

# The Status of Style

Nelson Goodman

## 1. *Exceptions Taken*

Obviously, subject is what is said, style is how. A little less obviously, that formula is full of faults. Architecture and nonobjective painting and most of music have no subject. Their style cannot be a matter of how they say something, for they do not literally say anything; they do other things, they mean in other ways. Although most literary works say something, they usually do other things, too; and some of the ways they do some of these things are aspects of style. Moreover, the what of one sort of doing may be part of the how of another. Indeed, even where the only function in question is saying, we shall have to recognize that some notable features of style are features of the matter rather than the manner of the saying. In more ways than one, subject is involved in style. For this and other reasons, I cannot subscribe to the received opinion<sup>1</sup> that style depends upon an artist's conscious choice among alternatives. And I think we shall also have to recognize that not all differences in ways of writing or painting or composing or performing are differences in style.

My quarrels, though, are not with the practice of critics and art his-

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1. E.g., Stephen Ullmann, in *Style in the French Novel* (Cambridge, 1957), p. 6, writes: "There can be no question of style unless the speaker or writer has the possibility of choosing between alternative forms of expression. Synonymy, in the widest sense of the term, lies at the root of the whole problem of style." This passage is quoted, with apparent approval, by E. H. Gombrich in "Style" (*International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 15), p. 353.

torians but with their definitions and theories of style, so often at odds with that practice.

## 2. *Style and Subject*

Plainly, when something is said, some aspects of the way it is said are matters of style. So far as the descriptive, narrative, or expository function of literature goes, variations in style are variations in how this function is performed by texts. Form varies while content remains constant—but there are difficulties with even this dictum. Graham Hough writes: “. . . the more we reflect on it, the more doubtful it becomes how far we can talk about different ways of saying; is not each different way of saying in fact the saying of a different thing?”<sup>2</sup> More recently, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., starting from the premiss that style and stylistics depend upon there being alternative ways of saying exactly the same thing, strives to defend and define synonymy.<sup>3</sup>

Synonymy is a suspect notion; and a study of my own suggests that no two terms have exactly the same meaning.<sup>4</sup> But distinctness of style from content requires not that exactly the same thing may be said in different ways but only that what is said may vary nonconcomitantly with ways of saying. Pretty clearly there are often very different ways of saying things that are very nearly the same. Conversely, and often more significantly, very different things may be said in much the same way—not, of course, by the same text but by texts that have in common certain characteristics that constitute a style. Many works on many matters may be in the same style; and much discussion of styles is carried on without regard to subject. Styles of saying—as of painting or composing or performing

2. Graham Hough, in his admirable and useful *Style and Stylistics* (London, 1969), p. 4. I concur also with his skepticism about resurrecting the notion of synonymy through transformational linguistics.

3. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., “Stylistics and Synonymy”, *Critical Inquiry* 1 (March 1975): 559–579.

4. Nelson Goodman, “On Likeness of Meaning,” *Analysis* 10, no. 1 (October 1949): 1–7; reprinted in Goodman, *Problems and Projects* (Indianapolis, 1972), pp. 231–38. This challenge to synonymy was by no means the first but (1) went further than earlier ones by showing that even under an analysis dependent solely on the extensions of terms, every two terms differ in meaning, and (2) suggested a criterion for comparative likeness of meaning, thus providing a basis for distinguishing style from content.

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—may often be compared and contrasted irrespective of what the subjects are and even of whether there are any. Even without synonymy, style and subject do not become one.<sup>5</sup>

So far our results are negative and nearly nil. Not only is style not subject; but where there is no subject, style is not at all delimited by not being subject. Even this is a risky statement. For sometimes style *is* a matter of subject. I do not mean merely that subject may influence style but that some differences in style consist entirely of differences in what is said. Suppose one historian writes in terms of military conflicts, another in terms of social changes; or suppose one biographer stresses public careers, another personal lives. The differences between the two histories of a given period, or between the two biographies of a given person, here lie not in the character of the prose but in what is said. Nevertheless, these are differences in literary style no less pronounced than are differences in wording. I have purposely picked examples of descriptive or expository literature, but part of a poet's style as well may consist of what he says—of whether he focuses on the fragile and transcendent or the powerful and enduring, upon sensory qualities or abstract ideas, and so on.

