

Thomas Fabisiak (October 2008) on
Vernon K. Robbins, *The Invention of Christian Discourse*

I hope that in the first answer I have articulated some of the reasons that the study of rhetorolects emerged out of the study of textures. On one level, they emerged out of the empirical investigation of texts: over time, they came to be noticed as the ‘patterns’ that seemed to emerge with some consistency from that work. On another level, and especially inasmuch as they have demanded and brought into play new theoretical resources, the study of rhetorolects emerged out of a set of goals, problems, and questions that I tried to indicate in my answer to the first question. To summarize as briefly as possible, those would be as follows: first, to write a new account of Christian origins that involved multiple and relatively autonomous forms of Christian discourse; second, to effect, on the basis of the study of rhetoric and language, a *prise de conscience* that would strive to bring to light the cognitive, linguistic, and/or social ‘space’, which can only remain to be theorized more and more rigorously, in which pre-reflective discursive, disciplinary, and social boundaries are instituted, boundaries that are both the condition of communication in general and that call into question any communication’s pretension to objective and definitive authority; as an extension of that second interest, to foster interdisciplinary dialogue and to make the broad-based analytic into a self-reflexive critique; finally, the problem that I developed least in my first answer, the desire to show the way in which specifically Christian modes of discourse emerged in ancient Mediterranean culture that drew widely on that culture, that still existed as something *new* and relatively *autonomous*, and that were both diverse and unified by certain common themes. Hence the name of the book that’s about to be published, *The Invention of Christian Discourse*.

In part, the elaboration of rhetorolects over the last ten years came out of problems that arose with respect to the study of ancient rhetoric as it had been applied to early Christian texts. The latter operates in terms of three modes of argumentation: deliberative, epideictic, and juridical. These were associated in turn with three locations in ancient city-states whose tradition and images they recalled: the political assembly, public ceremonies, and courts, respectively. In the ‘lived experience’ of early Christians, Robbins notes, these spaces were only marginally relevant at best, and at worst were oppressive institutions against which they needed to strive to maintain the integrity of their community and beliefs. As such, their development of new and special modes of rhetorical dialects came out of their need to ground their lives in religious and

ideological cognitive ‘spaces’ that had yet to be brought under the auspices of these dominant rhetorical modes. As long as they operated under the auspices of the dominant discourse, they would only reproduce its world, the world of the Roman empire and its institutional and cultural apparatuses.

Robbins’ work draws explicitly on the distinction that George Kennedy drew in 1984, I think, between worldly and radical rhetoric. The former was associated with the traditional and dominant modes of discourse in the Greco-Roman world; the latter, which located its authority in an extra-worldly cosmos, was developed by Christians as a way to nurture their own particular existence as communities. The radical form *par excellence* would, I think, be apocalyptic discourse, which located authority in the heavenly emperor, ruler of all (*pantokratōr*), God. The apocalyptic rhetorlect, as Robbins defines it, draws on the lived, bodily experience of living in an empire with a distant and immensely powerful emperor who controls vast armies that can destroy his enemies. This would be the ‘firstspace,’ to use terms from critical spatiality theory, in which Christians experienced a social and physical reality that they then sublated, transforming it into a conceptual resource by metaphorically mapping it onto the history and stories that they had received as cultural memories. These stories were drawn largely from the Hebrew Bible, as well as from what we now identify as pseudepigraphical texts such as the *Book of the Watchers*.

