

Modernizing Classical Rhetoric

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I.

The modernity of classical rhetoric has been acknowledged throughout the ages. Otherwise it would have been either neglected or entirely sunk into oblivion. On the contrary, each age has, in its own way, considered classical rhetoric as something contemporary, if not universal, and not merely as an event of the past which has found its eternal rest in the worm-eaten books of history. Such has been the “policy” of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the ensuing periods up to the present time. This policy which is known by the terms *imitation* and *emulation* has manifested itself in changing attitudes towards the classical heritage: in processes of adaptation, correction, reorganization and even of a (pseudo-) rejection of classical rhetoric altogether.

One of the major attempts at improving classical rhetoric concerns the reworking of its system. Claiming systematicity for any area under investigation in the humanities requires an overall structural design, intrinsic logical coherence and phenomenological completeness. These scientific structures are far from being approximated in Greek or Roman rhetoric. Histories of classical rhetoric like those by Richard Volkmann, George A. Kennedy and Josef Martin¹ rather provide extensive evidence of the diversity of concepts and structures in rhetorical theory and practice. This is due to the changing roles rhetoric has played in politics, social life and education throughout the centuries. The fact that a long school tradition is responsible for a certain constancy has misled modern rhetoricians to postulate a unified classical system which never existed. Thus an ideal is set up which does not stand the test of time and space. Harry Caplan’s tables of “Analysis” prefixed to his meritorious edition of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* foster the same impression². This kind of publication often represents a concoction of heterogeneous traditions and offers the modern student an a-chronic construct. Among the numerous, more or less felicitous, attempts at designing a neorhetorical system on a classical basis, an outstanding scholarly achievement is still Heinrich Lausberg’s two-volume *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik* (1960) that, in its often neglected

¹ Richard Volkmann, *Die Rhetorik der Griechen und Römer*. Leipzig 1885; George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Time*. Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980; Josef Martin, *Antike Rhetorik*. München 1974.

² *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. Ed. with an English translation by Harry Caplan. Cambridge, Mass., 1954.

subtitle, intends a “Grundlegung der Literaturwissenschaft”³. Though often scolded by classical scholars, it is nevertheless in constant, though secret, use with the same critics who know no better. Minor predecessors or followers of this magisterial handbook, which is largely based on Quintilian, are satisfied with reproducing only a small portion of its contents. Tables, figures, diagrams, and stemmata seem to convey the idea of historical systematicity and correctness. The same method is practised, with the same intentions and results, even by reformers of and opponents to the classical tradition. Their most prominent historical representative is Petrus Ramus (Pierre de la Ramée) whose famous laws (*leges*) evoke the impression of unshakeable truths. His law of justice (*lex iustitiae*) is responsible for the redistribution of the Five Great Arts into such as are allocated to dialectics (*inventio* and *divisio*) and into those that represent a “rhétorique restreinte” (*elocutio* and *pronuntiatio*), which, in its turn, is often further reduced to stylistics. In that case rhetoric, the ultimate progenitor of this *pars artis*, is regularly lost out of sight altogether and replaced by stylistics.

To sum up: Classical rhetoric is often –but not always– represented as a fairly coherent and comprehensive system of categories and procedures based on axioms of an almost universal validity. Probably the ultimate authority claimed for this idea of scientificity is Aristotle, maybe with the additional support of the *orator philosophus* Cicero and the *orator paedagogus* Quintilian. The constructs derived from such presuppositions are the result of levelling procedures suggesting a homogeneous rhetoric throughout Antiquity.

On the other hand there exist those modern rhetoricians who ignore or contest any systematic character of rhetoric. Their error is of the very opposite nature. It manifests itself in handlists, dictionaries, encyclopedias and other compilations of rhetorical terms. Though these originate from practical purposes and hence deserve our respect, they nevertheless propagate a wrong idea of classical rhetoric: that of a compilation of technical tricks for the student of rhetoric. In doing so they continue to contribute to the ongoing neglect and even contempt of rhetoric as a scholarly discipline. For the present argument these are assigned the status of a *quantité négligeable*.

