
STYLE IN HISTORY

PETER GAY

I STYLE – FROM MANNER TO MATTER

Style is a centaur, joining what nature, it would seem, has decreed must be kept apart. It is form and content, woven into the texture of every art and every craft – including history. Apart from a few mechanical tricks of rhetoric, manner is indissolubly linked to matter; style shapes, and in turn is shaped by, substance. I have written these essays to anatomize this familiar yet really strange being, style the centaur; the book may be read as an extended critical commentary on Buffon's famous saying that the style is the man.

Buffon's epigram has a beautiful simplicity that makes it both possibly profound and certainly suspect. It seems frivolous, almost inappropriate, to be stylish about style, for it is necessary, and difficult, to disentangle the multiplicity of meanings and the thicket of metaphors that have accrued to the word in the course of centuries. Style, we are told, is the dress of thought and its sinews, its crowning glory and its expressive voice. There appear to be almost as many uses for style as there are users. The critic and the scholar, the lyric poet and the political publicist, each employs style in his own way and for his own purposes: to appreciate elegance and depreciate clumsiness, to decipher obscure passages, to exploit verbal ambiguities, to drive home a partisan point. The historian, who does all of these things – though one wishes that he would keep his lyricism in check and discard his politics when he writes history – encounters style in these and other dimensions. He is a professional writer and a professional reader. As a writer, he is under pressure to become a stylist while remaining a scientist; he must give pleasure without compromising truth. His style may be a conventional tool, an involuntary confession, or a striking illumination. As a reader, he prizes literary excellence, absorbs facts and interpretations, and explores the words before him for truths working beneath their surface; style may be, for him, an object of gratification, a vehicle of knowledge, or an instrument of diagnosis.

Yet this profusion is an opportunity as much as a problem. As I will show, it is

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desirable, for the sake of clarity, to discriminate among the varied meanings of style, but it is impossible, for the sake of understanding, to keep them permanently segregated. The use of a single word for many functions need not be a symptom of linguistic poverty; it can be a sign that these functions are related to one another. That the word *style* should enter diverse combinations — style of thought, style of life, and others — without strain reinforces the impression that the several kinds of style, and style and substance, have much to do with, and to say about, one another. Style is like Ranke's Venetian ambassadors: widely traveled, highly adaptable, superbly informed, and, if adroitly interrogated, splendidly indiscreet. For the historian, therefore, the evidential value of style — both in getting and in giving evidence — is enormous.

I have said that this book may be read as an extended critical commentary on Buffon's *Le style est l'homme même*. The commentary must be extended, for, though an important observation, the epigram is so laconic that we must, as the philosophers say, unpack it. And the commentary must be critical, for Buffon at once says too much and too little. In its day, his *bon mot* was an energetic, almost unprecedented demand that style not be taken lightly as mere decoration, but seen as reaching into the very foundations of the writer's work.¹ Yet style is not always the man, certainly not the whole man. If manner and matter are joined in a Catholic marriage, irrevocably, this does not mean that they can never be apart from each other. Much talk about style centers on the search for literary felicities, and for the traditional, if surprisingly elusive, virtue of clarity.

Moreover, it is a historical fact (which the historian may privately deplore but must professionally investigate like any other) that style has not always been profoundly anchored. There have been those — in advertising, in journalism, in politics, even in publishing — who treat it as an afterthought, as the Gothic façade irrelevantly plastered onto modern concrete walls. Middleton Murry once called this practice "the heresy of the man in the street" and thought it "the most popular of all delusions about style."² He anatomized this delusion half a century ago, but the heresy had been popular long before and remains as popular as it was when he wrote in 1922. Makers of verbal artifacts for mass consumption still find it convenient to ask researchers to do research, writers to write it up, and stylists to add the fine touches. Such Balkanization, I need hardly say, fatally divides what needs to be united; the products that such procedures throw on the market are, as we all know, persuasively packaged merchandise, decorated with obsessive puns, exhausted superlatives, and unauthentic anecdotes. Style here is a by-product of commercial enterprise; it is by no means the man but the system.

This vast, vulgar subliterate is a valuable reminder to the historian that the word *style* is not only a term of praise — "that novelist has style" — but also a neutral description — "that novelist works in the Naturalist style". He must remember that the very idea of style is infected with a central ambiguity: it must give information as well as pleasure. It opens windows on both truth and beauty — a bewildering double vista. Aesthetically indifferent or aesthetically offensive procedures, as long as they have a certain consistency and characteristic form, partake of style. Second-rate poets, painters — and historians — have a style. So do gangsters perpetrating gangland killings, songwriters manufacturing popular hits, priests performing religious ceremonies in standardized ways. The study of style has diagnostic value in all these instances; to the historian they are all valid clues to the past, though not to the same historical experiences. If style gives information

not about the stylist but about his culture, the historian has no reason to be disappointed. When it comes to subject matter and to evidence, the historian is — or should be — a democrat.