However, I would want to insist here that one of the important features of rhetorlects is to move us away from a discussion of ‘genre’ or textual transmission, and to turn our attention to the ways in which these various texts are records of cultural memories that were inscribed and transmitted from generation to generation. As such, Robbins moves away from Collins’ and others’ work in the SBL seminar, in which they sought to delineate an apocalyptic ‘genre,’ and avoids the whole discussion of whether apocalyptic literature emerges out of ‘wisdom’ or ‘prophetic’ literature. Thus I think one of the strengths of the discussion of rhetorlects is that it emphasizes the way in which these stories continually underwent modifications even as they produced effects in generation after generation. The stories are never given as such, then, but always in transition and always drawing on, dislocating, disseminating, and reproducing those stories as they came to shape and be shaped by the ‘lived experiences’ of people in the world. At the same time, there is a centripetal aspect to rhetorlects that works in concert with this centrifugal tendency inasmuch as there is always a network of cultural references and resonances

that each rhetorlect can bring to mind, activating a whole system with reference to any given part of the system: for example, mention of the heavenly emperor tends to recall the stories, locations, and physical dispositions associated with apocalyptic or precreation rhetorlect, depending on other related circumstances or references.

Thus, at the time of the emergence of early Christianity we can reasonably begin to delineate the kinds of ‘apocalyptic story-lines’ that were being told, even as we have to recognize that these are always on their way to modification, especially through the work of blending, both the blending of first and secondspace that emerges in lived, bodily experience (thirdspace), and in the blending of rhetorlects with one another. The latter, in particular, is important for *Invention*, in which Robbins takes some time to delineate how various specific rhetorlects operate together in the same text to highlight and modify aspects of one another. Apocalyptic rhetorlect can inflect or appropriate prophetic rhetorlect, for example. It could and does appropriate it, for instance, by describing a ‘call’ in apocalyptic terms, as a call to certain forms of behavior in face of the impending wholesale transformation of the world; inasmuch as these forms of behavior entail ‘holiness’, which they typically do, apocalyptic rhetorlect can always be in conversation with priestly rhetorlect, which emphasizes holiness and purity in ritual contexts. Here one can see, then, how these distinctions between rhetorlects, which are always heuristic in the vein of socio-rhetorical interpretation’s delineation of boundaries in general, can give us resources to think about early Christian discourse in ways that have three important effects: first, that we no longer assume that each text is controlled by literary constraints, the constraints of form and genre, for example, that we’ve largely defined in advance in the mode of a naive, as opposed to rhetorical, study of *poetic* textual boundaries. Second, and conversely, it gives us resources to move from form and genre to cognitive *frames* that are the social and linguistic cognitive spaces through which we can begin to discern, however tentatively, an early Christian *mental topography* that would help us to understand the ancient world even as it implicates us in it by extension, by turning us back on our own work of *seeing-as* and our own framing as complicit in or as reworking these kinds of frames and stories in our own context. I think this would be where the study of rhetorlects is an extension of some of the ‘ideological’ concerns announced in *Tapestry*: by elaborating the mental topography of early Christianity in terms of its various discourses we can see how it has drawn the cognitive map of our own world, how we continue to work with these cultural memories, with some of the same frames and

stories, and how these stories gradually shift and transform in dialogue with other religious and ideological cultures and discourses. For example, Christian theology and historical criticism tend to work with prophetic frames derived from a Christian story announced in the book of Acts that describe the conquest of the ancient ideological world by a monolithic Christianity. Modern fundamentalists continue to activate some modification of apocalyptic rhetoric when they describe end-times scenarios involving massive destruction and the elimination of enemies. On the other hand, certain subversive American groups and individuals activate apocalyptic rhetoric in a parodic mode by simulating the antichrist or by understanding drug experiences or schizophrenic audio-visual hallucinations as apocalyptic visions, thereby appropriating and deploying a modified apocalyptic rhetoric in new and yet to be defined modes that entail significant shifts in characters, roles, and stories.

The last, third interesting and useful effect of this notion of blending among rhetorics is that it allows us to see a text as multivalent, no longer constrained by a single, generic mode, but as operating through the activation and imbrication of relatively autonomous discursive modes. The text is never simply apocalyptic, but apocalyptic rhetoric itself emerges in a number of different texts in different ways and in concert with other rhetorics. This lends a relational quality to the inner texture of a text, inasmuch as any given word, phrase, or character can always activate a variety of frames that are highlighted in or that serve as a background for the message of the text in question. At the limit, this keeps texts and their meaning from ever being rigorously locatable because of the mutual imbrication of rhetorics in a word like 'prayer,' for example, which would at least recall apocalyptic and priestly rhetorics, even as it allows us to close in with some certainty on a constellation or network of values and signs that work together in a text to produce and recall a given system.

