LANGUAGE, HISTORY, STYLE

Leo Spitzer and the Critical Tradition

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For Beth and Michelle
Thanks for all your help

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Contents

Introduction

Leo Spitzer's work in literary stylistics covers the period from 1910 to 1960, fertile and formative years for both stylistics and contemporary literary theory. Stylistics, as Spitzer boldly conceived it, was to "bridge the gap between linguistics and literary history. . . . The individual stylistic deviation from the norm must represent an historical step taken by the writer. . . : it must reveal a shift of the soul of the epoch. . . ."[1] Spitzer's use of linguistic methodology has since become a commonplace of literary stylistics, just as the late nineteenth century's commitment to a scientific linguistics has been refined and furthered during the twentieth. But his related concern with "literary history" (in which a style directly reveals the intellectual context of the age) has survived in less recognizable form, often appearing simply as a canonical assumption of a text's artistic worth. It is a dangerous assumption, however, since it ignores the need to produce arguments for the critical relevance of stylistics as a discipline. These two concerns, then—scientific description and epistemological value, linguistic methodology and literary significance—continue to underlie contemporary arguments about the true nature and value of stylistic study.

It is easy to uncover that first concern within Spitzer's studies. "I had in mind," he noted often, "the more rigorously scientific definition of an individual style, the definition of a linguist which would replace the casual, impressionistic remarks of literary critics" (*Linguistics and Literary History*, 11). And in numerous essays—ranging from "Wortkunst und Sprachwissenschaft" (1925) to "Linguistics and Literary History" (1948) to the

posthumous "Les Études de style et les différents pays" (1961),[2]—Spitzer sought to outline such a method. While shifts in linguistic method have produced numerous variants of his particular formula, Spitzer's procedures have continued to serve as both a foundation and a point of contention for critics of literary style. For example, in 1957 Michael Riffaterre described his newly proposed stylistic method as an objective extension of Spitzer's work.[3] The objective quality Spitzer sought would be obtained, Riffaterre declared, by supplementing Spitzer's highly educated critical readings with the formal analytical procedures of a newer linguistic science. Riffaterre's stated intentions echoed Spitzer's call for a scientific, linguistically oriented stylistics. Yet Spitzer would have none of Riffaterre's revision, and he fired off a blistering review of Riffaterre's book.[4] Clearly, the literary and linguistic environment had changed in the years from 1910 to 1958, and at the heart of that change lies the second key concern of Spitzer's stylistics: the relationship of style to its context.

To Spitzer, Riffaterre's proposed approach was a mid-century sacrifice of the human dimensions of language and literature to the goals of scientific method. To Riffaterre, Spitzer's denunciation was a refusal to recognize the methodological strengths of linguistic formalism. But seen in terms of the larger history of style and its study, the exchange simply encapsulates the theoretical struggles of the first half century of modern stylistics. Stylistics, caught between the interpretive goals of literary criticism and the descriptive power of linguistic methodology, has needed to redefine itself continually in relation to both. Continental stylistics, following the tradition mapped out by philology, has attempted throughout this century to produce schools of thought that pursue historical and comparative studies of style. Yet these schools have been forced to battle constantly against the shift toward general linguistics. That shift, while often less than satisfying for literary analyis, has proved to be the path most often followed both by European and Anglo-American stylistics. In order to maintain its status as a critical discipline, a good portion of modern stylistics has adapted itself to the rising interest in systematic analyses of language, temporarily turning away from a socially or contextually defined stylistics. Eager for objective methods of analysis, literary stylisticians have readily appropriated the linguistic studies of Saussure, Bloomfield, Chomsky, and others, as they searched for a more efficient description of the linguistic features of the text.

By 1970, however, the increasing variety of linguistic theories fragmented the theoretical base of this stylistic hegemony, and studies of

style became ready targets in such works as Barbara H. Smith's *On the Margins of Discourse* (1978), Stanley Fish's "What Is Stylistics?" (Parts 1 and 2, 1973 and 1980), and E. D. Hirsch's *The Aims of Interpretation* (1976).[5] The central argument undertaken by these essays repeats the core tension felt in Spitzer's opening comment: while today's more objective studies efficiently produce large amounts of stylistic data, they also must struggle to relate that data to a larger literary and interpretive context. The result of such questioning has been the reawakening of stylistics to a history it has too easily forgotten and the strengthening of its desire to reevaluate its critical goals. In short, literary stylistics once again faces the task of relating its beliefs about style (as a form of historical and cultural knowledge) to the power of linguistic science (as a culturally validated descriptive method).

