BRINGING BACK MORE FIGURES OF SPEECH INTO COMPOSITION

BONNIE DEVET

From the fourth century B.C. to the mid-to-late nineteenth century, figures of speech played a prominent role in the teaching of rhetoric and composition. Rhetoricans listed numerous figurative devices,[1] explained that schemes and tropes were linked to the proofs, and stressed that these devices were innate to a subject. However, from the 1860's onward, especially in America, textbooks limited the importance of figures, so that by our time only four are commonly mentioned by college textbooks used in freshman composition. According to a recent study of one hundred college textbooks published between 1975 and 1985, the four most frequently mentioned figures of speech are parallelism, metaphor, simile, and analogy (Devet).[2] The textbooks also teach that these figures perform limited functions, usually being relegated to the minor roles of making writing more colorful or vivid (Canavan 211) or of "add[ing] freshness to style" (Willson et al. 470). Hence, students can only infer that figures are added to discourse for beauty and clarity.

Why have modern textbook writers deemphasized the role of figures in composition? And is it time to bring back figurative language into the classroom? A brief look at the history of figures in the nineteenth century answers the first question, and the second question can be answered with a strong "yes," given the theories of language now being espoused and given the various process approaches to the teaching of composition.

In the first half of the 1800's, most colleges in America offered a set curriculum of mathematics and the classics. Under such a curriculum, students learned about the figures primarily by reading Hugh

Blair's essays on sublimity, taste, and beauty. However, after the Civil War, changes occurred. More state universities were founded, and more middle class students attended school (Berlin *Writing* 58-60). These students were part of the new scientific and business-oriented society in America, a society that demanded a different approach to the set curriculum. Students wanted to be prepared to live in an America created by the Industrial Revolution. Because of this new scientific age with its experiments and inventions, students questioned whether they needed to be able to translate the classics or build bridges (Kitzhaber 31-32). Bridge building won out, and the study of Cicero and Caesar began to decline.

Along with such changes arose an altered view of rhetoric and figurative language, a view still prominent today. With the rise of mercantilism, and the concomitant change in the schools, students wanted their teachers to teach "the everyday business of communication" (Harned "Intellectual" 48). So, as James Berlin notes, a more practical rhetoric arose with an emphasis on exposition. This rhetoric "reduces the composing act to a concern for exposition—for 'setting forth' the rational and empirical in an appeal to the reason and understanding." The students were only to "report not interpret," (Berlin *Writing* 63, 66), and their rhetorical aim was to present material briefly, economically, and clearly. What happened to figures of speech in such a "new" rhetoric? Since brevity, economy, and clarity were the by-words, only those figures which seemed to contribute to these effects were studied, primarily parallelism, metaphor, simile, and analogy.

This narrowed view is reflected in the late nineteenth century textbooks where the authors indicated that figures were tools to be used to create pictures and make material easy to grasp. Fred Newton Scott and Joseph V. Denny, for example, grouped the figures under three labels,[3] two of which show that schemes and tropes helped the readers' minds. "Figures of arrangement" such as antithesis and climax let writers organize material so readers can find "a pattern or design, that is easily intelligible" (236).

Modern composition instructors have inherited the nineteenth century's approach to figures of speech. With few exceptions,[4] most late twentieth century textbooks stress that figures should be used only to make material "clear" and to add color to writing.

However, two major changes in the twentieth century necessitate an altered perspective on the role of figures in the teaching

of composition: work of rhetoricians on the nature of language and new ways of teaching composition.

In studying how language functions, modern rhetoricians have emphasized that figurative language is not added to discourse, as the late nineteenth century rhetoricians implied. Instead, figurative devices are central to expression. I. A. Richards, for example, has said that metaphors are the working principle of language. Richards' view is summarized by Terence Hawkes:

> The 'meaning' of a language for the people who speak it results from and lies in the interaction which takes place between their language and their experience. Each modifies the other, and their 'co-presence' generates 'reality' as they know it. The process is 'vitally metaphorical.' (61)

Other theorists have followed Richards' lead. Owen Barfield, in "Poetic Diction and the Legal Profession," explains that metaphors are the basic operation of legal language (Hawkes 65). In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have analyzed how metaphors pervade and shape language. They conclude that metaphors reflect the basic concepts of a culture and, in turn, affect how a language user feels, things, and acts. In fact, the idea that tropes are endemic to language is a major tenet held by many prominent theorists such as Harold Bloom, Jacques Derrida, Janet Emig, Stanley Fish, Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Paul Ricoeur.[5] Kenneth Burke discusses how schemes, not tropes, comprise language. He notes that schemes are pervasive in expression: "You can't possibly make a statement without its falling into some sort of pattern [i.e. scheme]" (65).

