristotle, *Physics*, I.7, 190b12–15).

82) Aristotle, *Physics*, I.8, 191b28–191b29.

83) Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IX (Θ).6, 1048a30–31.

84) Ibid., IX (Θ).3, 1047b1–2.

85) Ibid., IX (Θ).6, 1048b22–23.

86) Aristotle, *Physics*, III.1, 200b15–200b21. Cf. Aristotle, *Physics*, III.4, 202b30–203a4.

87) Ibid., III.1, 201a20–21.

88) Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IX (Θ).1, 1046a9–18.

All potentialities that conform to the same type (“πρὸς τὸ αὐτὸ εἶδος”) are starting points, and are called potentialities in reference to one primary kind, which is a starting-point of change in another thing or in the thing itself *qua* other (“ἐν ἄλλῳ ἢ ἢ ἄλλο”). For one kind is a potentiality for being acted on, i.e. the principle in the very thing acted on, which makes it capable of being changed and acted on by another thing or by itself regarded as other; and another kind is a state of insusceptibility to change for the worse and to destruction by another thing or by the thing itself *qua* other, i.e. by a principle of change.⁸⁹

The pronoun and adjective ἄλλος (“other”) repeated here imply the notion of multiplicity, while the identity contrasted with it implies a principle of unity. The latter, given in the accusative as “πρὸς πρώτην μίαν” (that is, “to one primary kind”), would in the nominative appear as “πρώτη μία”, or more properly – “πρώτη μία ἀρχή”: “the first and only principle.”

The first term in this set concerns entities already complete in their actuality: stable, residing here or there, being of such a kind or another – alongside that which differs in relation to them. Whatever is “other” can be described, because each “other” differs precisely by virtue of its properties. Furthermore, these properties can change, and at every stage of this change it can still be described. Entities can therefore pass from one state to another, thereby traversing space.

Complications arise in connection with the description of the second term in this set – and at the same time the first in every hierarchy of entities, “πρώτη μία ἀρχή.”⁹⁰ It is the source of motion, constituting the basis for the mutability of actualized entities.⁹¹ Yet it is difficult to speak of its own change, for it has no properties that would undergo change. It constitutes an *immutable dynamism*. It is potentiality as the source of potential actualizations in features and properties. Yet it does not determine them – as happens in actualization, that is, in *energeia* or *entelecheia* – but

89) Ibid.

90) Ibid.

91) Cf. Aristotle, *Physics*, II.1, 192b12–23. Cf. Aristotle, *Physics*, I.7, 190b1–23 (on coming-to-be from an underlying subject and form; “something which becomes that” either as subject or as opposite).

enables them. It never undergoes a transition, but is transition itself, for it opens the way for transitioning.

It is in this very sense that it sets them – these actualized entities – in a position that becomes definable in relation to other entities, “ὕπ’ ἄλλου ἢ ἢ ἄλλο”⁹² – once again, to repeat after Aristotle.

It sets them in a vertical position and thus enables horizontal relations – I recall here our inquiry on the existence of objects, both in Merleau-Ponty and according to the concept of style under study given to us by language.

It is, therefore, *style* – to summarize the reflection conducted from the first line up to this point.

Here, nothing remains but to demand a decision – in connection with this reflection, this inquiry, this setting.

Style of Abundance

Style – if we recall the concept central to this brief inquiry – would be meant to bear witness to such a dynamism, yet it provides no description of it. It is merely the appearing of the space in which that immutable motion – because self-identical – takes place.

The question remains, however: is this *something* – this potentiality which, according to Aristotle, constitutes the principle of actualization and change; this “*way of ‘passing by’*” for Maurice Merleau-Ponty; the *mode of forming* for Pareyson and Eco; or else the *inner immensity* into which – as Gaston Bachelard announces – we enter by practicing a “phenomenology without phenomena” – is this *something*, then, further determined by these thinkers through motion, entering, or transition, however presented as a certain kind of indeterminate entity, an entity? A highly peculiar entity: encompassing the whole, immovable and *dynamic* (in the sense of δύναμις), and thus comporting itself as Being, yet at the same time not being it? Is it – or could it even be – something intermediate? Or does an irrevocable crossing of the boundary drawn by Heidegger between entity and Being occur here?

92) Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IX (©).1, 1046a9–18.

We cannot provide a positive answer to any of these questions. However, a negative answer also proves problematic.

Insofar as we wish to name, describe, or point to this “something,” we have, in fact, no other choice but to encapsulate in words the style that bears witness to the existence of such a peculiarity. Words, in their multiplicity, determinacy, and concreteness, negate its open whole. Thus, Aristotelian ἐνέργεια begins to represent δύναμις, and style is supplanted by an endless litany of properties. In such an instance, it undoubtedly has the status of an entity. But what is at stake in style, should this veil be torn away?

It is a formidable – if at all feasible – task: to say something about this “something,” yet, for the sake of the propriety of such speaking, not to speak of *what* is proper. This is a task that confronts an *aporia* transcending speech itself, while simultaneously concerning the relation of entity to Being – and only in this sense: a relation concerning Being.

It should be remembered that “something” by no means has to be a thing – or, indeed, anything determinate. When I say “something,” I speak thus precisely because I do not fully define that of which I speak. In this way, I define only the possibility for this “something” to be something concrete – to be a thing. I stop, however, halfway to its fulfillment. And halfway to Being, which does not depend on it and thus, in a certain way, “is” separate from it.

It is, therefore, neither this nor that. This is a peculiar distinction. Plato presents it in the *Parmenides*: “οὔτε ... οὔτε ...” or “μήτε ... μήτε ...” (incidentally, how similar this is to the *Upanishadic* “neti neti”⁹³): “Therefore it doesn’t change places by going somewhere and coming to be in something, nor does it move by spinning in the same location or by being altered.”⁹⁴

It is, however, an abundance that disrupts the division between the one and the other. For between them – between *Being* and *entity* – there is no room for that “between.”

It is an abundance precisely because, as the measure of everything, it appears as if in a mask, in the form of something other than itself, and therefore remains unrec-

93) Cf. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.3.6 (“neti neti,” “Not this, not this”), in Madhavananda, *The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 337.

94) Plato, *Parmenides*, 139a.

ognized. It causes difficulties in recognizing itself. Then we ourselves, as we begin to grapple with abundance, seek simplicity: this search is the need to overcome those difficulties, that is, the *aporia*. It is significant that Heidegger also includes similar observations about the need for simplicity – in the course of explaining the nature of the *Grand Style* in *Nietzsche* – immediately after invoking the Aristotelian δύναμις and ἐνέργεια: “The grand style prevails wherever abundance restrains itself in simplicity ... even if we clarify the greatness of the grand style by saying it is that superiority which compels everything strong to be teamed with its strongest antithesis under one yoke.”⁹⁵

It is, therefore, between the one and the other, and this “between” is unique, for one of the poles it joins cannot be defined as “that which is” in the way the second is essentially defined – visible and determinate as “that which is” (τὸ ὄν, *Seiende*). It is the first, called “Being” (εἶναι, *Sein*), which, through its visibility, becomes for us a point of reference and a path to reach that “between” which is style. It is style that represents it – and then, “the mask is the face,”⁹⁶ to repeat Sontag’s *aporia*. Through this “between,” as through a faint promise of an all-encompassing and simple otherness, it attempts to pose the question of Being.

For – as Heidegger says – “because the grand style is a bountiful and affirmative willing toward Being, its essence reveals itself only when a decision is made, indeed by means of the grand style itself, about the meaning of the Being of beings. Only on that basis is the yoke defined by which the antitheses are teamed and harnessed.”⁹⁷

Style, therefore, proves to be something entirely different from what is revealed in description, including the description of an entity. It is, instead, that through which – as principle, possibility, and immensity – the entity itself appears, dividing into antitheses. In this way, the entity appears as dividing even unto its limit: unto the limit of its Being, about which, in posing the question, it asks about itself “in the grand style.” For, as Heidegger writes in the “Letter on Humanism,” “The ‘question of Being’ always remains a question about beings. It is still not at all what its elusive name indicates: the question in the direction of Being.”⁹⁸

95) Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 134.

96) Sontag, “On Style,” 23.

97) Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 134.

98) Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 234.

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