The importance of Spitzer to this reformation extends far beyond his early founder's role. Spitzer's ongoing struggle to match an acceptable descriptive methodology with a post-Romantic epistemology of style remains the central problem to be solved by modern stylistics. The key to resolving that struggle lies in recognizing the organicist presence that still lingers in stylistic theorizing, and replacing it with a new definition of the relationship between style, language, and knowledge. This book's major argument is that Spitzer's thinking provides primary examples of the way in which that new definition should be constructed. Spitzer's attempts to supplement empirical description with a fuller critical interpretation provides the preliminary arguments for today's attempts to adopt other descriptive models—psychoanalytic, aesthetic, historical, and rhetorical—to stylistic analysis (and to the description of linguistic and stylistic context, whether of production or interpretation). Yet because of Spitzer's own critical milieu, he was led, time and time again, to assume that many of these models lowered style's general aesthetic value, shifting the text too fully into a specific historical situation. For Spitzer, the realm of social history appeared inadequate to support the declared aesthetic value of literary style, and his uniting of historical and literary interpretation remained tenuous.

Spitzer's dilemma has resurfaced in today's debates with a new urgency. The dissatisfaction surrounding much of today's stylistic work has led us to recognize, once again, that literary style exists neither as a contextually independent aesthetic value nor as a function of particular linguistic features, but as a form of cultural activity. Simply put, the production of literary style is a part of socially expressive and constitutive behavior, and

stylistics helps to reveal the linguistic and cultural frameworks that are a part of that production. As Mary Pratt and Mary Poovey tell us, style has ideological roots worth exploring.[6] This return to social and historical issues in the study of style reintroduces descriptive frameworks that Spitzer often explored, and in following his career we are led back to the basic question of stylistic analysis: How can stylistics produce a descriptive framework that remains committed to the move by Romantic and post-Romantic criticism into the heady realms of knowledge?

But if Spitzer's career offers so much to literary stylistics, why has he been overlooked of late? A simple answer lies in the nature of academic disciplines. Because the relevance of literary criticism supposedly rests in the knowledge it produces, we often think that the question we ask of our disciplines is essentially context-free: What do we know, thanks to this approach, or method, or discipline? In reality, of course, the question is really one of What do we *want* to know?, and that desire is never innocent. In the early half of this century, the answers to these questions were usually framed in terms of empirical knowledge or ahistorical interpretation. For nearly fifty years Richardsian and New Critical aesthetics provided stylistics with that second approach, but it was the growing power of linguistics as an academic discipline that really provided the underpinning for the study of style. Linguistic efficiency, presented as a way of attaining scientific knowledge, seemed to engage a primary descriptive procedure upon which all other aspects of stylistics could stand. But while the goal of efficient descriptive power may exist as an ideological current influencing many contemporary stylistic methods, it represents only one movement among others, and it has no primary claim to truth value. Indeed, recognition of the reductionism caused by an excessively efficient linguistics has renewed the interest of linguists in the pragmatic issues of discourse. Stylistic method, in matching this shift, has begun again to look beyond the boundaries of strict linguistic description, hoping to use related disciplines to explain literary style. As was apparent to Spitzer at the outset of his career, adequate stylistic methodology can only be constructed by incorporating into stylistic theory a variety of descriptive models concerned with describing language as a complex, culturally centered activity, of which style is a productive component.

Because social desires and pressures affect academic pursuits, this book— and its particular historical glance at Spitzer—contains a second argument for the value of his career to modern stylistic interpretation. It demonstrates how Spitzer's stylistics was affected (as stylistics still is) by its

historical relation to other academic disciplines and intellectual values, and thus displays the underlying tensions that now lead us to embrace, or still reject, those very disciplines that seemed so important to stylistic interpretation in the past. The consequences of academic bias are thus both a part of Spitzer's career and an argument for reevaluating his thinking. Historical context—when redefined to include the ideological frameworks governing a particular historical moment—can be recognized as important, then, not only to the production and interpretation of literary style, but to the advancement of literary stylistics as well.[7]

The first chapter of this book discusses the historical debates and dilemmas behind the formation of twentieth-century stylistics. Spitzer's own early attempts at resolving some of these dilemmas are analyzed in chapters 2 and 3. Until now, René Wellek's 1960 eulogy, "Leo Spitzer (1887–1960)," has provided the quickest overview of the early period. But Wellek clearly prefers those parts of Spitzer's literary criticism that operate in the aesthetic mode, and he focuses on the multicultural, panhistorical aspect of Spitzer's criticism to resolve arguments between Spitzer and other critics, such as Bruneau and Hytier.[8] I will follow a different approach. Chapters 2 and 3 will focus less on Spitzer's aesthetics and more on his desire to describe author and history in a form adequate to both his linguistic training and his critical desires. Three articles—"Wortkunst und Sprachwissenchaft" (1925), "Zur Sprachlichen Interpretationen von Wortkunstwerken" (1930), and "Linguistics and Literary History" (1948)—form the backbone of these chapters.[9]