In addition to studying how figures are innate to language, modern rhetoricians have also revived the classical concept that figurative devices fit with the *logos, pathos,* and *ethos* of a discourse. Following the lead of Quintilian (*De Institutione Oratoria* IX, i,19,21), Edward P. J. Corbett stresses that figures are tied not only to the writers' logic and emotion but also to the character of the writers themselves. As Corbett explains,

> because figures can render our thoughts vividly concrete, they help us to communicate with our audience clearly and effectively; because they stir emotional responses, they can carry truth, in Wordsworth's phrase, 'alive into the heart by passion';

and because they elicit admiration for the eloquence of the speaker or writer, they can exert a powerful ethical appeal. (459)

Like Corbett, Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca explain how figures create the *ethos* or moral character of the speaker. For example, the orator's sincerity is revealed through the figure license or pseudo-license (also called licentia), where the speaker tells the audience he is going to speak frankly to them (457 fn). Other devices may indicate the speaker's restrained manner: insinuation, reticence (breaking off into silence), litotes, euphemism, and reduction (using classification or definition to identify ideas for discussion) (467). Besides *ethos*, figures can reveal the speaker's *pathos* or even arouse the audience's feelings: hesitation, hyperbaton (inversion of the natural word order), and asyndeton (omission of conjunctions) (456).[6]

Of course, it is all well and good that modern rhetoricians have seen the vital nature of figures in language and persuasion. However, besides the insights of these theorists, there is another reason to reevaluate the role of figures in teaching freshman composition.

Since the 1960's, a revolution in the teaching of composition has taken place. One cannot go to any conference on writing or read any article in a professional journal without encountering the assumption that the current-traditional paradigm for composition is outdated and the "process" approach is supreme. No longer must instructors labor under the concept that stressed only a finished, polished product and a clear style (Young 31). Instead, composition instructors have before them several process approaches for teaching writing, each of which emphasizes a different point. And interestingly enough, figures, rediscovered by modern rhetoricians to be so special to language and persuasion, mesh well with any of the new process approaches. Instructors do not have to be limited to only the "Big Four" figures.

Two recent articles classify effectively the process approaches. Maxine Hairston presents a list of two "schools" for teaching composition, while Lester Faigley cites three, two of which are applicable to the figures.[7] The first school, the "cognitive" or "classical" (Hairston 442), as represented by Linda Flower and Frank D'Angelo, holds two basic tenets: first, writing is a way of "making plans and carrying them out" (Hairston 443) and, second, writing reflects thinking (Faigley 533). The dictum that "writing reflects thinking" may be

interpreted to mean that the usual categories of definition, partition (division), classification, examples, cause and effect, and contrast are actually thought patterns "which underlie all languages" (D'Angelo 57). As D'Angelo writes about these "topical categories,"

> they are to be considered dynamic organizational processes, symbolic manifestations of underlying mental processes, and not merely conventional static patterns. (56)

Given the cognitive school's belief that patterns reflect thoughts, which figures could students learn? Four commonly occurring but rarely taught figural devices show the writer's "mental processes": anaphora, epistrophe, climax, and anadiplosis. The first two, anaphora and epistrophe, are especially useful for showing how writers have divided and elaborated on a topic. Anaphora, where "the same words or groups of words [are repeated] at the beginnings of successive clauses" (Corbett 472) illustrates this division and elaboration. Atlanta newspaper columnist Lewis Grizzard provides an example, when he explains why youngsters go to McDonald's:

> They don't know what a real hamburger should taste like. They enjoy going to McDonald's because they see it advertised on television, because all of their friends go there, because of that silly clown, and because McDonald's serves cute little food for cute little children in those cute little boxes and containers. (218)

The opposite of anaphora is epistrophe, where words are repeated at the end of "several clauses, sentences, or verses" (Lanham 45). Like anaphora, epistrophe also reflects how writers have divided up their ideas. In the following advertisement, epistrophe details the almost infinite uses for oranges: "Half 'em, wedge 'em, toss 'em, section 'em, cake 'em, peel 'em, stuff 'em. They're oranges fresh from Florida."[8]

Climax reveals another thought process: the movement of the writers' minds as they progress from the least to the most important idea. Such a climax is evident in this ad using anaphora: "The car is well-built. The car is inexpensive. The car is a Nissan." This domino-like relationship of ideas is revealed in another figure as well. Anadiplosis creates a chain with the word at the end of one clause repeated at the beginning of the next (Corbett 475), as in this speech by Captain Queeg from the movie *The Caine Mutiny*:

"Abroad my ship, excellent performance is standard. Standard performance is substandard. Substandard performance is not permitted to exist."

