

Rene Wellek and Austin Warren

Theory of Literature

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Difficult practical problems are raised by the existence of prevalent styles, by the power of a single author to excite imitation and vogue. Formerly, the idea of genre had a great influence on stylistic tradition. In Chaucer, for example, there is a wide differentiation of styles between the individual stories of the Canterbury Tales and, more generally, between his works of different periods and literary types. In the eighteenth century, a Pindaric ode, a ~~six~~ satire, a ballad had each its own required vocabulary and style. "Poetic diction" was confined to specific genres, while a homely vocabulary was permitted or even prescribed in low genres. Even Wordsworth, in spite of his condemnation of poetic diction, wrote very differently when he composed an ode a topographical reflective poem like Tintern Abbey, a Miltonic sonnet, or a "lyrical ballad." If we ignore such distinctions, we characterize but futilely the style of an author who has cultivated many genres or passed through a long personal evolution. It is probably best to speak of the "styles" of Goethe, since we cannot reconcile the enormous differences between the early Sturm ~~XXXXXXXX~~ und Drang style, that of the classical period, and the late, pompous and involved manner of the Elective Affinities.

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