The last of these three articles was composed after Spitzer's flight from Nazi persecution and his subsequent move to the United States. That emigration removed Spitzer from the source of his training and thought, and it was accompanied by an increasing reliance upon personal authority in Spitzer's readings, a reliance that coupled only too readily with the assertion of beauty and truth that often accompanies a general aestheticism. It is a tendency that would prove to fit reasonably well, as we will see in chapter 4, with the New Critical trends that dominated Anglo-American critical thinking at this time. My own basic belief—that external descriptive models of language and behavior are necessary for the adequate description of style—must eventually come into direct conflict with this aspect of Spitzer's later thinking and its vision of the proper aesthetic reading. Faced with an ongoing academic drift toward positivism, Spitzer tended to overprotect his position by retreating into a hierarchical representation of aesthetic value as the key to literary history—a form of

argument present most clearly in his disagreements with Lovejoy and Burke (1941–1948) over history and rhetoric (chapter 4), and with Hytier, Bruneau, and Riffaterre (1950–1960) over literary and linguistic methods (chapter 5).

Spitzer's death brought an end to these exchanges, although there was a burst of discussion on Spitzer from 1960 to 1970 in essays by Wellek, Starobinski, Gray, and Dupriez, among others. That era itself came to a neat end in 1970, when Starobinski revised his initial study and reissued it in two different texts, one of them the first French-language edition of essays by Spitzer. Not surprisingly, the high tide of formal linguistic stylistics from 1970 to 1980 matches a low ebb in the discussion of Spitzer. But formalism has faced its own detractors of late, and Geoffrey Green's book on Auerbach and Spitzer (1982), David Bellos's edition of translations (1983), and the Stanford collection of essays (1988)[10] have declared the silence of the 1970s to be no more than a brief lacuna in English-language studies of Spitzer. In continental Europe Starobinski's essay "La Stylistique et ses méthodes: Leo Spitzer" has renewed interest in Spitzer by glancing more closely at the critical desires behind his thinking. Starobinski portrays—and champions—the uncertainties arising from Spitzer's opposing drives for a scientific criticism and a fuller literary history, while Starobinski's own interest in the open-ended nature of critical points of view leads him to praise Spitzer's distaste for positivistic analysis (580). Starobinski also rightly notes that Spitzer's interest in a psychology or sociology of style would have benefited from a more rigorous psychological, sociological, or philosophical framework. At the same time, David Bellos has continued to stress the literary history addressed in all of Spitzer's works (*Leo Spitzer: Essays on Seventeenth-Century French Literature*) by noting the more direct link between language and behavior in Spitzer's "politico-linguistic tracts" (xv).[11]

Still, the tenor of Spitzer's later career is captured in his gradual establishment of critical boundaries, and Bellos notes Spitzer's move away from the systematic integration of history into his procedures. This tendency to shift away from particular psychological explanations as the key to stylistic analysis and toward interpretations defined by a general historical context is extended by Spitzer's later movement away from history itself toward a wider-ranging cultural sensibility. Social issues, specific events, or the ideologies behind them thus defer to aesthetic, moral, and spiritual explanations of the literary work. This tendency has been well illustrated in Green's discussion of Spitzer and Auerbach (*Literary Crit-*

icism and the Structures of History), a study that clarifies Spitzer's sense
of the moral nature and purpose of the critical life and underlines his
continual thinking on the critic's position in the larger social framework.
The importance of the social status of critical thinking to Spitzer, as well
as its moral imperatives, can be found in another portrait of him and his
general philosophy of criticism—Starobinski's translation of five "aphor-
isms" from Spitzer's *Stilstudien*. Together they define Spitzer's sense of
the critic's proper position in relation to the text and, as Bellos also has
noted, they are useful in categorizing the various facets of Spitzer's schol-
arly activity. The aphorisms propose five scholarly areas as the components
of all academic activity: scientific specialization, methodological enrich-
ment, philosophical orientation, social engagement, and metaphysical
questioning. The last four areas are actively pursued by Spitzer, and the
latter three are clearly visible as a part of his authoritative critical stance.
The one area that Spitzer continually struggles with is the second one—
the methodological—and in the resolution of that struggle lies the bridge
between the specialist's descriptive role and the interpretive stance of
the literary critic.

