

# Introduction

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In large scale, this volume maps a historical trajectory that spans past and contemporary generations. On a more intimate level, it presents sound bites of ongoing dialogue among five seminal scholars, and their progeny. The former are figures who forged paths where none existed; the latter are those who have walked these paths and refined their contours. Structured as a series of discrete exchanges, this volume's essays represent discussions that took place in the fall of 2011 at the San Francisco meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.

At this meeting, a session devoted to the "Genealogies of New Testament Rhetorical Criticism" traced the stages of a comprehensive shift in the focus of twentieth-century biblical scholarship. The five seminal figures whose works are explored in this volume largely precipitated this shift and produced subsequent generations of scholars who continue to use and refine the methods of rhetorical criticism.

Antiphonally arranged, the discussions that structured the San Francisco exchanges are collected here in essay form. They are

framed as five units consisting of a presentation of the contributions of one seminal figure, paired with a response by this figure or by a close associate. Each unit affords readers the opportunity and privilege to recognize and reflect on the contributions of these illustrious ancestors of New Testament rhetorical criticism. Each underscores the degree to which contemporary scholarship remains both grounded in and indelibly shaped by their influence.

Discourse commences with Troy W. Martin's eloquent encomium, designating Hans Dieter Betz the "Ur-ancestor" of New Testament rhetorical criticism. In his response, Betz balances Martin's structured *argumentio* with anecdotal recollection of emergent understandings. In successive exchanges, C. Clifton Black and Duane F. Watson explore the degree to which the foundational work of George A. Kennedy marks a transitional juncture in studies of both New Testament and classical rhetoric. James D. Hester and his son J. David Hester with a response by Thomas H. Olbricht examine Wilhelm Wuellner's commitment to elucidating the "something more" of rhetorical expression. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's nuanced introduction of the ethical dimensions of rhetorical criticism is the subject of John R. Lanci's extended accolade. Schüssler Fiorenza, in turn, offers a summative refraction of the social and scholarly confluences that have, at once, "enabled" and "shaped" her groundbreaking analyses. In a final exchange, L. Gregory Bloomquist traces the sociorhetorical emphases emblematic of Vernon K. Robbins's interpretive approach. Robbins then re-caps, refines, and extends its contemporary implications. Finally, Todd Penner and Davina C. Lopez reflect on these essays and the responses setting out a distinct agenda for the criticism of New Testament Rhetorical Criticism itself.

## Hans Dieter Betz

In this volume's initial exchange, Troy W. Martin considers the rhetorical legacy of Hans Dieter Betz in an *encomiastic* argument for Betz' singular stature in the field. Advancing the *propositio* that Betz belongs at the very beginning of any genealogical list of New Testament rhetorical criticism, Martin claims for Betz the status of "Ur-ancestor." Framing his "case" in direct address of a hypothetical "audience," he adopts (and adapts) the conventions of *ratio*, an extensive *argumentio*—complete with three proofs—and a concluding *peroratio* to detail the seminal contributions Betz has advanced. As Martin affirms Betz's distinguished status as "progenitor," he just as effectively traces a broader, disciplinary history. Martin's stylized prose functions simultaneously to contextualize Betz's approach and to introduce the New Testament rhetorical critical methods articulated in the volume's successive "generations."

Hans Dieter Betz' succinct response offsets Martin's stylistic flourishes with personal anecdote and reflection. Likening his "discovery" of rhetorical analysis to "the unknown ancestor who 'invented' the wheel," Betz observes that "certainly the wheel was there as a possibility, but the 'inventor' discovered its usefulness for transportation." He names the lack of precision characterizing prevailing attempts to structure the content of New Testament documents as a catalyst for his own rhetorical investigations. The degree to which existing approaches appeared to be "mere guesswork," re-formulated and packaged as "theology," inspired his interpretive shift aimed at discovering "what the text itself had to say." Only gradually did it become apparent, Betz observes, that rhetorical criticism afforded "a new way to understand texts and their 'hermeneutics.'" While the potential impact was not immediately apparent, Betz notes that interpretive methodologies shifted as the

text itself became the starting point. Countering the “application of external labels or the imposition of predetermined conceptual grids,” Betz suggests that the “validity” of emergent interpretive approaches such as Rhetorical Criticism must instead be assessed by whether these approaches afford “better understanding of texts [and so] lead . . . to a better understanding of their significance.”

