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The ‘Alibi’ of Style: Modernist Manifestos

After charting in the previous chapters conceptions of style in modernist prose and poetry, this final chapter proposes to consider style in relation to a characteristically modernist ‘genre’, namely the manifesto. One could argue that the two terms ‘style’ and ‘manifesto’ are related etymologically: where the former refers implicitly to instruments wielded by the hand (a ‘writing-implement’, but also ‘a weapon of offence’),\(^1\) the latter refers explicitly to the hand (‘manus’) and to offence (‘fendere’).\(^2\) Moreover, if manifestos are defined not just by what they advocate, but also by what they oppose (a quality Mary Ann Caws terms their ‘againstness’),\(^3\) then equally ‘most of the famous statements on style [...] are protests’, as John Middleton Murry claimed in 1922.\(^4\) As well as tracing conceptions of style through a representative range of modernist manifestos, a particular emphasis will thus be placed in this chapter on the relationship between the manifesto and style, on what one could call the performative aspect of the manifesto:
what is the relationship between the ideas propounded and the way in which they are propounded? How does this correspondence between substance and style feed back into the concept of style put forward by the manifesto? ‘At its peak of performance,’ writes Caws, ‘its form creates its meaning,’ and this is what suggests its particularly modernist inflection: ‘high on its own presence, the manifesto is Modernist rather than ironically Postmodernist’. If modernism is the great period of ‘-isms’ (Henri Meschonnic counts 51 between 1886 and 1924), then the manifesto is its defining genre. In texts that are by definition ‘programmatic’, the heightened relationship between the thematic and the stylistic that is characteristic of modernism assumes a particular importance: style is made manifest as stylization.

‘Style without rhetoric’? From Le Problème du style to The Flowers of Tarbes

Published 20 years earlier than John Middleton Murry’s The Problem of Style, Rémy de Gourmont’s book of the same name is a clear illustration of the thesis that statements on style tend to be protests. ‘This new collection of essays belongs to a completely obsolete literary genre, the Refutation,’ begins Gourmont. Yet he does not seek to ‘defend’ the status quo in the manner of a défense; rather, Gourmont goes on the attack, targeting Antoine Albalat’s De la formation du style par l’assimilation des auteurs (1901), which he sees as falsely attempting to impose a normative sense of ‘good’ style through specious imitation of the classics. Gourmont rails against Albalat’s efforts to outline ‘assimilable