The prospect of paradox looms here. If what is said is sometimes an aspect of style, and style is a way of saying what is said, a tactless logician might point to the unwelcome consequence that what is said is sometimes an aspect of a way of saying what is said—a formula with the ambivalent aroma of a self-contradictory truism.

The remedy looks at first sight even more weird. What is said, rather than being a way of saying what is said, may be a way of talking about something else; for example, writing about Renaissance battles and writing about Renaissance arts are not different ways of writing about the battles or about the arts but different ways of writing about the Renaissance. Saying different things may count as different ways of talking about something more comprehensive that embraces both. Thus without departing from the principle that style pertains to ways of saying we can, for example, recognize as aspects of style both writing about the battles rather than the arts and writing in Latinate rather than Anglo-Saxon prose. But then we give up what seemed the very point of that principle; the contrast between ways of saying and what is said, between style and subject. If both packaging and contents are matters of style, what isn't?

Looking once more and harder, we may notice that differences in style dependent upon differences in subject do not arise from the mere

5. "Subject" is rather ambiguous as between topic and what is said about a topic; and some remarks below bear on the relationship between the two. But for purposes of the present paper, differences among topic, subject, subject matter, content, what is said, and what is named or described or depicted usually count for less than the shared differences from other features discussed below.

fact that what is said is not the same. When the military-minded historian writes about two different periods, his style may remain the same even though what he says is very different—at least as different as what he and the arts-minded historian write about a given period. To say that style is a matter of subject is thus vague and misleading. Rather, only *some* features of what is said count as aspects of style; only certain characteristic differences in what is said constitute differences in style.

Likewise, of course, only certain features of the wording, and not others, constitute features of style. That two texts consist of very different words does not make them different in style. What count as features of style here are such characteristics as the predominance of certain kinds of words, the sentence structure, and the use of alliteration and rhyme.

Thus we need not have worried about the difficulty of distinguishing form from content; for that distinction, insofar as it is clear, does not coincide with but cuts across the distinction between what is style and what is not. Style comprises certain characteristic features both of what is said and of how it is said, both of subject and of wording, both of content and of form. The distinction between stylistic and nonstylistic features has to be drawn on other grounds.

### 3. *Style and Sentiment*

Have we by any chance, in our struggle so far, left out the very essence of style? Some say that style enters where fact stops and feeling starts; that style is a matter of the ‘affective and expressive’<sup>6</sup> as against the logical, intellectual, cognitive aspects of art; that neither what is said nor what says it have anything to do with style except as they participate in expressing emotion. Two reports of a walk in the rain that use different words and describe different incidents may be in the same style, but they are in different styles if one is glum and the other gleeful. Style in general on this view consists of such, and much more subtle, qualities of feeling expressed.

As a criterion for distinguishing stylistic from nonstylistic features, this proposal has obvious limitations. Under any plausible sorting of properties into emotive and cognitive, some stylistic properties are emotive and some are not. Tight or loose construction, brevity or verbosity, plain or ornate vocabulary may arouse but hardly express admiration or antipathy and are surely not themselves emotional properties. Accordingly, “emotion” in this context comes to be replaced by the vaguer term “feeling”; and each plainly nonemotive stylistic property is held to have its peculiar feel. Periodic sentences feel different from loose sentences; we can feel the difference between a Latinate and an Anglo-Saxon

6. E.g., C. Bally; see the account of his view in Hough, esp. p. 23.

vocabulary. Moreover, we are often aware of these qualities of feeling before we discern the underlying factual properties, as we often feel a pain before perceiving the wound. And it is just these feelings rather than their vehicles that count as aspects of style. Such is the claim.

