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On Philosophical Style (and Substance)

Sharon Rider

It has actually come to the point with philosophy in our country, that hardly anything gets the "seal of approval" than utterly pallid and indifferent "academic special investigations" without any root in a life's necessity and without any fruit in real conviction. In academic authorship, it is no longer a question of coming to belief by way of thinking, but in fact merely of collecting "qualifications". However unfinished, merely programmatic and in many regards defective my book is, it does have *one* merit: it is a "document human", a reflection in the medium of abstract thought of a hard won personal development.¹

I have at all times thought with my whole body and my whole life. I do not know what purely intellectual problems are [...] You know these things by way of thinking, yet your thought is not your experience but the reverberation of the experience of others; as a room trembles when a carriage passes. I am sitting in the that carriage, and often am the carriage itself.²

¹ Vitalis Norström, Letter to Samuel Fries 7/3, cited in Mats Persson, *Förnufts kampen. Vitalis Norström och idealismens kris*. (Stockholm/Stehag: 1994), p. 202: "Det har i själva verket kommit derhän med filosofien i vårt land att knappast något annat stämplas som "god vara" än fullkomligt färglösa och indifferentia "akademiska specialundersökningar" utan något rot i ett livsbehov och utan någon frukt i verkligt övertygelse. Vid det akademiska författarskap är icke längre fråga om att genom tänkande komma till öfvertygelse, utan egentligen endast om insamlande av "meriter". Så utförd, blott och bart programmässig och i många afseenden ofullkomlig min bok än är, en förtjenst har den: den är ett "document human", en återspeglning i den abstrakta tankens medium av en genomkämpad personlig utveckling."

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gesammelte Werke*, Musarion-Ausgabe, XXI, 81 (München: 1929); Posthumous notes about *Daybreak*. Cited in Erich Heller, *The Importance of Nietzsche* (Chicago: 1988), p. 143.

I

It has been said of certain philosophers, such as Nietzsche, even (or perhaps especially) by their detractors, that whatever one thinks of the content of what is written, the writer is a fine "stylist". In this essay, I want to suggest this assessment is based on a misunderstanding.

Stanley Rosen is one contemporary philosopher who has been occupied with the question of the relationship between philosophical form and content, which is part of the question of the relationship between philosophy and poetry. Rosen is primarily known as a Plato scholar, in which capacity he has often criticized modern interpreters of Plato, especially in the Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophical tradition, for their refusal to take seriously the philosophical import of the dramatic form in the dialogues. Rosen's view is concisely expressed in an interview published in the philosophical review *Diotima*. In that interview, he was asked to account for the textual support for his reading of the *Republic* as a satire of the very idea of a political utopia:

You have to read it. You have to read it. I mean, what clues are there in a play by Shakespeare as to which statements are jokes, or intended ironically, or represent the view of the author? In other words, it would be rather stupid if Plato wrote in a footnote: "By the way, this is a satire. Don't take the surface intention to express my deeper ideas. I really have in mind the following five points." You have to think everything through yourself [...] To mention only one point: often we have to ask what Socrates would have said about something to a different audience [...] One can raise questions about the possibility of the *polis*, one can ask the question whether it's just to the philosopher to make him rule, and so on. You know, there are all kinds of details of this sort. Killing everybody over the age of 10, right? I mean, that sounds like Pol Pot. Does Plato say in the text: "that's obviously terrible!" No, of course not. You have to ask yourself, if that's a reasonable thing to do in order to establish a just city. So, it's really quite mistaken to ask for specific statements. I mean, there are no specific statements in Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, or in *Don Quixote*, that say: "this is a joke."³

Later on in the interview, in response to a question regarding the risk that too much emphasis on form and context runs the risk of missing the philosophical arguments, Rosen replies:

In a dialogue, exactly as in a play by Shakespeare, [...] you have to see the argument in the context that it is made. Here is my favorite example: in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Richard says: "A horse, a

³ *Diotima*, vol. 2, no. 1.

horse, my kingdom for a horse." Now suppose that I wrote an essay, called say, "Shakespeare's Political Philosophy", and in it I argue that according to Shakespeare, horses are more important than kingdoms. That would be stupid, right? Now, that's the level at which most people study arguments in Plato's dialogues.⁴

Now compare Rosen's view with a famous passage from Brand Blandshard's engaging study, *On Philosophical Style*:

It is unjust, I grant, to tear a passage from its context in this way, and the context would undoubtedly help; but if the context is of the same sort, that too will be obscure. Listen to this from a great philosopher. I leave out only the first word, and ask you to form the best conjecture you can of what he is talking about: "X is the self-restoration of matter in its formlessness, its liquidity; the triumph of its abstract homogeneity over specific definiteness; its abstract, purely self-existing continuity as negation of negation is here set as activity." You might guess the writer of this – it is Hegel – but I would almost wager the national debt that you don't have the faintest suggestion of what he is actually talking about. Well, it happens to be heat – the good familiar heat that one feels in the sunshine or around fireplaces. I strongly suspect that this farrago is nonsense, but that is not my point. My point is that even if it is not nonsense, even if a reader, knowing that heat was being talked about, could make out, by dint of a dozen re-readings and much knitting of eyebrows, some application for the words, no one has the right to ask this sort of struggle of his reader.⁵

Blanshard goes on to say that clarity and lucidity often turn on mere specificity:

To say that Major André was hanged is clear and definite; to say that he was killed is less definite, because you do not know in what way he was killed; to say that he died is still more indefinite, because you do not even know whether his death was due to violence or to natural causes. If we were to use this statement as a varying symbol by which to rank writers for clearness, we might, I think, get something like the following: Swift, Macaulay and Shaw would say that André was hanged. Bradley would say that he was killed. Bosanquet would say that he died. Kant would say that his mortal existence achieved its termination. Hegel would say that a finite determination of infinity had been further determined by its own negation.⁶

⁴ Ibid. For a thorough, scholarly account of dramatic readings of Plato, see Mats Persson, "Mot en ny Platonbild? ('Towards a new idea of Plato?')", in *Lychnos. Swedish Yearbook for the History of Ideas* (Uppsala: 1995), pp. 9 – 54.

⁵ Brand Blandshard, *On Philosophical Style* (Manchester: 1954), p. 30.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 30f. One might think that this imitation of Hegel's language is unfair, artificial or at least exaggerated. But I tested this formulation on a Hegel specialist, and asked him what he

Blanshard emphasizes repeatedly throughout the essay that writing clearly about difficult things is among the hardest things to do. He argues that a first step for philosophy and philosophers in this desirable direction is (i) to jettison pseudo-scientific jargon, and (ii) to resist the ever-present academic temptation to generalize. Blanshard seems to feel that Plato is a good philosophical stylist, at least in certain dialogues. His prose is certainly not particularly academic. And it is difficult to assess to what extent he is guilty of excessive generalization, since he writes in dramatic form. After two millennia of interpretation, there is still a great deal of dispute regarding his most fundamental doctrines, to what extent he even has fundamental doctrines, and the meaning of his most famous works. I suppose most of us would agree that Plato was not a materialist, but even this point has been disputed by at least on commentator.⁷

So how are we to distinguish between the difficulties arising in and out of the stuff of philosophical thought itself, that is to say, the difficulty of the problems, and just plain old, garden-variety bad writing? Is there a specifically philosophical way of writing badly? In one obvious sense, yes: that is, when philosophers adhere to scholastic conventions without considering that this is what they are doing or why they are doing it, a problem that one may term "the pitfalls of academic prose". Here is a famous example of what happens to our thinking when we fail to choose our words actively and conscientiously, from a master of the English language, George Orwell. He has "translated" a well-known verse from *Ecclesiastes* to contemporary intellectual pabulum. The verse is:

I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

Here's Orwell's rendition:

Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.⁸

thought was being described here. He paused briefly, shrugged his shoulders and replied: "Someone died(?)".

⁷ See, for example, Ronna Burger, *The Phaedo: A Platonic Labyrinth* (New Haven: 1984).

⁸ George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language", *Horizon* (London: 1946). <http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e-polit>, p.4.

