

## THE CHALLENGE OF MAKING AND REDRAWING BOUNDARIES: A PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIO-RHETORICAL CRITICISM

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### Introduction

Formulating a perspective on the work of Vernon Robbins (Robbins 1996a) and (Robbins 1996b), I would like to link to the metaphor of boundaries which is evidently of great importance to Robbins and which he prefers over against the well known metaphor of texts as mirrors and windows. In his preface to *New Boundaries in old territory* (Robbins 1994:xif), he remarks that the choice for new methods inevitably led him to the discovery of new boundaries, but even more to the recognition of the varying significance of boundaries for different people. This is taken up in (Robbins 1996a: 20) where the author reflects on the necessity of creating and dismantling boundaries in and around texts as a necessary step in the process of interpretation. It seems to me that this respect for the boundaries of others but at the same time an unwillingness to bow too deeply before any set of boundaries created by humans, is very characteristic of the socio-rhetorical approach of Robbins. In honouring our late friend and colleague, Hannes Olivier, with this contribution, it seems that the metaphor of challenging and redrawing boundaries in many ways also very aptly fit his contributions as scholar and academic –though not necessarily in the manner referred to by Robbins.

A brief note should be made concerning the relationship between *The Tapestry of early Christian discourse* and *Exploring the texture of texts*. In the first text Robbins deals in an inclusive manner (characteristic of the claims of socio-rhetorical criticism) with various researchers whose work can be seen to be in embryonic or in other manner, unconsciously or implicitly paving the way for the socio-rhetorical approach. The approach is then illustrated in reading 1 Corinthians 9.

In the case of *Exploring the texture of texts* a different audience is apparently envisaged and the approach is more pedagogical with a view to implementing the approach and less interested in the precursors and development of the approach. The most significant difference is the addition of a fifth texture, the *Sacred texture*, in *Exploring the texture of texts*, while the way in which the chapter on the ideological texture is set up, is more helpful to communicate the issue to the reader completely

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foreign to such material. We shall return later to this and other developments in the socio-rhetorical approach.

## **1. Boundaries and the fragmentation of interpretation.**

There is a certain fixation of boundaries in the historical critical approaches (which do not adequately incorporate other approaches), but the same is true of any method, which overemphasizes only one dimension of the text, such as structuralism or linguistics. It should also be noted that form criticism (as used by Bultmann, Dibelius and Schmidt) was also in effect critical of comparing the Gospels to Greco-Roman biographies.

Robbins calls attention to the programmatic presidential address of Amos Wilder at the *Society of Biblical Literature* in 1955. He gives credit to Wilder's appeal to cultural anthropology and folklore and focus on rhetoric and symbolic discourse. Unfortunately it took forty years for his insights to bear fruit (Robbins 1996a: 2). The urgent call by Robbins for dialogue between those focusing on literary and rhetorical phenomena, and those concentrating on historical, social, cultural and ideological issues, must be seen against this background of fragmentation and the call by Wilder to recognize that language should not be fragmented in such a manner.

Perhaps it is this inherent unease with fixed boundaries that is partly responsible for the fact that socio-rhetorical criticism has been continually in transition and evolving by adapting and adopting constructive aspects from diverse methodologies. For the evolution of a socio-rhetorical critical approach since 1975, see Gowler (1994:3), as well as the Preface in Robbins (1992).

## **2. Claims made by socio-rhetorical criticism**

What are the claims being made in the name of the approach being known as socio-rhetorical criticism?

### ***2.1 On the way to an interpretive analytics***

According to Robbins socio-rhetorical criticism claims to be an interpretive program moving toward a broad-based interpretive analytics, as "it invites investigations that enact integrated interdisciplinary analysis and interpretation" (1996a: 13). It renews the interests of the History of Religions school and merges it with new insights from literary, rhetorical and semiotic practices. Socio-rhetorical criticism has to take note of the insights of previous approaches and methods, and it would be a grave mistake to even think of bypassing them. But the claim is also that socio-rhetorical criticism

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can now in quite new ways explore New Testament texts as religious discourse (1996a: 14). This emphasis on the religious dimension of texts is also of great weight, and we shall return to that later.

