

# Equal, That Is, to the Field Itself: Stylistic Mimesis in Critical Writing

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**T**HE PHRASING IN THE SINGULAR of this forum's key query—Why do *I* have to write like that?—allows it to be read either as a rhetorical or non-rhetorical question. As a rhetorical question, it might be rephrased resistantly, in teenager-speak, as “And I have to do this *why*?” Non-rhetorically, it asks “*Why* do I have to do this?” and raises the issue of disciplinary compunctions. Of course, the two meanings are not entirely separable. But this brief reflection will pursue the second route.

Criticisms of the “baleful” language of theoretical inquiry are not new, so it is worth recalling at the outset that we were once exhorted, both directly and by example, to cultivate this “theoretical style.” Those who attended ACCUTE in the 1980s, and meetings of its lively Theory Group in particular, will recall the chain of reasoning: “natural” or “commonsensical” language use (whether in critical writing or, for example, the Victorian realist novel) laid claims to linguistic transparency and thus occluded the traces of its own (power/knowledge) operations. I particularly recall a memorable phrase in circulation at the time and even today: “the tyranny of lucidity.” Even without explicit encouragement in this direction, aspiring critics were offered ample precedent in the writings of some key European theorists (who were sometimes the victims of clunky and

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not always idiomatic translation, a factor not entirely incidental to this tale). The bold generic blendings, syntactic experimentations, neologisms, and elliptical formulations of Barthes, Derrida, Irigaray, and Lacan, for example, were read as signaling a new theoretical style, one true to the gaps, erasures, deferrals, rhythms, connections, and complexities of the signifying systems these authors sought to understand. As a result, we remain expectant of, if perhaps now less tolerant of, stylistic density and complexity in theoretical writing.

But is also important to remember that complaints about (what we might call) theoretical overwriting predate the advent of “theory” to the North American academy by some fifty to seventy years. Janice Radway notes that by the 1920s and 1930s, a set of highly specialized academic discourses and practices had arisen to challenge the older generalist or “liberal arts” educational model.<sup>1</sup> This was the result of three factors, all occurring more or less simultaneously from the period 1870 to 1915: in the United States, the rapid growth of dedicated research universities developed on the German model; the more general “professionalization” of academia leading to “guild” and bureaucratic discourses; and—this is Radway’s primary interest—the rapid proliferation and thus stratification of print, particularly periodical production, which permitted the rise of specialized academic publications but also allowed a broader range of cultural commentators (the dreaded “middlebrow”) to position themselves publicly and horn in on the academic’s traditional turf. Thus the new specialist style was designed not only to meet new knowledge demands but to strengthen demarcations of expertise. I would wish to add a further element, however, which is evidenced by the fact that the new “specialist style” involved more than the deployment of technical terms or “jargon.” In addition, it was marked—as its detractors never ceased to complain—by a discursive densification perceived as obscurantist or hermetic. At work is a sort of seepage: new paradigms, and new demands for analytical complexity, create a greater sense of phenomenological complexity (note the tail wagging the dog), whose description demands a style more complex in its turn.

Of course, critics always have matched the medium to the message: consider Matthew Arnold’s “Attic” style, or, even earlier, Pope’s “Essay on Criticism” in which the well-known lines of “representative verse” function

1 Janice Radway, “Research Universities, Periodical Publication, and the Circulation of Professional Expertise: On the Circulation of Middlebrow Authority,” *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 2004), 203–28.