The following remarks propose a modernized version of classical rhetoric and hence follow in the wake of the reform inaugurated by Petrus Ramus and others. It is restricted to the so-called figures of speech, under which is also, for the present purpose, subsumed the category of tropes. In their entirety the rhetorical figures of speech are basically represented in a bipartite model composed of two basic components: rhetorical *langue* (Saussure) or *competence* (Chomsky) and rhetorical *parole* or *performance*. Addressing ourselves to the smallest unit of this model, the figure of speech, the following basic assumptions are stated:

1. A (virtual) figure is subject to a threefold *semiosis*, which, following the theories of C.W. Morris⁴, results in the constitution of three classes of figures:

- a) a (semio-)syntactic,
- b) a pragmatic, and
- c) a (semio-)semantic one.

³ Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik: Eine Grundlegung der Literaturwissenschaft*. 2 vols. München 1960, Stuttgart ³1999. English translation by Matthew T. Bliss et al.: *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study*. Leiden/Boston/Cologne 1998.

⁴ C.W. Morris, *Writings on the General Theory of Signs*. The Hague 1971.

In their totality these figures represent a (tripartite) secondary grammar (of rhetoricity) which is superimposed upon a primary grammar (of grammaticality).

2. Apart from being subject to a threefold semiosis each figure participates in a general transformational procedure: deviation. This has to be defined differently for each semiotic dimension. Consider, for instance, the class of (semio-)syntactic figures, the specific deviation of which consists of an alteration of the “normal” sequence (combination) of the language signs. The latter represents the linguistic *degré zéro* and is formulated in the shape of a text grammar describing the primary norm of the standard language. As compared to this type of primary grammar rhetorical figures are systematized within the framework of a secondary grammar which is not a random collection of linguistic aberrations but constitutes a norm of its own, the norm of an (admittedly) virtual rhetoricity.

3. A (semio-)syntactic model of figures is composed of two basic linguistic dimensions: I. linguistic operations (1st axis) and II. linguistic levels (2nd axis). The linguistic operations consist of two types of rules, the first violating and the other enforcing the primary norm. The former are also known as rhetorical licences, anomalies, metaboles or simply deviations or, more precisely, anti-grammatical forms, the latter as equivalences, restrictions or isotopes or, more precisely, syn-grammatical forms. The rule-violating operations are addition, subtraction, substitution and permutation of the language signs, Quintilian’s *quadripertita ratio*⁵; the rule-enforcing operations mainly affect their repetition or *equivalence*⁶. Subordinate operations such as similarity, frequency, and distribution can be added. Moreover, there exist linguistic levels (phonological, morphological, syntactic, etc.) from which figures can be derived. As in the case of the linguistic operations, these admit of further differentiations and subclassifications.

4. The rhetorical (sub-)model which has so far been outlined works in such a way that the linguistic operations are applied to or projected on the respective linguistic levels and thus generate a large body of figures. In a series of transformational acts the primary linguistic norm is remodelled into a secondary one, that is: grammaticality into rhetoricity⁷. A matrix can visualize the possibilities inherent in such a procedure. All conceivable figures of the (semio-)syntactic class can be entered here. Its purpose as a heuristic system is fulfilled the better the more the linguistic operations and levels are subdivided. Thus the syntactic model grows in complexity and completeness on a clearly defined axiomatic basis.

5. The same holds true *mutatis mutandis* for the pragmatic and the (semio-)semantic classes of figures. These claim pseudo-communication (“quasi-speech acts”⁸) and pseudo-referentiality as the axiomatic bases of their respective secondary grammars. In the case of metaphor and irony, these well-known (and at the same time highly controversial) figures may be classified under all three semiotic categorizations of figures.

⁵ For a comparison, cf. W. Ax, “*Quadripertita ratio*: Bemerkungen zur Geschichte eines aktuellen Kategoriensystems”, *Historiographia Linguistica* 13 (1986), 111-114.

