Style: An Anti-Textbook
by Richard Lanham
Yale University Press, 1974

What makes Richard Lanham’s Style into An Anti-Textbook is his irreverent satire of all the qualities we expect textbooks and textbook prose to have—impersonality, clarity, sincerity. The subject: America’s prose problem. The debaters: Lanham versus “The Books.” The appeal: the scintillating rhetorical postures Lanham adopts to exemplify his point that stylistically self-conscious role-playing, not transparently “clear” communication, is the strongest motive for writing and for reading.

Lanham plays devil’s advocate, debates the uses of obscurity (why a University administrator urging cut-backs does not want to be too “clear”), champions the delights of jargon as play, as a version of the self, against impersonal, lifeless, scientific “mumblespeak.” There is pedagogical point to hip talk, we see. If Americans were born eclectics in prose style, why not make the most of this? Revel in jargon, imitate it, parody it, and translate it. As pleader of paradox (with the elan of a John Donne defending women’s inconstancy), Lanham argues that hypocrisy, not sincerity, is essential, that not originality but imposture, verbal artifice, is wanted. If prose style is always a presentation of self and if finding self is a process of role-playing, then students should be taught to experiment with role-playing in prose, with social and dramatic selves. This is Lanham’s stylistic version of the American self-made man/woman.

As satirist, Lanham gives “the fleering frumpe” (to borrow Puttenham’s sixteenth-century terms) to “ninny-proof” textbooks. He administers the “broad floute” to their “squirrel chatter of uncs, orgs, parals, and logs.” Exercising “the drye mock,” he romps through a “hortus deliciarum of adolescent indignation.” Armed with meiosis or “the disabler,” Lanham scoffs at “flapdoodle” and “tantrum prose,” “crackpot utilitarianism,” “house-broken” students, and the “spastic drool of likes, you knows, and wows” that “disfigure” student utterance.

Behind these jesting postures lies Lanham’s earnest point that to study prose style and to correct a paper is to engage in a satirical translation, satirizing pretense and pointing to a simplified reality. Such satire, such comic self-awareness, the student must learn to apply to his own prose, to his own self. Who would deny this point, delivered, in Lanham’s peroration, with practical appeal to “moneled leisure” and emotional appeal to Americans’ ability to reenact the Renaissance ideal of self-fashioning?

This most accessible of books is, at heart, the most Renaissance, advocating, behind its paradoxical disclaimers of clarity, a serious return to rhetoric, to the idea of word as sound and as ornament and to what Aristotle thought the most powerful means of persuasion—ethos, the character a speaker chooses to project. In The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1976), Lanham extends the stylistic conflict (clear, neutral, sincere versus role-playing, “rhetorical” prose) to a theory of two conflicting selves and world views in Western man. The central, stable, serious self, which uses a transparent, sincere style, and the dynamic, role-playing self, which uses a self-consciously calculated style, reflect two opposed world views. Lanham champions the “rhetorical” self and world view over the “serious” side and he argues that our failure to recognize both views and to appreciate the playful, dynamic self and motive is the reason why we have misunderstood the history of rhetoric and of Western literature, especially Renaissance literature. As counter-statements to serious and long-lived misconceptions about rhetoric, both books make important contributions to rhetorical theory.

The practical work that grows out of Lanham’s theories is his Revising Prose (Charles Scribner’s Sons: New York, 1979), which would have us develop an ear to hear it and dynamic voices to write it. Lanham’s concern with voice and self in all his books reflects the current preoccupation with “voice” in the works of Elbow, Macrorie, Moffett, and Coles (The Plural I). Lanham also shares with these composition theorists a suspicion of the “dead” letter, of deadly “official” prose. Unlike Elbow, Macrorie, Moffett, and others who stress finding our one genuine “self” or “voice” (the equivalent of Lanham’s “serious” self), Lanham argues the more profound and psychologically sounder idea that we have many selves and many motives. Finding our rhetorical selves is what Style is all about.

Annette Drew-Bear
Department of English
University of California, Santa Barbara