Buffon, of course, was not a democrat, in his view of style or of anything else. He was speaking of the literary style of the accomplished writer. And what he meant to say about the writer, I think, was this: the cultivated manner of the writer instructively expresses his personal past as well as the culture's way of thinking, feeling, believing and working. The symptomatic value of style is therefore far greater than that of providing insights into literary habits.³ Style is the pattern in the carpet — the unambiguous indication, to the informed collector, of place and time of origin. It is also the marking on the wings of the butterfly — the unmistakable signature, to the alert lepidopterist of its species. And it is the involuntary gesture of the witness in the dock — the infallible sign, to the observant lawyer, of concealed evidence. To unriddle the style, therefore, is to unriddle the man.

This exegesis makes a beginning, but it remains too elliptical to be conclusive. Both halves of Buffon's epigram, both *style* and *man*, require further explication. The most prominent and, for these essays, most productive kind of style is style in its narrow sense, literary style: the management of sentences, the use of rhetorical devices, the rhythm of narration. Gibbon's way of pairing phrases, Ranke's resort to dramatic techniques, Macaulay's reiteration of antitheses, Burckhardt's informal diction, taken by themselves, as single instances, mean what they say on the page. They describe a battle, analyze a political artifice, chronicle a painter's career. But once characteristic and habitual — that is, recognizable elements in the historian's mode of expression, of his style — they become signposts to larger, deeper matters. Partly idiosyncratic and partly conventional, partly selected and partly imposed by unconscious, professional, or political pressures, the devices of literary style are equally instructive, not always for the conclusive answers they supply but for the fertile questions they raise about the historian's central intentions and overriding interpretations, the state of his art, the essential beliefs of his culture — and perhaps, about his insights into his subject.

While I have taken style in its strict sense as my principal witness, my materials have compelled me to reach out to other related forms of expression, to styles in looser senses of the word. Among the most revealing of these is what I want to call the historian's emotional style, his tone of voice as it emerges in the tension or repose of his phrases, his favorite adjectives, his selection of illustrative anecdotes, his emphases and epigrams. In a tightly regulated stylistic system like neo-classicism, in which expressive means are severely circumscribed, emotional style has potent diagnostic possibilities, for while accepted canons of rhetoric, say, proscribe "low" epithets for highly placed personages, the range of permissible expressions remains large enough to give room for instructive choices. Gibbon characterizing the Emperor Augustus as "artful" only tells us that Augustus was — or rather, that Gibbon thought him — artful. But scattered liberally across the pages of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the word *artful* begins to trail clouds of meaning behind it and becomes an emblem for Gibbon's cynical appraisal of the Empire, a clue not merely to what he saw but what he, as an individual historian, was best equipped to see. In the freer, more loose-jointed writing of the nineteenth century, emotional style retains its capacity to yield dividends to the interpreter: Burckhardt's chilling stories about Renaissance despots point to perceptions more general than

those the stories are designed to illuminate. They help to outline the contours of Burckhardt's historical vision. In our examination of a historian's emotional style, we come very close to the man indeed.

Instructive as the historian's selection of expressive techniques and unconscious coloring of narrative may be, his habit of doing research and offering proof — his *professional* style — provides additional and significant clues. It invites inferences subtler and more far-reaching than judgements of his competence or his diligence. Ranke assiduously visited all accessible archives; Macaulay preferred to spend his time poring over broadsides and printed collections of popular verses; Gibbon mastered the history of ancient Rome from modern compilations; Burckhardt studied the Renaissance from contemporary accounts. To know this is to know something about the sheer validity of each historian's conclusions, but it also delineates his attitude toward his material. Ranke's obsessive, almost religious conscientiousness, which left its distinctive signature on all his work, reflects his sense of the historian as a man of God in the world. Gibbon's occasional credulousness, which contrasts so sharply with his pronounced, often malicious skepticism, suggests, not professional laxity, but a will to believe — especially in the wickedness of priests and the lasciviousness of emperors. Like the other styles I have mentioned, professional style, too, points beyond itself.