In the essay cited, Orwell notices, among other things, how excessive generalization and lackluster ready-made phrases are increasingly seen and used to indicate learning and scientific thinking. But good writing, Orwell argues, consists in choosing words for their precise meaning and inventing images to make one's meaning clearer. In truth, he admits, if any one of us today were to try to express something of the sense of the passage from *Ecclesiastes*, we would most likely formulate something similar to the imaginary sentence. Orwell clearly sees this as a decline. He asks for a "deep change of attitude", an "effort of the mind" to cut out "all stale or mixed images, all prefabricated phrase, needless repetitions, and humbug and vagueness generally", and offers rules of thumb about how to go about this. Among these are to avoid foreign phrases, scientific terminology and jargon where possible. But he concludes by pointing out that he is not talking here about "literary" use of language, but "merely language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought".⁹

By way of Collingwood, I want to suggest that the use of jargon, technical distinctions and pre-established conceptual categories in philosophy is actually a "literary" contrivance, a form of poesis. And, by contrast, it is the works of those philosophers whom we habitually call "poetical" or "literary" or even "rhetorical", that we often find the most stringent and successful attempts at the much touted virtues of clarity, stringency and intellectual honesty.

II

R. G. Collingwood's *Essay on Philosophical Method* predates Blanshard's book by over two decades.¹⁰ It is considered by many (including Collingwood), to be his greatest book, both in terms of style and content.¹¹ In that book, Collingwood poses the question if "philosophical literature has any peculiarities corresponding to those of the thought which it tries to express".¹² He goes on to argue that the form of philosophical reasoning

⁹ Ibid, p.7

¹⁰ R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (Bristol: 1995 [1933]).

¹¹ Collingwood's own satisfaction with the work may well be due to his considering it truly finished. See Peter Johnson, "Review of R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, New Edition, with an introduction and additional material, eds. James Connelly and Giuseppe D'Oro (Oxford: 2005) and *An Essay on Philosophical Method; The Philosophy of Enchantment; Studies in Folklore, Cultural Criticism and Anthropology*, ed. David Boucher, Wendy James and Philip Smallwood (Oxford: 2005)", in *Philosophy Reviews* 2006.05.09. Apparently, Collingwood was on a leave of absence due to illness the previous year, which relieved him of the many professional duties and pressures that elicited the complaint: "A man whose mind is always being stirred up by philosophical teaching can hardly be expected to achieve the calm, the inner silence, which is one condition of philosophical thinking.", *Autobiography* (Oxford, 1939; 1978), p. 28.

¹² Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, p. 199.

cannot be separated from the content (i.e., thinking). According to Collingwood, a serious consideration of the question in what good philosophical style consists, leads inevitably to the question in what good philosophy consists.

He begins this chapter, "Philosophy as a Branch of Literature", by making a few preliminary distinctions:

Literature as a genus is divided into the species poetry and prose. Prose is marked by a distinction between matter and form: What we say and how we say it. The formal elements are those which we call literary quality, style, writing, and so forth; the material elements are what we generally call the "contents" of the work. Each part has its own scale of values. On its formal side, prose would be clear, expressive, and in the most general sense of the word, "beautiful"; on its material side, it would be well thought out, intelligent, and in a general sense, true. To satisfy the first claim, the prose writer must be an artist; to satisfy the second, he must be a thinker.¹³

Collingwood says that whereas prose contains within itself the distinction between form and matter, or form and content, what makes poetry *poetry* is that its form *is* its content. This view of poetry has fallen out of fashion, but it was not uncommon among American and English philosophers and literary theorists influenced by idealism in general, and by Kantian aesthetics in particular. In his classic work *The Well Wrought Urn*, for example, Cleanth Brooks, the leading exponent of New Criticism, quotes Wilbur Marshall Urban:

The general principle of the inseparability of intuition and expression holds with special force for the aesthetic intuition. Here it means that form and content, or content and medium, are inseparable. The artist does not first intuit his object and then find the appropriate medium. It is rather in and through his medium that he intuits the object.¹⁴

In poetry, Brooks says, "form is meaning".¹⁵ The meaning of a piece of poetry cannot be separated from the poem, and then isolated and analyzed as a psychological state or intention in the writer or reader, for then it would not be the meaning of the *poetic work*, but something else. Brooks also rejects the notion that poetry can be paraphrased into true or false statements or

¹³ Ibid. The distinction in the aims and ideals of poetry and prose respectively is not to be mistaken for the empirical distinction between poetry and verse, which are simply two ways of writing. See Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, p. 201.

¹⁴ Wilbur Marshall Urban, *Language and Reality: The Philosophy of Language and the Principles of Symbolism* (London & New York, 1939), p. 462. Cited in Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York, 1947; 1975), p. 199.

