Where Is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?

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Introduction

RHETORICAL CRITICISM OF LITERATURE TAKES the exegetes of biblical literature beyond the study of the theological or ethical meanings of the text to something more inclusive than semantics and hermeneutics. As an integral part of a theory of literature, biblical or otherwise, rhetorical criticism does what all theoretical discourse does: it "separates the inseparable—theory from practice—in order to prescribe practice—the abandonment of theory."1


In the words of W. Booth, who contributed greatly to the renewal of theoretical interests in the rhetorical analysis and interpretation of literature, "Rhetorical study is the study of use, of purpose pursued, targets hit or missed, practices illuminated for the sake not of pure knowledge, but of further (and improved) practice."

Rhetorical criticism is taking us beyond hermeneutics and structuralism to poststructuralism and posthermeneutics. It takes us to a yet richer harvest resulting from renewed and concerted efforts now being undertaken in the vast fields of the history of Western and non-Western rhetoric—fields long neglected and much abused. Rhetoric, whether the classical "old" or the proposed "new rhetoric," has been and remains philosophy's archrival and religion's closest ally. "All religious systems are rhetorical," says G. A. Kennedy in his proposal to reorient NT interpretation through rhetorical criticism.

The rhetorical view of religious literature takes us beyond viewing language as a reflection of reality, even "ultimate reality" as understood in terms of traditional metaphysical and idealist philosophy, and takes us to "the social aspect of language which is an instrument of communication and influence on others."

What turns a literary critic or interpreter "automatically" into a rhetorical critic? What distinguishes accordingly all kinds of literary analysis from...
rhetorical interpretations of a text? It is this: in rhetorical criticism "a text must reveal its context."9 By "context" is meant more than historical context or literary tradition or genre or the generic Sitz im Leben. What is meant by context has recently been discussed in terms of various theories: e.g., the theory of intertextuality,10 or the notion of the argumentative or rhetorical situation.11 A text's context means for the rhetorical critic the "attitudinizing conventions, precepts that condition (both the writer's and the reader's) stance toward experience, knowledge, tradition, language, and other people."12 Context can also come close to being synonymous with what K. Burke and others call the "ideology" of, or in, literature.13

I. Theories of Rhetorical Criticism in Transition

As early as St. Augustine's attempt14 at outlining a rhetorical approach to the interpretation of Scripture, we notice the tendency, so tenaciously enduring into our own days, of listing and labeling the rhetorical figures of speech and figures of thought to be found in select parts of the Bible. In the

10 Intertextuality treats "discourse as the product of various sorts of combinations or insertions [It explores] the iterability of language, its ability to function in new contexts with new force" (J Culler, On Deconstruction Theory and Criticism after Structuralism [Ithaca, NY Cornell University, 1982] 135) On the close relation between deconstruction and intertextuality, see pp 130-31 On structuralist pursuits of codes leading "critics to treat the work as an intertextual construct—a product of various cultural discourses on which it relies for its intelligibility—and thus [consolidating] the central role of the reader as a centering role," see p 32
12 Sloan, "Rhetoric," 802-3
13 See K Burke's reply to F Jameson's critique ("Methodological Repression and/or Strategies of Containment," Critical Inquiry 5 [1978] 401-16) On the ideology of criticism as distinct from the ideology of, and in, literature, see T Eagleton (The Function of Criticism [London Verso Editions, 1984] esp chap VI, pp 107-24) on contemporary criticism See also Peter Hohendahl (The Institution of Criticism [Ithaca, NY Cornell University, 1982]), and E Bruss (Beautiful Theories The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism [Baltimore Johns Hopkins, 1982])
14 See especially his De doctrina christiana, Book 4, Pl. 34 89-122 For a review of recent literature on this work and on Augustine's "strong influence on the future development of rhetoric," see J J Murphy, Rhetoric in the Middle Ages A History of Rhetorical Theory from St Augustine to the Renaissance (Berkeley, CA University of California, 1974) 47-63, and G A Press, "Doctrina in Augustine's De doctrina christiana," Philosophies and Rhetoric 17 (1984) 98-120
view of students of the history of rhetoric, "the fragmentation of rhetoric," which influences Augustine's theory and practice of rhetorical criticism, emerges as early as the fourth century A.D. M. Leff has shown that the Latin handbooks of the fourth century show "a tendency to distort and contract the general design of the art [of rhetoric]," which in turn shows "how the nature of rhetoric reflects the wider social and cultural situation."\(^{15}\) The first known work by a Jewish scholar (Judah Messer Leon) in 1475 on the rhetoric of the Hebrew Bible manifests the same tendency.\(^{16}\) Whether we deal with rhetoric in Christian exegesis of the fifth century or in Jewish exegesis of the fifteenth century, we witness the increasingly paralyzing effects of a rhetoric, in theory and practice, increasingly restrained, distorted, and contracted, of which the biblical exegetes remained unaware.