In any case, I want to get back to the distinction that Kennedy had drawn between worldly and radical rhetoric. Christians, as I said, needed to ground the premises by which they argued and thus construed and modified the world in sources of authority beyond those available in the Greco-Roman world. Apocalyptic rhetoric then, would be a kind of Christian discourse *par excellence* inasmuch as it provides the key resources for a developing Christian cosmology, that is to say for a secondspace through which the firstspace of lived experience could be mediated and mapped in a way that would foster ongoing, autonomous forms of communal life among Christians. The strongly oppositional nature of earth-material apocalyptic rhetoric, the

call that it addresses, in a modified prophetic mode, on believers to live against or beyond the quotidian world of the Roman Empire, is entirely counter-cultural with respect to the dominant forms of life and rhetoric of that time and place. The Book of Revelation works, for example, rather explicitly against the juridical and civil ceremonial institutions that would condemn Christians like John to exile or that would have consisted, at least in Asia Minor, of imperial processions and architecture. The interest in periodization and cosmological elaboration would be part and parcel with marking out a time and a space that exists independently of firstspace. It's interesting to see how this is modified in precreation rhetorlect, when a less adversarial or oppositional mode is articulated, albeit one that still retains certain features of this otherworldly cosmology as inflected according to speculative philosophy. In a sense, the historically, eschatologically inflected cosmology of apocalyptic, in which the heavenly world is always about to erupt into and radically transform the firstspace of lived experience has been sublated here, turned into a space that does not threaten but rather conditions time. This has all kinds of political and ideological effects of course, not the least of which is that it tends to emerge in the space of blending in a way that is not directed as obviously against the existing order but comes, at the limit, to found and maintain it.

Even though apocalyptic rhetoric would seem to be *particularly* Christian, then, it would be better to say that it represents a point of leverage by which Christian discourse begins to gain some autonomy. At the other end of the spectrum, if early Christian discourse had *only* been apocalyptic, it would never have been able to be articulated in the ancient Mediterranean world. Part of the way that Christian discourse came to be articulated in dialogue with that world was insofar as each rhetorlect acted as a localization of existing streams of discourse: apocalyptic and prophetic rhetorlects localized visionary mantic and oracular mantic discourse, respectively. Miracle and priestly rhetorlects localized healing ritual and sacrificial and mystery ritual, respectively. Wisdom and precreation rhetorlects localized moral and speculative philosophy, respectively. By 'localization' I mean that they took on and modified these streams of discourse as part of their mental topography, by reconfiguring them on the basis of their own particular stories and traditions. Conversely, they added to these streams in a way that was readily comprehensible to people in the Mediterranean world, for whom the addition of certain 'new' features could be understood in terms of these existing 'old' or 'prototypical' forms of discourse.

