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Review of Butler's Out of Style

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Paul Butler. Out of Style: Reanimating Stylistic Studies in Composition and Rhetoric. Logan, UT: Utah State UP. 2008. x-xiii + 181 pages. \$24.95 paper.

Paul Butler's Out of Style: Reanimating Stylistic Studies in Composition and Rhetoric enters into several contentious conversations taking place in and around composition studies today. Ostensibly, Butler's primary goal is to recover the study and teaching of style from what he sees as an unnecessary and unfair relegation to the archaism of current-traditionalism. To do so, Butler historicizes the study of style throughout the history of Western thought, particularly in the New Rhetoric and linguistic movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Butler argues throughout Out of Style that over the past twenty years, since the end of what he calls the "Golden Age" of style study in the mid-80's, style has lost the rhetorical meaning with which it was once defined, leading to "today's nearly universal characterization of style as a 'remnant' of current-traditional rhetoric, as the rhetorical antithesis of invention" (7-8). Butler argues that this arhetorical view of style is both historically errant and detrimental to teachers and students of writing.

Butler notes that style, like invention, is rhetorical inasmuch as it can be used to "inform, persuade, and generate knowledge for different purposes, occasions, and audiences" (3). To that end, Butler's definition of style is "the deployment of rhetorical resources, in written discourse, to create and express meaning" (3). He goes on to synthesize and analyze a wide range of scholarship on such topics as invention, cohesion, generative rhetoric, transformational grammar, sentence combining, speech acts, classical rhetoric, discourse analysis, linguistics, text linguistics, composition theory, and process pedagogy to show the many ways that style informs and is informed by these topics. By synthesizing and analyzing this array of topics, he helps readers see possibilities for scholarly approaches to studying style and argues for reasons why they should choose to do so.

Chapter 2, “Historical Developments: Relevant Stylistic History and Theory,” is an especially important chapter for everyone—yes everyone—in composition studies to read. Many scholars who completed doctorates in the 1960s and 1970s have likely read much of the scholarship cited in Chapter 2, but it seems reasonable to guess that newer PhDs have not had the same experience. Still, even for people who have read the scholarship before, Butler’s focused analysis of the burgeoning attention to style throughout the process era does much to support his argument for the reanimation of stylistic study in composition and rhetoric and to counter the belief that style is a current-traditional mainstay. By locating valuable discussions of style in the works of such rhetorical luminaries as Edward P.J. Corbett and Ross Winterowd, among others, Butler convincingly shows that style was vital to process pedagogies, including sentence-level pedagogies such as generative linguistics, which, he argues, have also suffered unwarranted dismissal. Butler’s observation that style flourished in the process era (45-50) is interesting and useful for teachers and historians.

Butler’s categorical defense of style as invention in Chapter 3, “Out of Style: Reclaiming an ‘Inventional’ Style in Composition,” effectively lays out his purpose in this book. He writes:

[A] reanimation of style practices would have at least two purposes. First it would offer composition scholars, teachers, and students access to and facility with a rich array of language resources that would allow them to gain expressive ability, eloquence, clarity, precision, and other valued “writerly” qualities. Secondly, a recuperation and reconsideration of style studies could aid writers with invention of ideas. (65)

Butler is not shy about reminding readers that he is not interested in recovering style from obscurity merely because it has been subsumed by other concerns in the field. Rather, he sees the recovery effort as valuable for students, teachers, and writers who have much to gain from

better understanding how attention to the local concerns, the domain of stylistics, reverberates globally. In other words, for Butler, attention to style makes writers more effective overall.

Butler's counter-history of stylistics and his work to supplant a static view of style with a dynamic, rhetorical one are engaging in and of themselves. But his thesis in the early chapters of the book, that reanimating style is imperative for composition studies, anticipates what is probably his most compelling argument: composition studies remains a marginal field because of the field's marginalization of style. Here Butler recounts vividly some of the more polarizing public pronouncements by non-specialists about the degenerative state of literacy, composition, and rhetoric. Using Merrill Sheils's widely read and cited "Why Johnny Can't Write" (Newsweek, 8 Dec. 1975, 58-65) as a jumping off point and progressing through more recent instances of non-specialists such as Stanley Fish speaking for composition studies, Butler engages the argument that composition studies has a dearth of public intellectuals, which he defines, taking Fish's definition, as "someone who takes as his or her subject matters of public concern, and has the public's attention" (118 emphasis in original).

Butler argues that the public at large, including business and industry, has for decades made clear that they are interested in issues of style, usage, grammar, and spelling. However, according to Butler, compositionists and rhetoricians have greeted this public pronouncement by, in Janet Zepernick's words, "circling the wagons and writing diatribes against the grammar police" (126). He believes that the field of composition, by ignoring stylistic studies, has effectively ceded the right to talk about style in public for a public audience. In Butler's argument, the public unintentionally defers to "language experts" such as Fish, even though he is not a writing specialist, because Fish addresses issues that the public finds significant. Furthermore, Butler believes that as long as composition studies fails to "articulate a clear view

of the value of stylistic study in the field” (137-138), public intellectuals from outside the field will continue to fill the gap in stylistic study that might be filled by public intellectuals in the field if we could learn to address our audience more successfully. He writes:

“Illuminating...stylistic traditions for the public would give the field a claim to the very expertise held by composition scholars. It would establish the importance of composition studies by reclaiming language concerns that are important both inside and outside the field” (138). A rhetorical view of style would allow the field to talk about style rhetorically, which would, in turn, enhance the public valuing of compositionists and their expertise.

Butler’s book covers much historical ground, and as he notes in the first chapter, “Introduction: Reanimating Style in Composition and Rhetoric,” he cannot possibly cover in depth all of the important scholarship relating to style over the course of the past 2000 years. However, Out of Style surveys enough of style’s history to support the undeniable assertion that it has not received much interest in the curriculum or in scholarly writing in recent years. Butler makes a compelling case for redirecting some of our attention to style. As a field, we have grappled with issues of grammar and usage, but we have not devoted much attention to style, and if we were to focus more on style, we might change the public discussions about language use. Instead of dealing with a concerned, sometimes angry public that demands more attention to grammar and usage, we could foster more productive conversations about style even as we stimulate students’ development as writers by helping them to build useful stores of stylistic knowledge. As a whole, the book has the potential to spur interest in style—as a subject for scholarly inquiry and for curricular innovation.

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