### **George A. Kennedy**

In a second exchange, C. Clifton Black and Duane F. Watson engage the foundational work of George A. Kennedy. Black introduces the contributions of Kennedy as, at once, a complement and counterpoint to Betz. Black’s treatment simultaneously invites wider consideration of “the Kennedy Family’s” significance in shaping the field. He observes that as the first non-New Testament specialist to apply the tools of rhetorical criticism to the New Testament, Kennedy synthesized and systematized the “implications of classical rhetoric for New Testament exegesis as a whole.” Black notes that Kennedy provided an enduring bridge between classical scholarship and New Testament studies and that, even today, Kennedy’s “six steps of analysis” remain standard to the field.

Over decades of development, Kennedy’s approach has been “adopted, adapted, and extended,” and the various threads of New Testament and classical rhetorical criticism have become so intertwined that disentangling them is difficult. As a result, his scholarship marked a transition that has left an indelible print on both classical rhetoric and New Testament studies. Black remarks that “Betz was the first to bring [the] dish [of New Testament rhetorical criticism] to the table, Kennedy add[ed] his own seasonings, and the kitchen has been bustling ever since.”

Since Kennedy was able neither to attend the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in San Francisco nor to participate in this session

honoring him, Duane F. Watson, his former student, responds to Black's assessment of Kennedy's work. Trading on Black's metaphors, Watson names Kennedy's seminal volume, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, "a veritable feast of discovery." He likewise follows Black in offering a general survey that outlines the foundational significance of Kennedy's work. Watson assigns particular significance to the ways in which Kennedy's general consideration of New Testament literary genres introduced rhetorical criticism to new practitioners without training in Greco-Roman rhetoric. Simultaneously, he balances the breadth of Black's synthesis with closer analysis of Kennedy's impact on the various genres of source material included in the New Testament canon. Through exploring the ways in which Kennedy's foundational assessments continue to be refined, Watson deploys Kennedy's conversation partners—whether critical or complementary—to holistically (and usefully) situate Kennedy's work along a broader, more extensive scholarly trajectory.

### Wilhelm Wuellner

This volume's third exchange addresses the scholarly legacy of Wilhelm Wuellner. As introduced by James D. Hester and J. David Hester, the degree to which Wuellner wanted to demonstrate the "something more" of the rhetorical enterprise, emerges as a point of particular emphasis. Tracing the formulation of a critical theory characterized by "explorations," "cul-de-sacs," and repeated "revision," Hester and Hester traverse a discursive arc that is, at once, chronological and topical. Their initial focus on "defining Wuellner's theories of rhetoric" and identifying "features of Wuellnerian rhetorical critical analysis" lead them to explore Wuellner's understanding of the "power of rhetoric as the power of the sublime."

These considerations conclude with the query “Where Could Wuellnerian Criticism Take Us?” Exploring this question, Hester and Hester call attention to the ways that Wuellner’s work marked a fundamental change in the theoretical and philosophical foundations of rhetorical theory. This Wuellnerian shift introduced the dimensions of rhetoric not only “as utterance, arrangement and style, and elements of argumentation” but also as a method of communication that “intends not only to engage an audience but to persuade it to do something.”