Wisdom rhetorlect, however, represented the form through which these reconfigurations came in particular to enter into the wider world of ancient Mediterranean discourse. Wisdom rhetorlect would be the most ‘worldly’ discourse, on the opposite end of this heuristic spectrum from apocalyptic, operating as it does in the discursive modes of argument, dialogue, and teaching that all formed part of ancient moral philosophy. Wisdom rhetorlect blended the firstspace of families in households and the natural world with the secondspace of God as the father and light and wisdom as mediators of the created world; the world becomes the space for teaching and understanding inasmuch as it provides examples for the understanding and cultivates wisdom; observing the world demands that one learn about the world, and, in Christian wisdom rhetorlect, that one set one’s body and mind to the rhythm of the natural, god-given order in order to live in a relationship of goodness and fruitful productivity with it. Wisdom rhetorlect, then, is worldly in two senses: first inasmuch as it aims to persuade people to abide by and cultivate the existing, natural order, and secondly inasmuch as it works to develop modes of discourse and argumentation that would be comprehensible to worldly people, that is, people not directed, as in apocalyptic rhetorlect, toward an end time, combat with spirit beings, or obeisance to a heavenly emperor. Instead, while it draws on cultural memories of holy persons like Solomon and spirit beings like Wisdom herself, it does so in modes that develop these as rhetorical *topoi* that can create new modes of teaching and dialogue. Thus Robbins argues that it was through wisdom rhetorlect in particular that early Christians were able to elaborate a new *paideia*. That is to say that the elaboration of a new mental geography was also the elaboration of a new ‘topography’ in the etymological sense of *topoi*. It helped to produce the topics by which early Christians could engage with, dispute, convince, or condemn other people in their environment. By modeling the father-child relationship not only in the cosmos, but by simulating it in teaching relationships, they were able to create rhetorical models for engaging with other groups.

Nevertheless, even this mode of rhetoric had some ‘radical’ features, according to Kennedy via Robbins. Robbins notes that Kennedy had already elaborated the major features of each of the six rhetorlects without articulating them as such. Their ‘radical’ nature, or the ‘radical’ nature of early Christian discourse, would proceed from the fact that it is grounded in some kind of otherworldly source of authority. Robbins begins to move into a consideration of some of the major problems that inform the work on rhetorlects out of a need to articulate, I

think, the way in which this ‘otherworldly’ or ‘radical’ rhetoric could still be rhetorical, that is, could still proceed through persuasive argument that acted on ‘rational’ people. Some of his work in the late nineties and the first few years of the 21st century focuses on enthymematic argumentation in a way that, if I’m reading him correctly, begs similar questions. It begs the question, namely, of how certain rules can be elaborated that *make sense* in argumentation even if they do not proceed in the modes of traditional rhetoric, on the one hand, or if they do not exactly fulfill the demands of abstract philosophical-logical argumentation, on the other. In part, these problems lead to the sacred textures that I mentioned above, which open the door to a discussion of stories, characters, and roles as these play a part in argumentation and persuasion. Argument, that is, does not only seem to proceed *in abstracto*, but always operates according to rules and cases that make sense within a particular culture with particular ideological values that are fostered and maintained through stories and arguments.

Thus he returns, again, to a social and pre-reflective level at which a mental topography is *collectively mandated and inscribed* in such a way that individual arguments can proceed from and respond to it. Logic here can never be internal to a given text, but is always, beyond the horizon of a naive or new critical literary analysis, implicated in social and cultural networks that extend beyond and from within it. Thus, once again, we should note the way in which the study of rhetoric comes here to modify a literary mode of understanding rhetoric itself, as internal argumentation rather than as social, cultural, ideological argumentation with investments and predilections that proceed from beyond its individual, particular context.

Thus, for example, Robbins noted in a study on apocalyptic discourse in Mark in 1999, that argumentation proceeded on the basis of cases that were based on pictorial narration. This understanding of enthymematic argumentation as proceeding on the basis of picturing prepared the way for what Robbins would eventually describe as *rhetography*, namely the way in which speakers create and recall whole social, cultural, religious, and ideological contexts with their arguments rather than just recalling specific ‘ideas’ or ‘premises’. Rhetography would be opposed to logical argumentation, then, which Robbins calls *rhetology*. At least it would in theory. In practice, however, he notes that the two are often and almost always part and parcel with one another. Logical argument never takes place entirely *in abstracto* and imaging and narration are always implicated in social and ideological contexts of persuasion, that is, contexts of conflict, interest, investment, and/or desire. Again, then, this interest in picturing and

imagining in argumentation returns us to the level of socially, culturally, and ideologically invested bodies. Reasoning takes place in images as well as in ideas, and these images are derived from cultural memory, on the one hand, and people's lived experiences in the physical world, on the other. To that end, a notion of rhetography demands an elaboration of the spaces through which these bodies move and according to which they delineate new mental topographies; these mental topographies in turn, can now more rigorously be described in terms of sequences of pictures that provide the narrative context in which reasoning and argumentation can begin to take place. Thus the turn to CST and conceptual blending is part and parcel with this turn toward cognitive *spaces* that are at once the conceptual spaces in which the world is imagined and the lived spaces of experience that are mapped into that imaginative space.