The reality all these styles point to, the fish that the analyst hopes to catch, is, as I have suggested, nothing less than the historian's total perception of the past, the constraints within which he works and the truths he is uniquely capable of grasping. Yet this exalted region — the ultimate destination of stylistics — where matter seems to hold a complete monopoly, is invaded by manner also. I am speaking of the historian's style of thinking, a convenient and telling phrase that relates style to content in more than a mere metaphorical sense. For a historian's most fundamental and therefore least examined assumptions about the nature of the world, its ontological makeup, also have their expressive aspect which may leave its traces in his literary, emotional, or professional style. Yet styles of thought may also find other, more subterranean, channels of communication: a historian need not write, or feel, or work like another, and yet think like him and learn from him. Gibbon was deeply indebted to Tacitus' disenchantment, but Gibbon structured his sentences, chose his adjectives, and pursued his research in ways markedly different from the ways of Tacitus. Burckhardt had a pronounced affinity for Hegel's vision of cultural wholes, but it is — unfortunately — impossible to mistake a passage, any passage, of the *Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* for a passage, any passage, of Hegel's lectures on history.

In general, though, intellectual affinities scatter more clues than they did in Gibbon and Burckhardt. The styles I have discussed do not normally lie side by side as strangers without touching. It is significant that many stylistic qualities are hard to place: does Gibbon's irony or Macaulay's rhetoric form part of their literary or their emotional style? Do Burckhardt's stories serve to disclose his view of the world, his private pessimism, his wish to keep his readers interested, or all three? These questions suggest their answer: styles are a network of clues to one another, and, together, to the man — to the historian at work.

This brings me to the second half of Buffon's epigram. Man lives in several worlds at once, most notably in his private sphere, in the comparatively intimate realm of his craft, and in the wide public domain of his culture.⁴ Like the various dimensions of style, these worlds intersect and continuously impinge upon one another: the private person internalizes the standards of craft and the commands of culture; craft by and large serves culture and obediently expresses its overriding ideals. A mature literary style is a synthesis of all these elements, variously combined; it is therefore, at once individual and social, private and public, a combination of inherited ways, borrowed elements, and unique qualities. That is why the student of style can treat this synthesis analytically and sort out the threads of which the stylistic tapestry is composed. If, as some Romantics were inclined to think, style were simply the outward garb of inner states, the spontaneous overflowing of the springs of creativity, it would yield information about a writer's psyche, nothing more. But these Romantics were wrong. To begin with, literary style — and this is the style on which I shall concentrate — can be learned. Writers are not born stylists; they fashion their style through an unceasing effort to overcome dependence and find their own voice.⁵ Normally, the apprentice writer — and here, as elsewhere, the historian acts like other writers — discovers the style appropriate to him by first following and the discarding admired models; imitation seems to be an essential phase in the process of self-discovery. Not even in the beginning, then, does writing come wholly from the heart; it comes, for the most part, straight out of other books. The higher naïveté comes later, the fruit of labor that conceals labor.

To say that style can be learned is therefore not precise enough. It is more accurate to say, rather, that style must be learned. It is only in part a gift of talent; beyond that it is an act of will and an exercise of intelligence. It is the tribute that expressiveness pays to discipline. Style is an instrument of the practical reason. Words, of course, do many things: they convey information, they disclose affection, they utter warnings; they are, often, the unedited transcription of emotions into verbal form. But style is the application of means to an end; though, as we well know, it too has its passionate side and its involuntary revelations.

That is why styles have histories, even in individual writers. Gibbon is perhaps an exception: while even he found it necessary to experiment, he cast all his writings, early and late, into the same unmistakable mold. But, then, Gibbon was never young.⁶ For nearly all other writers, style has been, in addition to being an endowment, a conquest; the study of style chronicles and analyzes that conquest. "Style", wrote Gibbon, "is the image of character".⁷ Here is the first indication of the uses that stylistics may have for the historian: it gives him access to a writer's private, psychological world.

This is not the only world that the study of style serves to discover. Writing is an activity pursued within the texture of a literary tradition. Apart from a handful of innovators, most writers, even the greatest, speak in a language that others have made familiar. Even those, like the Dadaist poets, who aim at incomprehensibility find their vocabulary within the context of a society, no matter how select; their incomprehensibility is their way of communicating — comprehensibly — with the others in their circle. A writer's attitude to his tradition may be compliant, ambivalent, or rebellious. He may write as he does because others have written his way before, or because others have *not* written his way before. Whatever his attitude, he cannot be indifferent to the atmosphere that his choice of

profession compels him to breathe.

Just as individual styles have a history, style itself has a history. In every epoch, writers have had specified expressive modes available to them. They have always been subject to rules laying down permissible language, to conventions channeling their private preferences, to hierarchies appropriate to any theme. Until modern times — which, in this context, means the 1890s — there have been some things historians must say and others that they would have found it unthinkable to say.