The recent revival of interest in rhetorical criticism in OT studies goes back largely to the programmatic appeal made by J. Muilenburg in his presidential address of 1968 to the Society for Biblical Literature, "After Form Criticism What?"\(^{17}\) The answer to this question—rhetorical criticism, that's what!—led to the rise of a veritable Muilenburg School, whose publications have done much to make the reference to rhetoric acceptable, if not fashionable, again in biblical exegesis and its institutional representation: the learned societies devoted to biblical exegesis.\(^{18}\)

But neither Muilenburg nor his school worked with an identifiable model of rhetorical criticism, though pleas were made that the practice of rhetorical criticism needed a methodology.\(^{19}\) Even when efforts were made to link up with models of rhetorical interpretation in recent centuries, the theorists in the Muilenburg School failed to realize how much the prevailing theories of rhetoric were victims of that "rhetoric restrained," i.e., victims of the fateful reduction of rhetorics to stylistics, and of stylistics in turn to the rhetorical tropes or figures. Reduced to concerns of style, with the artistry of textual

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\(^{15}\) The quote is from Vickers, "Introduction," *Rhetoric Revalued*, 22, see also M. C. Leff's essay, "The Material of the Art in the Latin Handbooks of the Fourth Century A.D.," *ibid.*, 71-78


\(^{17}\) *JBL* 88 (1969) 1-18


disposition and textual structure, rhetorical criticism has become indistinguishable from literary criticism, as is evident in the works of two leading literary critics: L. Alonso Schökel and R. Alter.

In NT circles we have the same dilemma. D. Rhoads, making common cause with a literary critic, deals with the rhetoric of Mark by simply enumerating such features as repetition, two-step progression, framing, concentric patterns, episodes in a series of three, along with other "literary-rhetorical features."

Several years earlier, in the mid-1970s, H. D. Betz and W. Wuellner respectively worked with models of rhetorical criticism indebted to traditional Hellenistic-Roman rhetoric as masterfully, but one-sidedly, reconstructed in H. Lausberg's books. All of Kennedy's works are informed by the traditional model of rhetorical criticism derived from Roman antiquity. With Kennedy's proposal for NT interpretation through rhetorical criticism, pub-

20 The Inspired Word Scripture in the Light of Language and Literature (New York Herder, 1965)


22 D. Rhoads and D. Michie, Mark as Story (Philadelphia Fortress, 1982), see chap 2 (pp 35-62) on "The Rhetoric"


25 H. Lausberg, Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik (2 vols, Munich Hueber, 1960), and his Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik (8th ed, Munich Hueber, 1984) Vickers (Rhetoric Revalued, 30) cites the warning of Dutch critic M. Spies "that the influence of Heinrich Lausberg's re-codification of rhetoric [was not] beneficial in one particular, since he asserts that epideictic rhetoric was designed mainly for the praise of beauty, and had little importance in argumentation" See n 63 below

lications with rhetoric in their titles will likely reach tidal-wave proportions. Rhetorical criticism has brought us to a crossroad where we must choose between two competing versions of rhetorical criticism: the one in which rhetorical criticism is identical with literary criticism, the other in which rhetorical criticism is identical with practical criticism. The former is marked by a “rhetoric restrained”; the latter strives for a "rhetoric revalued" (B. Vickers), rhetoric reinvented (T. Eagleton), in which texts are read and reread, interpreted and reinterpreted, “as forms of activity inseparable from the wider social relations between writers and readers.” Not only do rhetorical devices of disposition and style get studied as means of creating “certain effects on the reader,” but the very construct of a theory of rhetorical criticism, compared with past and present alternative theorizings, can be, indeed should be, examined “as a practice.”

