Textual Styles

Analyzing Prose
By Richard Lanham
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Review by G. Keilan Rickard

Almost anytime I sit down to write a paper, I procrastinate beforehand. Checking email is one of my usual stall tactics. So just now, I open my inbox to find that a friend has sent me a Monk-E-Mail—best not put that off till later. What's a Monk-E-Mail? Picture a gussied-up chimp in a bathroom, urinals in the background. That's the image which comes up on screen. His eyes follow the cursor as I mouse my way to the "Play Message" button below him. And when I click the button the chimp starts talking. Hilarious. His voice is automated; the text he recites is one my friend typed herself. Monkey lips mouth the words, and I'm on the floor. But wait. It gets even funnier when he places vocal emphasis on the wrong syllable. I mean, the poor chimp doesn't even know what he's saying! He's just some mindless cyber-simian oracle speaking on behalf of my friend. Eureka—my inspiration for this review.

No, Richard Lanham (2003) doesn't talk specifically about Monk-E-Mails in his second edition of *Analyzing Prose*, but he does talk all about textual styles. (I'll return to Monk-E-Mails a bit later.) Lanham's thesis, in a nutshell, is that "[e]very statement about style makes, if we know how to interpret it, a statement about behavior" (p. 8). So, for example, a noun style—with its preponderance of nouns, prepositional phrases, and conjugations of 'to be'—indicates the subject's stasis, its fixity. Whereas a text that uses a verb style moves; its verbs create action, dispel passivity. To describe a still, wintry evening, an author might opt for the noun style; while a verb style would be reserved for a lively circus scene.

Lanham takes the reader through more than just noun and verb styles. Ever hear of hypo- and parataxis? How about periodic and running styles? Complicated terms, to be sure, but Lanham guides us through them with ease, with expertise. Along the way, he cites helpful examples—sometimes lengthy ones—of the style being discussed. These selections range from Winston Churchill's "In a Solemn Hour" to R. D. Laing's "Knots."

Next he charts each pericope to render its style more salient. These color charts, perfect for "visual" thinkers, highlight rhetorical devices in the chosen texts that we might otherwise overlook. Through them, Lanham unmasks polysyndeton, chiasmus, anaphora, and isocolon, to name a few. (All such great terms, it would be nice if they were indexed at the end of the book.) More than just a "nomenclatural game," this in-depth analysis reveals textual styles, which, in turn, serve as an analogy for the subject's behavior.

Throughout the ten chapters of *Analyzing Prose*, Lanham inserts questions about how electronic texts will change the face of prose as we know it. How will we read them? Will they shape human nature itself? What influence will they exert on postmodern thought? E-texts, after all, put "back-pressure on how we think, and how we learn to think" (p. 130). And they remain forever mutable. Just click on a hyperlink and off we go, forging our way through a text of our own choosing. Like the aforementioned Monk-E-Mail, e-texts force us to look *at* rather than *through* them. (A fuller discussion of *at* vs. *through* can be found in Lanham's book. This distinction premises his entire argument.) What I saw in the Monk-E-Mail was not its content; instead, I saw its delivery, its opaque style. The monkey could have recited anything—from a boring recipe to a highfalutin sermon—and I would have laughed, not because of the text's content but its style. Lanham addresses issues pertaining to e-text in the book's epilogue, but his discussion here is not as thorough as I had hoped. Perhaps he sets the stage for a sequel.

In *Analyzing Prose* Lanham does what no one has tried to do: he "reason[s] through the self-contradictions of a transparent theory of prose style" (p. 220). But readers expecting a meticulous genealogy would be advised to look elsewhere—perhaps in another work by Lanham. Since Aristotelian times, transparent styles have predominated the landscape of academic prose. Striving for clarity, brevity, and sincerity, academes have neglected poetic flourishes in favor of elucidating content alone. In the process, though, they have sacrificed voice and readability, resulting in "shapeless and caco-rhythmic" prose (p. 101). Lanham, therefore, calls for prose that's more social, conversational even. And his own writing style serves as an exemplar. He invites the reader to explore a scholarly topic, minus the stodginess.

This is not to say that Lanham's writing is at all facile. On the contrary, his subject matter is cerebral, most likely too difficult for undergraduates in fact. Thus, I would suggest that *Analyzing Prose* is more appropriate for the graduate level and above. In which academic discipline? Obviously, English and rhetoric departments could benefit from this book; and creative writers

of any ilk should give it a read. But why stop there? Lanham's *Analyzing Prose* outlines a veritable qualitative research method useful for the social sciences in general. I could see how the field of narrative inquiry, for example, might make use of this method to scrutinize interview transcripts. Anthropologists could enrich their ethnographic descriptions by choosing a prose style that more closely reflects the behavior of the cultures they study. Even psychologists could learn a thing or two from Lanham, particularly his views on the self and on the creative power of language.

So it's clear that Lanham's book is interdisciplinary. But how, exactly, does this method work? "Well, to start, a miscellaneous pulling of first one thread then another […] quickly starts building a coherent whole" (p. 150). In the first six chapters, Lanham teaches us about the different "threads" we can pull. (These are the rhetorical and stylistic devices I discussed above.) Then in chapter seven, a pivotal one entitled "Two Lemon Squeezers," he demonstrates how to "[f]ind every verbal pattern you can in a given text" (p. 137). This way of describing a text dates back to Aristotle, although Lanham's approach is less concerned with value judgments, he says. You stop the thread pulling once you've got a feel for "the basic patterns, the basic relationship of style to structure" (p. 151). Patterns, then, generalize to explain the text as a whole. One needn't worry about one's level of training or familiarity with rhetoric; in fact, Lanham acknowledges that no two analyses will yield the same results. The point, then, is to incorporate "all our powers of thinking, feeling and intuiting. That is why analysis will always remain inexact—but also why it remains so much fun" (p. 78). Again, we can see that Lanham is not in the business of making prose analysis a stodgy activity.

Overall, I found Lanham's book informative and persuasive. Although his subject matter is weighty, his masterful writing style flows smoothly, makes the arguments easy to follow. Even after the first chapter, I was able to apply some of the terminology and techniques to other texts. And by the end, I had a decent grasp of his method and felt confident to begin analyzing prose from a Lanhamian perspective. *Analyzing Prose* can be useful to a wide range of audiences—from those who just want to improve their writing to those engaged in social science research. I would even go so far as to say that anyone who writes academically should read the book, no matter what the field. As electronic texts become more and more abundant, more and more legitimate, academic writing—with its roots in Aristotle—risks the dinosaur's fate. That is, unless it becomes self-conscious, less transparent, can take itself less seriously. Richard Lanham's *Analyzing Prose* leads this movement.