The way in which stylistic theory finally can build that bridge is the
focus of the last chapter of this book. What *would* a Spitzerian stylistics
look like, Starobinski has mused, if it addressed "Freudian or Marxist
inferences," "intentional antecedents, affective or socio-economic infra-
structures" (*Études*, 20)? The answer is that such an ideologically alert
framework, designed and strengthened to support Spitzer's critical goals,
would produce a stylistics that grants literary style its desired critical
relevance while meeting the requirements for an adequate description of
literary discourse.

NOTES

1. Leo Spitzer, *Linguistics and Literary History* (Princeton, N.J.:
Princeton University Press, 1948; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1962).

2. Leo Spitzer, "Wortkunst und Sprachwissenchaft," *Germanisch-ro-
manisch Monatsschrift*, 13 (1925), 169–86; "Linguistics and Literary His-
tory," *Linguistics and Literary History*, 1–39; and "Les Études de style
et les différents pays," *Langue et Littérature, Actes de la Fédération
Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes* (Paris: Société d'Édi-
tion « Les Belles Lettres », 1961), 23–39.

3. Michael Riffaterre, *Le Style des Pléiades de Gobineau: essai d'ap-*

plication d'une méthode stylistique (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 20.

4. Leo Spitzer, "Review of *Le Style des Pléiades de Gobineau: essai d'application d'une méthode stylistique* by Michael Riffaterre," *Modern Language Notes,* 73 (1958), 68–74.

5. Barbara H. Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980); E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

6. Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Mary Pratt, "The Ideology of Speech-Act Theory," *Centrum,* 1, no. 1 (Spring, 1981), 5–18 and "Conventions of Representation: Where Discourse and Ideology Meet," in *Contemporary Perceptions of Language: Interdisciplinary Dimensions, Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1982* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1982), 139–55. Poovey holds to a general and wide-ranging sense of ideology: "Ideology, as I use the term, governs not just political and economic relations but social and even psychological stresses as well" (xiv). Eagleton both admits and exempts some of these areas from ideology in his definition: "By ideology I mean, roughly, the ways in which what we say and believe connects with the power structure and power relations of the society we live in. It follows from such a rough definition of ideology that not all of our underlying judgments and categories can usefully be said to be ideological" (Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: an Introduction* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983], 14–15). I will adhere to Poovey's more general definition.

7. The work of M.M. Bakhtin provides a remarkably similar case of the vagaries of the critical marketplace. Currently seen as a growing force in critical thought, until recently Bakhtin's work was virtually unknown in the English-speaking critical world—an oversight that ignores his position in relation to the imposing figures of Continental philology. As Michael Holquist notes in discussing the incredible range of his work, Bakhtin "belongs to the tradition that produced Spitzer, Curtius, Auerbach and . . . Wellek" (M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* ed. Michael Holquist [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981], xvii). It is a tradition that insists upon the inclusion of cultural interpretation in language study. Not surprisingly, then, Bakhtin's work contains the same desire to resolve the critical tensions between linguistic form and cultural discourse that we will find in Spitzer. (See especially Bakhtin's essay "Discourse in the Novel" in Holquist.)

8. René Wellek, "Leo Spitzer (1887–1960)," *Comparative Literature,* 12 (1960), 310–34. Wellek's article and its bibliography constitute one of the better English-language introductions to Spitzer's work. The article is necessary reading for anyone analyzing Spitzer's work. Sister Eileen Craddock's dissertation, *Style Theories as Found in Stylistic Studies of Romance Scholars (1900–1950),* vol. 43 of *Studies in Romance Languages and Literatures* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1952), contains a large amount of theoretical material gleaned from various sources. Although the major portion of the study consists of translations, there are some short summaries at the end of each chapter as well.

9. Leo Spitzer, "Zur Sprachlichen Interpretationen von Wortkunstwerken," *Neue Jahrbucher für Wissenschaft und Jugendbildung,* 6 (1930), 632–51; rpt. *Romanische Stil- und Literaturstudien* (Marburg: Elwert, 1931), 4–53. Wellek argues that these articles only narrowly define Spitzer's literary theory. But Wellek himself uses them specifically for the purpose of discussing Spitzer's early career, and they remain important in understanding the struggles that faced Spitzer as he pursued his stylistic goals. As we will see later, those goals are not just a part of his early career; they are central to Spitzer's thinking as a whole.