Alternative models of rhetorical criticism have emerged in biblical exegesis during the last decade. To explore each, or to discuss their relative merits compared with classical rhetoric, would demonstrate “the powers and limits of pluralism” and show critical understanding for what it is: “an end in itself.” Rhetorical criticism based on C. W. Perelman’s “New Rhetoric” as “theory of argumentation” was first proposed in W. Wuellner’s essay of 1976; F. Siegert’s Tübingen dissertation of 1984 is the first monograph-size effort of making Perelman’s model applicable to exegesis. Rhetorical criticism based on various models of modern linguistics appeared in E. Güttgemann’s journal Linguistica Biblica and in monograph-size studies by Swedish exegetes.

27 The title of his edition of collected essays (see n 15 above)
28 T. Eagleton, Literary Theory. An Introduction (Minneapolis University of Minnesota, 1983) 205-6 Cf. his The Function of Criticism (London Verso, 1984) 119 “[literature should be] seen as rhetorical in the deeper meaning of the word not just directed towards persuasion, but inscribed, like all discourse, with the movements of power and desire” Cf Kennedy, New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism, 158-59 “. rhetorical criticism comes closer [than other modern critical approaches] to explaining what they want explained in the text its power, the power of those texts as unitary messages”
29 Rhoads and Michie, Mark as Story, 35
30 See Charles Taylor, Social Theory as Practice (Delhi Oxford University, 1983) On the extensive discussion about theory as just another form of practice, see the various essays in Against Theory. Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism (ed W J T Mitchell; Chicago. University of Chicago, 1985)
31 See W C. Booth, Critical Understanding The Powers and Limits of Pluralism (Chicago University of Chicago, 1979)
32 In “Methodological Considerations Concerning the Rhetorical Genre of First Corinthians,” SBL Pacific Coast Regional Paul Seminar Paper, March 26, 1976
33 Siegert, Argumentation
34 E.g., see W Wuellner, “Der Jakobusbrief im Licht der Rhetorik und Textpragmatik,” LB 43 (1978) 5-66 See also A M Johnson, Bibliography of Semiological and Structural Studies of Religion (Pittsburgh Barbour, 1979)
35 I refer here to B. Olsson’s Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel (ConBNT 6;
Rhetorical criticism informed by modern semiotics appeared in J. Delorme's *Sémiotique et Bible*,36 in D. Patte's integration of A. J. Greimas,37 in R. A. Culpepper's adaptation of Genette's system of semiotic analysis,38 and the exploration of J. Derrida's deconstructive criticism by J. D. Crossan and others.39

Between the one extreme of the proliferation of exegetical methods and the other extreme of promoting antitheoretical arguments—both with the declared interest in serving rhetorical practice40—there remains the exegete's concern with classical rhetoric. This form of rhetorical criticism goes beyond both the theory and practice of rhetorical criticism proposed and promoted by Muilenburg and his school and the sociorhetorical method proposed by V. Robbins,41 which ends up in the service of the historian's interest in social description. By contrast, Kennedy's model of rhetorical criticism includes the concerns of Muilenburg on the one hand and those of Robbins on the other, but is more comprehensive, especially with the modifications of classical rhetoric proposed by modern critics. We turn now to a brief examination of Kennedy's proposal of rhetorical criticism.