From here, Robbins is able to raise a number of different problems and possibilities. For example, he begins to try to discern the way in which 1st and 2nd space are blended, that is, the way in which rhetorolects provide resources for the elaboration of lived relationships to the world, for identity or community, for example. In part he begins to do so through a discussion of the relationship between frames, roles, and characters, with frames both emerging out of existing roles and characters that we might tentatively begin to define in the ancient world and with rhetorolects elaborating roles and characters that believers can begin to simulate in the lived space of experience. As the Christian story begins to be developed, it begins to tell stories about Christian believers, as in the Acts of the Apostles. Thus it begins to make it possible for Christians to take on these characters, not only consciously as 'models' to be 'imitated', but as dispositional frameworks that suggest and inculcate a certain orientation toward the world. Again, the sacred textures allow us to point to personages who form the basis for Christians' understanding of their relationship to the world.

This was something of a sticking point for me for a few reasons, though I do not see it as a 'weakness' per se, but rather as a space that needs further elaboration. I see how the sequences of pictures that provide the narrational frameworks also provide personages who can be simulated. However, I think this emphasis on imaging at times tends to elide another important dimension of critical spatiality theory and simulation, namely its emphasis on dispositions that have less to do with stories than with physical attitudes from *proskunēsis* to *hupomene*. These attitudes or dispositions certainly have images that correspond to them, but they are also visceral

and physical affects that might help to describe the way in which believers come to blend 1st and 2nd space at the level of their bodies.

It seems to me then, and again I say this tentatively and without knowing the literature on first, second, and thirdspace as well as Robbins does, that at times Robbins seems to see thirdspace in terms of secondspace. In other words, the body has already been transfigured into an entity that participates in God's cosmos and time but has not returned to the world entirely. Robbins often uses the language of the 'goals' of the blending in a particular rhetorolect, and this would correspond to the persuasive dimension of rhetorolects, but I would want to remain open to effects of blending that are not comprehended by these goals in order to push us back to the pre-reflective level of bodily existence. I think there must at least be another aspect to this blending of first and second space where the body is also *produced*, and this would turn back on firstspace, in ways that orient it more problematically and uncertainly to lived experience, creating tension as much as nurturing community. Any notion of a psychoanalytic unconscious, or records of puritans' relentless self-examinations, for example, would suggest to me that apocalyptic discourse will not only create bodies awaiting redemption and transformation, but also bodies awaiting fiery eruption, for instance. The sensory-aesthetic dimensions of themes of consumption by fire would seem to inscribe themselves as much on the 'saint' as on the 'sorcerer.' Considering that early Christianity was already marked by intense internecine conflicts and a whole discourse on determining the legitimacy of, for example, prophetic inspiration, it is likely that at least some early Christians would have been susceptible to feeling their own body as a locus of impending apocalyptic plagues and fiery conflagration. Not to mention that there have always been those for whom there is a certain pleasure in imagining their bodies as threatened by sudden and radical fleshly transformations and modifications. At the same time, given that the addressees of Revelation are not only those who await consolation but those who were most likely participating in the wider Greco-Roman culture in ways that John wants to condemn, by participating in guilds or associations, for example, it's entirely likely that they could have experienced any reading of Revelation as a ritual inscription of rings of fire surrounding their own bodies inasmuch as the latter tended toward imbrication in the social and political world of the empire. Watching an imperial procession or festival could aggravate prophetic anger, on the one hand, or pre-millennial tension, on the other. The space of blending then, is one of anxiety and danger as much as one of redemption and nurturing.

