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Prolepsis: Dealing with Multiple Viewpoints in Argument

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the argumentation strategy *prolepsis*: anticipating and subsequently responding to an argument before it has been made. Although *prolepsis* is common to a variety of arguments, it seems insufficiently studied or understood—or, worse, misunderstood as simply a “feint.” Drawing on scholarship in rhetorical theory and cognitive and social psychology, I offer a new understanding of *prolepsis*, recognizing the technique’s potential in argumentative discourse—especially in the search for “common ground.”

KEYWORDS: contrast principle, framing, *prolepsis*, reader-based, rebuttal, reciprocity, writer-based

INTRODUCTION

Our first reading today comes to us from Paul, in the 1st Corinthians, chapter 15, lines 35-37. Discussing the doctrine of Christ’s resurrection, Paul asks, “But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?” Paul then responds, “Thou fool, that which sowest is not quickened, except it die: And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body shall be, but bare grain, it may chance wheat, or of some other grain.”

Thus we have an example of *prolepsis*, understood in this paper as “the anticipation of and answering of an argument before it has been made” (Trail 2000, p. 144). As I consider the functions and effects of *prolepsis*, I shall first review both classical and recent scholarship on *prolepsis*. Next, I argue that although *prolepsis* is a commonly-used strategy in a variety of arguments, it is, in contemporary times, insufficiently studied or understood—or, worse, misunderstood as simply a “feint.” I will also examine a brief selection of *prolepses*. Finally, drawing on scholarship in rhetorical and composition theory and cognitive and social psychology, I will offer a new understanding of *prolepsis*, one that recognizes the strategy’s potential in argumentative discourse—especially in the search for “common ground.”

CLASSICAL RHETORIC AND *PROLEPSIS*

According to Richard Lanham, in *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, one of the earliest mentions of *prolepsis*, of “anticipations of arguments,” is in the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, a work that dates back to the time of Aristotle and is often attributed (rightly or wrongly) to him (Lanham 1991, p. 121). There, *prolepsis* is briefly discussed as

“*procatalepsis*,” but Lanham offers that *prolepsis* is the preferred term, in part because it is “shorter and better known” (p.121).

A more comprehensive classical discussion of *prolepsis* comes to us from the Roman rhetorician Quintilian. In Book IV of his *Institutes of Oratory*, Quintilian comments on *prolepsis* at length. While advising orators on how to render judges “attentive,” he remarks,

A little pleasantry, too, seasonably introduced, refreshes the minds of the judges, and gratification, from whatever quarter produced, relieves the tedium of listening. *Nor is the art of anticipating what is likely to be said against us without its use*, as Cicero says that he knew some had expressed surprise that he, who had for so many years defended many but prosecuted none, should now appear as the accuser of Verres, and then shows that the accusation of Verres is a defense of the allies. This rhetorical artifice is called *prolepsis* or “anticipation.” As it is useful at times, it is now almost constantly adopted by some declaimers, who think that they must never begin but with something contrary to their real object. (emphasis added, IV.i.49-50)

Later, in Book IX, Quintilian again considers *prolepsis* at some length. This time, although in Book IV he had implicitly cautioned against the overuse of *prolepsis*, Quintilian’s esteem for the strategy is clear. He remarks,

But what has a wonderful effect in pleadings is anticipation, which is called by the Greeks . . . *prolepsis* . . . and by which we prevent objections that may be brought against us. It is used, not sparingly, in other parts of a speech, but is of the greatest effect in the exordium. (IX.ii.16).

Perhaps more significant than Quintilian’s mention of the “wonderful effect” is his subsequent, and somewhat lengthy, breakdown of various types of *prolepses*:

Though there is in reality but one kind of it, it includes several species, for there is *praemunitio*, “precaution,” as in the speech of Cicero against Quintus Caecilius, when he premises that “having always before defended, he is now proceeding to accuse”; there is a sort of confession, as that of Cicero, in his pleading for Rabirius Posthumus, whom he acknowledges to be blamable in his opinion, “for having entrusted money to king Ptolemy”; there is a sort of prefatory statement, as, “I will say, not for the purpose of aggravating the charge,” etc. There is a kind of self-correction, as, “I entreat you to pardon me if I have gone too far”; and there is also, what is very frequent, a species of preparation, when we state at some length either why we are going to do something or why we have done it. The force or propriety of a word, too, is sometimes established by *prolepsis*, as, “Though that was not the punishment, but the prohibition, of crime,” or by correction, as, “Citizens, citizens, I say, if I may call them by that name.” (IX.ii.17-18)

Twelve books comprise Quintilian’s *Institutes of Oratory*, and the work has been rightly described as “an exhaustive encyclopedia of Roman educational practices that has been treasured for centuries by Western scholars for both its scope and depth” (Honeycutt, 2007). So, perhaps my argument that the amount of space Quintilian devotes to *prolepsis* is indicative of his esteem for the strategy itself is a weak tack. Nevertheless, I do believe it is significant that such a towering figure as Quintilian—whom Hugh Blair called “the most instructive and most useful” author on rhetoric in antiquity (qtd. in Honeycutt, 2007)—would not only consider *prolepsis* at such length but would also break down the strategy into several species or varieties. Certainly the strategy merits the attention of argumentation scholars and theorists.

CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS OF *PROLEPSIS*

Curiously, however, contemporary scholars of rhetoric and argumentation seem to have overlooked, to some extent, the significance of *prolepsis*. Before I examine this phenomenon further, however, allow me to comment, briefly, on why I am moving forward 2,000 years in my survey of rhetorical and argumentation theory as I examine the place of *prolepsis* in such scholarship.

As has been well documented in various histories of rhetoric, between the fall of Rome and the Renaissance, the study of rhetoric was confined, by and large, “to the study of style and the declamatory rhetoric of the Second Sophistic” (Bizzell and Herzberg 1990, p. 367). Thus, because *prolepsis* is not primarily a stylistic device, it seems reasonable to assume that few scholars in the middle ages or even the 17th or 18th centuries would turn their attention to the strategy. To my knowledge, extensive (or perhaps even cursory?) discussions of *prolepsis* do not appear in rhetorical texts until the 20th century. I am not suggesting, of course, that arguers themselves did not anticipate and answer objections in their texts for 2,000-something years; far from it. I am clarifying, however, that more recent discussions of *prolepses* are more germane to my purposes in this paper.

Several contemporary discussions of *prolepsis* reveal an interesting pattern: Whereas Quintilian cautioned against its overuse but still noted its potential for “wonderful” effects, more recent commentators seem to regard the strategy with somewhat lower esteem or limited regard. Consider Trail’s definition, from *Rhetorical Terms and Concepts: A Contemporary Glossary*. Consistent with classical definitions, Trail first remarks, “*Prolepsis* is the anticipation of and answering of an argument before it has been made.” He adds, then, “In writing it is less impressive than in a live situation, but it remains a powerful tool if it can be handled in such a way as to appear to be a fair representation of an opposing position” (Trail 2000, p. 144). Though Trail does note that *prolepsis* can be “a powerful tool,” it is worth wondering why it is “less impressive” in writing than it is in a live situation. Trail does not elaborate on this point, but it is a point I shall return to later in this paper.

In *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca also turn their attention to *prolepsis*—twice in the text, in fact. While considering “anticipatory refutation,” the authors remark that when it takes “the form of an objection to the speaker’s own argument, it can give rise to *prolepsis*, a figure which has a definitive argumentative connotation” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, p. 501). Contrast this conceptualization of *prolepsis* with the authors’ first mention of *prolepsis*, appearing much earlier in their text. In their discussion of “Rhetorical Figures and Argumentation,” they offer,

If . . . a speaker introduces objections into his sentence in order to answer them himself, we have a figure of speech, *prolepsis*, which is simply a feint. These objections may be clearly imaginary, but it is important for a speaker to show that he had himself foreseen possible objections and taken them into account. (p. 169)

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s definition is curious, to say the least. Are they suggesting that any objection the arguer introduces into his own discourse constitutes a “feint”? If this is the case, why then is it important for the arguer to show that he had seen

possible objections and taken them into account? My answer is that introducing (possible or probable) objections and then answering them is one powerful way arguers can connect with audiences—more of this below, in “A Writing Teacher’s Perspective.”

In *The Uses of Argument*, Toulmin does not directly address *prolepsis* per se, but the parallels between the figure and his discussion of what he terms a “rebuttal” must be noted. Take, for instance, Toulmin’s well-known example of Harry and his British citizenship. With data as “Harry was born in Bermuda,” and a warrant of “A man born in Bermuda will generally be a British subject,” one can reasonably infer the qualified claim “So, presumably, Harry is a British subject.” There are instances, however, where the claim about Harry (or, anyone in a similar situation as Harry) might not be true. Toulmin leaves room for such instances or exceptions in his schema in two distinct places: one, the modal qualifier (here, “presumably”), but more importantly for our purposes in the rebuttal category. Toulmin offers two sample rebuttals: “Unless both his [Harry’s] parents were aliens” or “Unless he has become a naturalised American” (Toulmin 1958, p. 102). These last two instances are, according to Toulmin, “conditions of exception” and “conditions . . . indicating circumstances in which the general authority of the warrant would have to be set aside” (p. 101).