Interpretive analytics treats texts as discourse, and discourse is to be seen as part of a larger field of power and practice in which different paradigms are operative. Thus socio-rhetorical criticism want to be seen as a "system" approach to interpretation, which implies that presuppositions and strategies in one area have implications for other areas of the model too (see also Phillips 1989:53; Robbins 1996a: 40). It also wants to place itself very deliberately in a new environment of interdisciplinary study of the New Testament where there are now also new resources at our disposal. This means it is a *revalued* or *revisited* form of *rhetorical interpretation*, which is explicitly interdisciplinary in nature, as well as the result of a concerted effort to integrate new practices of interpretation (1996:41).

According to Robbins biblical studies do not need so much a method or theory in the usual sense, but rather an interpretive analytics (Robbins 1996a: 12). Because certain resources, e.g. from the discipline of psychology are still absent, socio-rhetorical criticism must not yet be seen as a full-fledged interpretive analytics, although it is moving in that direction.

## **2.2 Presupposition of socio-rhetorical criticism**

It is important to clarify what the stated presuppositions of socio-rhetorical criticism are.

"Underlying the method is a presupposition that words themselves work in complex ways to communicate meanings that we only partially understand. It also presupposes that meanings themselves have their meanings by their relation to other meanings. In other words, all of our attempts to name truth are limited insights into small aspects of the relation of things and meanings to one another. Interpreters and investigators have acquired amazing abilities, however, to describe the relation of things and meanings in complex but structured ways that are informative about life and the world in which we live. Socio-rhetorical criticism challenges interpreters to use a wide spectrum of these amazing human abilities when they investigate and interpret biblical texts" (Robbins 1996b: 4).

It is also clear that the location and ideology of the interpreter as such is taken very seriously in socio-rhetorical criticism. The biblical interpretation of the interpreter must embody who (s)he is, and socio-rhetorical criticism is Robbins' answer to this challenge. "Socio-rhetorical criticism attempts to nurture such interactive subject-object, body-mind interpretation of texts" (Robbins 1996a: 28).

### **2.3 Goals**

Against this background a major challenge of socio-rhetorical criticism is then to bring together various approaches to the interpretation of texts that are often separated from one another. The remarkable thing is that in ordinary life people normally apply the necessary skills needed for negotiating meaning in the different worlds in which they live. Now socio-rhetorical criticism has as goal "to bring skills we use on a daily basis into an environment of interpretation that is both intricately sensitive to detail and perceptively attentive to large fields of meanings in the world in which we live" (Robbins 1996b: 2).

The purpose is to enable interpreters to have an overall view of life and of the language that we use and to explore a text in a systematic, broad manner that leads to a rich environment of interpretation and dialogue. According to Robbins no complete interpretation of a text is humanly possible. Yet interpreters should be aware of the complexity and the full scope of potentialities of a text when deciding to concentrate on specific dimensions of the text while being fully aware of their own social location and personal interests.

Strangely enough (at least when seen in the light of the reigning ethos in the guild of New Testament scholars) the (idealistic?) goal of socio-rhetorical criticism is not so much mutual agreement, but rather cooperation in the analysis and interpretation of data even among people who disagree. Robbins formulates as an explicit goal of socio-rhetorical criticism to bring different disciplines into dialogue with one another on an equal basis by creating space around and among areas of specialty normally functioning in a strictly disciplinary manner (Robbins 1996a: 42). With a view to illustrate this he displays in *Tapestry* a wide range of strategies in interpreting 1 Corinthians 9 to give the readers an initial perception of the manner in which socio-rhetorical criticism generates multiple strategies for reading and rereading the text.

It is therefore the challenge of socio-rhetorical criticism to confront the interpreter with the relation of texts to society, culture and history. As language is an integral and constitutive feature of human culture and society, the insights of sociolinguistics are very important in this respect (cf. also Blount 1995). To explore these different relations, socio-rhetorical criticism functions as a systematic approach setting multiple ways of interpretation in dialogue with one another in order to nurture a broad-based interpretive analytics.

### **2.4 A new metaphor**

Mention has already been made above to the fact that Robbins prefers the metaphor of boundaries to the metaphor of windows and mirrors. But this functions not only with a view to the necessity of creating boundaries in and around texts, but also to the fact that boundaries created by language have to be taken away again in order to

enable different arenas of understanding to interact in a dynamic manner with each other. It is therefore significant that in the diagram of the socio-rhetorical model of textual communication (Robbins 1996a: 21), the boundaries are broken lines. They actually have gaps facilitating the exchange of meaning and meaning effects from one stage of the diagram to another.