While anaphora, epistrophe, climax, and anadiplosis seem to fit well with the "classical" school, other figures mesh effectively with the second process approach called the "romantic" (Hairston 442) or "expressive" school (Faigley 528-531). This approach, as represented by Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, and William Coles,

> think[s] that writers discover their meaning by writing, and that, for the most part, they cannot know what to write nor how to write it until they actually begin to write something. (Hairston 442)[9]

This school believes that students not only discover themselves but find a voice for their writing. Throughout time rhetoricians have stressed the "pathetic" or emotional nature of four figures which would help express the writers' voices and thus readily fit with the "romantic" school: rhetorical questions, polysyndeton, asyndeton, and antimetabole. The power of rhetorical questions to reveal the writers' voices is evident in Pauline Kael's review of *Falling in Love*. In the following, the questions indicate Kael's disappointment with the film:

> Can a vacuum love another vacuum? That's the question posed by 'Falling in Love', a piece of big star-packaging in which Robert DeNiro and Meryl Streep look, respectively, handsome and pretty as Frank . . . and Molly . . . two prosperous Westchester commuters, each married to someone else, in marriages that have become (who'd have thought it?) empty . . . . (168)

Like rhetorical questions, polysyndeton and asyndeton also help students convey their voices. Polysyndeton, or the "use of conjunctions between each clause" (Lanham 78), slows down the movement of a sentence in order to denote stateliness. Such a feeling can be found in this example from the Bible: "Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years" (Galatians 4:10). The opposite of polysyndeton is asyndeton, which omits conjunctions "between words, phrases, or clauses" (Lanham 18). Such omissions add rapidity so a sentence feels "like a bolt from a catapult," as Longinus once said (XIX, 2, 189). This feeling is evident in the following,

where the newspaper columnist Grizzard expresses his disgust with hard-core rock 'n roll:

> And one day I found myself (just as my own parents had done when Elvis peaked), condemning modern music as the hedonistic, un-American, ill-tempered, God-awful, indecent warblings, of scrungy, tatooed, long-haired, uncouth, drugged-out, so-called musicians. (58)

A fourth figure which students could learn in order to indicate their tone of voice is antimetabole. This rhetorical device repeats words but in the opposite order, creating what may be called a mirrored reversal. With this figure writers may convey an air of completeness, thoroughness, and pithiness, as in Samuel Johnson's rather caustic advice: "Your manuscript is both good and original; but the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good."

So far, it is evident that certain figures would readily admit themselves to various techniques for teaching composition. There is yet another approach towards the teaching of writing, an approach as yet not completely designated as a "school" per se, but one which, nonetheless, is beginning to appear.[10] Although the school is not well differentiated, it might be classified as a non-logocentered approach, where teachers stress the delight inherent in words for themselves, not for how they carve up reality or reflect the user's mind. This approach, inspired by Derrida's study of language and metaphor, emphasizes many concepts, including the idea that instructors should show students the "play" in language and the "power and magic" (Crowley 284) inherent in words.

Of course, metaphor, the heartbeat of the language and the main contributor to the "play" in expression, is aptly mentioned in most freshman composition textbooks. But there are other figures which demonstrate the flexibility of language. Puns, as delineated by the ancients, could be readily taught if instructors want to be part of the "play-in-language" school. One such pun is antanaclasis, where a word is repeated but with a different sense in its second use (Corbett 482). This repetition is readily found on billboards, as in this ad for a mobile home community: "Live a lot. Own a lot." Even Presidents are not immune to antanaclasis. In a July 1984 campaign address to a Texas rally, Ronald Reagan told the voters, "The national Democratic Party leadership has gone so far left, they've left America." Another pun which would show students the

flexibility of language is paronomasia, where a writer uses words "alike in sound but different in meaning" (Corbett 482). The Irish airliner Aer Lingus used this pun in its slogan, "Aer Lingus to Ireland. Service on a very different plane." An advertisement for Costa Cruise Lines stressed that its vacations were unregimented: "Cruises should be serene and not herd." Naturally, these puns are groaners, but recognizing and analyzing them helps students become cognizant of the multiple levels to words.

Of course, there will be objections to adding more figures of speech to the English curriculum. One such objection might be that teaching additional figures would be a waste of time because these devices are relatively obscure as compared to the commonly occurring parallelism, metaphor, simile, and analogy. Actually, the reverse is true. Anaphora, epistrophe, climax, anadiplois, rhetorical questions, polysyndeton, asyndeton, antimetabole, and puns are ubiquitous in the prose the students encounter outside of the classroom, occurring in discourse ranging from Presidential addresses to billboard advertisements. So, teaching these rhetorical devices educates students about the discourses found outside the world of the classroom. Arthur Quinn, professor of rhetoric of the University of California at Berkeley, explains the value of recognizing figures:

> Writing is a matter of making linguistic choices, and reading depends upon understanding the linguistic choices made by someone else. The figures of speech help you see the choices available in a given context. And being able to see them helps you make them or judge them. (5)

Another objection would be that adding more figures to the curriculum might encourage students to produce overly written prose. Perhaps they will merely attach these figures to their writing like adding ornamental filigree to a building. Students do not use figurative devices as overlays to discourse when they are shown that figures are related to thought processes ("cognitive" approach) or expression of self ("romantic" approach) or even "play in language." In fact, as Michael Halloran and Merrill Whitburn explain, learning figures helps students grow:

> We discover/invent ourselves in many media of action, but language is probably the most important. Rhetorical style expresses personality, and it can be a medium in which we become larger, more complex, more sophisticated as persons.