¹⁵ Cleanth Brooks, "The Formalist Critics", *The Kenyon Review* XIII (1951:1), p. 72.

expressions of the author's psychological or emotional state that have been put into "a sort of beautiful envelope".¹⁶

Here I think is a helpful illustration, although obviously not Collingwood's or Brooks'. The famous broadcaster and author Studs Terkel interviewed Bob Dylan in 1963. Of particular interest to journalists at the time was the "political content" of his so-called "protest songs" (Dylan has subsequently either claimed that he never wrote protest songs, or alternatively, that all of his songs are, in a much deeper sense than the political, protest songs). Terkel began his question by referring to a certain famous song, "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall", as an allegory for the threat of atomic fallout. Dylan cut Terkel off in mid-sentence, with evident irritation in his voice: "It's not atomic rain, it's not fallout rain... it's just a *hard rain*. It's a hard rain." For Dylan, as for any poet or troubadour, the form is not something added on to the real core of the text, its "meaning". The meaning of a poem, what makes it the meaning of a poem, is in how it's written, its poetic form. Or, as Brooks would have it: "the paraphrase is not the real core of meaning which constitutes the essence of the poem".¹⁷

It would seem then, that philosophy belongs naturally to prose rather than to poetry. But actually, the matter is not so simple. While it's true that prose is not pure form in the manner of poetry, we should also be circumspect about the form/content distinction as such. Collingwood's use of the distinction seems to have the character of a grammatical remark when he writes: "The formal part is servant of the material. We speak well, in prose, only in order to say what we mean: the matter is prior to the form."¹⁸ (In contrast to the poet, the form of whose articulation is what he means. The form is irreducibly the matter.) In almost Aristotelian fashion, Collingwood seems to be saying that there can be no pure matter, or content, for that would be simply pure potentiality, an impossibility. If something is written, it must have a form and form is always distinct. Thus if what is written is philosophy, it must have a distinctly philosophical form. But what is philosophical form? Collingwood's answer is that the form necessarily expresses the content; the form says something essential, of necessity, about the content.

There are two elements to this claim, which are not clearly spelled out as such in Collingwood's text. One concerns stylistic conventions and principles. When we speak well in order to say what we mean, the very adequacy of the expression tells us something fundamental about what is meant, that is, about what can be meant. As C. S. Lewis put it: "At bottom, every ideal of style dictates not only how we should say things but what sort

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 226.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 197.

¹⁸ Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, p. 212.

of things we may say."¹⁹ To deem a certain sort of writing as adequate to its task is to make a judgment about the nature of the task, about what sort of thoughts are worth thinking. A second element stresses the notion of wanting to say something, or rather, wanting to mean something. In this regard, there can only be one ideal, namely, clarity. To write well, in this respect, is to succeed in saying what one wants to say, to achieve a clear meaning. These two strands ought to be borne in mind when one contemplates the relationship between philosophy and poetry.

According to Collingwood, the resemblance between the two becomes more profound "as philosophy becomes increasingly philosophical".²⁰ At first glance, one would think that there might be a tension between these two aspects of good philosophical writing, the rejection of pre-established stylistic conventions, on the one hand, and the ideal of clarity as such, on the other. In the first case, where stylistic ideals dominate, philosophical thought seems to be constrained by things unphilosophical. Thus one should be wary of them. In the second, philosophical thought seems to become "mere poetry" in the sense that it is an expression of meaning unconstrained by convention, code, established concepts and techniques. Thus, one might worry, the philosophical content may appear less clear (think of the difficulty people have in reading the Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, not because of its technicality, but rather because of the absence of technical terms and standard academic form. Reading the *Investigations* is, for many of us, like driving on a road without signposts saying where one is headed, or indicating when one has lost one's direction.) In what follows, using Collingwood as my starting point, I wish to show that this tension is an essential one, one which expresses the difficulty and nature of philosophical style (and substance).

According to Collingwood, as we said, the form of prose expresses the matter. Thus the matter is prior.