10. Jean Starobinski, "La Stylistique et ses méthodes: Leo Spitzer," *Critique* (July, 1964), 579–97; rev. and rpt. as "Leo Spitzer et la lecture stylistique," in Leo Spitzer, *Études de style,* ed. J. Starobinski (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 7–42 (page references are to this work); and Starobinski, *La relation critique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 34–81; Bennison Gray, "The Lesson of Leo Spitzer," *Modern Language Review,* 71, no. 4 (October, 1966), 547–55; B. Dupriez, "Jalons pour une stylistique littéraire," *Le Français Moderne,* 32 (1964), 45–53 (Dupriez discusses Spitzer very briefly); Geoffrey Green, *Literary Criticism and the Structures of History: Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982); David Bellos, ed., *Leo Spitzer: Essays on Seventeenth-Century French Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Alban K. Forcione *et al.,* eds., *Leo Spitzer: Representative Essays* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1988).

11. Leo Spitzer, *Betrachtungen eines Linguisten über Houston Stewart Chamberlains Kriegaufsätze und die Sprachbewertung im allgemeinen* (Leipzig, 1918); *Fremdwörterhatz und Fremdvölkerhass, eine Streitschrift gegen Sprachreinigung* (Vienna, 1918). These contextually based concerns are further demonstrated by Spitzer's use of contemporary writers to teach linguistics following World War I to soldiers, who—not surprisingly—rejected any disjunction between the academic and the social, between style and history.

1 The Historical Background
Rhetoric, Linguistics, and Literary Criticism

The rise of literary stylistics as an academic discipline is primarily a twentieth-century phenomenon, its arrival linked to the related appearance of literary criticism and linguistics as independent academic pursuits. Charles Bally's *Précis de stylistique* (1905)[1] is regularly used to mark the beginning of *stylistique*, that is, the linguistic analysis of a language's stylistic possibilities. Modern literary theory announces its presence twelve years later, according to Terry Eagleton,[2] through Viktor Shklovsky's 1917 Formalist essay "Art as Device." The beginning of modern literary stylistics, or *Stilforschung*, can be placed neatly between those other two milestones by tying it to the start, in 1910, of Leo Spitzer's career.[3]

The concerns of modern stylistics thus rest, both temporally and theoretically, between the concerns of modern linguistics and modern literary theory, sharing the analytical and interpretive goals of each in varying proportions. At the same time, stylistics continues to have close ties with the third major influence on thinking about style: rhetoric. Through these ties, modern stylistics maintains the tradition of relating its own status to the status accorded to other descriptive methods within the culture's intellectual and social framework—the most important of them continuing to be rhetoric, linguistics, and literary criticism. To this disciplinary tangle must be added a further complication, which all three areas depend upon in turn—the Romantic and post-Romantic view of language as a component of knowledge, and style as an epistemologically significant use of language. Thus, to the methodological and disciplinary issues surrounding

the description of style, we must add the further "philosophical" issue of how to define the knowledge that literary style supposedly captures.

The modern concept of literary style, like that of literature itself, has been heavily qualified by Romanticist ideas of literature as acontextual, or at least as floating in the cleaner aesthetic air found above any particular social context. This attitude permeates early Romantic views of style and later is subsidized by twentieth-century concerns with formally objective definitions of language. These Romantic and post-Romantic attitudes differ markedly from much of the long-standing, pre-Romantic rhetorical concern with style as a contextually dependent form of social interaction. Yet Romantic attitudes have gradually been accepted as a natural historical development away from the concerns of rhetoric. That easy historical judgment has come under scrutiny of late, however, as the deep-seated ideological considerations underlying Romantic and post-Romantic intellectual frameworks have been brought to light.[4] These arguments have begun to have a profound effect on contemporary stylistic theory, for in demonstrating that literary and linguistic *theory* do not operate in a contextual vacuum, such arguments also demonstrate that the *production* of literature and language must be influenced by historical context. That may be a commonsense view of writing, but it has been downplayed in Anglo-American criticism for over seventy-five years.

The renewed interest in discussing historical contexts and ideological constraints goes to the heart of modern stylistic theorizing, which has tended to rest its claims for critical validity on a combination of the methodological power ascribed to a context-free scientific formalism in linguistics and the post-Romantic importance of organicist aesthetics in literature. The combined influence of these attitudes has led to the rejection of a stylistics rooted in the functional contextuality offered by earlier rhetorical traditions, whether of a classical or an eighteenth-century stamp, and to the acceptance of a stylistics rooted in literary and linguistic formalism.

Leo Spitzer's attempt to provide a stylistic method from within these strictures presents the essential goals—and difficulties—at the core of modern stylistics. He began as early as 1910 to conceive of a literary stylistics founded on the descriptive power of linguistic analysis. Despite his later antagonism toward neo-grammarian linguistics, Spitzer never denied the importance of his formal training in historical linguistics. In fact, he was to state a preference for such work if the only other option were an open-ended and amorphous response to literature.[5] His difficulties