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as a synecdoche for the larger project. We could follow this escalator back to classical times, with critics modelling the ways they think writing ought to be: weighty, or witty, or decorous. The idea that style should reflect, or be appropriate to, both subject matter and occasion is a cornerstone rhetorical precept. Arguably, however, something different is happening in the period Radway describes, which may best be illustrated, in the literary realm, by I. A. Richards and his famous treatise *Practical Criticism*, of 1929.<sup>2</sup> Richards's own goals locate this work within the new research paradigm Radway describes: his trifold aims were to introduce a "new kind of documentation" of the state of contemporary culture; to provide a "new technique" for approaching poetry; and to prepare the way for new educational methods.<sup>3</sup> (The significant words here are documentation, technique, and method.) Specifically, Richards (who was not a professor of English but of mental and moral science) wished to import to the humanities the rigour of the sciences and the emergent social sciences by initiating a "systematic discussion of the forms of meaning and the psychology of understanding" (334). For Richards, at the end of the day, these would be one and the same. To read through the concluding chapters of *Practical Criticism* is to follow an extraordinary mimetic chain. The well-wrought poem is a finely balanced play of tensions and ambiguities: it is ordered and synthetic. Continual exposure to such poetry allows for constant mental recalibration: Richards uses the analogy of a mantra passing through the mind, and I have suggested elsewhere, only half-jokingly, that we might update this with the simile of the virus check. The eventual goal is "self-completion": "The completed mind would be that perfect mind ... in which no disorder, no mutual frustration of impulses, remained" (285). The completed mind thus is structured like the poem as valued on New Critical principles—complex, yet integrated—and is achieved by exposure to it. By extension, then, the discourse of the accomplished reader (the teacher or, it is to be hoped, eventually, the student) reproduces the adjudicating and synthesizing capabilities of the poetry itself.

Using Richards as an example of the new "professionalized" discourses requires one important caveat: Richards was not a technocrat nor an obscurantist, and the goal of works such as *Practical Criticism* and (with C. K. Ogden) *The Meaning of Meaning* was to put paid to linguistic

2 I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1929).

3 Charles Olson, "Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself," *Collected Prose*, eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 120–25.

mystification. If he erred it was in the other direction, as with the system of Basic English, which assumes that language can be reduced to basic communicative integers. Rather, Richards is being offered here in support of the claim that the stylistic mimesis we often associate with theoretical writing is found, at least in principle, much earlier than the advent of the “theoretical style,” indeed sufficiently early to have become entwined with the growth of the discipline of English. Similarly, as has already been suggested, the “specialist” style, and complaints about it, were already well ensconced before theory came along. In both cases, the assumption (whether explicit or implicit) is that academic or analytic discourse mirrors, or should mirror, the perceived properties of its object of inquiry. Is there an alternative to this reflective model?

Musing on the problem, why do we think that there should be some sort of reflection or equation between a discourse and its field, led by a loose associative chain to poet Charles Olson’s innovative review essay of 1958, “Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself.” In search of a second coconut to bang against this hard disciplinary nut, a practice advocated by Freud, I picked up Olson’s essay. Fortuitously, Olson provides not only an insightful appreciation of the writing of Herman Melville (yet to achieve his current canonical state) but a ground-breaking attack on theories of literary mimeticism, as the poet debunks a recent critical work classifying Melville as a literary naturalist. As Olson will go on to assert, the poet in the face of the new—by which he means a new understanding of the composition of the universe, the spatio-temporal order—must break free of schools and models and develop a non-mimetic writing which is instead equal to the “real itself.” Such did Meville, in the face of the no-less-radical epistemic shifts of his day. What is advocated, in “Equal, That Is, to the Real Itself” and in Olson’s other poetic manifestoes, is an “open” writing, deeply processual in nature, which rejects inherited poetic forms and takes as its starting place the “real” and the poet’s entanglement with it. It is a mis-statement to say, as some sources do, that Olson advocated the development of “new forms” to match “new contents.” (He echoes Robert Creeley’s precept that “form is never more than an extension of content” [cited “Projective” 240]).<sup>4</sup> Rather, his thinking is radically anti-mimetic, despite the “equation” in the essay’s title. Nor does Olson’s faith in the human breath as the carrier of poetic energy mean that the poetry itself is simply personal or lyrical, a question of how *I* should write. “The projective act,” writes Olson, “is the artist’s act in the larger field of objects,” and,

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4 Olson, “Projective Verse,” *ibid.*, 239–49.

he predicts, “if projective verse is practiced long enough, is driven ahead hard enough ... verse again can carry much larger material” than it has been able for centuries to sustain (“Projective” 248).

“Equal” in this instance is not “equal” in the sense of similitude but in the sense of being equal to the task of writing in the current moment. To conclude, I would like to appropriate for a moment the term most closely associated with Olson and his poetics to ask: What would theory look like if were written, not reflectively, not in a mimesis of its linguistic object, but projectively, working from the “real” of our own day?