This priority, no doubt, is rather logical than temporal. The matter does not exist as a naked not fully formed thought in our minds before we fit it with a garment of words. It is only in some dark half-conscious way that we know our thoughts before we come to express them. Yet in that obscure fashion they are already within us; and rising into full consciousness as we find the words to utter, them, it is they that determine the words, not vice versa.²¹

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Proposes a Toast and Other Pieces* (London, 1965) p. 10. For Lewis, in poetic language we simply use the ordinary meaning of words. A tree, a river, a stone are used to signify what is real but complex or subtle: feelings, moods, spiritual experiences. For Lewis, such use is not primarily a question of arbitrary artistic originality or creativity. Rather, there is little room for arbitrariness or contingency in using language metaphorically, if the metaphors employed are to work.

²⁰ Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, p. 200.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

Scientific literature contains a number of technical terms, and this by necessity. Without those, the scientist cannot say what he means. He cannot express a *scientific* thought. But many of us are inclined, with Blanshard, to banish technical terms in philosophy, where they tend to have the character of jargon or embellishment. Why is this so? Collingwood says that technical terms are invented *ad hoc* for special purposes, or, alternatively, are borrowed from ordinary speech but used *ad hoc* in a special technical sense. An example of the first would be the myriad neologisms that scientists create to name previously unknown phenomena, such as newly discovered extinct species. An example of the second might be the many studies in biology in which the mounting behavior of birds, bees and scorpion flies is described as rape, by which is meant copulation resulting in an infringement upon the "victim's" autonomy with respect to reproduction.²² Thus a technical term, insofar as it calls for explanation, is to that extent not language properly speaking, but something else, which "resembles language in being significant, but differs from it in not being expressive or self-explanatory."²³ Thus a technical term is more like a mathematic symbol than an ordinary word. It presupposes language for its functioning; the terms of which it consists are intelligible only in ordinary or non-technical language, that is, in language proper.²⁴ Language proper, on the other hand, does not presuppose symbolism or technical terms. In poetry, where language is "most perfectly and purely itself", no technical terms are used or presupposed, "any more than in the primitive speech of childhood or the ordinary speech of conversation."²⁵ (Collingwood must surely have been able to imagine a genre of poetry in which technical terms or symbols are used, but he would probably not consider such poetry to be of the "purest and most perfect" sort; in a sense, such experiments fail to achieve poetry as an ideal.)

Scientific prose consists of two kinds of language: expressions, in the mathematical sense, which signify thought but are not language proper, and verbal definitions of these terms, which are language proper, but which do not signify *scientific* thought as such. In Collingwood's view, wherever philosophy has attempted to imitate science, the imitation has been "slight and superficial". Indeed, the more quasi-scientific the prose, the worse philosophy. For Collingwood, genuine philosophy has no use for technical terms. Science must create new terms for new concepts (he offers the example of pterodactyl); but philosophy is concerned with concepts, and no concept, if it is to be intelligible, can be wholly new to us. And relatively new concepts require only relatively new words. On the face of it, this is not entirely convincing. Pterodactyl is a composite word taken from the Greek

²² See, for example, Randy Thornhill, "Rape in Panorpa Scorpionflies and a General Rape Hypothesis", in *Animal Behavior* nr 28, 1980, p. 52-59.

²³ Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, p. 204.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

("wing-finger"), and assumes that we know both what a wing and a finger are, that wings are associated with flying, etc. The phenomenon was not *entirely* new, even if the species that it names was hitherto unknown. But I think that his point is that we could give the phenomenon any name, say "pointy-beaked flying lizard" or whatever we like, since we're describing something entirely new to our scientific linguistic practice insofar as it has created a new object. We had no word for the thing, no expression, because we had no use for it until paleontology had undergone certain developments that entailed certain new categorizations. When the need arose, we were free to make one up as we saw fit. But a concept that has no use whatsoever, i.e. that is wholly new, is wholly unintelligible.

What about other forms of prose? Collingwood takes up the example of historical writing. He grants that the historian resembles the philosopher insofar as he uses words as words, and not as expressions. There are, however, significant differences, the most important of which is probably this:

All historical writing is [...] presumably addressed to a reader, and a relatively uninformed reader; it is therefore instructive or didactic in style. The reader is kept as arm's length, and is never admitted into the intimacy of the writer's mind; the writer, however conscientiously he cites authorities, never lays bare the processes of thought which have led him to his conclusions, because that would defer the completion of the narrative to the Greek calendars, while he discussed his own states of consciousness, in which the reader is not interested.²⁶