In this version, the thesis is attenuated to the point of evaporation. In any sense that the cited features of a text have their peculiar feeling qualities, so it seems does every other—indeed every word and sequence of words. That we can feel such properties seems to mean little more than that we can perceive them without analysis into component traits, just as we recognize a face; but this surely is true of most properties, and useless for distinguishing style. Making the theory broad enough is making it too broad to work.

Furthermore, definition of style in terms of feelings expressed goes wrong in overlooking not only structural features that are neither feelings nor expressed but also features that though not feelings *are* expressed. Although the Sturgis drawing and the Pollaiuolo engraving illustrated below (pp. 804 and 805) both represent men in physical conflict, the Sturgis expresses flashing action while the Pollaiuolo expresses poised power.<sup>7</sup> A Daumier lithograph may express weight, a passage from Vivaldi express visual patterns of skaters, and Joyce's *Ulysses* express an infinite cycling of time.

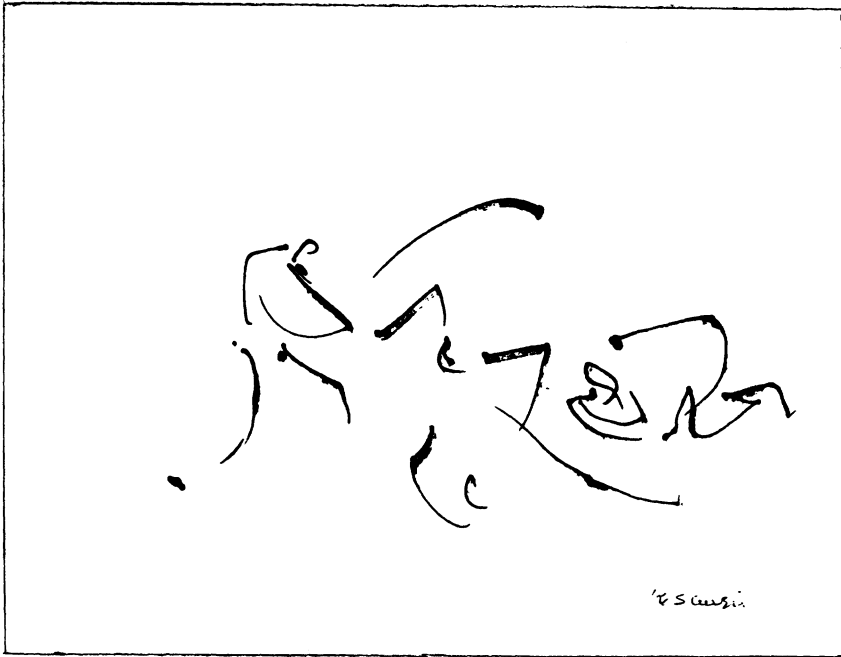
Thus style is confined neither to what is expressed nor to feelings. Nevertheless, expressing is at least as important a function of many works as is saying: and what a work expresses is often a major ingredient of its style. The differences between sardonic, sentimental, savage, and sensual writing are stylistic. Emotions, feelings, and other properties expressed in the saying are part of the way of saying; what is expressed is an aspect of how what is said is said, and as in music and abstract painting may be an aspect of style even when nothing is said.

All this is plain enough, and yet plainly not enough. For since expression is a function of works of art, *ways* of expressing as well as ways of saying must be taken into account. And as differences in what is expressed may count as differences in style of saying, so differences in what is said may count as differences in style of expressing. Gloominess may be typical of a writer's way of describing outdoor activities; emphasis on rainy weather may be typical of his way of expressing gloom. What is said, how it is said, what is expressed, and how it is expressed are all intimately interrelated and involved in style.

