1 Introduction

The theory of assemblages ought, at first sight, to be the climax and the end of Deleuze's philosophy of language: it is the most original of his various views on the workings of language, the one that makes the most decisive break with mainstream linguistics. But 'assemblage' is not the last word in Deleuze's philosophy of language – the last word, which is also the first, is style. And we reach not so much the acme of his thought about language as its point of highest tension, something, to use a term Deleuze never uses himself, of a contradiction.

The contradiction can be summed up thus. On the one hand, we have a quasi-Marxist concept of language, in terms of *rapports de forces* and collective assemblages, characterised by their dubious ontological mixture – a materialist but also a libidinal concept of language, which owes a lot to Guattari's contribution. Assemblages, as sites where forces compete and coalesce, tend to increase and multiply, without privileging one genre or language-game over another. Such a theory is extremely powerful, not only in that it definitively breaks with the logic of representation and the dogmatic image of thought, but in that it finally eschews the centrality of the subject and firmly places the 'depths' of the human psyche outside, in language, in its assemblages.

But, on the other hand, we also have an elitist view of literature, conceived as the acme of linguistic practice, together with a high-modernist, or avant-garde, position on literature as not merely a form of language, but as being mainly reflexively concerned with language.

The concept of style in Deleuze names this tension and aims to resolve it. It is doubtful whether it does resolve the tension (and we know
enough about Deleuze to be aware that problems resist their solutions), but the attempt produces interesting results.

I shall concentrate on the concept of style in Deleuze's late work – there is a chronological as well as a logical order in my three chapters on the new pragmatics – but the concept has been with him throughout his philosophical life, with a first appearance in *Proust et les signes.* The core of the concept of style to be found in that book can be expressed in a formula of Deleuze's, offered in obvious contrast to Buffon's 'le style, c'est l'homme': 'le style, c'est l'essence'. Since the formula is rather cryptic, the chain of argument which it sums up must be briefly rehearsed.

Deleuze’s reading of Proust (a strong reading if there is one) defines the ‘problem’ of the Proustian *oeuvre* as the problem of signs (signs, as we saw in Chapter 2, appear in several types of world: the madeleine, or la petite phrase de Vinteuil are canonical signs). The signs that primarily interest Proust, and Deleuze reading him, are of course the signs of art. Like all signs, they initiate a process of learning, in that they need interpretation, but what they reveal is not merely objects (the referents of the signs) but essences. Essences are what art enables us to reach, or rather, the privilege and aim of art is to enable us to reach them. Essences are variously defined by Deleuze as absolute and ultimate differences, and as monads. An essence is a point of view on the world, each one expressing the world in an entirely different way, and creating subjects in the process. From that it appears that such essences must not be taken in their transcendent, Platonist form, but must be read as immanent (or the essence as the ‘essential oil’ that gives the perfume its fragrance).

The question is, of course: in what form are essences embodied or revealed in the work of art? And the answer is, in the materials (matières) the work of art is made of – certain colours, or sounds, or words. We see what I have called Deleuze's 'high modernism' creeping in: a work of art is not characterised by its contents or theme, but by the materials it is materially made of. And this is where the concept of style appears: style is the treatment of the materials that turns the work into a work of art; it is the establishment of unknown or unexpected relations between objects, through the organisation of materials. And it is defined in two moments: it works through metaphor (in so far as it establishes unknown relations), but those metaphors are ‘essentially’ metamorphoses, when the objects related in style exchange their determinations and their names. Thus are a new world, a new point of view on the world, an essence reached. So the style is not the man, but the essence, and the chain of argument goes like this: