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Review Essay

Reflections on Style and the Love of Language

Learning from Language: Symmetry, Asymmetry, and Literary Humanism

Walter H. Beale

Pittsburgh: U Pittsburgh P, 2009. 196 pp.

Out of Style: Reanimating Stylistic Study in Composition and Rhetoric

Paul Butler

Logan: Utah State UP, 2008. 181 pp.

Performing Prose: The Study and Practice of Style in Composition

Chris Holcomb and M. Jimmie Killingsworth

Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2010. 203 pp.

Academic Writing in a Global Context: The Politics and Practices of Publishing in English

Theresa Lillis and Mary Jane Curry

New York: Routledge, 2010. 203 pp.

A Taste for Language: Literacy, Class, and English Studies

James Ray Watkins Jr.

Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2009. 181 pp.

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Stylin— (*stay-lin*) v. *Lookin good, walkin tall, en mode, dress so fine.*
Look at her in dem new rags from 5th Avenue. She stylin.
Stylin—(*staaaaay-lin*) v. *Exaggerating or telling an outright lie.*
That ain no Armani. You stylin!

.....

Style—*performance, playing with language, elevated language, a consciousness about language for effect, maybe even for affect, one of the five canons of rhetoric—elocutio—becoming associated with pronunciation (What you mean “rrrain in Spain”? You stylin.), tied to the canon pronuntiatio, delivery—also associated with pronunciation (You staaaaay-lin)*

Source—Victor Villanueva, Auburn University

A box comes in the mail: five books, all about language, some about English studies in the United States, one about English studies or, more precisely, the use of English outside of the United States, a couple specifically about style. They're intended to hang together, somehow, to form the basis of one of those CCC reviews of new stuff in our biz. And so I read, enjoying them all—all, mind you—not a negative in the lot (or the same negative throughout all but one, maybe, but more of that in parentheticals throughout). But what ties them together? Language. Something about language and love. Something about language and politics, politics as in geopolitics or class politics. And something about *style*. Two are specifically about style. All say something about style in one sense or another. But it's style that strikes me—as a subject, as that which draws me into what I'm reading, as part of what I would suggest should make all of these books worth reading, even reading carefully.

I will surely reread Walter H. Beale's *Learning from Language: Symmetry, Asymmetry, and Literary Humanism*. It begins and ends with the assertion that those of us who work in English studies, whether creative writers, literary scholars, linguists, rhetoricians, or compositionists (and I'm carefully not asserting a hierarchy here), claim a "love of words." When pressed, however, we can't be sure what we mean by that. The argument through nine chapters (1 through 8 and a concluding chapter) is that those of us who are "literary humanists" are intuitively drawn to the notion of language's symmetry, that even as we recognize the arbitrariness to language, its asymmetry, we wish to grant language greater power than that, as transcendent. Beale even confesses his being drawn to the theological-as-transcendent in language—the Word in St. John, in Genesis, in Augustine, in (as antistrophe) Goethe's *Faust*, the

scholar Faust declaring “I calmly write: ‘In the beginning was the Deed!’” (84), in a penultimate chapter titled “Style and Divinity,” even in the references to Burke’s *Rhetoric of Religion*, his pentad, his Four Master Tropes, his own wishes for rhetorical-poetical transcendence.

This book cannot be summarized. It’s really too grand and expansive and too beautifully written for that. It isn’t to say that the other books aren’t wonderful also, or even that they lack breadth. It is to say that at bottom I would suggest that we all make this journey ourselves, enjoy something of the gentleman scholar whose work embodies three-fifths of what we do in conventional English departments, insofar as there is little in the book that involves composition or creative writing (some, but not much), and whose style is like Cicero’s *delectare*, especially in the way that Holcomb and Killingsworth demonstrate it (74–76), the plain style (clean, crisp sentences), but with elements of the high style in its range of allusions (though in saying this, I’m walking into a hornets’ nest, or at least a Butler’s nest, insofar as Butler’s book aims to complicate our commonsense notions of style), something in between Walker Gibson’s *sweet* and his *stuffy*. I simply enjoyed the writing as much as the reading.

But even though this book cannot be summarized, I am obliged to encapsulate. The opening chapter sets the terms: *symmetry, asymmetry, literary humanism*. After a brief introduction, the chapter moves into the status of Latin within “Western” culture (the scare quotes signifying how someone from the Western Hemisphere ought to think twice about which “western” we’re discussing—not even a “Western Movie” is Western in the Western Culture sense; but I digress; Beale shouldn’t be faulted for not doing what he never intended to do). Beale presents the biases and the faults in those biases of an eighteen-century supposition of the superiority of Latin. From this to a lovely explanation of “Symmetry versus Asymmetry”:

Symmetry and asymmetry . . . are not two forms of literary humanism but two contrary ways of thinking that have motivated and informed it. They connect to philosophical issues of a broader sort, and they connect to specific practices in the language arts. Historically, symmetry has been the more enchanting proposition and the more powerful motivator, though the more difficult to explain and defend. (16)

Nor will Beale defend symmetry, but he will assert that though many of the arguments that he details (and many that he does not, surely) cannot be justified and have even led to some not-helpful pedagogical practices, “the basic intuition of symmetry is never wholly wrong—language is worth listening

to and learning from” (174). And on the way to that conclusion, we read of Plato versus the Sophists as a matter of the asymmetrical (Plato) versus the symmetrical; Augustine’s internal conflicts about the word (as a rhetorician) and the Word (as the converted). Chapter 3 takes us to the “six claims of symmetry.” For each claim he presents (Symmetry of Sounds, Words, Grammar, “Diagrammatic Iconicity,” Language and Culture, and Language and Imagination) he provides a commentary, sympathetic to the claim and discussing the inherent complications or fallacies thereto. It’s a fun read, even when wishing to disagree (as I would for the discussion of Language and Culture, say, not really in defense of Sapir and Whorf, but as one who has traveled languages and cultures; he makes fine gestures to dialect, but there is the superlative of *language*, and I want to disagree, don’t know that I can, but do know that I want to; and I think that’s his point).

The next chapters take us to linguistics, theology versus the philosophy of linguistics, speech-act theory, *langue* and *parole*, naming versus designating, figures and tropes, with Vico and Burke and the Four Master Tropes. And in terms of style, Beale turns, of course, to the ancients and the canon of style but works his verbal and scholarly magic on them (and in so saying I teeter between the symmetrical and the asymmetrical), noting that there is a compass to discourse, that the stylistic encompasses not only up and down (plain to high, say) but a left and right (an out and in): a making, a saying, an exploring, and a doing. All that happens in fully developed discourse. It’s quite a journey through “Western” studies in language—the poetic, the linguistic, the rhetorical, the philosophical, the theological. If you are one to find reading Burke fun, you will find Beale fun (and easier, stylistically, to read).

To the extent that Beale’s *Learning from Language* is broad in its philosophical considerations of language, Theresa Lillis and Mary Jane Curry’s *Academic Writing in a Global Context* is broad in its political considerations. Where Beale’s study says nothing of economies and only a passing reference to empire (in reference to Augustine, the guy from Africa, not an African in the racialized sense, but not a mention of empire as part of the explanation for the power of Latin—theology, yes, but a theology tied to the Holy Roman Empire, the crucifix on the hilt of the sword, to paraphrase Eduardo Galeano, and the Roman Empire before it), Lillis and Curry cannot bypass the politics of English in the current global economy. Theirs is a presentation of an eight-year longitudinal study of the problems confronted by those who are not from English-speaking countries of the center, nor from English as a language of

education or commerce countries. Invoking the terms of Immanuel Wallerstein (5) and his world-systems perspective, Lillis and Curry divide the world into core, semi-periphery, and periphery, in this case determined by language as well as economic power. Although the researchers come from the United States and from the United Kingdom, and though they recognize that most of the “international” journals are English journals also located in those two countries, they avoid taking their participants from either of those countries, nor from Scandinavian and Western European countries in which English is the language of higher education (as Latin once was), or from countries of the semi-periphery linguistically, like Sri Lanka, in which English is a national language of prestige (again tied to empire). Rather, their participants are fifty scholars from twelve institutions located in Slovakia, Hungary, Spain, and Portugal. The participants’ disciplinary fields (like the researchers’) are psychology and education.

The work described in *Academic Writing in a Global Context* is large and complex. Their research method is “text-oriented ethnography,” by which they mean all kinds of texts: those written by the participants, face-to-face discussions, correspondence, research notes, telephone discussions, email, other kinds of documentation—including rejection letters from those “international” journals (with the scare quotes insisted upon by Lillis and Curry, since it is a monodirectional transnational set of transactions—to English, to the economic and cultural core). The “key questions” of the book, they write, are:

- In what ways is the global status of English influencing academic text production and exchange in the twenty-first century?
- To what extent can English be viewed as the global “academic lingua franca”?
- How is the status of English in academic knowledge production maintained and sustained through key national, transnational and supranational institutions?
- How are individual scholars in non-Anglophone contexts responding to the pressures to publish in English?
- What kinds of knowledge are “staying local” and which are “going global”?
- What kinds of texts and knowledge “travel” across national and transnational boundaries? (2)

As is clear from this set of questions, the book is complex, the style in keeping with what Lillis and Curry call “the norms of Enlightenment Science” (123): the kind of disinterested, “objective” discourse we recognize as scientific discourse. But despite the syntactic and discursive “tone” (a troublesome word for Holcomb and Killingsworth, who prefer *footing*, as I’ll discuss below), Lillis and Curry are far from dispassionate or disinterested. Their biases are clear: English might well be the academic market’s lingua franca, but that poses a clear disadvantage to those most in need of the benefits that can obtain from publication—which means publication in English.

Given Lillis and Curry’s “key questions,” *Academic Writing in a Global Context* considers the style of book production, of research presentation. Rather than a linear exposition that would go on for many hundreds of pages, the book uses inserts and graphs and table-summaries to convey the richness of the research, to give us insights into the participants, to allow us to see the responses of the participants to questions, the comments of “language brokers” (translators of various sorts—like language translators and discipline-specific translators, “brokers” allude to the set of disciplinary, cultural, and linguistic problems that inhere in translation). There isn’t a clear distinction between “research” and “discussion” in the use of inserts, tables, charts, summaries, and discussion, however. One is forced to consider, to read alinearly, if one is drawn to the issues under discussion, issues about what it means to be the dominant language in academic settings. In the end, the book is a research study that acts as a powerful empirical polemic, an intentional oxymoron (stylin) on my part, marking how Lillis and Curry (or their findings) blur the lines between the kind of exposition one assumes of scientific discourse and the kind of argument one expects of polemics.

I was most struck by the comments of reviewers of submissions by the non-English speakers. I’ve been an “anonymous” reviewer many times over the years, and I’m ever conscious of having the potential to ruin as much as to help a writer’s chances. But I’ve never been in the position (at least not that I’m aware) to decide the fate of someone working in a language and from an environment far distanced from English (I’ve worked with those whose language isn’t primarily English, but they were here, in the United States, doing work in journals that didn’t pronounce themselves “international”). In a section titled “Textual ideologies in gatekeeping the boundaries between local and global,” Lillis and Curry provide these kinds of comments from reviewers:

As regards the language the text also needs some revision. There are formulations that, in my view, are a little bit over the top and too pretentious (for instance “This paper is situated at the cross-roads of the idea . . . with the belief . . .”; “Theory that a theoretical and empirical tradition . . . “social transformations of our times.”) Maybe it is not the language, but it is just too Latin for a North-Western European. (150)

Or these comments:

These papers do not want reading, they want translation. Poor writing doesn't encourage the reader to turn the page to read more about the ms. This comment is not about the authors' competence in scientific English. It is about thinking. Using weasel words (“phenomena,” “approach,” “consideration”) is useless to the reader. Their sole utility is to fill a void in the author's mind. One author—the one who's fond of “phenomena” and “approach”—Freudianly forgot to paginate his or her ms, while directly allowing himself or herself sentences 50-word long and more. And what about using weasel words 92 times (the word “perspective”) as one author allowed himself or herself to do (in the ms X). Talking about long sentences, our prize goes to the ms with one sentence 83-word long. (152)

The reviewers would be chagrined (I would hope) to read Lillis and Curry's account of scholars trying word-by-word translations from Hungarian (94), the troubles in affording translators, the troubles of simple access to libraries, never mind research facilities. Lillis and Curry note what Robert Phillipson calls *Linguistic Imperialism* and “English-Only Europe,” matters that never occurred to me, as I romanticized at the linguistic fluidities of Europeans, my own experience in Europe very limited, a short time in the southwestern France where, when my French faltered, my Spanish—not my English—came to the rescue. Whatever my agreements with Horner and Trimbur, who in “English Only and U.S. College Composition” speak of a time to reconsider monolingual comp classrooms (and I do agree), the argument can always be made that the United States is de facto an official English state (although we know that historically it's tended to be German-English, a matter about which I've written elsewhere). No such argument should obtain for Europe, for Eastern Europe, for Spain and Portugal. There is an imposed “style,” *international* is *staaaaay-lin*.

So there's a particular style that obtains for academic success in Europe: it is English, and it is an English that we can say reflects a scientific discourse (Enlightenment science). And we can also say that those of us who work in principally monolingual environments (i.e., within U.S. English departments) make a claim for loving the word, maybe even especially those of us who can move in several languages. And we also recognize that what we do has a certain

privilege. I'd even dare say that those who are most exploited by University, Inc.—the non-tenure-track faculty (insofar as graduate students, while they are graduate students, hold the hope for a time when the exploitation will be less apparent)—do what they do because they are lovers of language and recognize there is a privilege in doing this particular underpaid work—which isn't to say that the principal reason for putting up with it all is not economic; of course it is. This all speaks to *A Taste for Language: Literacy, Class, and English Studies*, the latest entry in the CCCC Studies in Writing and Rhetoric series, written by James Ray Watkins Jr.

A Taste for Language is a delightful monograph, a mix of biography, autobiography, a kind of composition history, and polemics. The style of the writing is gracious, for the most part, lovely storytelling mixed with theory and considerations for a field, its history, its trajectory, a mixed genre (for which I hold a certain affection). This is the story of a working-class white man, the son of tenant farmers, who went to college on the GI Bill and lived out the rest of his life as the middle class, an accountant, a husband, and the father of four, one who wasn't all that interested in the literary yet instilled in his son, the author of the monograph, "a taste for language." That seeming contradiction of a literate but not literary household is captured in a single sentence:

I have always enjoyed writing and being a writer, which my father once told me was fine, as long as I did not end up a suicide like Hemingway. (40)

There are nuggets like this through the first three-quarters of the book, insights I would never have gotten about the frugal white middle class, not quite *Leave It to Beaver* nor *The Honeymooners*, somewhere in between.

The theoretical lynchpin of the book is Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital, in particular the contrasting epistemologies between a formalist aesthetic and a popular ethos, which translates for Watkins to the ethos contained in comp studies and the aesthetics that obtains in literary studies, though he's not quite so flat-footed as this makes him sound. His more subtle rendering is of "that ability to shift from a framework of ethos to one of aesthetics, a fluency in conceptual or epistemological code-switching, [that] succinctly defines the cultural capital of English studies" (4). He makes his case by way of a kind of "textual ethnography," to borrow from Lillis and Curry, looking at the first-year comp textbook his father had used as a returning vet in 1947, after some time in construction with Uncle Pops. Although I'm using Lillis and Curry's term for what Watkins does, his own preference is to Deborah Brandt's work on

working literacy, an accumulated literacy, with Watkins telling of his father's accumulation of literacy that leads to the further accumulation that is his own.

Watkins begins with his father's comp textbook, *Unified English Composition* by Sanders et al., published in 1946. A rhetorical analysis of the text reflects that it is not a preparation for a job as much as a preparation for entry into the professional middle class. It notes precision in grammar and in diction. It notes the ways in which language might be imprecise but how educated people come to agree to some terms over others, some ways of relating those terms over others. It is, in other words, geared toward accumulating the ethos of the middle-class American (who might not be a woman and is surely not bilingual, at least that's my inference), of acquiring the cultural capital of that class (with the implications about race mentioned explicitly, if parenthetically):

Language is a problem if used incorrectly, and the technicalities of grammar and syntax are taught in hopes of avoiding an inaccurate reproduction of the author's originating perception. Moreover, the ability to spell correctly, to be precise yet vivid and so to faithfully reproduce preexisting knowledge, and so on, is itself evidence of an educated, middle-class sensibility. (56)

Watkins, turning to the likes of Berlin and Bloom no less than Bourdieu on the theoretical, to the books of his father's education and his father's life, underscores the university and English as that which would over time increase the sphere of influence from upper-middle-class white men to those of other classes.

Then, writes Watkins, comes Cleanth Brooks and New Criticism. This, argues Watkins, marks a turning point, where even though class mobility remains a part of the goal of pedagogy, the primary object is to inculcate a formalist aesthetic epistemology as the foundation for all language apprehension. Eventually, Watkins comes to our time, when there are more and more adjuncts and fewer professionals, where the epistemology of ethos is reasserting itself though struggling against the digital paradigm, where the cry for a return to vocationalism is being heard, with Watkins arguing for something in between. That something is what he calls "Writing in the Wild,"

a series of balancing acts. On the one hand, we must accept our students' vocational goals as legitimate expressions of their desire to maintain or strengthen their socioeconomic position; on the other, we must seek out ways to persuade them that the contemplative reflective traditions of the academy are important to their professional social futures. Indeed, our goals ought to be even larger: to convince students that despite their apparent impracticality, the critical methodologies of the school have immediate professional application. (130)

And Watkins lays out the principles to make that happen. Finally, he argues that part of what needs to happen for English departments, for universities in general, is that the hierarchy from staff to full professor must be dismantled. In the end, he calls for a common union for all academics. And here I recall the old Latin American joke of the revolutionary who goes to the campesino, or farmer, to explain socialism:

Revolutionary: Campesino, if you have two houses, would you give one to the state to provide shelter to the people?

Campesino: Sí, patrón; why not?

Revolutionary: Or if you have two cars, would you give one to the state to provide transportation to the people?

Campesino: Sí, patrón, of course.

Revolutionary: Or if you have two chickens, would you give one to the state to feed the people?

Campesino: No.

Revolutionary: No? Why not?

Campesino: I *have* two chickens.

I'm not being Hobbesian here, arguing that there is nothing but self-interest, nor am I taking issue with the underlying premise—that the hierarchy be staaaaay-lin—but there is something about dismantling the system that sounds mighty unlikely, as we watch collective bargaining for teachers going out the window despite huge protests in the spring of 2011.

And maybe part of the problem is that though this book is about class, it's really an uncomplicated notion of class, in some sense. I like what Watkins writes about the silence of the middle, like the descriptions of the mid-twentieth-century worker rising to a kind of middle that I don't think would carry quite the same dignity today, but there is so much interesting stuff about classes outside of our English discussions, more than Bourdieu, himself a kind of cultural capital, the one who writes of class in almost aesthetic ways, the one to whom literary and rhetorical types tend to turn, who doesn't get down to the nitty-gritty of the class system. I was surprised, in fact, not to find Dews and Law's collection on working-class academics, *This Fine Place So Far From Home*, or Shepard, McMillan, and Tate's *Coming to Class*, which is about composition teachers, among Watkins's references (though I was delighted to see

James Sledd, even though he once included me among the “boss compositionists”). But for all that, I learned of an important take on Bourdieu’s references to ethos versus aesthetics, and more important, I was introduced to the life of a kind of family I would otherwise know nothing about, a tale told in a manner that was compelling, compassionate, but never melancholy.

But of all the books under review here, I felt most at home as a compositionist in Paul Butler’s *Out of Style: Reanimating Stylistic Study in Composition and Rhetoric*. Like Beale, he turns to all the fields that comprise English studies to explain style and to explain what happened to style. He writes that the perception that style lost favor in our discussions because it was associated with the current-traditional product orientation as opposed to the writing-process movement is incorrect. He argues, in fact, that the Golden Age of Style was the 1960s through the mid-1980s. The years 1979 to 1985 mark my time as a graduate student, so that reading about Lauer and Berthoff and Francis Christensen, about Young, Becker, and Pike (who allude to James Moffett in the quote mentioned by Butler, though Butler seems not to know it), about the rise of Chomsky and about sentence combining were all downright nostalgic, no less than rehearsing the discussions of style that came out of ancient Greco-Roman rhetorics.

But nostalgia doesn’t quite get at it. There’s more. He does what he sets out to do—reinvigorate style by pointing to the ways these various rhetoricians, compositionists, and linguists were in fact discussing style. We tell that history as the time of the centrality of invention, but Butler argues persuasively that the discussions on invention were always tied to style, if *style* is defined as “the deployment of rhetorical resources, in written discourse, to create and express meaning” (3). And he argues, about a third of the way through the book, that a reanimation of style would not only help form better writing but would also reanimate invention. And in the process he reinvigorates a history that is dynamic, a history that might reinvigorate other young scholars to remember a Golden Age of Comp, perhaps.

He also argues convincingly that style never did really fall out of our discussions but was both scattered and absorbed, that it became a part of the ecology of discussions of writing (absorbed) and dispersed, for which he likes the term *diaspora* (a term that folks of color might have problems seeing depoliticized, maybe even trivialized in this way). Style becomes a part, he writes, of the discussions concerning genre, rhetorical analysis, the personal and memoir, and discussions of women and people of color. The Students’ Right to Their Own

Language, he writes, “is fundamentally—and has been since its inception—an explicit and implicit call to style for the field” (129). And there is something to that: as we experiment with expression, we are playing with style (though less to call attention to style than to call attention to language and culture). A consciousness of style, of learning about, developing an affinity for, and teaching style will give us a way to counter public arguments against what we do, for we are constantly criticized for not doing what they believe we ought to be doing (teaching grammar, teaching form, not content, etc.), but they could understand style, especially if we argued for what we do in a compelling style. This is a call for us to be stylin in public discourse.

And how one goes about that becomes the subject of *Performing Prose: The Study and Practice of Style in Composition* by Chris Holcomb and M. Jimmie Killingsworth. Whereas Butler ties style to invention, Holcomb and Killingsworth tie it to performance—style and delivery in classical Roman rhetoric. The real audience here, however, is students. This is a textbook, a very stylish textbook, insofar as it has none of the bells and whistles of books produced by the textbook market. It’s published by Southern Illinois University Press, presented as a monograph. But the audience is students, students who are treated with respect and with wonderful humor. The author’s innovations are in recognizing that our discussions of voice and tone are oral-isms, more metaphorical than helpful for the student:

But what does it [voice] mean? Too often it means little more than “I like it!” In other words, such references to voice can be a cop-out on the part of the teacher . . . we would hope that teachers might be able to show a path to achieving distinction rather than merely saying, “Keep practicing, and I’ll tell you when you get there.” (57)

That sounds mighty familiar. I remember being complimented as a student for my voice, like I knew what I was doing—or like I knew what the teachers were talking about. Rather than voice or tone, Holcomb and Killingsworth argue for *footing*, a matter of using language to indicate proximity in physical space or in social space. And how they demonstrate it all is sure to resonate with student writers. And the same can be said for their substituting allusion for *sampling*, drawing on the discourse of hip-hop. Beyond that, like Butler and like Beale, Holcomb and Killingsworth take the reader through classical Greco-Roman rhetorics, through figures and tropes, including the Four Master Tropes of Kenneth Burke (though Beale points out that Burke got the concept from Vico), to begin to train the palate to acquire a taste for language.

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