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36 *Sémiotique et Bible* (Lyon Centre pour l'analyse du discours religieux), vol. 1- (1976–)
37 On the relation of rhetoric to semiotics, see also B. Spillner, *Linguistik und Literaturwissenschaft, Stilforschung, Rhetorik, Textlinguistik* (Stuttgart Kohlhammer, 1974), and his later essays
39 See R. Detweiler (ed.), *Derrida and Biblical Studies* (Semeia 23, Chico, CA Scholars, 1982) See also Culler (On Deconstruction, 242-51) on "deconstructive criticism and rhetorical reading", see also the index, s.v. "rhetoric" See n. 10 above on Culler's view of the relationship between deconstruction and intertextuality
40 See n. 30 above on Taylor and Mitchell, and n. 13 on Bruss
II. Kennedy's Classical Model of Rhetorical Criticism

Based on the legacies of Hellenistic-Roman textbooks on rhetoric adapted to modern use, Kennedy proposes the following five stages of rhetorical criticism.

A. The Definition of the Rhetorical Unit

What is the rhetorical unit compared to a literary unit? It is in all respects the same, except in one point which defines a text unit as an argumentative unit affecting the reader's reasoning or the reader's imagination. A rhetorical unit is either a convincing or a persuasive unit.

The smallest rhetorical units are metaphors and parables, sentential sayings and apophthegms, macarisms and hymns, commandments and parénesis, etc. The next larger rhetorical unit is constituted of varying combinations of the smallest rhetorical units, as atoms are combined into molecules. We find such units, e.g., in the Matthean Sermon on the Mount, the Marcan Apocalypse, the speeches in Luke-Acts, the Johannine Farewell Speech, Paul's Apology in 1 Corinthians 9, his Fool's Speech in 2 Corinthians 11, etc. The largest rhetorical unit is the text as a whole, whether that of a given document or that of a collection of certain types of documents, like the Four Gospels, or the letters of Paul, or finally the collection of all documents into a stated "canon."

B. The Identification of the Rhetorical Situation

Kennedy follows L. F. Bitzer's understanding of the argumentative or rhetorical situation as that specific condition or situation which invites utterance. This second stage is the most crucial one. It has been so since antiquity, where the rhetorical situation underlying or preceding a text was discussed as the crucial initial step of invention. H. Lausberg outlines the problems involved in terms of Situationsfrage: given a specific "case" (causa), what options are available and what choice is best suited to deal with it for maximal

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42 Kennedy, New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism, 33-34. On p. 34, Kennedy says "In rhetorical criticism it is important that the rhetorical unit chosen have some magnitude. It has to have within itself a discernible beginning and ending, connected by some action or argument. Cf Culler (On Deconstruction, 200) on "the notion of organic unity as the unquestioned telos of critical interpretation" and on "the identification of unity as a problematic figure." See also n. 58 below.


44 Kennedy, New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism, 34-36. For literature on the technical term "rhetorical situation," see n. 11 above.

45 Lausberg, Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik, 21-23.
effect? The rhetorical situation differs both from the historical situation of a
given author and reader and from the generic situation or conventions of the
*Sitz im Leben* of forms or genres in one point: the rhetorical critic looks
foremost for the premises of a text as appeal or argument. The grammarian
or linguist faces a similar problem in the determination of the mood or modal-
ity appropriate to the intention and purpose prior to the actual choices made
from the available grammar of a given language. Literary critics like Booth
developed the distinction between real authors or real readers and implied
authors or implied readers. More rigorous than Booth is Z. K. McKeon’s
recent proposal for “inventing rhetorical criticism.”

Traditional rhetorics went about defining a text’s rhetorical situation in
three distinct ways: (1) in the notion of a text’s *status* (or basic issue);47 (2) in
the notion of a text’s underlying *topoi* (or *loci*, the “places” or “material”);48
(3) in the notion of a text’s rhetorical genre (forensic, symbouleutic, epideic-
tic). Kennedy can also speak of the need to consider the rhetorical problem or
special challenge faced in a given rhetorical situation; he can also speak of
“following out . . . the invention strategy of [a given rhetorical unit].”49

*C. The Identification of the Rhetorical Disposition or Arrangement*50

There are three areas of discussion which illuminate the difference be-
tween literary structure as “anatomy” or “architecture” of a text and rhetori-
cal structure as strategy.