The boundaries within which historians have been compelled to maneuver are of peculiar importance for the history of history. That history is the history of the emancipation of a craft from powerful, normally overpowering, masters. Through long centuries, historians have lived in many houses, borrowing their speech and convictions from their hosts: the theatre in Greece, the law courts in Rome, the monastery in the Middle Ages, the salon in the Enlightenment. Ancient, medieval, and early modern historians proffered their works as pieces of rhetoric: they had to satisfy moral demands and employ accepted literary devices. The tradition of eloquence, reinforced and distorted in the early modern era by memories of antique oratory, pervaded historical writings down to the sixteenth and even the seventeenth century, when historians added to this antique rhetorical tradition the eloquence of the pulpit. The philosophe-historians' dependence on polite society in the eighteenth century was actually a giant step toward independence: history became a respectable literary genre among other respectable literary genres.

Then, in the nineteenth century, historians moved into their own house, the university — not, I might add, without some losses. But, whatever the losses, the modern autonomy of the historian has markedly increased the range of his stylistic options. As more aspects of the past have become accessible to inquiry, more ways of speaking about the past have become permissible. The relation of the historian to his work has changed; the craftsman has become a professional. Yet in principle, the debt that the individual historian owes to his craft — its dominant traditions, its current debates, its exploratory techniques — has neither increased nor diminished. The study of historians' style, therefore, whether of ancient, medieval, or modern practitioners, gives access to the world of their craft.

But it also gives access, finally, to culture itself, of which craftsmanship is only a specialized, and sometimes recalcitrant, representative. This is what Macaulay had in mind when he said of Herodotus that he "wrote as it is natural that he should write. He wrote for a nation susceptible, curious, lively, insatiably desirous of novelty and excitement".⁸ Reading Herodotus tells us much about the Greece of his day, just as reading Mommsen or Namier tells us much about the Germany or England of their day. Conversely, it also tells us much about their perception of their culture: we cannot read Mommsen's *Römische Geschichte*, with its stunning anachronisms, its Junkers in togas, without sensing within Mommsen, the objective scholar, another Mommsen, the passionate and frustrated political animal. We cannot read Namier's *Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, with its resolute anti-intellectualism, its affectionate portrayal of the political microcosm of mid-eighteenth-century England, without detecting in Namier, the minute researcher, a hidden Namier, the lover of English civility so infatuated that he must be a foreigner.

The social information that style provides is by no means infallible; if past words were addressed to the chosen few, and if we have lost the key that will unlock their message, the intentions of the writer, and with them the full bearing of his

utterance, will remain opaque. It has long been a commonplace that men often use words to conceal their meaning behind veils of indirection, difficulty, and ambiguity.⁹ In such circumstances, we must first solve the style before we can, with its aid, solve other puzzles: there are times when politics is as much a clue to style as style is a clue to politics. Fortunately this is not a logical but an existential circularity, a symptom of the mutual dependence of style and life and, hence, of the possibility that they may reciprocally illuminate each other.

While one school of intellectual historians, Leo Strauss and his disciples, has made a cottage industry of reading between the lines, reading the lines themselves remains, for the historian, a rewarding enterprise. Erich Auerbach, in his *Mimesis*, has shown the path that may take the historian from philology to sociology. It is easy to demonstrate, as he does, that the barbarous Latin of a Merovingian chronicle mirrors, with its impoverished vocabulary, the desperate decay of antique culture. But with this analysis of Tacitus' world view, Auerbach shows that stylistics may trap more elusive game: social perceptions. In describing a mutiny, he notes, Tacitus puts elevated words in the mouth of one of the mutineers, sprinkles his report with ethical adjectives, and employs the rhetorical devices current among cultivated orators in the Rome of his day.¹⁰ Auerbach deduces from such linguistic habits Tacitus' blindness to the social and economic pressures bubbling beneath the surface of events. He sees, this failure as more than the political bias of an aristocrat confronting the demands of famished soldiers; he sees it, rather, as characteristic for a Roman who does not, and cannot, see the lower social orders as full human beings. In sum, the study of style provides a diagnostic instrument as much for the historian's social and cultural as for his psychological and professional worlds, a decisive clue to their meanings, their limitations — and their insights.