⁶ Term of Roman Jakobson in his “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics”, in: T.A. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language*. Cambridge, Mass., 1968, pp. 350-377.

⁷ The matrix is visualized in the author’s *Systematische Rhetorik: Konzepte und Analysen*. München 2000, p. 22. This monograph describes the model of figures proposed here in greater detail.

⁸ R. Ohmann, “Speech Acts and the Definition of Literature”, *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 4 (1972), 1-19.

6. As initially stated, the model of rhetorical *langue/competence* has to be supplemented by one of *parole/performance* in order to meet the exigencies of practical communication. Of course, not every deviant utterance is a rhetorical figure that contributes to an act of persuasive communication. The problem of what constitutes the linguistic norm is a highly controversial one and can only be treated as a hypothetical entity to be solved under specific spatio-temporal circumstances. Deviant language units (such as geminations, ellipses or metaphors) may be indicative of linguistic deficiencies but also of colloquial style or even literary idiosyncrasies. What constitutes then the distinguishing feature of *rhetorical performance*? The answer is: “persuasiveness”. This criterion, however, poses as many questions as it is expected to solve. For the present purpose it is not necessary and therefore will be discarded.

The present outline rather focuses on the question in which respects the model outlined before is superior to its classical antecedents. We shall proceed by three evaluative criteria.

a. *Consistency*.- It is self-evident from the treatises of classical rhetoric that the classification of figures does not obey the principle of logical consistency. A striking illustration of this fact is the distinction between *figurae verborum* (“*schemata lexeos*”) and *figurae sententiarum* (“*schemata dianois*”), e.g. in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* IV.xiii.18, which Harry Caplan, like many others, renders as figures of diction and figures of thought. Perhaps the equation of Greek *dianoia* and Latin *sententia* with its twofold meaning of “sense” and “sentence” is the reason for a semantic and terminological confusion that has persisted through the ages. On the one hand there exist the figures of diction or words (in Spanish: *figuras de palabra*, in German: *Wortfiguren*, in French: *figures de mots*), on the other hand the classificatory terms are figures of thought or sense (in Spanish: *figuras de pensamiento*, in German: *Gedankenfiguren*, *Sinnfiguren*, in French: *figures de sens*, *figures de pensée*) or, alternatively, figures of sentence (in Spanish: *figuras de sentencia*, in German: *Satzfiguren*, in French: *figures de sentence*). Thus there exists a dilemma whether one single principle (a linguistic one) or a jumble of two heterogeneous criteria (a linguistic and a psychological one) can serve as the classificatory basis of the figures. One further issue raised in this connection is the structural location of tropes. Do they just form a part of the figures, or are they entitled to an autonomy of their own? At the beginning of the 9th book of his *Institutio Oratoria* (IX.i.1), Quintilian gives expression to the debate of his day and tries to find a solution to this problem. Perhaps a Solomonic wisdom is expressed in Caplan’s laconic statement in his footnote on *Ad Herennium* IV.xiii.19: “The line of demarcation between tropes and figures, and that between figures of thought and figures of diction were often vague”⁹. The same holds true for the Liège Groupe Mu’s addition of a category of *métalogismes* to their otherwise linguistic paradigm consisting of *métaplasmes*, *métataxes* and *métasémèmes*¹⁰. Here a confusion of a different kind takes place, that of (meta-)grammar and of (meta-)logic.

The (semio-)syntactic model presented here tries to avoid such methodological inconsistencies which are bound to result in the disorientation of the user. Its semiotic basis is the starting point of a strictly linguistic matrix of operations and levels. As for the linguistic levels, the vagueness of figures of thought is replaced by clearly defined syntactic figures,

⁹ *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. Ed. H. Caplan, p. 275, n. c.