In this respect, Collingwood notes, philosophy is precisely the opposite of history: "every piece of philosophical writing is primarily addressed by the author to himself."²⁷ In writing, the philosophical author is trying to unravel some difficulty, to get clear on something that he does not yet fully grasp. In short, philosophy is not concerned with expressing certainties, but rather with working through doubts. Whereas good historical writing will conceal whatever confusions or uncertainties the author may have, good philosophical writing consists in the author's confession of his own. In Collingwood's view, the philosophers who have displayed the deepest instinct for style hesitate to use the didactic or instructive mode because they recognize that, in philosophy, they are in the same state of darkness and confusion as the reader (otherwise they should not need to do the work called philosophizing). This is why it is so common that great philosophers write in "the manner of a dialogue, in which the work of self-criticism is parceled out among the *dramatis personae*, or a meditation in which the

²⁶ Ibid, p. 209.

²⁷ Ibid.

mind communes with itself, or a dialectical process where the initial position is modified again and again as difficulties come to light. Common to all these literary forms is the notion of philosophical writing as essentially a confession, a search by the mind for its own failings and an attempt to remedy them by recognizing them."²⁸ Consequently, says Collingwood, the style ought to be plain and modest, rather than an attempt to persuade, convince or impress. Whereas we "consult" works on history, we "follow" the reasoning of philosophers: we try to understand what they think and to formulate for ourselves, as best we can, how they came to think it. Indeed, the former presupposes the latter. We shall return to this presently.

III

A philosophical text demands a certain degree of good will from its reader, says Collingwood. If a reader has prejudices about the text or its author, or if he simply has no patience with the author's style of reasoning, or lacks sympathy with it, the text will be quite literally "unreadable" for him. His reading of it will be of no philosophical value to him, or to anyone else. This is the most important respect in which philosophy resembles poetry. A philosophical work is a kind of "poem of the intellect"; what is expressed in philosophical writing, however, "is not emotions, desires, feelings, as such, but those which a thinking mind experiences in its search for knowledge; and it expresses these only because the experience of them is an integral part of the search, and that search is thought itself."²⁹ Thus philosophy represents the point at which prose comes closest to being poetry. When philosophy is poetical in this regard, the poetry is not merely a matter of a certain talent for apt metaphor or skill with tropes; rather, the "good style" is a direct consequence of the search for truth, the very attempt, in fact, *to be clear about what one means*. This is why some of the greatest philosophers, according to Collingwood, have written in an "imaginative" or poetic style that would be "ridiculous" in history and "nonsensical" in science. Here we might think not only of Plato, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, but also, in places, Augustine, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant and Hegel. In the works of such philosophers, poetic formulations, striking metaphors, elegant turns of phrase are not signs of imprecise thought, but the reverse: attempts to find adequate form for the most subtle, difficult or profound insights.

Like the poet, the philosopher should have an ear for simile, the imagination to invent new phrases and allusions that strike home, to improvise; in other words, the philosopher should attend to his language as he attends to his thought: as something vibrant, malleable and alive.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 210.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 212

Similarly, the reader of a philosophical text must see in it the expression of an individual experience: the living, breathing thought of a (at least at one time) living, breathing human being. The reader who approaches a text as a set of desiccated doctrines describing a state of affairs outside of himself will not hear what is being said to him, as a voice addressing him. Thus, however ingenious his reconstruction, analysis or interpretation, in point of fact, he as not understood anything worth understanding. He has, in Kant's terminology, a "merely" historical understanding, rather than a subjective, which is to say, philosophical, one.³⁰ In this respect, philosophy is entirely different from science. A serious reader of a serious philosophical work will not in the first instance seek faults, defects and deficiencies, or attempt to ascertain to what extent what is said is true or false, but will be "quiet, in order to be attentive".³¹ Naturally, Collingwood admits, there are philosophical authors who just do not merit that this sort of silent, uninterrupted attention. But such writers, in Collingwood's view, do not deserve to be read at all.

Philosophy is, as we said, in some as yet still undefined sense, the search for truth. The reader of a philosophical text, insofar as he is trying to understand what is being said to him, must be engaged in the same pursuit. In a sense, to have sympathy with a certain kind of philosophy is to have similar thoughts, concerns, doubts or suspicions as the author. To find a philosophical text helpful or valuable is to recognize oneself in the problems or questions articulated. It's common to emphasize the aspect of the philosophical project called, for want of a better term, "critical thinking". But we can only begin to criticize intelligently and intelligibly what we can begin to understand. This, in turn, requires that we *want* to understand. If that seems self-evident, it might be worth reminding ourselves that we often exhibit a very different attitude in academic thinking. As an illustration, we might return to Blanshard, who opens his discussion with an anecdote recounted by Hans Reichenbach.