I must add a final word. Style, I said earlier, is sometimes less than the man; often it is more than the man. In examining the styles of four great historians, I am in no way committing myself to the fashionable relativist implications that have usually been drawn from Buffon's epigram. Historians have long been engaged in a great, or at least persistent, debate over the essential nature of their craft, and Buffon has been taken as supporting the view that history cannot be a science, but must be an art — a subjective encounter between a literary man and the past, which he reshapes through his private vision and reports in that idiosyncratic manner we call his style. But a personal report may be an objective report. It is even possible that while style reflects the man, the man it reflects is a scientist. I do not want to decide this matter now and will return to it in the Conclusion. But on this much I want to insist here: there is no reason why style must be the undistorted reflection of the historian's private neurosis, social location, or historical epoch. If he has any professional conscience and competence at all, he is bound to say far more about the time of which he writes than the time in which he lives.¹¹ Individual stylists develop in rebellion against their past, their environment, even against themselves, and the results are not always predictable. While in all its aspects style is instructive, not all styles are instructive to the same degree: like other writers, a historian usually has two styles, formal and informal, and both are an intermixture of self-expression and self-control. There is no rule book, no prepared recipe, setting

down in advance just what the study of style may disclose. All I claim is that it discloses much, and that it will contribute some light to the heated debate over the nature of history.

II ON STYLE IN HISTORY

I said at the beginning that I intended these essays as a contribution to the persistent debate over the definition of history. One striking conclusion on which they converge is that the straightforward dichotomy between art and science is quite untenable. Gibbon, among the most self-aware men of letters that historical literature has known, firmly made his work part of the philosophes' program of turning history into a science. Ranke explicitly argued that there is a profound affinity and necessary alliance between *Dichtung* and *Wissenschaft*. Macaulay did not pronounce on the matter, but his writings stand in the tradition of Gibbon: he wanted to be read and to be believed; he admired, if I may put it this way, Bacon and Shakespeare in equal measure. And Burckhardt, as I have shown in some detail, thought a certain kind of poetry not merely the associate but the very foundation of prosaic history. From the perspective of these historians, and indeed from that of the modern historical profession in general, art and science are not neatly segregated from each other; they share a long, meandering frontier which scholarly and literary traffic crosses with little impediment and few formalities. Nor do the two between them engross the terrain of possibilities. A craft may bear the characteristic markings both of art and of science; to include it under one rubric may not exhaust its definition. Or it may be neither, except in the loosest application of the terms; to expel it from one in no way guarantees it a haven in the other.

It will therefore become necessary to trace the boundaries and specify the character of science and of art. But this much, I think, I can conclude with confidence now: history is an art much of the time, and it is an art by virtue of being a branch of literature. I say "much of the time", for the widespread complaints against inartistic historical writing are perfectly justified. Clio, G.M. Trevelyan found it necessary to remind the public at the beginning of this century, is also a muse; history, H.R. Trevor-Roper found it necessary to insist more recently, no longer speaks to the general public because it has lost its grip on literature.¹ Some of the laments we hear are the helpless response of the philistine confronted with the daunting apparatus of scholarship, but it remains true that much historical work is innocent of even a nodding acquaintance with the writer's art. We have all encountered those dreary, dutiful chronicles piling up mounds of facts that everyone knows or nobody wants to know; those narrow, earnest monographs choking in their garlands of ibids and parched in their deserts of charts. We have wondered at those mountainous and learned French theses that do strive for distinction but founder in literary incoherence, with their style borrowed at once from the frenzy of Michelet and the ungainly informativeness of the railway timetable.² Whatever else it may be, history is not an art all of the time.

I have no wish to sentimentalize the past, least of all the past of historical

writing. Trevelyan's much-quoted polemic against historians who forget their obligations to literature in whoring after the false god of science has an impressive pedigree. Literary historians in ancient Greece and Rome conducted a running battle with pedantic annalists; in the end, the historians won, subjected history to the stringent discipline of rhetoric, and pronounced the anathema against scholars who breached the rules of style appropriate to the dignity of history. Again, in the Renaissance, humanist historians denounced the "barbarity" of their Scholastic forebears and applied this derisive epithet to a failure of taste rather than a failure of decency; they never doubted that medieval historians had been unable to write proper history because their culture had prevented them from imitating such classic literary models as Livy.³ And in the Age of Enlightenment, the philosophe-historians mocked the erudite scholars of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries not just for the mortal sin of being Christians but also for being pedants, a sin which, though only venal, was in their eyes discreditable enough. Tacitus, Guicciardini, and Voltaire all wanted to be accurate historians, but they also wanted to be interesting; they recognized that the road to interest traversed the land of art, and that some of their most learned contemporaries failed to take it. Thus the unliterary presentation of historical material has a long and respectable tradition behind it, almost as long — and almost as respectable — as the tradition that began with Herodotus and Thucydides. We can read the history of history in several ways, but one profitable way is as an inconclusive debate between the proponents of beauty with truth and the proponents of truth without beauty. The contest is intermittently confused by bouts of politeness: each protagonist ceremoniously suggests to the other that dispute is really redundant, since science need not be dull and art need not be inaccurate. But contentious or courteous, the debate, it seems, goes on.