¹⁰ J. Dubois et al., *Rhétorique générale*. Paris 1970, pp. 123-144.

and the tropes are integrated into the model as semantic figures. The differentiation of the latter according to linguistic levels –as morpho-semantic, syntacto-semantic, or text-semantic– avoids ambiguities and provides the necessary precision required in an age of science. This does not mean an abandonment of classical inventions and procedures, only their refinement. An illustrative example may clarify this point. The question of “irony” which, apart from Quintilian (*Inst. Or.* IX.i.7) who asks himself whether it is a trope or a figure, has troubled many centuries, may be solved, from a rhetorical viewpoint, as a participation in the three semioses of the figures. In the (semio-)syntactic focus it is a semantic figure, in the pragmatic focus a pseudo-communicative one, and in the (semio-)semantic focus a pseudo-referential one, each of them exactly defined by certain features. Thus it should also be possible to draw a distinction between rhetorical and non-rhetorical notions of irony.

b. *Completeness*.- It is a well-known fact that classical rhetoric is far from giving a local habitation and a name to the vast number of rhetorical phenomena that existed in Greece and Rome and that have ever since sprung up into existence. Rhetorical theorists have tried to cope with the communicative exigencies of their respective ages by creating new terms and concepts. *Alliteratio*, for instance, which is now a well-established term, was coined by the humanist Pontanus, because the existing Greek expression *homoeoprophoron* was not suitable to describe the equivalence of initial consonants of words in vulgar (esp. Germanic) poetry.¹¹ Eduard Norden in his masterly study *Die antike Kunstprosa*¹² demonstrates the difficulties in tracing the *rhyme* as a (poetical) figure –in contrast to the *homoeoteleuton*, one of the Sophistic (Gorgianic) figures of oratorical prose which largely neglects its prosodic aspects. The English Renaissance controversy between Thomas Campion’s *Observations in the Art of English Poesie* (1602) and Samuel Daniel’s *A Defence of Ryme* (1603)¹³ is a reminder of the apologetic strategies needed in order to provide a non-classical figure with a legitimation. Lastly a hint shall be given that at the beginning of the Gutenberg Galaxy scarcely a change in the classical system took place which reflected the revolution in the media. One of the few imperfect exceptions to the rule was Charles Butler’s Ramist *Oratoriae Libri Duo* (1633) that introduced the dichotomy of “Punctualis Distinctio” and “Literalis Distinctio”¹⁴ which modern linguistics would identify as inter(supra-)segmental and segmental categorization respectively. Viewed on the whole, the ideal of oral communication continued to determine the rhetorical norm. Almost the only exception was epistolography.

In contrast to these fragmentary improvements on the rhetorical system the present one pursues the aim of at least a virtual totality. It does not claim to register and name any existent figure but it offers a heuristic frame enabling the identification of hitherto unknown figures in texts. For this reason the phonological level, often underrated in rhetoric, is expanded to comprehend not only segmental figures such as alliteration and assonance but also supra-segmental or prosodic figures such as stress, pitch and juncture. Thus the well-known poetical rhyme can be treated as a rhetorical figure consisting of a synthesis of segmental (vowel,

¹¹ R. Sabbatini in Lausberg, *Handbuch*, § 1246.

¹² E. Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa*. 2 vols. Darmstadt 51958 (11898), vol. II, p. 810 f.

¹³ Cf. G. Gregory Smith (ed.), *Elizabethan Critical Essays*. 2 vols. London 1959 (11904), vol. II, pp. 327-355 (Campion), pp. 356-384 (Daniel).

¹⁴ Cf. Plett, “Oralität und Literalität in Rhetorik und Poetik der englischen Renaissance”, in: W. Raible (ed.), *Erscheinungsformen kultureller Prozesse*. Tübingen 1990, pp.167-195, esp. pp. 176-177.