Wilhelm Wuellner’s death on February 14, 2004, preceded this session honoring him, and so his friend and associate Thomas H. Olbricht offers a response to Hester and Hester. Olbricht addresses the hands-on role Wuellner played in creating a community of scholars that were willing to encounter rhetorical criticism as a “holistic discipline.” He suggests that Wuellner’s cognizance of the degree to which rhetoric impacts “not only the understanding but the very lives of human beings” spurred his contemporaries to “contemplate...words, worlds, and transcendence” in existential terms. Conceiving of verbal expression as a source of well-being and healing, Wuellner, in Olbricht’s estimation, viewed rhetoric as a “rapprochement between ‘heaven and earth’” that is able to influence and impact the mundane occurrences of daily life. In exploring a “chain of transcending dimensions” that extend into the beyond,” Olbricht affirms the untapped richness of Wuellner’s analytical approach. He observes, however, that just as Wuellner’s assessments took years to unfold, it may take contemporary scholars decades to grasp and to develop the full potential of his rhetorical insights.

### **Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza**

In this volume’s fourth exchange, John R. Lanci and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza consider Schüssler Fiorenza’s seminal explorations

of the ethical dimensions of rhetorical criticism. Lanci initiates discussion with the observation that while Schüssler Fiorenza is best known as a “feminist scholar,” this terminology runs the risk of mis-categorizing and circumscribing her legacy. Although Schüssler Fiorenza’s work rightfully retains singular status in emergent trajectories of rhetorical and theological discourse, Lanci suggests that she will be most remembered for introducing a paradigm shift rendering scholarship “accountable and relevant to the wider Christian community without sacrificing . . . rigor or legitimacy.” Through expanding “the use of rhetorical criticism to include the scholarly inquiry itself as an object of study,” Schüssler Fiorenza’s work, he asserts, “challenges the trajectories of virtually all of the rhetorical criticism that has gone before.”

As Lanci offers an overview of Schüssler Fiorenza’s critical approaches to the Bible, he details a multi-stage journey of exploration and discovery. Emphasizing the singularity of her cognizance of “the potential of rhetorical criticism to decenter biblical studies,” he simultaneously explores the effect of her application of “an ethic of inquiry” in moving biblical studies from the “exclusive purview of the academy to the wider community.” By introducing alternate approaches to understanding biblical authority, Lanci argues, Schüssler Fiorenza has placed rhetorical criticism in the “service of . . . establish[ing] a just world for all.”

Schüssler Fiorenza adds particular detail to the parameters of Lanci’s synthetic overview of her work. She names her own project as one that has “sought to integrate and transform elements of the\*logical, historical, and literary paradigms of biblical studies into a fourth paradigm of rhetorical-ethical inquiry.” Noting that “the renaissance of rhetoric corresponds to the same five decades in which feminist biblical studies emerged and matured,” she affirms the degree to which this confluence has, at once, enabled and shaped her work.

Recounting her experience as one of the earliest feminist scholars in biblical studies, she notes the degree to which feminist rhetorical analyses are uniquely equipped to leverage a critique of both language and ideology through probing “the structures of kyriarchical . . . domination that are controlling the production of knowledge in a given discipline.”

Schüssler Fiorenza situates her own contributions along a trajectory comprised of four stages. The first stage was her initial inquiry to efforts aimed at conceptualizing and developing a “feminist standpoint and theoretical perspective.” This first stage led her to the second of focusing anew on “the rhetoricality or rhetoricity of scholarship, knowledge, and science.” The third stage was her emergent understanding of the inseparable character of “rhetoric and ethics” that brokered the fourth stage of her conceptualization of a radical democratic practice of conscientization engendered as an “*ekklesia* of wo/men” engaged in “the ‘dance’ of interpretation.”

Schüssler Fiorenza maintains that the last of these stages most aptly captures the essence of a feminist approach. She suggests that because “dancing involves body and spirit . . . feelings and emotions,” it carries the potential “to take us beyond our limits and create . . . community.” Like dancing, “rhetorical moves and movements” can organically shift between “present” and “past,” between “realism” and “imagination.” Rather than providing “the transcript of a process,” rhetorical approaches afford “basic steps [for] textual and contextual explorations that . . . must [be] execute[d] in order to keep dancing.”