#### 4. *Style and Structure*

That features of what is said and of what is expressed must be taken into account does not at all diminish the central importance of sentence

7. Both works, of course, express much else.

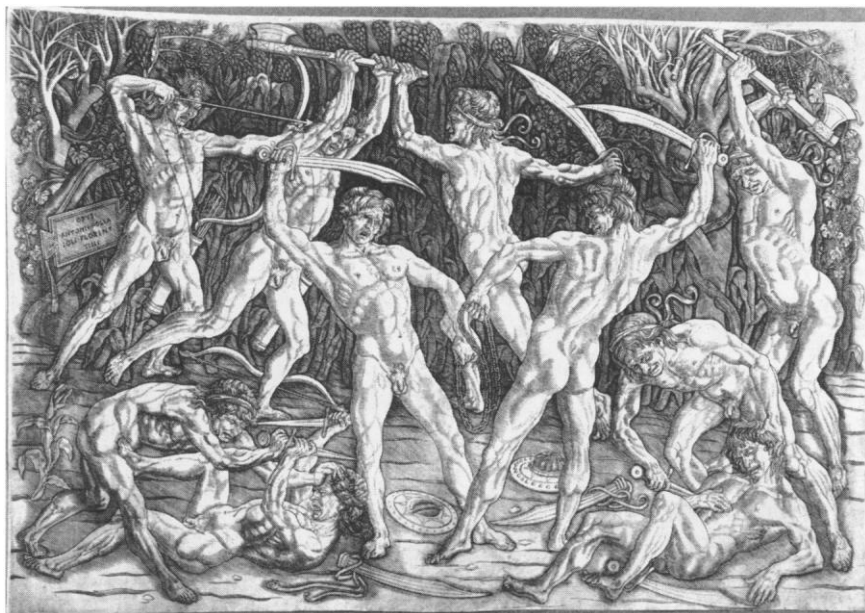


Katharine Sturgis, Drawing from a hockey series, Ink, Courtesy of the artist.

structure, rhythmic pattern, use of iteration and antithesis, and so on. Nor, as illustrated by certain characteristics of vocabulary (Latinate or Anglo-Saxon, collegiate or colloquial) in prose and of color in painting, are all features of style that are not properties of what is said or expressed 'formal' or 'structural' in any but an overstretched sense.

We are tempted to classify all such properties as intrinsic or internal on the ground that unlike properties of something—subject or feeling—that a text or picture refers to by way of denotation (description, representation, etc.) or expression, these belong to, are possessed by, are inherent in, the text or picture itself. But philosophers have had trouble trying to draw any clear line between internal and external properties. After all, what a text says or expresses is a property of the text, not of something else; and on the other hand, properties possessed by the text are different from and are not enclosed within it, but relate it to other texts sharing these properties.

Can this class of not exclusively formal and not clearly intrinsic features be better defined in terms of the difference between what a work *does* and what it *is*? Saying the earth is round or expressing gloom is doing so; being tautly written or freely painted is just being so. I am afraid this does not quite work either. In the first place, the gloom expressed by a poem or picture is in my view possessed by it, albeit metaphorically rather than literally; that is, the poem or picture express-



Antonio Pollaiuolo, *Battle of Naked Men*, Engraving, Courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase, J. H. Wade Fund.

ing gloom *is* (metaphorically) gloomy.<sup>8</sup> In the second place, I think the so-called intrinsic stylistic features of a work are never merely possessed but are among those possessed properties that are manifested, shown forth, *exemplified* just as color and texture and weave, but not shape or size, are exemplified by the tailor's swatch he uses as a sample. Thus, expressing and exemplifying alike are matters of being and doing, of possessing properties *and* referring to them. This, indeed, provides a clue to the distinction we have been trying to make: the features here in question, whether structural or nonstructural, are all properties literally exemplified by a work.

Exemplification, though one of the most frequent and important functions of works of art, is the least noticed and understood. Not only some troubles about style but many futile debates over the symbolic character of art can be blamed on ignoring the lessons, readily learned from everyday cases of the relation of being-a-sample-of, that mere possession of a property does not amount to exemplification, that

8. Even though a metaphorical statement may be literally false, metaphorical truth differs from metaphorical falsity much as literal truth differs from literal falsity. This and other matters—pertaining to metaphor, to denotation and exemplification and expression, and to symbolization or reference in general—that are essential to but can only be briefly summarized in the present paper are more fully explained in Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, 1968).

exemplification involves reference by what possesses to the property possessed, and thus that exemplification though obviously different from denotation (or description or representation) is no less a species of reference.