Rhetoric and epistolography (the study of letter writing conventions and
of typical letter structures) is one area of discussion. H. Hübner makes this
his centerpiece in his review of Betz’s commentary on Galatians.51 Orality

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46 Z K McKeon, *Novels and Arguments Inventing Rhetorical Criticism* (Chicago Uni-
versity of Chicago, 1982) See also G L Bruns, *Inventions Writing, Textuality, and Under-
standing in Literary Histor* (New Haven, CT Yale University, 1982).

ment Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, 18-19 For application to exegesis, see J D Hester,

48 On *topos* as a rhetorical rather than a literary issue, see W Wuellner, “Toposforschung
on the Topos as a New Testament Form,” *JBL* 104 (1985) 495-500. See also Siegert, *Argumenta-
tion bei Paulus*, 35-38, on topos in Perelman’s work, and pp 199-206 on topoi and values

49 Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, chap 1

50 Ibid, pp 13, 23-25, on p 37 Kennedy defines disposition or arrangement as “what
subdivisions [a text] falls into, what the persuasive effect of these parts seems to be, and how
they work together—or fail to do so—to some unified purpose in meeting the rhetorical situation “

51 H Hübner, “Der Galaterbrief und das Verhältnis von antiker Rhetorik und Epistolo-
*Ohio Journal of Religious Studies* 5 (1977) 4-12
and literacy are a second area of discussion. W. Ong and W. Kelber helped amplify C. S. Lewis's judgment of rhetoric as "the greatest barrier between us and our ancestors," i.e., the categorical barrier between oral and literary structures. Ethos and pathos, or convincing and persuasive strategies are the third area of discussion. Rhetoric in the service of religion is never solely persuasive—nor mainly convincing—in the Gedankenführung which J. Jeremias, e.g., saw in the arrangements of texts. Convincing disposition differs from persuasive strategies, as theological differs from kerygmatic disposition.

**D. The Identification of Rhetorical Techniques or Style**

Only by perceiving that and how invention generates disposition, and disposition generates special techniques of convincing or persuasive rhetoric and stylistic devices—only thus can we fully appreciate the liberation of rhetoric restrained, the liberation from the Babylonian captivity of rhetoric reduced to stylistics. Two problem areas are being addressed by rhetorical criticism focusing on the stylistic devices.

One area is the preoccupation with the identification of the cultural origins and literary traditions of style at the expense of any concern with the functions or effects of style. To speak of style as artistic devices (Kunstmittel) and of literary structures as art of disposition (Dispositionskunst—so M. Bünker in his 1984 study of rhetoric in 1 Corinthians) diverts attention with such misleading questions as where and how Paul, or the evangelists, could have possibly acquired such artistic training as part of Hellenistic paideia?

The other area of discussion is that of the functions or effects of chosen rhetorical devices or techniques. Neither the reference to style as embellishment nor the reference to style as serving affective functions will suffice.

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56 *Briefformular*, 48-72
Devices such as rhetorical syllogism, or the devices consisting of associative as over against dissociative techniques (Perelman’s notorious distinction),\(^{57}\) serve the function of convincing rhetoric (the traditional \(\textit{ethos}\) and \(\textit{logos}\)). But sometimes the same devices serve the function of persuasive rhetoric: the affect-arousing pathos of traditional rhetoric.

\textit{E. The Identification of Rhetorical Criticism as a Synchronic Whole}\(^{58}\)

At the end, Kennedy invites the rhetorical critic to review the whole of this critical enterprise in all of its diachronic parts. Given the fact that rhetorical and literary compositions are creative acts and that the activation of audience or readers aims to gain or maintain and strengthen convictions and values held by the readers, Kennedy rightly emphasizes that in this concluding stage of rhetorical criticism the whole of what is being analyzed must appear as greater than the sum of its parts.

With this brief outline of Kennedy’s model of rhetorical criticism, we can now proceed to a concise examination of the usefulness of this model in the exegesis of biblical texts. I have chosen 1 Corinthians 9 as a lengthy discursive and argumentative unit. Limitations of space prevent me from testing Kennedy’s model on one of the biblical narrative units.