It is therefore important that in socio-rhetorical criticism the boundary dividing the world of the text (represented world) from the information of the real Mediterranean world allows language and other texts to pass through these boundaries just as information and material data. One has to realise that "both the ancient Mediterranean world as we infer it and our own world, conscious and unconscious to us, flow into the text. Texts are in the world and of it" (Robbins 1996a: 22).

But the metaphor that really determines both recent publications, is the metaphor of a text seen from the perspective of weaving, as a thick tapestry which can be looked at from different angles bringing multiple textures of the text into view (see Dean 1998). And whereas in *Tapestry* four textures were named (inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture), in *Exploring* a fifth one was added, sacred texture. This metaphor of the thick nature of texts as well as the many angles from which the same text can be approached, proved to be a felicitous choice, especially when combined with the idea of borders with gaps that allow a free flow of language and information.

### **2.5 Distinctive features**

Mention has already been made to the important relation between texts and society, Christianity and culture. The consistent emphasis on this relation is one of the most distinctive features of socio-rhetorical criticism in its present form. We have just seen that the ancient and modern world can flow into the text, and it is an important characteristic of socio-rhetorical criticism to work this out in more detail and in a systemic manner. This awareness of the role of social control, conflict, and change sensitizes the interpreter to be aware of different cultural manifestations of Christianity and that one may even refer to the New Testament texts as the "cultures" of New Testament Christianity (Robbins 1996a: 5).

This interchange between text and world is almost all pervasive in socio-rhetorical criticism. In dealing with inner texture, the first of the textures, one might think that we are dealing here with an intrinsic or text-immanent approach. This has changed in socio-rhetorical criticism by placing the results of intrinsic analysis in dialogue with other disciplines dealing with other textures of the text. To this has been added the real reader/audience as interactive counterpart of the real author in the construction of the inner texture of the text (Robbins 1996a: 30). It is furthermore important to note that in the discussion of the inner texture Robbins in a consistent manner

underscores the effect of the patterns of repetition and progression to persuade and convince the reader (Robbins 1996b: 37).

The contribution of the analysis of the *opening-middle-closure* of texts also contributes to the distinctiveness of socio-rhetorical criticism. Whereas in traditional source, form and redaction criticism analytical comparison of the synoptic Gospels or passages in Paul is to be done before a holistic analysis of a specific text on its own terms, in socio-rhetorical criticism this holistic analysis should be done *before* the comparative analysis. The process is thus reversed by socio-rhetorical criticism (Robbins 1996a: 53).

In dealing with the *narrational texture and pattern*, a socio-rhetorical analysis tries to overcome the limitation of the narrational and narratological analyses of literary critics in which the narrator is actually seducing the interpreter. In such analyses the interpreter follows the narrator as her reliable guide without taking the rhetorical dimension of the narration fully into consideration or making clear how the narrator advances the goals of the implied author (Robbins 1996a: 55).

The rhetorical nature of texts really comes to the fore when attention is given to the *argumentative texture*. Here the role of logical or syllogistic reasoning is dealt with, and especially the function of unstated premises in discourse (Robbins 1996a: 59). This leads to the discussion of the role of the enthymeme, which has recently given rise to a lively and as yet undecided discussion on the Internet.

Closely related to this is the discussion of the implications for analysis and interpretation of the manner in which people were able to develop a *chreia* into a speech or an extended argument. This means that large portions of the tradition of Jesus were transmitted in this kind of reasoning in the context of speech and action in a form which would have been widely understandable and known in Mediterranean society (Robbins 1996a: 61). One also has to realize that *chreia* was functioning as a medium of transmitting culture. "The discourse features Jesus embodying topics that have become central to Christian identity. Instead of Jesus creating the discourse, then, the discourse is creating the image of Jesus in Christian tradition" (Robbins 1996a: 63).

One should also distinguish between two types of reasoning, logical and qualitative. Logical progression is when an argument is advancing step by step in a logical manner. Qualitative progression occurs when the quality of images, analogies, examples and citations supplying the implicit reasons encourages the reader to accept the portrayal as true, and they function in a persuasive manner. In this case the reader usually recognizes the appropriateness of the argument only in looking back (Robbins 1996b: 23).

From what has been said so far it must be clear that even the treatment of the inner texture of texts is in socio-rhetorical criticism not simply a text-immanent approach. Already in this first phase of a socio-rhetorical analysis, intertexture, social and cultural texture and ideological texture are already - may it be unconsciously - exerting some influence (Robbins 1996a: 92). This obviously has important consequences when one is considering writing a socio-rhetorical commentary. Even the most technical sections dealing with ostensibly text-immanent material will not escape the influence of the other textures.