In summary so far, a feature of style may be a feature of what is said, of what is exemplified, or of what is expressed. Goya and El Greco characteristically differ in all three ways: in subject matter, drawing, and feeling. Features of any of these kinds may also be ways of performing one or more of the three functions. For example, shapes exemplified in a painting of drapery may at once constitute a way of representing costume and a way of expressing bulk or agitation or dignity; the drapery “can curl, it can swirl, it can billow, it can melt; or it can resist the eye with a structure of humps and hollows as durable as a rock modelled by the waves,” can become “an instrument of harmonious certainty.”<sup>9</sup> In other cases, differences in what is expressed—say in the character of the risen Christ in Mantegna’s engraving and Piero della Francesca’s painting—may be different ways of depicting the same subject. Again, features of what is said may be ways of saying or expressing; Whitman’s choice of detail is both an aspect of his way of describing human beings and his way of celebrating vitality, and the different subjects chosen by Vermeer and de Heem and van der Heyden and van Everdingen are at once different ways of depicting life in seventeenth-century Holland and different ways of expressing its domestic quality. Sometimes, features of what is exemplified, such as color organizations, are ways of exemplifying other features, such as a spatial pattern; witness the differently colored impressions from a single silk-screen design by Albers, and more recently by Patrick Heron. And a given structure, such as the sonnet form, may of course be exemplified in poems having quite different subjects, so that features of a subject matter count as ways of exemplifying a form.

But we need not ring all the changes here or argue over particular examples. My purpose has not been to impose an elaborate and rigid system of classification upon features of style, but rather to free the theory of style from the warping constraints of prevalent dogma—from the misleading opposition of style and subject, of form and content, of what and how, of intrinsic and extrinsic. Far from claiming that the tripartite taxonomy outlined is mandatory or the best possible or even altogether adequate, I am urging explicit recognition of aspects of style that, while often considered by critics, are shortchanged by traditional theory. This does not answer but only underlines the question what in general distinguishes stylistic features from others. Identifying the properties of a literary—or pictorial or musical—style matters more than

9. Quotations are from Kenneth Clark, *Piero della Francesca*, 2d ed. (London, 1969), p. 14.



further classifying them into ways of saying, exemplifying, and expressing.

### *5. Style and Signature*

Yet while style embraces features of the several sorts described, such features are not always stylistic. If a work is in a given style, only certain among all the aspects of the subject, form, and feeling of the work are elements of that style.

In the first place, a property—whether of statement made, structure displayed, or feeling conveyed—counts as stylistic only when it associates a work with one rather than another artist, period, region, school, etc. A style is a complex characteristic that serves somewhat as an individual or group signature—that bespeaks Resnais or Whistler or Borodin, that distinguishes early from late Corot, Baroque from Rococo, Baoulé from Pahouin. By extension, we may speak of a work by one author as being in the style of another, or of a passage being or not being in the style of other passages in the same or another work; but in general stylistic properties help answer the questions: who? when? where? A feature that is nonindicative by itself may combine with others to place a work; a property common to many works may be an element of style for some but stylistically irrelevant for others; some properties may be only usual rather than constant features of a given style; and some may be stylistically significant not through appearing always or even often in works of a given author or period but through appearing never or almost never in other works. No fixed catalogue of the elementary properties of style can be compiled; and we normally come to grasp a style without being able to analyze it into component features. The test of our grasp lies in the sureness and sensitivity of our sorting of works.

In the second place, not even every property that helps determine the maker or period or provenance of a work is stylistic. The label on a picture, a listing in a catalogue raisonné, a letter from the composer, a report of excavation may help place a work; but being so labelled or documented or excavated is not a matter of style. Nor are the chemical properties of pigments that help identify a painting. Even being signed by Thomas Eakins or Benjamin Franklin is an identifying property that is not stylistic. Although a style is metaphorically a signature, a literal signature is no feature of style.