\textbf{III. Testing Kennedy’s Model}

\textbf{A. Rhetorical Units in 1 Corinthians 9}

The smallest units would be, e.g., the metaphor in 9:24 (all compete for the sports trophy in the stadium, but only one gets honored) or the sentential sayings in 9:7 in the form of rhetorical questions (hired soldiers serve for wages).

The next larger rhetorical unit might be the “apology” Paul offers in 9:2-27; or possibly the two constitutive parts of traditional apologies: the accusation and defense, paradoxically reversed in sequence (9:3-12 and 9:13-27); or possibly other rhetorical units within the apology, such as the two syllogisms, one in 9:8-12a, the other in 9:19-23.

But Paul’s \textit{apologia} is part of the digression\(^{59}\) beginning in 9:1 with an

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\(^{57}\) To be found in both of his textbooks \textit{The New Rhetoric} (n. 6 above) and the \textit{Realm of Rhetoric} (Notre Dame, IN University of Notre Dame, 1982), see chaps 7-10 on associative techniques of argumentation and chap 11 on “dissociation”

\(^{58}\) See Kennedy, \textit{New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism}, 38. On the distinction between the organized whole in the text itself and the rhetorical critic’s effort of constituting an organized whole, see McKeon’s work cited in n. 46 above; see also n. 42

\(^{59}\) On the role of digressions in argumentation, see Wuellner, “Greek Rhetoric and Pauline Argumentation,” 177-88
anacolouthon and closing properly with its own short peroration in 10:12-13. This digression does for chaps. 8–10 what 1 Corinthians 13 does for chaps. 12–14. Furthermore, as the repetition of the Corinthian (or Pauline?) slogan in 6:12 and 10:23 suggests, 1 Corinthians 9 is part of the larger ring composition from 6:12 to 11:1 dealing with the conventionally joint topics of sex and food regulations. Lastly, we have the rhetorical unit of 1 Corinthians as a whole, then 1 Corinthians as part of Paul’s Corinthian correspondence, then as part of the Pauline corpus, and finally as part of the whole canon of Scripture.

B. Rhetorical Situation(s) in 1 Corinthians 9

Paul’s own choice of calling his discourse an *apologia* leads us to expect something forensic in tone. Instead, we discern that Paul’s advocacy of behavior when confronted with food sacrificed to idols is partly supportive and praising, but partly also critical and negative. The specific condition or situation that generates the argument both in chap. 8 and in the digression in chap. 9 is mixed. In just such “mixed” cases, Lausberg points out, it is the negative portion that requires an “apologetic” treatment: rights and privileges, praiseworthy as they are, will not be used, yet what is seemingly offensive gets apologetically praised. The result: an epideictic apology, one of many possible mixed genres which is chosen as most suitable for the rhetorical situation underlying chap. 8, for which chap. 9 serves as an amplifying digression.

C. Rhetorical Disposition in 1 Corinthians 9–10

I have given some illustration already of the dispositional arrangement of 1 Corinthians 9 as part of a digression concluding with its own brief peroration in 10:12-13, with 9:1–10:11 aiming at convincing the readers. But in 10:12-13 the aim is to persuade, i.e., affectively appeal to the reader, before resuming the course of the argument in 10:14 about idol meat in Corinth.

D. Rhetorical Devices

The use of rhetorical questions in 1 Corinthians 9 is an outstanding example of one particular “technique”; the rhetorical questions are more numerous in this chapter than in any other chapter of the NT. One cannot read this chapter without feeling the affective quality of this stylistic device. Yet the affective effect is not aiming at persuading the fictive jury in this apology; rather, its aim is to enhance the conviction, the values held and

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60 *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik*, §66 (p. 61), §145 (p. 88), §156 (p. 92), §193 (p. 105).

lauded by Paul, for himself as well as for his associates and for believers everywhere, i.e., for what Perelman calls the universal audience which is assumed to find these arguments convincing.62