consonant) and suprasegmental (stress, caesura) aspects with additional criteria such as quantity, similarity, distribution, and frequency. The existence of traditional figure poems (*technopaignia*, *carmina figurata*), of modern object poetry (E.E. Cummings, Ernst Jandl), and of contemporary configurations of *typoésie*¹⁵ necessitates a system of graphemic figures of which Ramist rhetoric only provides a slight glimpse. Their share in a general theory of graphostylistics has gained in importance, because modern marketing strategies make an increasing use of graphemic deviations (e.g. <Flu-Id-Deth> = an insecticide)¹⁶. Many of the problems raised by these often mannerist phenomena can be explained by the instruments provided by our system. On a translinguistic level an amplification of the classical system leads to the constitution of textological (textual) and perhaps even intertextual figures¹⁷. As textological figures may be regarded digression (addition), omission (subtraction), allegory (substitution), the *ordo artificialis* (permutation of chronology), and a verbal *perpetuum mobile* (equivalence: e.g. S. Beckett's *Play*). As for intertextual figuration, an outstanding instance is the citation¹⁸ which may be interpreted as the substitution of a textual segment (*proprium*) by a pre-textual one (*improprium*).

c. *Precision*.- Everybody who has ever consciously used the term of a rhetorical figure, will complain of its lack of precision. This complaint has become an old-age *topos* from the beginnings of rhetorical theory and will certainly continue into the present millennium. Whatever is to be understood by metaphor, allegory, irony, parallelism and a host of other stylistic categories, is by no means evident, as every rhetorical reference work testifies. It may be a matter of debate whether this terminological imprecision, which also affects such minor figures as antisthecon, systrophe or zeugma, may be interpreted as a deficiency or, contrariwise, as an advantage of the rhetorical tradition. On the debit side it gives rise to misunderstandings because of the co-existence of Greek and Latin nomenclatures, of the semantic overlapping of their denotata, and of the ambiguity and diversity of their definitions. On the credit side it could be claimed that this very polysemy of rhetorical terms is an outstanding source of critical inspiration which has resulted in phases of creativity and innovation from the Sophistic Age through the Age of Postmodernism.

The system of rhetorical figures we propose here is not designed to abolish traditional nomenclatures. For it would be a Herculean labour, and a fruitless one as well, to eradicate these and replace them *in toto* by neologisms. Such an iconoclastic adventure would have to subvert the authorities from Aristotle through Quintilian and the whole western tradition of rhetoric –which is a futile undertaking. On the contrary: the intention is to retain, wherever possible, the established terms and concepts, but at the same time to invest them with more precise features, at least for a conscious practical usage. The case of parallelism may serve as an illustration. Whereas Todorov¹⁹ wrongly attributes it to the *signe-référent*, i.e. the (semio-)semantic, dimension, it definitely belongs to the (semio-)syntactic dimension: as a

¹⁵ J. Peignot, *Typoésie*. Paris 1993.

¹⁶ Cf. R. Gläser, "Graphemabweichungen in der amerikanischen Werbesprache", *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 20 (1972), 184-196.

¹⁷ Cf. Plett, *Systematische Rhetorik*, pp. 236-245.

¹⁸ Cf. Plett, "The Poetics of Quotation", *Annales Universitatis Scientiarum de Rolando Eötvös nominatae. Sectio Linguistica* 17 (1986), 293-313.

¹⁹ T. Todorov, "Essai de classification", in: Todorov, *Littérature et Signification*. Paris 1967, pp. 107-114.

syntactic equivalence which can further be specified according to similarity, word-class, quantity, frequency, distribution and its interlinkage with phonology, morphology, and semantics. Thus every rhetorical figure can be defined according to linguistic levels and procedural criteria. If it is known, that from the (semio-)syntactic viewpoint the example <Flu-Id-Deth> can be described as an additive graphomorphological figure with certain other characteristics (e.g., subtraction of an <a> in <Deth>, substitution of a small by a capital letter), it is hardly necessary to invent a new term. What counts, is the knowledge of the principal operations and the instruments of their description. Otherwise this New Rhetoric of Figures would indeed be inundated by a huge wave of terminological innovations which would prove rather counterproductive to a modernization of classical rhetoric. For nothing can be more dangerous to it than a New Scholasticism. On this point there is an agreement with Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida and other poststructuralists.

III.