Another distinctive characteristic of socio-rhetorical criticism is the way in which it has separated the one broad concept of intertextuality into the separate areas of intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological and sacred texture (Robbins 1996a: 33). The emphasis on all of these dimensions in one systemic approach is really an important contribution. Not only the world represented in the text is being dealt with, but also language and information outside the text being textualized by the author.

In the discussion of *intertexture* in socio-rhetorical criticism, further differences emerge. Robbins is not willing to restrict oral-scribal intertexture to the Hebrew Old Testament, but wants to broaden it to the Greco-Roman world too. Socio-rhetorical criticism also offers a refinement of the analytic procedure in dealing with intertextual echoes in texts. It distinguishes between oral-scribal and cultural intertexture and expands it further into social and historical intertexture (Robbins 1996a: 102).

Socio-rhetorical criticism also deals with cultural intertexture, the knowledge of "insiders" in the form of references or allusions and echoes. These subtle and indirect links evoking concepts from different cultural traditions may or may not be discerned by the audience (Robbins 1996b: 60). And again, while analyses in the past were often either strictly Jewish or strictly Greco-Roman, Robbins is inclined to a bi-cultural interpretation (Robbins 1996a: 115).

After discussing the cultural intertexture and social intertexture, Robbins remarks on the fact that some interpreters choose to remain within a canonical culture when doing intertextual research. For him the real challenge in the field of secular literary studies as well as New Testament studies is to investigate the full range of all possible social and cultural intertextures, and not to refuse engaging texts outside the Jewish (or canonical) tradition.

Just as important, however, is it to be aware of the *social and cultural texture* of texts, making use of sociological and anthropological theory to unravel the social and cultural dimensions of the text of the New Testament. In this manner the interpreter endeavours to explore the social and cultural location of the language and the kind of

social and cultural person a person living in the "world" of the text would be (Robbins 1996b: 71). Specific social topics in the text reveal the different types of religious response to the word. Common social and cultural topics would give a clue to the type of social and cultural systems presupposed, while the final cultural topics would reveal the cultural location and the orientation toward other cultures reflected in the text.

The distinctiveness of socio-rhetorical criticism probably is to be seen especially with reference to the *specific social topics* and the *final cultural categories*, although the consistent integration of all three these aspects of the *social and cultural texture* are also typical of this approach. Attention should also be given to the claim of socio-rhetorical criticism that this attention to the social and cultural texture will enable us to rewrite the history of first-century Christianity. While many may look at Acts as a standard history of the early church, it should be considered that according to Robbins this is a reformist and conversionist response to the world. Acts can be seen as an example of contracultural discourse in relation to the Jewish leaders embedded in subcultural discourse with reference to the values of peace and salvation in the Roman Empire. "In other words, Jewish contraculture discourse interweaves with Mediterranean subculture discourse in Acts to present a favorable view of Christians in the Mediterranean world" (Robbins 1996a: 174). Socio-rhetorical criticism wants to take seriously not only the so-called great traditions, but also all the voices in the New Testament, which are often not heard or not really taken note of.

When we come to the *ideological texture* of the text, we are at the opposite end of the spectrum from inner texture. Ideological analysis has primarily to do with people dialoguing with each other, and with the text as the guest in this conversation (Robbins 1996b: 95). It is further dealing with the links and relations between what we say and believe and the power structures and power relations of society.

This is probably the aspect of socio-rhetorical criticism about which some interpreters may be the most uneasy out of fear that all interpretation will just become ideology (Robbins 1996b: 132). Even though texts are not *only* ideological constructions, they *are* ideological constructions even when it must be kept in mind that the term ideology means different things to different people. As is the case with other dimensions of socio-rhetorical criticism, socio-rhetorical criticism is also building on previous research in this respect. It is again the consistent manner in which this investigating of the ideological texture is being dealt with in relation to all the other textures that is really distinctive. Attention is here given to the people and the text involved in interpretation.



This means that ideological analysis focuses on individuals (including the location of the interpreter) and groups. It also deals with the way in which different types of intellectual discourse and critical approaches to the text can be aligned with different ideological views. Finally it is occupied with the way in which ideology can be found in the text itself by taking into account the social and cultural location of the implied author as well as the power relations in a text. It nevertheless acknowledges that our own interpretations of texts must be subjected to the same strategies used to interpret texts themselves.

