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RHETOR-FITTING: DEFINING ETHICS THROUGH STYLE

Dion C. Cautrell

Style is indeed, as Buffon most famously said, the man himself—but the man sometimes as he is, sometimes as he wants to be, sometimes as he is palpably pretending to be, sometimes, as in comedy, both as he pretends to be and as he is. Stylistic pedagogy ought to cover the whole range. Only by doing so can it perform its authentic social duty: to enhance both clear communication between citizens and the selfhood of the citizens who are communicating.

—Richard Lanham, Style: An Anti-textbook

No comprehensive treatment of rhetorical style (Greek lexis, Latin elocutio) rightfully avoids the ethical criticism that has plagued the third canon since at least the time of Gorgias (483–378 BCE). Plato censured rhetoric for its potentially damaging social and moral effects, deeming it a “knack” for mass manipulation rather than a discipline proper to achieving Truth, Beauty, and Goodness (Plato 2003, 463b; see also 465c). During the Renaissance, Peter Ramus limited rhetoric primarily to style, which he considered less rational because of its supposed imprudence. Ramus’s decision left stylistics with little more than a catalogue of verbal niceties (schemes and tropes) and underlies the charges of “empty” or “mere” rhetoric that still populate contemporary public discourse. Because such criticisms are not universally accepted, these and other disputes have proven impossible to settle, and stylistic theories that seek consistency or closure often skirt ethics to do so. Style’s ongoing troubles derive partly from the long-standing friction between philosophy and rhetoric.1 Because ethics stands within philosophy’s traditional purview, rhetorical treatments of ethics are often seen as inadequate, if not wrongheaded. Scholars and teachers of rhetoric are thus left appealing to philosophical principles in order to satisfy criticism, criticism at times engendered by skepticism about the very idea of rhetoric.
Yet beyond philosophical disagreements stand additional challenges springing from the character of human communication. Stylistics treats the elementary patterns of language and of language use that drive discourse—words put to work in the world—but those patterns vary according to context and, as patterns, may be assigned ethical value only through disregard or distortion. That is, no stylistic strategy may be judged “good” or “bad” apart from actual writers and readers, the thinking, feeling human beings who create and interpret discourse. Moreover, and even in context, what “good” or “bad” might mean remains open to debate precisely because different interlocutors value different (kinds of) outcomes. That is, rhetorical value necessarily remains in flux—even if due simply to differing expectations of how discourse should function. The question any ethics of style must answer, then, is How does one define ethics in the dynamic context of stylistic enactment, rhetorical give-and-take?

In actuality, a robust stylistics carries certain advantages in grappling with rhetoric’s ethical conundrums because the third canon is directly caught up in discourse’s ‘values dynamic’: “A style is a response to a situation. When you call a style bad, or exaggerated, much less mad, you ought to make sure you understand the situation it responds to. You may be objecting to the situation, not to the style invented to cope with it” (Lanham 1974, 58). The sort of judgment Richard Lanham describes may come without conscious, much less formalized, criteria, but it carries the traces of valuation all the same. Indeed, Lanham counsels readers to read self-reflectively to ensure their (e)valuations do not spring from faulty assumptions about style’s relationship to communicative context. Readers ought knowingly to affirm/confirm their responses, ethical and aesthetic, by accepting that they (those responses) are inevitably the confusion of a style and its attendant situation.

That a style is ever confused with a situation, however, does not come solely from missing or misunderstanding the relationship among styles, situations, and values. Because styles are pragmatically inseparable from their rhetorical situations, stylistics bears not only on the underlying language choices that writers and readers make but also—because the choices come in response to a particular situation—on how contexts enable or constrain styles. A given judgment may not rightly apply to this or that style, but this or that style surely entails a value judgment, at times an entire ethical system. Styles potentially reveal how the values behind a judgment encourage or discourage rhetorical action; the pragmatic confluence of style with judgment discloses the obligations and opportunities
that rhetorical contexts carry. Lanham extends the idea to its ultimate state, placing style at the center of human socialization: “By a sense of style we socialize ourselves. Style finally becomes, as Burke works it out, social custom. . . . Style defines situations, tells us how to act in them. . . . We return to the self-consciousness shared by writer and reader. In society, it is called manners, in literature, decorum” (1974, 132–33).

Of particular note is the third canon’s reversal of roles, “defin[ing] situations” along with being (as on page 58) a reaction or response to them. Style thereby becomes so thoroughly implicated in socialization that it is both a kind of social (inter)(re)action and a commentary on it. Thus, for Lanham, stylistics’ primary ethical dilemma comes in practitioners’ unreflective enactment of social obligation and responsibility. Especially for this reason, scholarship and teaching are most effective when they equip writers and readers to understand how ethical (inter)(re)actions come about—as well as how any one of us might create those opportunities—rather than what judgments ought finally to be made. In the classroom, for example, Lanham’s model encourages teachers and student writers to focus on enacting the situational habit of mind that style embodies, not on a specific set of ethical injunctions or precepts. Classrooms that privilege the latter are likely, in Susan Miller’s estimation, to produce student writers who “only compose exercises in order to reflect on or display their grasp of democratic consciousness. In these . . . classrooms, their writing is not positioned to enact that consciousness because they, as writers, are not taught that they have the power to do so” (1997, 498).

In addition, the overlapping of writing-reading and theorizing-teaching enables Lanham’s “self-consciousness,” the capacity to envision the third canon as itself an ethics of rhetorical (inter)(re)action: “Prose style exercises . . . our range of possible behavior. By allowing the luxury of imaginative rehearsal, it confers real ethical choice, and to this extent frees us from necessity. Ethics at this point touches taste, indeed becomes it” (1974, 133). Taste is no more stable a concept than ethics, though, and scholars and teachers of writing must determine whether switching terms produces more than a pleasing if only momentary flourish. Lanham casts the values dynamic in terms of style, but he leaves largely unchallenged style’s position within rhetoric—which he formulates in the sophistic and Ciceronian tradition.2 By contrast, Friedrich Nietzsche draws on rhetorical prudence to reconfigure ethics and taste rather than simply equate one with the other: “The real secret of the rhetorical art is now the prudent relation of both aspects, of the sincere and the artistic. . . .
It is a playing at the boundary of the aesthetic and the moral: any one-sidedness destroys the outcome. The aesthetic fascination must join the moral confidence; but they should not cancel one another out” (1989, 37, 39). Prudence centers Nietzsche’s rhetoric, defines the habit of mind that allows rhetorical action to have/take effect in the world. Without the prudent pairing of “the sincere and the artistic,” style’s potential for defining ethical (inter)(re)action—for acknowledging its opportunities and obligations—is “destroy[ed].”3

According to Stephen Halliwell, Aristotle held a complementary view of rhetoric and morality: “[T]he Rhetoric remains open to the possibility that the orator’s engagement with popular morality will sometimes, and non-accidentally, succeed in contributing to the realization of the human good and will do so in ways that embrace legitimate appeal to the criteria both of phronesis and of to sumpheron” (1994, 228). Phronesis (practical wisdom, prudence) and sumpheron (expediency, advantage, benefit) coincide in ways that violate neither rhetoric’s efficacy nor the principles underlying public morality or advantage. A “practically realizable sumpheron” indeed “represents . . . an evaluative mode of bringing conceptions of ‘good’ to bear on the situation” (226).4 It is, thus, the socioethical equivalent of phronesis, and though the two need not always coincide, they may operate simultaneously without inherent contradiction or conflict.

To make this equivalency more tangible, we might liken the relationship between prudence and benefit to the tension ready-built into pedagogy. Teaching is, of course, a rhetorical performance, and through that performance instructors seek to achieve certain curricular goals while also meeting the needs of students. Effective teachers are effective precisely because they manage to define their own goals in terms of others’ needs, to fulfill the promise of the former by accepting the reality of the latter. Prudence-benefit, the whole complex of competing demands placed on teachers, circumscribes the range of choices available within a classroom. For example, in helping student writers to understand stylistic strategies, do I ask them to memorize those strategies acontextually, or do I ask them to recognize how specific writers deploy strategies in individual situations? Do I demand that student writers accept those strategies’ importance a priori, or do I create opportunities for them to judge for themselves when/how/why the strategies most effectively engage readers? Although the prudence-benefit dynamic does not predetermine what choices teachers make, it does make certain choices (im)possible in the first place. Prudence—what I find most effective or “best”—must
be brought into productive tension with benefit—what students gain from my (and their own) choices. Effective teachers strive for this kind of mutual challenge and discovery, and in doing so they embody the prudence-benefit dynamic. Likewise, an ethics of style is defined by the questions that prudence-benefit poses to writers and readers, not the answers on which they eventually settle.

The complex interaction of phronesis and sumpheron does not easily suffer formulation, at least not as Aristotle describes it, but that interaction seems fairly well to describe what Nietzsche terms “playing at the boundary” (1989, 39) between taste and ethics—the same zone within which Lanham’s style supposedly functions. More importantly, Aristotle’s treatment renders each mode as a habit of mind, a distinctive way of evaluating rhetorical contexts, thereby ensuring that stylistics and rhetoric in general retain the self-consciousness (prudence) and social connection (benefit) that Lanham accentuates. In this way scholars, teachers, and writers-readers stand a good chance of understanding the range of ethical judgments invited by rhetorical choices as well those choices most likely to affect the world outside their own heads. To understand, however, they must envision phronesis and sumpheron as an internally linked binary, as neither a pure synthesis nor a pure disjunction, for a truly stylistic ethics is not a single action but rather a way of looking at things through my own prudence as well as others’ benefit or self-interest.

Kenneth Burke, in *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1962), posits internally linked binaries as “transformanda,” pairings that simultaneously suspend neither and both of their constituents.5 Like “terms for transformation in general,” then, prudence and benefit must not “be placed statically against each other, but in given poetic contexts usually represent a development from one order of motives to another” (Burke 1962, 11). Indeed, Burke’s emphasis on “order[s] of motives” implies that prudence-benefit properly defines stylistic ethics. Ethics is nothing, after all, if not a judgment about motives and their consequences.6 Furthermore, because this motival development occurs “in given poetic contexts”—that is, within/through language-in-use—Burke leaves open the possibility that rhetorical action produces (or causes to be produced) the linking of and negotiation between one order of motives and another, between phronesis and sumpheron. As my pedagogy illustration suggests, it is the identification of my goals with the needs of others that activates the prudence-benefit binary and that, consequently, makes possible an assessment of ethical rhetoric. Both
teacher and student writers come to recognize the other’s investment in a particular course of action—the rote memorization of stylistic strategies, for example—and thereby leave the other (and themselves) with some opportunity for (inter)(re)acting in rhetorically ethical ways.

We might schematize style’s transformandum, then, through the (pairs of) terms proposed by the authors I cite, remembering that the pairs are both internally linked and bound to other (internally linked) pairs. Rhetoric-philosophy, for instance, represents one aspect of the tranformandum but should not be isolated from decorum-manners or exposure-discipline.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>phronesis</th>
<th>sumpheron</th>
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<td>prudence, practical wisdom</td>
<td>benefit, advantage</td>
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<tr>
<td>rhetoric</td>
<td>philosophy</td>
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<tr>
<td>aesthetics and taste</td>
<td>ethics and morality</td>
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<tr>
<td>decorum</td>
<td>manners</td>
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<td>literature</td>
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<td>exposure (non resistance)</td>
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<td>self</td>
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Assuming stylistic practices do enact the prudence-benefit dynamic, the third canon should lay bare the discursive means adequate and appropriate to ethical (inter)(re)action. And yet, even if an ethics of style might be so identified, scholars and teachers of writing—as well as writers of all stripes—should still return to my epigraph and Lanham’s definition of style. Does it or can it conform to the dynamic I outline? Or more directly, how do we address the questions begged by the definition, and come to embody the “authentic social duty” that Lanham ascribes to the third canon and its pedagogy (1974, 124)? This duty is fulfilled only if it “enhances clear communication” as well as the “selfhood” of citizen-communicators. While Lanham takes up these two principles, it is not self-evident how/why they necessarily define stylistic ethics, especially if style embodies ethics through taste. The principles seem to have little or nothing to do with the sort of aesthetic Nietzsche, and Lanham himself, describes. Furthermore, the singularities within the definition—“authentic,” “clear,” “selfhood”—(seem to) work against the multiplicity of roles and contexts that Lanham establishes as style’s distinctive demesne. Perhaps he attempts, as many stylisticians before him, to have his cake and eat it, too, or perhaps his reliance on these terms challenges the
belief that singularity is the core characteristic of clarity, authenticity, and selfhood. Is there a compelling reason for defining these concepts as unities, as tolerating no multiplicity of meaning or function?

Rather than situate this question within the traditional debates surrounding style, Lanham would have us accept that the canon’s own multiple character necessarily demands multiple notions of clarity and authenticity. Of what use is rhetorical judgment, after all, if it cannot be enacted? How could rhetorical judgment exist outside the possibility of, and means for, stylistic enactment? Lanham champions multiplicity throughout *Style,* and he attaches both stylistic and pedagogical importance to the interplay that Nietzsche describes: “Style as visible, selfconscious, opaque, forms part of a curriculum whose center will be self-consciousness, whose rock-bottom is an awareness of boundary conditions” (1974, 132; emphasis added). It is on the rhetorical margins, where prudence-benefit and taste-ethics challenge and interpenetrate, that style is most potent. The reason that until recently writing scholars and (especially) teachers have generally been reticent to accept this proposition lies in long-standing attitudes about what discourse, particularly writing, is and represents.7

Post-process theories of writing have gained acceptance within rhetoric and composition only in the last decade or so, and it is only through the changes they have wrought that my questions seem appropriate, even commonsensical. While differences exist among these theories, few adherents would dispute that “(1) writing is public; (2) writing is interpretive; and (3) writing is situated” (Kent 1999, 1). Because, however, so much yet needs to be done to bring writing pedagogy and treatments of style into full accord with these principles, Lanham’s assumption of them (the principles) represents a defining choice, literally and figuratively.

Without claiming any superiority for this or that post-process theory, we can apply Thomas Kent’s three criteria directly to the ethics developed in *Style.* Three interlinked forces in flux, the criteria shift attention from the unity-multiplicity debate to a world inhabited by necessary difference and discrepancy, the realm of the contingent and the rightly rhetorical. Whatever truths or realities exist in the world, rhetorical action cannot grant unmediated access to them; the best that discourse may provide is the means for understanding the world and oneself. Understanding—knowledge at work in new contexts—comes for Lanham in the form of taste, situated and public interpretation, the social custom on which Burke and others rely so heavily and which the Sophists favored over Plato’s dialectical rhetoric.8 The ethics of stylistic rhetoric could, therefore,
never be defined as an absolute way of thinking or acting without violating the fundamental character of writing itself, whether taken as a phenomenon or as a habit of mind.

Let us return to Lanham’s 1974 definition, then, through the lens of Kent’s 1999 criteria, a stylistic subversion of chronology that proves revealing. Stubbornly unitary on their face, the trio of terms I cite still seems unchanged. Drawing on a tradition that has been largely abandoned, they appear to have little to do with a postmodern—some would say “posthuman”—understanding of the world. Yet what if, at least for a moment, Lanham’s terms are considered, not simply through the lens of post-process writing theories but as being the rhetorical consequences of those theories? In other words, what if we envision the terms as indices for what style makes possible and, consequently, what the third canon brings to any explanation of rhetorical ethics? Style might, according to this view, be the means by which clarity, authenticity, and selfhood are created and maintained in a world that would otherwise leave interlocutors radically destabilized, perhaps too imbalanced even to (presume to) act. These social(izing) qualities would be the result of, and the primary benefit accruing to, stylistic action, not merely archaic fictions with which contemporary scholars have been able to dispense—and perhaps too easily at that.

The philosopher Donald Davidson has long been known for suggesting that, as often as not, what seems the case is the case—at least for those not caught up in theoretical intricacies, for ordinary people living ordinary lives. One of his most incisive illustrations of that principle involves how someone might come to believe a pot of water is boiling: “My view . . . is that if someone perceives that the pot is on the boil, then the boiling pot causes him or her, through the medium of the senses, to believe the pot is on the boil. It may be that sensations, perturbations of the visual field, sense data and the like, are also always present, but this is of no epistemological significance” (1999b, 135). Those investigating style might likewise wonder if, while writing, I perceive that I am a certain someone (self) and I perceive the meaningfulness and accuracy of what I say (authenticity and clarity), why are those perceptions not necessary and useful beliefs? That they do not, or cannot, exist outside the rhetorical moment matters less than whether their existence might be understood through and embodied by stylistics, whether they are the rhetorical consequence of a situation’s style. Philosophers and theorists will continue to investigate the nature of the self and what could or should be meant by
the term authenticity, but within the realm of stylistic ethics, Lanham’s treatment seems the most viable precisely because it does not dispense with the attitudes that style engenders in writers and readers alike.

Bolstered by the prudence-benefit dynamic, Lanham’s concept of taste stands as an index of how effectively language users assume—take onto themselves as well as fulfill—the stylistic demands of clarity, authenticity, and selfhood in a given context. In short, Lanham supplies the means by which an ethics of style might be judged, tested, or reconsidered. What he does not, cannot manage is a sense of what might replace stable criteria/values for judgment in the world of stylistic rhetoric. The answer instead lies in my earlier pedagogy illustration, in what teachers and student writers do in their classrooms every day. To teach effectively, I must (re)cast my goals in the form of my students’ needs. That principle does not ensure ethical action, for how could I predict beforehand what would/n’t be ethical on any given day, in any given classroom? But it does ensure that my students and I are able to work toward an ethics that accounts for everyone’s needs while also demanding more from us than simply what we might wish or want for our individual selves. For example, if I believe that my goals can benefit students most directly through the memorization of stylistic strategies, the issue will not be settled until we understand, together and alone, that foreclosing other opportunities—which is what rote memorization often does when taken alone—is unethical. Similarly, a stylistic ethics is created the moment a writer puts words to paper or a reader engages a text. It is created in the moment of communication and cannot be taught as one teaches names or dates or geographic features. It is created by/through the interchange between prudence and benefit, between one self and another, between worlds that would otherwise orbit different suns.

* * *

The continual revision of patterns and potentials that drives style occurs only with feedback, both other and self-produced, for its (style’s) effects and judgments about them are what constitute perspective over time and across contexts. Stylistic feedback allows interlocutors to understand language situations through what Kent calls “hermeneutic guessing,” a contextual revision of our thoughts about which patterns fit which potentials (1993, 14). Presuming that hermeneutics (a theory of interpretation) stands at the center of rhetorical patterning, Kent contends that discourse cannot be theorized without also being distorted, that the only viable means for gauging writing or speech is a description, however
tentative, of what occurs as interlocutors interact in an individual context. Narratives of this sort are necessarily incomplete, involving as they do the analyst’s own stylistic (read: interpretative) choices, but Kent’s paralogic theory accepts its own provisionalism as a necessary precursor to meaning making. That is, the theory posits that meaning is generated through the disjunctions and consequent tensions between or among words.

In this way Kent does for meaning what Lanham does for ethics, leveraging the ready-built multiplicity of the rhetorical situation. Although Kent’s approach precludes meaning from being stored within words, I suggest that the meaning (making) he describes is accessed through style, which determines what gets written, in what ways, and for what reasons. When I encounter Kent’s repeated use of “guessing” and “guesswork,” for example, I do not construct meaning only from individual words in isolation. Every use after the first reinforces a pattern of polyptoton (repetition of forms or cases) that invites me to (re)consider (1) whether and why the root guess- might be more significant than others used less frequently in his book; and (2) whether, according to context, guess- in its ordinary meaning is all that Kent in fact expresses through the strategy. In short, to make sense of Kent’s text, I must ask why he might have used this specific set of words in these specific ways. While the self-conscious enactment of style provides decided advantages, Kent’s polyptoton need not be purposeful or exist for precisely the reasons that readers imagine. The asking of the question is the immediate goal of stylistic awareness because it (the asking) sensitizes the questioner to the likelihood that X or Y be the case. Words’ individual uses are always potentially meaningful, of course, but the complex they form when taken as a group reveals even more about Kent’s (making of) meaning, the situation those words both create and respond to.

Assuming Lanham’s theory of taste works as promised, something like I describe should occur not only with semantic judgments but also with ethical ones. The confluence of phronesis and sumpheron, however, does not automatically follow from the pair’s potential for integration through judgment or ethical action. Moreover, their transformandum undermines assumptions about the ways in which judgments get made. How do I judge what remains in flux? Which rhetorical or ethical criteria could possibly generate and organize my response to an ever-changing stylistic performance? Lyotard maintains that ethical evaluations of this kind must be made “without criteria”: “[Aristotle] recognizes—and he does so explicitly in the *Rhetoric*, as well as in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that a judge
worthy of the name has no true model to guide his judgments, and that the true nature of the judge is to pronounce judgments, and therefore prescriptions, just so, without criteria. This is, after all, what Aristotle calls prudence. It consists in dispensing justice without models” (Lyotard and Thébaud 1985, 25–26).

Judgment comes without guidelines, in the rhetorical moment, because those things that might lead to predictable judgment are occluded or shut out. The dynamism of rhetorical (inter)(re)action stands apart because “[o]ne does not know whom one is speaking to; one must be very prudent; one must negotiate; one must ruse; and one must be on the lookout when one has won” (43). Because style puts everything into play—selfhood, authenticity, and so forth—stability comes only in the necessity for judging. Writers-readers must judge styles, motives, consequences, and as Lanham reveals, this process of evaluation teaches us what it means to, in Lyotard’s words, “negotiate . . . on the boundaries” (43).

Lester Faigley, building on these and other principles, concludes that what remains for prudence and, therefore, rhetorical ethics is “a matter of recognizing the responsibility of linking phrases” (1992, 237). In this way, Faigley suggests, “Lyotard relocates ethics in the material practices of reading and writing.” The pragmatic actions of writers-readers are an ethics, serve contextually to define that which is just or unjust. Lyotard (and presumably others) “would not have writers look to an external theory of ethics but would encourage them to consider the implications of their linkages” (238). Lyotard’s theorizing thereby “points to a missing ethics through the activities of composing, for all are involved in linkage” (239). In Just Gaming (Au Juste), Lyotard admits what Faigley calls “the contradictoriness of his position” (233):

[I]f one remains within these [language] games (the narrative, the denotative, or any other) that are not prescriptive, the idea of justice does not have to intrude. It intervenes inasmuch as these games are impure. By which I mean something very specific: inasmuch as these games are infiltrated by prescriptions. . . . To the extent that these language games are accompanied by prescriptions . . ., then the idea of justice must regulate these obligations. (Lyotard and Thébaud 1985, 96–97)

Lyotard moves beyond Faigley’s characterization, however, suggesting that while “there is first a multiplicity of justices, each one of them defined in relation to the rules specific to each game . . ., [j]ustice here does not consist merely in the observance of the rules; as in all games, it consists
in working at the limits of what the rules permit, in order to invent new
moves, perhaps new rules and therefore new games” (100).

The obligation produced by linkages is not only to oneself or other
thinking, feeling human beings but also to the linkages themselves. By
mobilizing the elementary patterns of discourse that drive composition,
style provides the means by which the implications and probable out-
comes of linkages are both accessible and malleable. Such an ethics of
style opens the possibility that those who speak might find a way to be
heard and makes the third canon the generative engine for communi-
cation in a postmodern world.

Charles Paine agitates for precisely this approach in the classroom,
what he calls a “responsible pedagogy” based on individuals’ “perme-
ability” and openness to the dissonance inherent in postmodern culture
(1999, xiv, xiii). Living with chaos and conflict—the discourses and
power relations that create them—is best managed through stylistic self-
awareness, the acceptance that style implicates not only selfhood but also
society because, in Lanham’s words, rhetoric “allocates emphasis and
attention,” underlies “the construction and allocation of attention-stra-
tures” (1993, 61, 227). Paine underwrites and extends this conclusion: “It
would be far more valuable to allow our students to, as Lanham puts it,
‘mix motives,’ oscillating between the critical distance of the intellectual
and ‘the getting things done’ motive—or even the profit motive—of the
everyday world” (Paine 1999, 201). As with the world it intersects, stylistics
must accept the variability of human motives, of unknowable (or at least
inexpressible) feelings and attitudes, and focus on that which it does, and
can do, effectively: remind each of us that her capacity to act through
rhetoric depends on how her (inter)(re)action affects others’ capacity to
do likewise. Above all else, her obligation is not only to speak, not only
to be heard, but also to enable in good faith and with goodwill others’
speaking and being heard, however various the motives or potential out-
comes.

As rhetoric-composition has matured, it has become increasingly com-
mon for its practitioners to refer to rhetorics (in the plural) as a gesture
toward the presence of divergent attitudes about and formulations of
rhetorical theory. One popular textbook, for example, bears the title
Everything’s an Argument, privileging argumentation as the informing prin-
ciple behind rhetorical action, whereas the title of the rhetorical reader A
World of Ideas implicitly argues that discursive action is driven not by the
world per se but rather by the world of intellectual inquiry and discovery.
The vantage points offered by various rhetorical theories are complementary even in their conflicts, however, precisely because they (re)inscribe the multithreaded history of rhetoric from its birth in the ancient Greece of 2,500 years ago. In that helter-skelter world of burgeoning literacy and rational inquiry, ars rhetorike was far from monolithic, much less unitary. It is only right, then, that rhetoric-composition, the contemporary discipline that has sprung from those roots, should begin to reexamine the multiple character of its history and tradition.

Likewise, the ethical dimension of style need not be expressed as a unitary precept or principle. The exigencies of context intermingle with the values that may (or may not) be shared by author and audience, intermingle in ways that thwart formalized inquiry. What remains is not to accede to a radical relativism that allows any discursive action providing it might somehow be excused by tenuous arguments or rationalizations. On the contrary, the intermingling of exigency and value is precisely what rhetoric controls through language, Lanham’s “‘economics’ of human attention-structures,” and nothing short of willful blindness could produce a stylistics that is not, at heart, built on that principle (1993, 227). Stylistic rhetoric draws on that intermingling to provide both writers and readers with bottom-up opportunities for making prudent discursive choices. Ethics, in this view, becomes the direct consequence of rhetorical action, the language choices interlocutors make/enact through stylistic strategies. The obligation I assume to my readers comes, therefore, as a result of my making discursive choices, and it is the character of that obligation that determines the ethics of our discursive interaction, the consequences of my working through words in the world: “[E]thics is also the obligation of rhetoric. It is accepting the responsibility for judgment. It is a pausing to reflect on the limits of understanding. It is respect for diversity and unassimilated otherness. It is finding the spaces to listen” (Faigley 1992, 239).