E. Synchronic Aspect of Rhetorical Criticism

The exordium of 1 Corinthians (1:1-9) leads to the statement of Paul's main thesis, i.e., the main purpose of his writing (1:10). The unity (oneness, koinònia, agapè) which Christians have experienced both in the public ekklèsia and the private oikos—that unity is to be maintained and strengthened. The rhetorical situation is focused on praising what has been experienced and on arousing shame for what has been neglected. This assessment is vindicated by the "recapitulation" of the main thesis in 16:13-14 and the following peroration. This makes 1 Corinthians as a whole appear now as thoroughly epideictic in character and purpose as is the Letter to the Romans. It is one of the merits of Perelman's work on rhetoric that epideictic rhetoric is no longer simply equatable with panegyric, but rather is viewed as essentially educational in orientation.63 Education, not propaganda nor polemics, is the earmark of Paul's rhetoric in 1 Corinthians and in other epistles. Even the much cited and much misunderstood diatribe has emerged at last as essentially epideictic in purpose.64

IV. Where Is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?

Swedish classicist A. Wifstrand, speaking to biblical exegetes over thirty years ago, encouraged the study of genuine rhetoric because it functioned (1) to introduce distinctive and essential ideas and (2) to bestow on those ideas, convictions, or values some "forcefulness and educational effect, resulting in elevating and stimulating the audience."65 Perelman, born in Poland and a naturalized Belgian citizen, sees rhetorical criticism helping us to elaborate a logic for judgments of value that is indispensable for the analysis of practical reasoning66 as one major component of religious texts (among other components). Thus, rhetorical criticism leads us away from a traditional

62 New Rhetoric, 31-35, Realm of Rhetoric, 17-18
63 See Perelman, Realm of Rhetoric, 19-20, R Podlewski, Rhetorik als Pragmatisches System (Hildesheim/New York Olms, 1982) 133-68
64 See S. K Stowers, The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans (SBLDS 57, Chico, CA Scholars, 1981)
65 A Wifstrand, Die Alte Kirche und die Griechische Bildung (DALP—Taschenbucher 388D, Bern Francke, 1967) 38
66 Perelman, The Realm of Rhetoric, 8 "The role of argumentation can be conjoined with practical reason, it is a role that is fundamental in all areas in which we perceive the work of practical reason, even when our concern is with the solution of theoretical problems [e.g., the choice of definitions, models, and analogies] "
message- or content-oriented reading of Scripture to a reading which generates and strengthens ever-deepening personal, social, and cultural values. American K. Burke's long-standing interest in the rhetoric of religion would have us look in rhetorical criticism not primarily for religious persuasion, nor for religious conviction. Rather, with the help of rhetorical criticism, he would have us look for and find ever deepening dynamics of personal or social identification and transformation.67

Rhetorical criticism makes us more fully aware of the whole range of appeals embraced and provoked by rhetoric: not only the rational and cognitive dimensions, but also the emotive and imaginative ones.68 Here is where rhetorical criticism can, indeed will, make common cause with feminist criticism and non-Western modes of criticism.

Rhetorical criticism changes the long-established perception of authors as active and readers as passive or receptive by showing the rationale for readers as active, creative, productive. Moreover, rhetorical criticism changes the status of readers to that of judges and critics to that of validators.69

Taking us beyond the diachronic reading to a synchronic reading of texts, rhetorical criticism makes us appreciate the practical, the political, the powerful, the playful, and the delightful aspects of religious texts. For, as Booth has pointed out, rhetorical study is the study of use, of purpose pursued, targets hit or missed, practices illuminated for the sake not of pure knowledge, but of further (and improved) practice.