Though created for the sake of linguistic artistry, the use of figures of speech was not confined to verbal discourse but by analogy extended to non-verbal media as well. The cultural period when this categorial transfer of rhetorical terms above all occurred was the Renaissance. In it the assumption emerged that figures of speech are basically semiotic categories and hence also applicable to pictorial and musical works of art. Their intermedial status was first asserted in art treatises²⁰, as for instance by Leon Battista Alberti and Leonardo da Vinci, but also by the musical theories of Joachim Burmeister, Johann Matheson and the musical practice of composers such as Giulio Caccini, Claudio Monteverdi, Heinrich Schütz and Johann Sebastian Bach²¹. In both non-verbal media theoreticians and practitioners interpreted the classical figures of speech as instruments for the creation and interpretation of their respective art-works. In modern times the intermedial character of the figures was revitalised by such authors as Gui Bonsiepe, Roland Barthes and the Liège Groupe Mu who used them as hermeneutic categories for the analysis of iconic texts²².

IV.

A comparative survey of the systems of classical rhetoric and the various attempts at their modernization, including the present one, displays one common feature shared by all of them: their Westernness or Occidentalism. This observation is particularly important for *elocutio* and the rhetorical figures. For hitherto, as a matter of fact, the presupposition was tacitly implied that all languages are subject to the same fundamental laws which can be formulated in some sort of universal primary grammar. From this assumption the conclusion is

²⁰ Cf. R. L. Lee, *Ut pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting*. New York 1967; A. Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Renaissance Italy*. Oxford 1940, rpt.1964.

²¹ Cf. J. A. Winn, *Unsuspected Eloquence: A History of the Relations Between Poetry and Music*. New Haven / London 1981.

²² G. Bonsiepe, "Visuell/verbale Rhetorik", *Format* IV/5 (1968), 11-18; R. Barthes, "La rhétorique de l'image", *Communications* 4 (1964), 40-51; Groupe Mu (Liège), *Traité du signe visuel: Pour une Rhétorique de l'image*. Paris 1992.

deduced in its turn that the secondary grammar of rhetoricity is only the consequence of a series of transformational acts, some of them greater, some of them smaller in scope. Thus the two-storied building erected so far is not built upon solid ground but solely on a number of hypotheses. The first hypothesis which is open to debate is that of the norms of both grammars. Whole armies of arguments were levied against the constitution of a primary (grammatical) norm and equally large arsenals of volleys emptied for the destruction of deviation, the basis of secondary grammars. No doubt, with many a good reason. But it must also be stated that such hypotheses are necessary in order to explain an alliteration, a paronomasia, a parallelism or even a metaphor. Viewed in this light, all kinds of rhetoric, the normative as well as the descriptive ones, are full of hypotheses. Their practicability can only be (and has often been) tested in specific communicative situations: in such of a persuasive or of a poetical nature. That is a question of *parole/performance* which must be treated in a further argumentative phase: the modernization of the concept of “persuasiveness”.

Quite another matter is the cultural and linguistic *différance* between Occidentalism and Orientalism, to name only a recently debated binarity which could easily be supplemented by one of Northernness and Southernness. Thomas M. Conley justly calls his book *Rhetoric in the European Tradition*²³, because it deals with a cultural history that stretches (for him) from the Sophists to Chaim Perelman (with further scholars in the future). In this light the following questions must be raised: What is rhetoric in the Chinese or Japanese and what is rhetoric in the Indian or the Arabic traditions? An important concluding question therefore is: Does “Modernizing Classical Rhetoric” –the subject of the present essay– make here any sense or not? Future transcultural²⁴ research-work on rhetoric will hopefully focus on the topic of whether there exists a plurality of cultural identities in rhetoric or whether there are only transformations of classical rhetoric –“under western eyes” (J. Conrad).

²³ T. M. Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition*. Chicago 1990. Cf. Thomas O. Sloane, *On the Contrary: The Protocol of Western Traditional Rhetoric*. Washington, D.C., 1997.

²⁴ For the term, see the works by the Russian culturologist Mikhail Epstein. For George A. Kennedy, non-western rhetoric is the subject of comparative rhetoric, as stated in his book *Comparative Rhetoric: An Historical and Cross-Cultural Introduction*. New York 1998.