### Vernon K. Robbins

The work of Vernon K. Robbins is the focus of this volume’s fifth and final exchange. Highlighting the nature of “transformative performance” that runs through Robbins’ scholarship, L. Gregory Bloomquist traces the development of Robbins’s interpretive

strategies, played out along six discrete trajectories. The first, a praxis of “critical rhetoric,” moves toward “demystifying the conditions of domination . . . even as it promotes a realignment in the forces of power that construct social relations.” The second is embodied in the “interactionist” character of Robbins’s “interpretive analytic.” Its aim is to bring alternate ways of interpreting a text “into energetic, interactive dialogue on an equal playing field.” A third trajectory engages the “materiality of discourse” through “envisioning the landscape within the world of ancient texts.” A fourth is expressed in the “doxastic nature” of rhetoric. Privileging face to face discussion over dogmatic assertion, it “deals not with knowledge but with beliefs and opinions that are critically tried out and navigated locally.” Bloomquist identifies the fifth trajectory as an emphasis on “local rhetoric” that understands meaning “as an ongoing process [of] active reconstruction by people” in local settings. A sixth and final trajectory is linked to making audible the “absent voices” in a text, by attending not only to existing expressions and *topoi* but also to those that have potentially been effaced. Bloomquist ends his appraisal of Robbins’s approach with a series of concluding queries that evocatively underscore the degree to which Robbins’ “sociorhetorical interpretation” retains its potential to affect past, present and future understandings.

Robbins responds to Bloomquist’s analyses by reflecting on four key developments that directed the trajectory of his emergent thought. Moving chronologically, he first emphasizes the degree to which concurrent strains in sociology and cultural anthropology as well as the need to move beyond form- and redaction-critical analyses shaped the “reintroduction of rhetoric to the study of the Bible.” In a second development, he registers the ways in which the “blending of Judaism and Hellenism with help from the *Progymnasmata*” freed interpretation from the “horizons of

courtroom, political assembly, and civil ceremony . . . [and] the oratorical rhetoric of the Greek city-state” to consider “the progymnastic modes rhetoricians used to elaborate sayings, short stories, fable-like parables, and other literary genres.” Robbins notes that these two intersecting developments, in turn, invited a third development that conceived of the “real and imagined locations for emerging progymnastic Christian rhetoric [through] merging Social Science with Cognitive Science.” The fourth development, in turn, involved the shift from rhetorology or rhetoric that produces argumentation to rhetography or rhetoric that evokes graphic images and pictures in the mind. As the shape of studies and commentaries shifted and became increasingly “informed by rhetography and rhetorical force,” the importance of engaging the real and imagined *loci* from which Christian rhetoric emerged could no longer be ignored. Robbins concludes that considerable insight has been gained by linking literary-historical methods with socio-rhetorical strategies of analysis and interpretation, but it is essential for the next generation to embrace new strategies that likewise address “how texts participate in historical, social, cultural, ideological, and visual material culture.”

### Conclusions

Cumulatively, the essays included in this volume comprise something of a “handbook” for the producers of contemporary scholarship. Simultaneously, the volume’s genealogical trajectories underscore the significance of both established and emergent contributions. The field has changed dramatically since these forefathers and foremother began reframing established questions and forging new configurations. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of their respective analyses, however, is the degree to which each still retains its import. For those of us who are the heirs of these scholars’ seminal

work, the voices captured in this volume serve as both historical record and contemporary resource. They deliver, at once, a lofty challenge and an invitation to produce scholarship just as enduring in its significance. As each of these ancestors of the method of rhetorical criticism underscores the degree to which biblical literacy remains essential, the patterns that link privilege with scriptural interpretation run a cyclical course. Although the questions have changed, the stakes have hardly grown less significant.