He picked up Hegel's *Philosophy of History* and, before getting past the introduction, read the following: "Reason is substance, as well as infinite power, its own infinite material underlying all the natural and spiritual life; as also the infinite form which sets the material in motion. Reason is the substance from which all things derive their being." Now, says Reichenbach, "the term 'reason', as generally used, means an abstract capacity of human beings, manifesting itself in their behaviour, or to be modest, in parts of their behaviour. Does the philosopher quoted wish to say that our bodies are made of an abstract capacity of themselves? Even a philosopher cannot mean such an

³⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York, 1929; 1781), A836/B864.

³¹ Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, p. 215.

absurdity. What then does he mean?" Reichenbach discusses it for two pages, but gives it up as hopeless.³²

What Reichenbach displays here is a specific attitude, one which, in Collingwood's view, is almost the opposite of the philosophical inclination to ask oneself seriously, not rhetorically or polemically, for instance, what Hegel could sensibly mean by his use of "reason". Here one is tempted to recall Collingwood's depiction of modern philosophers' response to ancient metaphysics:

For example, metaphysicians have been heard to say "the world is both one and many"; and critics have not been wanting who were stupid enough to accuse them of contradicting themselves, on the abstractly logical ground that "the world is one" and "the world is many" are contradictory propositions. A great deal of the popular dislike of metaphysics is based on grounds of this sort, and is ultimately due to critics who, as we say, did not know what the men they criticized were talking about; that is, did not know what questions their talk was intended to answer, but with the ordinary malevolence of the idle against the industrious, the ignorant against the learned, the fool against the wise man, wished to have it believed that they were talking nonsense.³³

It seems to me that we can shed some light on the obscurity attending the issues raised at the beginning of this paper through Collingwood's notion of philosophical style as of one piece with philosophical content. Plato wrote dialogues. That the dialogues are dialogues is not extrinsic to their meaning. They cannot be reduced to the arguments imputed to them *ex post facto* by adherents of a school of thought impatient with, or even hostile to, their "literary" (i.e., "unscientific") form. Which is to say that the dialogues can neither be properly understood nor properly criticized from such a viewpoint. Similarly, we might very well share Blanshard's enormous frustration with Hegel's style; but that is only to say that we feel an enormous frustration with Hegel's thought. We cannot fairly assess Hegel's style without assessing his philosophy. But that requires a great deal more effort.

Concluding Remarks: On a Serious Note

I have chosen examples that I have found illustrative, illuminating or striking. In each case, I also found them amusing, and expected the reader

³² Blanshard, pp. 3-4.

³³ Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 40.

also to do so. But in no case was the humor intended to be glib, or clever, or witty, or a display of erudition. Rather, what elicits laughter in these cases is largely due to the sheer honesty, directness, or even audacity involved in an established professional philosopher calling his colleagues "stupid" or "idle" in print (Collingwood); or bearing witness to his own complete incapacity to make heads or tails of a great thinker, betting explicitly that neither can we (Blandshard); or the self-irony involved in an author renowned for the simplicity of his prose admitting that he must make an struggle to express himself as clearly as the man on the street could, effortlessly, only decades earlier (Orwell). Perhaps one might think that such remarks bear witness to an intellectual immaturity, like the use of metaphor, an indication that they cannot think in the detached, disinterested way that the more scientifically minded can and do. But this is a misconception. Collingwood's autobiography makes clear that he detests what he takes to be the complacent lack of self-awareness or self-criticism expressed in the pseudo-scientific style, not merely on esthetic grounds, and not even primarily on intellectual grounds, but on *moral* grounds. He summarizes the aim of his autobiography with the following remark:

I am not writing an account of recent political events in England: I am writing a description of the way in which those events impinged upon myself and broke up my pose as a detached professional thinker. I know now that the minute philosophers of my youth, for all their profession of a purely scientific detachment from practical affairs, were the propagandists of a coming Fascism. I know that Fascism means the end of clear thinking and the triumph of irrationalism. I know that all my life I have been engaged unawares in a political struggle, fighting against these things in the dark. Henceforth I shall fight in the daylight.³⁴