Why do such properties, even though plainly who-when-where relevant, fail to qualify as stylistic? Briefly, because they are not properties of the functioning of the work as a symbol. In contrast, such typical stylistic qualities as a concentration upon setting, a peculiar elaboration of curved forms, a subtle quality of bittersweet feeling, are aspects of what the poem or picture or piano sonata says or exemplifies or expresses.

Style has to do exclusively with the symbolic functioning of a work as such.<sup>10</sup> Earlier we saw that any, and now we see that only, aspects of such symbolic functioning may enter into a style.

The lineaments of a definition of style are thus before us. Basically, style consists of those features of the symbolic functioning of a work that are characteristic of author, period, place, or school. If this definition does not seem notably novel, still its divergence from some prevalent views must not be overlooked. According to this definition, style is not exclusively a matter of how as contrasted with what, does not depend either upon synonymous alternatives or upon conscious choice among alternatives, and comprises only but not all aspects of how and what a work symbolizes.

Throughout, I have been speaking of style of works of art. But need style, as conceived here, be confined to works, or might the term “work” in our definition be as well replaced by “object” or by “anything”? Unlike some other definitions, ours does not rest upon an artist’s intentions. What counts are properties symbolized, whether or not the artist chose or is even aware of them; and many things other than works of art symbolize. Insofar as the properties in question are characteristic of an author or maker, style indeed pertains only to artefacts, unless “maker” covers also the person who presents an *objet trouvé* as art. But natural objects and events may function otherwise as symbols, and properties of what they symbolize may be characteristic of time or place of origin or occurrence. A Mandalay sunrise may be not merely a sunrise in Mandalay but a sunrise expressing the suddenness of thunder—a sunrise in Mandalay style. Nevertheless, in the present context we may do well to restrict style to works and performances and objects of art.<sup>11</sup>

Some stylistic features are more prominent and more telling than others; but the line between trivial stylistic features and features like those cited earlier that are not stylistic at all has seldom been clearly drawn. Consider some fussy statistical characteristic of the novels of a given author, such as that more than the usual proportion of second words of his sentences begin with consonants. Is the difference between this and an important genuine feature of style categorical or comparative? This property is statistical, but so are many plainly stylistic properties such as the frequency of rhyme or alliteration. This property is determinable only by long labor; but some of the most significant properties of style are so subtle as to be discovered only at great pains. Finally, that this property is too ad hoc to be interesting is a matter of degree;

10. And only as such; not, for example, with the symbolic functioning of a poem as a message in some military code.

11. Although my examples in the present paper are works, what I say of styles applies equally to performances. The much-abused question “What is art?”—that is how, or better when, anything qualifies as a work of art, good or bad—and related questions concerning the *objet trouvé* and conceptual art are explored once more in my lecture “When is Art?” now being prepared for publication.

just as generalizations in science are the more ad hoc the fewer and weaker their connections with the theoretical background, so stylistic properties are the more ad hoc the fewer and weaker their connections with the network of other stylistic concepts.

So far, then, nothing distinguishes our preposterous property from unmistakably stylistic properties. Nevertheless, our definition of style discloses a categorical difference here. Though our property indeed belongs to the novels in question and even identifies them as by the given author, it is hardly exemplified or symbolized in any way by them as works. In this it is like the size and shape of a tailor's swatch that serves as a sample not of these properties but of color and texture. Since our property is not symbolized by the novels, it does not satisfy our definition of style. In contrast with even the strangest or most negligible stylistic properties, this is not a stylistic property at all.

Now admittedly, while what is or is not exemplified by a tailor's swatch is evident enough, just which properties are exemplified by a work of art or a performance is often difficult to determine. The distinction drawn in the definition may sometimes be hard to apply. But likewise, we often find it hard to tell just what a work says or expresses. That we have trouble making a determination implies that there is something to be determined: that the work in fact does or in fact does not say so-and-so, does or does not exemplify (or express) a given property. Whether a property is stylistic depends no more than what a work says either upon the difficulty of determining or upon the importance of what is exemplified or said.