One political reality that has made the debate particularly confusing is the curious alliance between scientists and skeptics. In the last two centuries, as the claims of historical scientists have grown more emphatic, the very different claim that objective knowledge is impossible has become louder as well, and it has often been made by the same historians. The irenic posture of most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historians has not survived into our time; what we have today is a spectrum of views ranging from the certainty that history is a strict science to the incompatible certainty that it is wholly literature, to the more widely held conviction that it is neither of these. A forceful expression of one modern attitude is V.H. Galbraith's declaration that "there is no essential connexion" between history and literature, "however much and long they have been associated. By all means," he adds, "write like Macaulay and Gibbon — if you can — but however one writes and whatever one writes about, the basic aim should be to arrive at the bare truth. Truth and rhetoric are bad fellows."⁴ In its righteous insistence on the historian's duty to truth, and to that alone, Galbraith's dictum is a bracing declaration of faith. But to treat style as decoration is to give advice that is at once bad and dated. It is bad because to write like somebody else cannot be good style: Gibbon and Macaulay, after all, much as they modeled themselves after admired ancestors, wrote like themselves. And it is dated, because it reverts to the classical and neo-classical conception of style as the application of rhetoric to subject matter. If we have learned anything since the Romantics — or, for that matter, since Buffon — it is that style is not the dress of thought but part of its essence.⁵ It is, after all, significant that while in the course of centuries

history has shed many of its partners and defied most of its masters, it has never surrendered its profitable affection for literature. It seems a little late in the day to disrupt a liaison that has persisted for such a long time and has been so agreeable to both partners.

The study of style, then, suggests that the historian has not finished his work once he has understood the causes and the course of events. Historical narration without analysis is trivial, historical analysis without narration is incomplete. Monographs need not be artistic, though in skillful hands they can have their own aesthetic quality. But the house of history, to which monographs are so indispensable, must be not only secure, but handsome as well. Otherwise, though it may stand, neither casual tourist nor cultivated connoisseur will take the trouble to visit it.

But if history is often an art, what kind of art is it? Here the trail, easy to follow so far, becomes less legible. The assertion that the historian's principal loyalty is to the truth — an assertion that no one has ever disputed — does not instantly differentiate it from other literature. The stylistic techniques that historians employ to state their truths resemble strikingly the techniques that novelists and poets employ to present their fictions. And conversely: it is one of the proudest boasts of imaginative authors — of all but fabulists and sometimes even of fabulists — that they are conveying truth through their work. Aristotle's much-quoted observation that poetry is truer than history has found many echoes; Burckhardt was only the most famous of historians to give it his humble assent.

But we do well, I think, to hesitate before we equate the truth of poetry with the truth of history. We are here in the hands of analogy, and analogy is a seductive, which is to say, dangerous, guide. Sigmund Freud used to say that he envied novelists and poets — *Dichter* — for their rapid, almost instinctive grasp of hidden psychological processes, but he never confused his science of psychology with the art of poetry; intuitive divination might at times provide a breathtaking shortcut to the truth, but never a substitute for the patient pursuit of causal connections or the rigorous test of scientific demonstration. But because fiction and history have style in common, it becomes critical at this point to specify in what the truth of fiction consists. Fiction can certainly offer veracity of detail; novelists and poets are no strangers to research. Balzac tells his readers perhaps more than they care to know about the printing business in *Les illusions perdues*; Melville piles up exhaustive technical information about whales and whaling in *Moby-Dick*; Thomas Mann dwells with undisguised relish on the causes and treatment of tuberculosis in his *Zauberberg*. In themselves, these facts are reportage; detached from the fiction in which they perform their function, they would be pieces of journalism or scholarship or even history. But they exist to provide plausible settings for imagined characters, to ease the reader's entry into the fictive world the writer has constructed for him. Truth is an optional instrument of fiction, not its essential purpose.