In restating Burke's keen interest in the "modes of rhetoric's deepest desires [as] transformation and identification," F. Lentricchia comes to see in rhetorical criticism a "rhetoricopolitical activity."70 Rhetoric in the Bible and rhetoric of the Bible (e.g., as literature or as "canon") are the one thing rhetorical criticism is concerned with. But the rhetoric of criticism itself is yet another dimension highlighted by Burke. Not only is there persuasion where

68 See D Ehninger, "A Synoptic View of Systems of Western Rhetoric," The Quarterly Journal of Speech 61 (1975) 448-53, esp 452-53 "[We must learn] to accept on their own grounds the whole range of appeals which rhetoric embraces—those addressed to the imagination and feelings as well as those addressed to reason " See also the statement of Eagleton in n 28 above
69 See R L Scott, "A Synoptic View of Systems of Western Rhetoric," The Quarterly Journal of Speech 61 (1975) 439-47, esp 446 "Contemporary movements of our culture begin to appeal to listeners as validators rather than judges " See also R Detweiler (ed ), Reader Response Approaches to Biblical and Secular Texts (Semeia 31, Chico, CA Scholars, 1985)
70 F Lentricchia, Criticism and Social Change (Chicago University of Chicago, 1983) 145-63 Cf R Fowler, Literature as Social Discourse The Practice of Linguistic Criticism (Bloomington, IN Indiana University, 1981), esp chaps 2 and 10, and now his Linguistic Criticism (Oxford/New York Oxford University, 1986) Anthropologist Victor Turner also perceives persuasion as crucial to social process
there is meaning, but there is persuasion also where there is criticism, i.e., interpretive, critical exegetical activity. Warning that “specialists in literary technology . . . [can be] not much better than specialists in atomic destruction,” Burke’s version of where rhetorical criticism is taking us makes us careful to look for and find in biblical texts as well as in exegetical methodologies instruments of persuasion embodying principles of development and change—in Burke’s terms, “identification and transformation.”

In light of all that has been said and outlined above, it will be well for us to be mindful of the words of a veteran practitioner of rhetorical criticism, written twenty years ago but still applicable to our days: “We have not evolved any system of rhetorical criticism, but only, at best, an orientation to it. . . . We simply do not know enough yet about rhetorical discourse to place our faith in systems, and it is only through imaginative criticism that we are likely to learn more.”

Where, then, is rhetorical criticism taking us in biblical studies in the years ahead? It is taking both the individual exegetes and the guild of academic exegetes out of an increasingly confining captivity, exile, or dispersion imposed by the dual hegemony of traditional science and traditional philosophy. Our faith in systems is challenged; so is the increasing isolation and departmentalization of exegetes working scientifically, whether individually or in learned societies and guild-sponsored seminars. Rhetorical criticism takes us to interdisciplinary studies and to the study of what Bakhtin called “the dialogic imagination.” It makes us heed the call heard since Patristic times for a theologia rhetorica, a legacy also of late medieval and renaissance-humanist biblical hermeneutics, which in turn profoundly influenced the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation alike.

Rhetorical criticism also promises to take biblical exegetes at last out of the ghetto of an estheticizing preoccupation with biblical stylistics which has remained for centuries formalized, and functionless, and contextless. The fateful bifurcation of rhetoric into dialectics and stylistics (the legacy of the sixteenth-century iconoclastic Peter Ramus)—a split latent in the theoretical distinction between “figures of thought” (res) and “figures of speech” (verba) in classical systems of rhetoric—must at last be overcome. The divided concerns are reunited in a new rhetoric which approaches all literature, including inspired or canonical biblical literature, as social discourse. Like

71 Criticism and Social Change, 152, similarly, Eagleton in The Function of Criticism, passim
72 E Black, Rhetorical Criticism A Study in Method (New York Macmillan, 1965) 177
the linguistic criticism advocated by R. Fowler, the emerging new rhetorical criticism regards "the texts it studies not as isolated and timeless artifacts [or revelation of timeless truths], but as products of a time of writing and [emphasis is mine] of a time of reading." With the significance of the text changing as cultural conditions and beliefs change—as feminist criticism, for one, keeps emphasizing—the discipline of rhetorical criticism will emerge as "a dynamic process," not as a system, least of all that of a neo-Aristotelian or neo-Ciceronian system. Rather, it will be imaginative criticism (E. Black), a criticism of the dialogical imagination (M. Bakhtin) which is cognizant of the Bible as "ideological literature" (M. Sternberg) and of biblical hermeneutics as part of the "politics of interpretation."  

74 Fowler, Linguistic Criticism, 178
75 Idem