## 6. *The Significance of Style*

Stylistics, plainly, is a narrow part of criticism. Criticism may incorporate discussion not only of historical, biographical, psychological, and sociological factors, but of any properties whatever of the works studied. Stylistics, in contrast, is confined to features of what and how the works symbolize, and still further to such of these features as are characteristic of a given author, period, region, school, etc.

Does this mean that concepts of style are mere instruments for the literary or art historian, curatorial devices for sorting works according to origin? Are styles, like catalogue listings and excavation reports, simply aids in filing or have they aesthetic significance? Is stylistics merely part of the mechanics of scholarship or does it concern works as art?

The question as framed is misleading. It assumes that attribution is alien to aesthetics, that the 'mere' identification of artist, period, place, or school is aesthetically irrelevant, that history and criticism are entirely independent pursuits. This is a mistake. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>12</sup>

12. Goodman, *Languages of Art*, pp. 99–111.

knowledge of the origin of a work, even if obtained by chemical analysis or other purely scientific means, informs the way the work is to be looked at or listened to or read, providing a basis for the discovery of nonobvious ways the work differs from and resembles other works. Indeed, the perceptual discovery of a style must usually start from prior identification of works representing an artist or school. Thus attributions however effected contribute to the understanding of works as art.

The question really at issue here is different: whether stylistic properties have any more direct aesthetic significance than do nonstylistic properties that aid attribution. The answer is implicit in what has already been said. Placing a work is itself aesthetically significant insofar as it makes for discovery of such qualities as those of style. That style is by definition characteristic of an author or period or region or school does not reduce it to a device for attribution; rather, so far as aesthetics is concerned, attribution is a preliminary or auxiliary to or a byproduct of the perception of style. History and criticism differ not in having separate subject matters or unrelated tasks but in exchanging ends for means. Where the historian uses his grasp of style to identify a picture as by Rembrandt or a poem as by Hopkins, the critic uses the identification of authorship as a step toward discerning the Rembrandt properties or the Hopkins properties of the work.

Why, though, should style matter more than some quality that might be discerned, with enough study, as characteristic of works in a random selection? Partly for the same reason that ad hoc stylistic properties count for little: lack of interesting interrelationships with the ever-developing fabric of other features involved in organizing our aesthetic experience; and partly because, in the absence of any claimed correlation with such projectible factors as authorship or school, our tentative perception cannot be reinforced, refined, or extended by testing against further cases. Nothing here is incompatible with the familiar fact that interesting qualities are sometimes revealed through the juxtaposition of works in a mixed anthology, exhibition, collection, or concert, or even a storeroom jumble.

The style of Haydn or Hardy or Holbein does not proclaim itself to the casual listener or reader or museum goer, and is seldom to be recognized by following explicit instructions. Styles are normally accessible only to the knowing eye or ear, the tuned sensibility, the informed and inquisitive mind. This is not surprising, or even peculiar to styles. No feature of anything is so central or so potentially prominent as not to be overlooked even under close and repeated scrutiny. What we find is heavily dependent on how and what we seek. We fail to see the face in the woods in a child's picture puzzle. We may miss form and feeling as we focus upon what is said, or miss what is said as we listen to rhyme and rhythm. People equally at home in two languages may, when learning lists or texts in a mixture of the two, hardly notice and quickly forget

which words are in which language. Overall design may be ignored for or distract attention from fine detail. The perception of any pattern not fitting the structure of the search often takes great trouble.

Yet the more complicated and elusive the style, the more does it stimulate exploration and reward success with illumination. An obvious style, easily identified by some superficial quirk, is properly decried as a mere mannerism. A complex and subtle style, like a trenchant metaphor, resists reduction to a literal formula. We usually perceive the style or the sadness of a picture or a poem without being able to analyze either property into elements or specify necessary and sufficient conditions for it. Just for this reason, the perception when achieved increases the dimensions of our comprehension of the work. And the less accessible a style is to our approach and the more adjustment we are forced to make, the more insight we gain and the more our powers of discovery are developed. The discernment of style is an integral aspect of the understanding of works of art.