To use rhetoric in this way, we must command the techniques of rhetorical art, the schemes and tropes and strategies of organization and argument. (69)

It might also be asked, "Isn't teaching figures of speech the role of a literature teacher?" The domains of composition and literature cannot be separately so easily and shouldn't be, except for convenience. Both the writing teacher and the literature instructor should show students the full range of language and certainly figurative devices are part of that range.

Finally, it might be said that except for the "Big Four" now being taught, figures are basically oral devices not suited to a print-oriented culture. In other words, the figures are old fashioned and out of date. Actually, even these so-called oral devices are valuable for the written realm. As Walter Ong has explained, "written" texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meaning" (8). Figures can be that link between the oral and the written.

Cicero once referred to figures of speech as *lumina* or "lights" (*Orator* 39.135). Unfortunately, still linked to the nineteenth century approaches to composition, too many modern textbooks allow only a few lights (parallelism, metaphor, simile, and analogy) to glow. I's time to break from the past, to be alert to the new perspectives on language, and to teach writers more figures, no matter the approach to composition instruction.

Dr. Bonnie Devet teaches in the Department of English at the University of South Carolina.

NOTES

[1]George Winfred Hervey, a minor nineteenth century American rhetorician, represents an extreme case. Believing that figures should be a part of everyone's knowledge of rhetoric, he listed 467 figures of speech in an appendix to his *A System of Christian Rhetoric for the Use of Preachers and Other Speakers* (1873). This list, with its synonyms for each rhetorical device, appears to be the longest ever compiles.

[2]Parallelism was cited by 81 textbooks, metaphor by 64, simile by 57, and analogy by 52. Next in order of appearance were the following: personification was directly named by 37 textbooks; alliteration by 23; hyperbole by 17; periodical sentence by 15; rhetorical questions by 14; antithesis by 13; allusion by 10. Other figures of speech appeared in fewer than 10 texts: synecdoche and metonymy in 9 texts each; puns and irony in 8; assonance in 7; climax in 6; litotes in 5; oxymoron and onomatopoeia in 4; periphrasis in 3; anaphora, consonance and

asyndeton in 2; allegory, anadiplosis, antimetabole, epanalipsis, epistrophe, meiosis, paratactic, polyptoton, polysyndeton, syllepsis in 1 text each.

[3]The third label was "figures of contradiction" (like irony or hyperbole) (236-37).

[4]Four modern textbooks which I surveyed break from the narrow nineteenth century view of figures. These books mention that figures, especially the metaphor, are valuable as heuristic devices: Joseph A. Alveraz's *Elements of Composition*; Ben W. McClelland's *Writing Practice*; Betty N. Dietsch's *Writing for Results*; and Louis I. Middleman's *In Short* (see Works Cited for full citations).

[5]These are the representative works where the modern theorists stress the value of tropes in language: Harold Bloom's *A Map of Misreading*; Jacques Derrida's "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" in *Margins of Philosophy*; Janet Emig's *The Web of Meaning*; Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?*; Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle's *Fundamentals of Language*; Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading*; J. Hillis Miller's "Composition and Decomposition Deconstruction and the Teaching of Writing" in *Composition and Literature*; Paul Ricoeur's "The Metaphorical Process . . ." (See Works Cited for full citations).

[6]Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca call these audience-affecting devices "figures of presence" since, as the name implies, the figures make the user's subject appear to be immediate and near. Onomatopoeia is one such "figure of presence," making an idea seem "immediate" by imitating its sound (170).

[7]Many articles have tried to classify the pedagogies currently used to teach composition, notable of which is James Berlin's "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories." Although Berlin's four categories of Aristotelians, Current-Traditionalists, Neo-Platonists, and New Rhetoricians are useful, Hairston's and Faigley's articles describe more succinctly the process schools. Faigley's third category "social" does not readily fit with the figures.

[8]Some examples of figures originally appeared in *Carolina Writer*.

[9]Ideas are not new, just reborn. One is reminded of what Sir Philip Sidney's muse tells him in Sonnet I of *Astrophel and Stella*: "'Foole,' said my Muse to me, 'look in thy heart and write'."

[10]Both Sharon Crowley and Jon Harned ("Post-Structuralism") have voiced the need for students to experience the playfulness of language. A recent paper (Dunn) at the South Atlantic Modern Language Association conference in Atlanta, Georgia, also expresses this concern.

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