Most makers of fiction, to be sure, are shackled by chains of probability and coherence. "Information is true if it is accurate", E.M. Forster once said. "A poem is true if it hangs together".⁶ The storyteller's initial choices constrict the choices he can make later. In *La nausée*, Jean-Paul Sartre follows the mental crisis of Roquentin, a twentieth-century Frenchman troubled by uncertain academic aspirations and immured in a provincial town for his research. What he eats, whom he meets, how he talks, even what nauseates him, must all be appropriate to his loca-

tion in time, place and station. The arm of coincidence must never be allowed to grow too long. Yet what is remarkable about fiction, as distinct from history, is not its limits but its license. It is true that what Dickens can permit David Copperfield and his friends to say, wear, believe, or experience is far from infinite. To establish a character is to sign a contract. But will David's mother marry Mr. Murdstone or not? Does Mr. Murdstone beat David? And does David bite Mr. Murdstone? On these and countless other matters Dickens' implicit contract with his readers is conveniently silent. A writer may stir a drop of fantasy into his realism; he may give Sherlock Holmes an invented address in a real street, or supply the Statue of Liberty with a sword in place of a torch. But the reader would find fault with Conan Doyle or Franz Kafka only if these novelists had been writing police reports — or histories.

There are times, of course, when fiction assumes some of the burdens of history. A novel about Henri IV or a play about Queen Victoria requires an intimate commerce with facts in which a novel about Tom Jones or a play about Barbara Undershaft need not engage. Yet even in these historical fictions, the obligations of literature differ from those of history. Shakespeare's historical plays stand as a reminder of how readily historical personages lend themselves to myth making, and the more remote the event from our passionate and partisan concerns, the more malleable the past in the poet's hands. Doubt arise, to be sure, if the myth is too tendentious or self-serving; when Rolf Hochhuth tells lies about Winston Churchill we are not inclined to palliate them on grounds of poetic license; when Shakespeare denigrates Richard III as an unrelieved villain we may enjoy his poetry without accepting his verdict; when Schiller has St. Joan dying on the battlefield our temptation to laugh becomes irresistible. Yet within generously drawn political or aesthetic boundaries, readers of fiction suspend their disbelief in behalf of the writer's invention, even when he is inventing reality. They do not insist on verifying his evidence as he moves beyond documents to imaginary conversations or unknowable thoughts. They allow Solzhenitzyn to invade Stalin's mind with a freedom that a historian can envy but not imitate.

The truth of such privileged portraits as Solzhenitzyn's exploration of Stalin's mind in *The First Circle* is a combination of the particular and the general. If Solzhenitzyn had portrayed Stalin as a lovable, much-maligned philanthropist, he would have failed to convince anyone: Stalin, his readers would say, was not like that. And if Solzhenitzyn had portrayed Stalin as a mechanical monster, with no regions of fear or madness, he might have secured emotional assent qualified by reservations: human beings, his readers would say, are not like that. The proofs for Solzhenitzyn's portrait lie outside his fiction, in his readers' knowledge of history and of human nature.

Imaginative writers normally claim that their fictions penetrate to truths of a high and general kind. The writer sees life with an embracing sympathy or a perceptive eye; he empathetically identifies himself with many conditions and comprehends the dilemma of life which it is the supreme task of melodrama to deny and escape.⁷ Novelists have said many penetrating things about social relations and private conflicts, about the travail of faith, the subtleties of rank, the power of money, the temptations of the flesh. Fielding offered as his bill of fare nothing less than human nature. But these free-floating truths emerge from a context of untruths. Indeed, to make a story too probable, to derive it too closely from newspaper accounts, as realists have been known to do, is to turn bad history into bad

fiction. In my judgement, the experiments of writers like Truman Capote and Norman Mailer with new genres — documents as novels and novels as documents — have only served to confound two distinct realms, to the benefit of neither. Oscar Wilde presciently condemned such innovations when he visualized the novelist working "at the Librairie Nationale, or at the British Museum, shamelessly reading up his subject", and falling "into careless habits of accuracy".⁸ However much we may love stories for the truths they reveal, we love them even more for the lies they tell. "A copy of the universe," Rebecca West has said, "is not what is required of art; one of the damn things is ample."⁹ Precisely. But what is not required of art is required of history: to discover, no matter how shocking the discovery, what the old universe was like rather than to invent a new one. The difference is nothing less than decisive.