The final distinctive characteristic of socio-rhetorical criticism, is its emphasis on the *sacred texture* of the text (Robbins 1996b: 120ff). This is not the first time that attention has been given to this dimension of the text (cf. e.g. Schneiders 1991). But again, in giving attention to the way texts speak about God or divine beings, spirit beings, divine history, human redemption, human commitment, religious community and ethics, this is again done in a systemic manner. In socio-rhetorical criticism the meanings and meaning-effects of sacred texture are investigated by analyzing all the other textures in which the sacred texture is embedded (Robbins 1996b: 130).

In this respect the problematic relationship between rhetoric and religion has to be taken into consideration as according to some this relationship would be as impossible as between the 'harlot of the arts' and the 'queen of the sciences' (Botha & Vorster 1996:17). It has to be noted that socio-rhetorical criticism does not advance the truth claims normally associated with religion when dealing with the sacred texture of the text, but is placing this dimension of the text in relationship to all the other textures as indicated above already.

It is therefore important to see that socio-rhetorical interpretation must be seen as rhetorical hermeneutics. In order to interpret texts in a responsible manner, broader and more flexible paradigms of interpretation are needed. This not only entails multiple modes of interpretation, but also a special interest in religion. Therefore, texts perceived to be religious texts, "call for a wide-ranging, complex, and flexible approach to interpretation" (Robbins 1998c: 3).

But if socio-rhetorical criticism is hermeneutical in nature, what are the implications of the fact that this approach is rhetorical in nature? Steven Mailloux propagates the idea of "rhetorical hermeneutics" (Mailloux 1991:233).

While hermeneutics is on the one hand criticised for being historicist and forcing a textual straightjacket onto religious systems, it is also attacked for neglecting the "power" of the text and restricting meaning to reconstructed-meaning-as-historical meaning". Over against such exclusivistic approaches, socio-rhetorical hermeneutics entails an interactionist approach.

"Its procedures are multiple, dynamic, and non-polarizing. A primary goal of socio-rhetorical interpretation is to integrate the study of religion as a humanistic discipline, a theological discipline, and a social-scientific discipline. The choice of the term 'rhetorical' moves beyond the confines of literary studies to the interrelation of communication, theology, philosophy, and the social sciences. The prefix 'socio-' in the phrase 'socio-rhetorical' moves beyond the confines of historical studies to the interrelation of cultural discourse, social contexts and sociological and anthropological theory" (Robbins 1998c: 6).

It is also significant to note that the subject of the interpretation is not only the content of the text (or representative models), but especially the mode of the production of the text - or operational models. While many approaches simply articulate the representational model found in Luke - Acts (seen to be representing the process by which Christianity came into being).

### ***2.6 Adaptability and development***

A remarkable feature of socio-rhetorical criticism is its ability to function effectively even in periods of transition. Gowler refers to the admirable capacity of Robbins for progress and change with the result that socio-rhetorical criticism is continuing to enrich its approach and incorporating criticism and valuable insights of others (1994:13). Robbins himself draws attention to the fact that a *four-texture approach* was not explicit in initial socio-rhetorical interpretations, but that this has developed only during the course of time. In the previous section reference was made to the *sacred texture of texts*. This is an example of development taking place between *The tapestry of early Christian discourse* and *Exploring the texture of texts*.

That Robbins is continually struggling to grapple with the implications of dealing with the text of the New Testament in a rhetorical manner is testified to by the fact that he has recently added another dimension to socio-rhetorical criticism. He posits that while the classical rhetoric in Greece dealt with three modes of rhetoric: judicial, deliberative and epideictic, one can identify six major modes of discourse in early Christian discourse (Robbins 1996d: 353).

In typical manner Robbins again acknowledges antecedents to this form of analysis in the work of F.C.Baur, Robinson and Koester, Burton Mack, Mikhail Bakhtin and the insights of sociolinguistics and cultural anthropology. He ventures to analyse the different kinds of rhetoricity in the various kinds of early Christian discourse as well as the relation of the discursive traditions to one another (Robbins 1996d: 355).

Robbins builds upon the insight of Bakhtin that language is not monological and that one has to acknowledge the dialogical nature of multiple voices in all literature, every society, and every culture, and that every language is always in a state of change. In

contradistinction to a *sociolect*, which is a variety of language based on a social community or social class, and following a suggestion of the sociolinguist, Benjamin H. Hary of Emory, he proposes the term *rhetorlect* for rhetorical dialects in New Testament discourse.