To write, as Nietzsche says of himself, "with his whole body and his whole life" means taking intellectual and moral responsibility for one's thoughts. But to take responsibility means not hiding behind what others say and think, a prose that, in its very style, proclaims the distance between the thinker and what is thought (what is expressed). To write philosophy in "purely scientific detachment" is to think in the mode of the anonymous collective, who, as such, cannot be held responsible for how its thoughts arise, or take responsibility for correcting them. In this sense, good philosophical style amounts to nothing more and nothing less than a painstaking, honest and uncompromising effort to understand what one thinks and why. Naturally, this effort will take different forms from case to case: the style will reveal something essential about the character of the thinker as well as his history,

³⁴ Ibid, p. 167.

his tradition, even his education. But this will be equally true of the thoughts expressed in this style; the style is not "chosen", but forced upon the thinker as the result of his best effort to get clear on things, to mean exactly what he says and to say exactly what he means. To develop into a good philosophical stylist is to mature as a thinker, to reach a stage at which one is capable of taking responsibility for one's own thoughts. One is tempted to recall Kant's definition of Enlightenment:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. [...] Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a proportion of men, long after nature has released them from alien guidance (naturaliter maturennes), nonetheless gladly remain in lifelong immaturity [...] If I have a book to serve as my understanding, a pastor to serve as my conscience, a physician to determine my diet for me, and so on, I need not exert myself at all [...] Thus, it is difficult for any individual man to work himself out of the immaturity that has all but become his nature. [...] Rules and formulas, those mechanical aids to the rational use, or rather misuse, of his natural gifts, are the shackles of a permanent immaturity.³⁵

Now, obviously, there are philosophical writers who are very clever, adept at wordplay, learned and elegant in their manner of presentation, and even display a willingness to break academic rules, thwart scholarly convention, and so forth, but the content of whose thoughts, upon closer scrutiny, simply do not say very much. Are they not nonetheless good stylists? The answer must be that they are good *literary* stylists, they excel at the literary genre of "philosophy" (which comes very close, I believe, to what the ancients meant by sophistry, but that's another paper).

One might say that there are at least three standard genres of academic philosophical literature, with three different codes of style. In the one, the literary ideal is scientific writing. In another, the conventions are rather those of rhapsody, or even prophecy. In the third, the conventions are largely those of the scholarly apparatus that began with historical writing understood as a science. In all three cases, taken as ideal types, the forms, conventions and rules proper to the chosen style not only guide thought, but even replace it. And one gets the impression that following these rules is seen as a way of

³⁵ Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" (Königsberg, 1784) in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, 1983), trans. Ted Humphrey, p. 41. Kant's *gesammelte Schriften*, hrsg. Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Band VIII (Berlin & Leipzig, 1904-), pp. 33-36. All emphases, except the last sentence of the quote, are Kant's.

inoculating oneself from criticism, by showing that one excels in the craft. Thus it gives the author a sense of belonging, i.e., a sense of professional identity. But if I have a serious matter on my mind that I wish to discuss, to work through, say, with a friend, I am disinclined to express myself in technical jargon, or prove that I have documented all the relevant material, or hold an elegant speech as if toasting a bride. If I take the matter seriously enough, I will rather do everything in my power to make myself (my concerns and my doubts) understood. Beyond the professional ideals of the engineer, the librarian and the prophet, a philosopher is a human being seriously trying to work out a problem that he has, where pride and pomposity play a subordinate roll.

But the "genre" of philosophical writing is not the subject matter of the foregoing reflections. Rather, the remarks about good philosophical style made in the present discussion concern the activity of philosophical writing (which is largely, although not exclusively, also the activity of philosophical thinking) as an ideal, rather than as a *de facto* practice, but an ideal without which the practice of philosophy would be nearly pointless. In short, I have attempted to understand the "inner life" of philosophical writing, how style evolves out of thinking. If my effort has been muddled, if I have not succeeded in describing something that the reader can recognize, or if everything I have said hitherto seems either just banal or simply wrong, this is not "merely" due to a lack of semantic precision, bad composition, impoverished vocabulary, or poor scholarship. Rather, it means that I haven't thought the question through enough, or have not formulated the right question, or that my intended audience feels no sympathy with the ideal that guides my thinking and how it is expressed.

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