NOTEN

I. Style — From Manner to Matter

1. A rare early supporter of this modern view was Robert Burton; see his comment "our style bewrays us", which is the epigraph of this book. The view I defend here was well put by Marcel Proust in an interview of 1913: "Style", Proust said, "is in no way a decoration as some people believe; it is not even a matter of technique; it is — as color is with painters — a quality of vision . . ." I should note that in what follows, *style* is applied to writers only; obviously, composers, painters, architects confront stylistic problems in precisely the same way. See below, p. 189
2. *The Problem of Style* (edn. 1960), p. 10
3. I should add that the four historians I have chosen do not in any way exhaust the possibilities of stylistic analysis; in principle, and in practice, the analysis of inferior historians should yield results that would be quite as interesting, if not quite so pleasing.
4. I intend to explore these worlds, and their meaning for the analysis of historical causation in a forthcoming book, *Three Variations on the Theme of Cause: Manet, Gropius, Mondrian*.
5. See Burckhardt's comment to his friend Friedrich von Tschudi: "My way is, through dependence to independence". See below, p. 161
6. "I am tempted to enter a protest against the trite and lavish praise of the happiness of our boyish years, which is echoed with so much affectation in the world. That happiness I have never known, that time I have never regretted." *The Autobiography of Edward Gibbon*, ed. Dero A. Saunders (1961), p. 68.
7. *Autobiography*, p. 27.
8. Thomas Babington Macaulay, "History", *The Works of Lord Macaulay*, 2nd edn., ed. Lady Trevelyan, 8 vols. (1871), 5: 124.
9. On words as concealment, see below, p. 26.
10. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, (1946; trans.

- Willard R. Trask, 1953), pp. 33 - 40. I shall return to this passage ; see below, pp. 30 - 31.
11. I shall examine this point at greater detail in the Conclusion; meanwhile, it should be obvious that I reject E. H. Carr's popular simplistic relativism : "When we take up a work of history, our first concern should be not with the facts which it contains but with the historian who wrote it ... Before you study the history, study the historian." *What is History ?*, (1962), pp. 24, 54. While elsewhere in his book, Carr retreats from this extreme position, it is these formulations that have gained wide currency and undeserved acceptance.

II. On Style in History

1. See G. M. Trevelyan, "Clio : A Muse" (1903), in *Clio : A Muse* (1913), and somewhat abridged in *The Varieties of History, From Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Fritz Stern (1956), pp. 227 - 245. H. R. Trevor - Roper, *History : Professional and Lay* (1957).
2. In justice I should note two splendid exceptions, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Les Paysans de Languedoc*, 2 vols. (1966) ; Pierre Goubert, *Beauvais et les Beauvaisis de 1600 à 1730* (1960)
3. See Stephen Usher, *The Historians of Greece and Rome* (1969); Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini : Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (1965) ; Donald R. Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship : Language, Law, and History in the French Renaissance* (1970) ; Hanna H. Gray, "Renaissance Humanism : The Pursuit of Eloquence", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 24, no.4 (October - December 1963), 497 - 514.
4. V. H. Galbraith, *An Introduction to the Study of History* (1964), p. 3.
5. Dryden wrote in the preface to his *Annus Mirabilis* : "... the first happiness of the poet's imagination is properly invention, or finding of the thought ; the second is fancy, or the variation, deriving or moulding of that thought ... the third is elocution, or the art of clothing or adorning that thought so found and varied in apt, significant and sounding words." Quoted in Graham Hough, *Style and Stylistics* (1969), p. 3. Some isolated instances apart (my epigraph from Burton records one such), this was the standard view ; it makes Buffon's famous remark all the more remarkable.
6. Quoted in George Watson, *The Study of Literature : A New Rationale of Literary History* (1969), p. 29.
7. To quote but one representative statement, from George Watson : "To have studied and understood *Othello* is to have absorbed information about the moral world ; and anyone who has observed with care the steps by which the heroes and heroines of Henry James's novels take or fail to take their decisions could not avoid learning what few men could otherwise know about what a considered decision in all its stages is like." Watson, *The Study of Literature*, p. 46.
8. Oscar Wilde, *Intentions* (1891), in *The Artist as Critic : Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellman (1969), pp. 293-294.
9. Quoted by D. Terence Langendoen, "The Problem of Linguistic Theory in Relation to Language Behavior: A Tribute and Reply to Paul Goodman," *Language as a Human Problem, Daedalus* (Summer 1973), p. 198.

* noot van de redactie

Bovenstaand stuk is een tekstgedeelte uit *Style in History* (1974) door Peter Gay. Het betreft de 'Introduction' (p. 3-17) en een deel van de 'Conclusion' (p. 185-194). Het werd met toestemming van de Amerikaanse uitgever in TAAL EN GESCHIEDENIS opgenomen. Ter verduidelijking : het 'weggelaten' middengedeelte bevat vier afzonderlijke essays over stijlkenmerken in het werk van de historici Gibbon, Burckhardt, Ranke en Macaulay.