"A rhetorlect is a form of language variety or discourse identifiable on the basis of a distinctive configuration of themes, topics, reasonings and argumentations. Six major rhetorlects appear in early Christian discourse: wisdom, miracle, apocalyptic, opposition, death- resurrection, and cosmic discourse. Each type of discourse is a rhetorlect which certain early Christians may or may not have spoken and intermingled with other discourses" (Robbins 1996d: 356).

Different early Christian writings consisted of the interaction of these different rhetorlects that would introduce specific socio-rhetorical features to the discourse. The interaction of these different rhetorlects created what can be called early Christian discourse. Incorporating again an insight from Clifford Geertz, Robbins underlines the fact that culture is organized in a 'logico-meaningful' manner. From this it follows that a particular culture (a system of beliefs and attitudes) is generated and nurtured by rhetorical reasoning. When one accepts that a cultural system can be compared to a set of major and minor premises, a rhetorlect then contains major and minor theses with theses about God and the world supported by rationales and the other typical elements of an argument. "In the context of this broader look at culture, different rhetorlects contain reasoning that reveals the logico-meaningful integration of different minicultures within a larger, overarching culture" (Robbins 1996d: 356).

It seems as if the identification of syllogistic reasoning in these different discourses in the New Testament, will be the issue for important further discussion and reflection (Cf. the discussion on the Internet and Robbins 1996c).

### **2.7 A rhetorical approach**

In his introduction to *Exploring the texture of texts* Robbins exhibits a remarkable accommodating approach to people interested in using socio-rhetorical criticism. A person is not even required to follow the order of the book but one could start immediately with analysing the sacred (last) texture of a text, or any other texture for that matter, depending on one's own personal special interest. Although an interpreter is not required to go through all the textures, (s)he is continually encouraged to thicken and deepen the interpretation by analysing at least two or three other textures.

"The interplay among these textures initiates a dialogical environment among multiple modes of perceiving a text and multiple modes for a text to function within the lives of people" (Robbins 1996b: 6).

Robbins closes the text of this book by inviting the reader to share in using multiple skills of memory, reasoning, playing etc.

### **2.8 The interpreter's location and ideology**

Mention has already been made of the role of ideology in the text and in the process of interpretation. At this stage it is just important to give a reminder that in socio-rhetorical criticism peoples' interpretations of texts must be subjected to the same strategies used to interpret texts themselves. It is for this reason that in socio-rhetorical criticism it is necessary to be clear and explicit concerning one's own location and ideology as interpreter (Robbins 1996a: 24ff, 41).

## **3. Further specific contributions**

It is interesting that whereas in *The tapestry of early Christian discourse* rhetorical elaboration is discussed in the chapter dealing with *inner texture* (Robbins 1996a: 62, 77), the issue of narrative amplification and thematic elaboration is discussed in *Exploring the texture of texts* explicitly when dealing with *intertexture* (Robbins 1996b: 51ff). This takes into account the progress being made in the research on the role of *chreia*.

### **3.1 More clarity on role of the Chreia in argumentation**

The distinction currently being made between the rhetorical expansion of a *chreia* and the two levels of elaboration (see Robbins 1993: xiii) must be seen as a definite improvement on the lack of clarity in earlier attempts by Burton Mack (see now Mack 1993:283). It is also important to note that the first level of elaboration usually refers to the "topics" or "headings" of rhetoric. The second level of elaboration uses the list of arguments constituting the complete argument in *Ad Herrenium*.

Mack also questions the use of the term "levels" of elaboration as it could suggest layers in some developmental sequence, although Robbins admittedly does not propose such a thesis and apparently has in mind something like the level of complexity or even the degree of approximation to the complete argument.. As important as the role of the complete argument may be, Mack feels that the work of Robbins on the many ways in which the *chreia* can function in argumentation has in effect lessened the importance of the "complete argument". For such reasons Mack questions whether "level" is the appropriate term for the distinctions being observed (1993:284).

Another major advance has to do with the position of the major pronouncement in a pronouncement story in the argumentation as a whole. It is very helpful to observe that it can be in the beginning or at the end depending on the rhetorical strategy of an expanded or an elaborated *chreia*. The flow of argumentation is frequently reversed when changing from one type of amplification to another. Robbins has to

be credited for recognising that the features in pronouncement stories can actually be correlated with the compositional practices of the ancients, and were even named by them (Mack 1993:284).

