Mythopoesis

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Abstract

Defines style in writing as "the Author's singing voice" and discusses its importance.

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A Column by Sarah Beach

Style

"Style" is a slippery word when one comes to consider writing of any sort. Yet it seems to become a fighting word when one turns to fantasy. It is deeply felt by many writers and readers of fantasy that "Style" is very important. But what is it that is meant by the word "style"?

One definition we can pass over quickly is that which translates "style" as "the fashion of the moment." Although many writers fall into a rush to imitate a successful Sub-Creation, this is not the meaning which provokes heated argument. Nor is the definition "sort, kind, type" the provocateur, for this definition is similar to the first.

There are three crucial definitions of "style" which ought to be considered before looking at various arguments about style. The first defines it as "individuality expressed in one's actions and tastes." The second states: "a combination of distinct features of literary expression characterizing a particular person or school." The third covers a very broad territory: "the way something is said" (all definitions are from the American Heritage Dictionary). It is these three definitions which are important to sorting out arguments about style. It is a matter of understanding which definition is being applied. For when a writer starts thinking about the Style of his writing, he is coming close to an emotional matter.

Ursula K. LeGuin points out the personal nature of style in her essay "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie" (in *Fantasists on Fantasy*, Avon Books, 1984).

> Style isn't just how you use English when you write. It isn't a mannerism or an affectation (though it may be mannered or affected). It isn't something you can do without, though that is what people assume when they announce that they intend to write something "like it is." You can't do without it. There is no "is," without it. Style is how you as a writer see and speak. It is how you see: your vision, your understanding of the world, your voice. (FF, p.208)

This is a description of "individuality expressed." It is a reminder to the Author that he is creating from his own heart, and thus should listen to the songs lying there in that secret place. The beginning of Style is within the Author, in his loves, hates, and perceptions (even in his personal misperceptions). But one should always remember that "individuality expressed" is only the beginning, and must be tempered by the second and third crucial definitions of "style".

"A combination of distinct features of literary expression characterizing a particular person or school": this is perhaps the point where many think that style exists— thus far and no more. There is an underlying acceptance in both readers and writers that certain forms are proper to fantasy while others are

not. Fantasy written in modern slang may be enjoyed, but no one puts it on the same level as The Lord of the Rings or William Morris' novels.

The problem for the writer in dealing with this aspect of Style is that he must have an understanding of the "schools" or traditions affecting his material. C.S. Lewis pin-points the crucial element of stylistic choices. In "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said," he gives a description of the creative impulse:

> In the Author's mind there bubbles up every now and then the material for a story.... This ferment leads to nothing unless it is accompanied with the longing for a Form: verse or prose, short story, novel, play or what not. When these two things click you have the Author's impulse complete. It is now a thing inside him pawing to get out. (FF, p. 115-116)

By understanding this "longing for a Form," the writer can make surer stylistic choices. The proper form, when found, is most satisfying to the Sub-Creator. His material is no longer fighting and struggling with him, but rather flowing smoothly. However, the ability to recognize and master the forms ideas can take is the result of— quite basically— education. One cannot truly master what one does not understand from the ground up. This knowledge can be acquired many ways. But it is the Author's possession of the basics of Style— the grammar of the language, the traditions of the genre, the structures of storytelling— which will determine whether his personal style, his "individuality expressed" will satisfy readers.

For it is the final definition of "style" which in the end determines a writer's success or failure: "the way something is said." This covers everything from the correct usage of vocabulary to the atmosphere an Author has woven into his material. A word used incorrectly will jar. Even if it sounds exotic, and therefore "fantastic," if it is inaccurately used, it weakens the fabric of the Secondary Creation.

Style, then, is the Author's singing voice. It is the music which carries the words and it is the singer's delivery, his performance. The audience recognizes the song which is not sung from the heart or is sung incorrectly. Likewise, readers recognize flawed writing, whether it springs from a false voice or incorrect usage. When an Author listens to his own songs, understands them and gives them their proper forms, their proper Style, he does a wonderful thing: he sets other hearts singing.

The Bath Song