To consider this from a different angle, we could consider miracle rhetorlect, which proceeds from the stories of miracles beginning with Elijah, Elisha, and Moses in the Hebrew Bible and from the lived experience of sickness and other unexpected transformations. I would want to consider the ways in which miracle discourse not only maps existing sick bodies into the conceptual world in which God can miraculously intervene in the cosmos, but also the ways in which it produces sick bodies. Thus, we know, following Foucault for example, that medical discourse has shaped our notions about our bodies, the way that we understand and analyze them, as well as the sicknesses to which we are susceptible and which form a critical part of our identity in the world. It seems entirely possible that this was also the case in antiquity. I would consider Aelius Aristides, for one, as a great example of someone whose sickness was as much produced by discourse about miraculous healing as it was a resource for the articulation of that discourse in the first place.

I think one of the fascinating aspects of miracle discourse in general is that sickness becomes a mode of intercourse with the divine in ways that we see death operating in other contexts (apocalyptic contexts, for example). The whole sacred cosmology, that is to say, that seems to mediate and transform 1st space into the space of blending also is bound to the first space world that it proceeds from, and we separate these too rigorously, I think, at our risk. Thus stories about miracles can transform our understanding of sickness, but I would want to explore the ways in which a conceptual image of Jesus is derived itself from a physical experience of hemorrhaging, blindness, or leprosy that does not only see these as resources but as the very condition in which Jesus becomes possible. Thus I'd want to explore the way in which the word "Jesus" might not only evoke images of healing, but also crippling pains and feelings of physical weakness. I want to insist, this is all to say, that the sensory-aesthetic dimensions, the visceral dimensions of our experience of: the space of blending, the stories we hear, and the graphic and argumentative dimensions of rhetorical dialects, could be emphasized in a more thoroughgoing fashion. They wouldn't have to be of course, and again this is not so much a 'weakness' or lack in Robbins' work as it is a reminder that there are other possibilities here; I think that Robbins' study of rhetorlects, that is to say, puts us on this path by returning us to the body and demanding that we take seriously the way in which discourses operate at a social and cognitive level that is embedded as much in our feelings of anxiety, pain, and anger as it is in our images of transformed bodies producing goodness, for instance.

To that end, one possible direction that I could see this work moving, in keeping with the anti-hermeneutical emphasis in the study of rhetoric, would be to explore texts in the modern world that we could use as resources for understanding the spaces of blending in rhetorolects in more visceral and immediate ways. Cultural Studies would seem to be a good place to go for help with this. For example, an ‘intertextual’ (not in the mode of SRI’s “intertexture”) analysis of apocalyptic discourse in modern films or books with dystopian imagery, work that certainly has already been done in some quarters of biblical studies, would furnish resources for understanding earth-material apocalyptic rhetorolect’s urban, dystopian landscapes in a more full-bodied way that engages *our* embodied cognitions. From there, we might be able to articulate somewhat more richly the ancient mental landscape in which early Christian discourses began to emerge as embodied cognition.

Of course, the more that I think about it the more I realize that this tendency is already comprehended within the existing work on rhetorolects, inasmuch as one could always simulate a sick person or false prophet as much as Paul or Jesus. I think it would be helpful, however, and again not being exactly sure whether Robbins hasn’t done this work elsewhere or begun it in some other way, to begin to focus on the specifically physical dispositions and attitudes that seem to be at work in the rhetorolects. There’s so much language of uprightness and submission, all the various words based around *tassō* modified by a preposition, for example, that recall both physical attitudes and social and cosmological hierarchies. I did notice that some of the work on apocalyptic rhetorolect does mention the creation of a world in turmoil and distress even as it relocates the heavenly temple to the body, but I feel like these ideas could be drawn out more in a way that would relate them to physical dispositions more explicitly.