### **3.2 Scriptural citation in elaborated chreia**

This seems to be another area where a real contribution has been made by socio-rhetorical criticism. Quotations from the Old Testament have often been treated rhetorically as examples of authoritative or "precedent judgment". In this respect the recent publications of Robbins are building on an article by Dean-Otting and himself (Dean-Otting and Robbins 1993).

Whereas citations have often been seen to function in deliberative speech and there functioning in inartistic manner (referring to exhibits or laws), they drew attention to the fact that citations were also used in judicial rhetoric and then also in an artistic manner. This is now very clear in the discussion of oral-scribal intertexture and cultural intertexture. When this is considered in the context of the different exercises that Theon describes, it becomes clear that recitation, recontextualisation and reconfiguration can contribute to narrative amplification. This phenomenon can be placed in an even broader context, that of cultural intertexture. Cultural intertexture may be detected in a text either in the form of a reference or an allusion, or an echo. Robbins illustrates this by showing how in Mark 15 the sequences of scenes follow those of the text of Dio Chrysostom and in this way reversed the order of scenes in Ps 22 (Robbins 1996b: 61). This means that Old Testament quotations were treated as part of a reservoir of cultural images that could be used for rhetorical purposes.

"To establish the fact of such *rhetorical* freedom in the citation of the scriptures is surely an important advance in our quest to understand the authorities that may have been operant in the early Jesus movements" (Mack 1993:285).

### **3.3 Logic and social function of humour**

A promise of socio-rhetorical criticism perhaps not realised adequately enough, is the awareness of the logic and social function of humour in texts. This has to be investigated further and it could have important implications for our reading of the Gospels (Mack 1993:287).

### **3.4 Role of paradigms**

In an earlier article, Andersen and Robbins have shown that paradigms function in the domain of inductive argumentation, making their case by appealing to a particular example in support of a speaker, or a thesis or a part of an argument (Andersen and Robbins 1993:3f). In order for paradigms to function effectively, some important person or moment should provide the authoritative quality. In contrast with paradigms, analogies present ordinary occasions, things that people know by

observance and experience, such as planting grain, baking bread etc. The range of functions for paradigms is much more limited, as they deal with special rather than ordinary circumstances.

This is important, as Dibelius had linked paradigms to pronouncement stories (chreiai) in the Gospels claiming that they function as paradigms. It is now acknowledged that a chreia is a form that can be used as paradigm, but also in a variety of other functions (Scott 1993:276). A paradigm is an argument from example, and this may be in the form of a narrative or a chreia. In the light of the fact that early Christians were forming a subculture or counterculture, they were reluctant to incorporate the customary incidents and people from Mediterranean society in their arguments. "The way in which they engage in paradigmatic argumentation, however, has amazing similarities with the way in which paradigmatic argumentation was being employed throughout Mediterranean culture" (Andersen and Robbins 1993:29).

### 3.5 Modifications in order

In passing it may be important to recall that with reference to the rhetoric in a given text, the logic of the argument may be modified and present a different order than that of the fixed speech organisation due to the pressure of conflict in the rhetorical situation.

When discussing the rhetoric OF the text (in contradistinction from the rhetoric IN the text), Parrott is of the opinion "there can be little doubt that a socio-rhetorical approach is more comprehensive than a purely rhetorical one, and represents a step in the right direction" (Parrott 1993:32). He draws our attention to the significance of the way in which attention to the sociological dimensions of conflict in the Gospel of Mark as a whole can contribute to our understanding of the modification of the rhetorical species in a given pericope. This observation again underlines the importance of consistently utilising socio-rhetorical research with a view to the narrative as a whole.

Nevertheless, a literary critic like Ledbetter disputes that the parts are equal to the whole. "I suggest that the answer is no; in fact; as a literary critic, I would suggest that the whole must be held accountable to the parts. ... Perhaps the text's fissure, its ambiguity located only in one pericope, is the text's most profound rhetoric" (Ledbetter 1993:294). The thematic consistency of the whole should not dominate the interpretation of the parts.

#### 4. Further issues

##### 4.1 Critical questions

Scott raised the issue whether rhetoric is clear enough about the distinction between form and function as Hermogenes is dealing with function and not with form. "The reluctance of rhetorical critics to develop a new language and their preference instead to continue borrowing from the ancients obscure the analytical process. Is it helpful for *chreia* to designate both form and differing functions?" (Scott 1993:276). One has to note, however, that the discussion about reasoning and argumentation has been moving backwards and forwards between ancient and modern statements on reasoning and logic.

Culpepper is concerned about the surprising absence of discussion on the role of genre as authors and readers approach texts of different genres differently (1998:74). To this Robbins responds that the discussion need to move beyond discussion of literary genres into a discussion of rhetorical genres. The agenda is set for research on Messianist rhetorical genres like thaumaturgic, apocalyptic, oppositional, death-resurrection and pre-creation discourse which eventually led to identifiable Christian speech (Robbins 1998b: 103).

Margaret Dean takes up Robin's own metaphor of tapestry and weaving and underlines the text as the interweaving of written signs and vocal sounds. She further points out that model of text as speech is also fully compatible with socio-rhetorical criticism but underlines the importance of the further exploration of the phenomenon of auditory reception (Dean 1998:80f). Her remark that the inner texture of a text should also be treated as auditory signals deserves attention. She also remarks that in ancient times "speakers found that in public performance they could evoke and reconstitute family, village and marketplace with subtle spoken clues" (1998).

##### 4.2 Only a rhetorical half-turn?

The criticism of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1996) that socio-rhetorical criticism is not characterised as a critical rhetoric of inquiry by reflection on the social location, unacknowledged theoretical presuppositions, the socio-political framework and argumentative discourse of scholarship, does not really hold water. This is amply to be seen in *The tapestry of early Christian discourse* and *Exploring the texture of texts*.

Robbins has also recently responded to this view (1999). It is, therefore, not necessary to argue the case here as I am of the opinion that he convincingly answers most of her objections. That he clearly states his own ideological points of departure is documented in (Robbins 1996a) and (Robbins 1996b). His own position

is also rather to be taken as interactionist than scientific or scientistic (Robbins 1998c: 286-288).

One has to agree that in effect Schüssler Fiorenza seems to be closing down the debate with her oppositional discourse, rather than opening it up (Robbins 1999:4). In trying to answer the challenge to make a rhetorical full-turn Robbins (1999:9) takes up a metaphor used by Schüssler Fiorenza of the African American circle dance or the European folk dance. In this metaphor the image of dancing together despite the possibility of stepping on each other's toes and interrupting each other's turns evokes the forward and spiraling movement in which debating and disagreeing with one another can be a realistic image of the discourse of scholars coming from differing locations.

There is no claim that socio-rhetorical criticism is THE method to be followed. On the contrary: "To rely on any one methodological approach is to tell only one of many stories, and therefore deprive ourselves of a rich variety of interpretive approaches, each legitimate and crucial in its own way" (Ledbetter 1993:296). Each of the different perspectives can offer the reader something valuable. One has to move beyond the language of a right or wrong interpretation and work more within the context of a responsible interpretation" (Ledbetter 1993:290).

#### 4.3 Theology

Another issue raised is that Robbins gives little guidance concerning ways in which narrative, epistolary and apocalyptic texts construct a theology (Culpepper 1998:76), or the categories, construction or functions of the theology of New Testament texts. Yet, it does seem that further research will be delivering more along these lines as detailed research continues.

The issue of enthymemes is also becoming more and more important in socio-rhetorical criticism. As a characteristic of an enthymeme is to leave a premise or conclusion unexpressed, it follows that enthymemic discourse is a discourse that invites a context to fill out its meanings. In his discussion of the enthymemes in Lk 11:1-13, Robbins claims that the Gospel of Luke combines enthymemic networks in the text of Luke with social, cultural, ideological and theological enthymemes evoking contexts outside the text (Robbins 1998a: 2). In his discussion of different types of reasoning, Robbins also underlines the relevance of abductive reasoning. He also draws attention to the utilisation of suggestions, hypotheses or flashes of insight in argumentation. In his analysis of the reasoning operative in Lk 11:1-13, Robbins finds that at the conclusion of the elaboration, enthymemic social, cultural and ideological reasoning moves into theological reasoning.

"Through rhetorical elaboration, enthymemic reasoning configures social, cultural and ideological topics into topics that inhabit the sacred texture of the



text (Robbins 1996b: 120-31). These topics interweave theology and Christology in a manner that creates not only a new social, cultural, and ideological world, but also a new theological and christological world for the reader." (Robbins 1998a: 22)

It seems that there is much scope to do a great deal of basic work in describing the theology of the texts of the New Testament, starting from the enthymemes and the different modes of reasoning as well as the changes in the conventional wisdom and premises and conclusions which can be tracked in this manner.

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