These conditions of exception seem strikingly similar to *prolepses*. However, nowhere in his discussion of rebuttals does Toulmin implicitly recognize a sort of chronological or “time” element. Is it this element that sets a *prolepsis* apart from a rebuttal? When an arguer utilizes a *prolepsis*, she does so *before* the audience has the chance to offer the objection, the qualification, or the counterargument. She anticipates these things prior to the audience members offering them up themselves. It is worth noting here, for instance, that when Lanham defines *prolepsis* as “foreseeing and forestalling objections in various ways,” he also notes that the figure is related to *procatalepsis*, “a seizing in advance” (Lanham 1991, pp. 120, 119). Although I am not comfortable with the war or fighting metaphor inherent in the term “seizing,” I do think the time element inherent in the figure matters a great deal: first this (the anticipation of the counterargument), and then that (the response). Since Toulmin does not explicitly recognize this sequential nature, a rebuttal could seemingly be offered anywhere in the micro-argument or schema. (Or, perhaps the rebuttal could even be offered by the audience rather than the arguer?)

Or, is the issue more complicated than this? For instance, in relation to the argument about Harry and his citizenship, could the sample rebuttals simply be a species or variant of *prolepsis*? Consider a scenario such as the following: Two friends are discussing a mutual acquaintance, Harry, trying to discern his citizenship. One participant in the dialogue—while offering that Harry is a British citizen (claim) because Harry was born in Bermuda (data)—realizes that the other participant may very well challenge that claim. (In oral communication, such as this example, body language cues—eye contact for instance, or a furrowed brow—most certainly affect, among other things, the contents and direction of the discourse.) As the first participant realizes this, as the first participant anticipates a possible objection of “Well, Harry could be a naturalized American,” that participant subsequently includes the objection in his argument. That objection is not necessarily or directly addressed, but is it primarily the anticipation of the counterargument, and not also the direct answering thereof, that makes a *prolepsis*? That is, what exactly constitutes a *prolepsis*? Does an argument need to explicitly include both

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the anticipation of the counterargument and the subsequent response to said counterargument to be a *prolepsis*? For instance, in the Toulmin/Harry's citizenship example, would the arguer need to include not only "Unless Harry is a naturalised American," (the anticipation of counterargument) but also a clause along the lines of "which is definitely not the case" (the subsequent response) to make that a *prolepsis*? Additionally, would the arguer need to mark the forthcoming *prolepsis* with a clause such as "You may be thinking . . ." or "Perhaps you're wondering . . ."? My contention is no, not necessarily. All of these elements do not need to be explicitly included to make a *prolepsis*. Such a definition or distinction seems much too rigid, for of the various elements (including the anticipation of the counterargument, and the answering of that counterargument) it seems that the *anticipation* is what matters most.

Though Toulmin does not directly address *prolepsis*, a more recent argumentation scholar, Tindale, includes an extended discussion of *prolepsis* in his *Rhetorical Argumentation*. Trail identifies *prolepsis* as "less impressive" in writing than in speech (Trail 2000, p. 144), and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca caution against *prolepsis* when it functions simply as "a feint" (1969, p. 169). Tindale, on the contrary, seeks to restore *prolepsis* to its rightful place in argumentation scholarship. (A distinction Tindale raises in his "Preface" is worth noting here: About various approaches to the study of argument, Tindale explains that the approach he emphasizes in his book "stress[es] *the process involved in the argumentative exchanges between arguers and audiences*" (as opposed to those approaches that emphasize "the logical product" and "those that investigate the procedures involved in argumentative exchanges" (emphasis added, Tindale 2004, p. xi).)

Tindale offers a traditional definition of the term, "the anticipation of objections to one's position and preemptive response to those objections" (p. 83). However, unlike other contemporary commentators, Tindale also argues that the figure's

significance lies in its importance to dialectical argumentation, models of which will often require something very like *prolepsis* in the procedural rules (or dialectical obligations) it proposes for good argumentation. (p. 83)

Even better for our purposes here, Tindale then offers an extensive explanation of his summative claim about *prolepsis*: "So there is much to recommend *prolepsis* as an argument" (p. 85). For instance, as he examines a recent argument (from 2002) about the killing of Palestinians by Israelis—and, by extension, the culpability of American citizens—Tindale uncovers not only an extended analogy in the argument but also an extended use of *prolepsis*. He explains

The point is made by a series of objections and counters to those objections. This is not just the strategy of counter-argumentation that many theorists already promote in any arguer's repertoire; this is countering of imagined objections, and so success depends to a large extent on the quality of the appropriateness of such imaginings. Once again, the audience is able to "experience" the reasoning insofar as *prolepsis* presents to the mind the semblance of an exchange into which that audience enters. In a similar way, it invites collaboration. . . . Again, like other figures, successful use of this also has an ethotic payoff, since using *prolepsis* gives the argumentation an air of objectivity, shows the arguer trying to conceive things from the other point of view and treating that point of view in a reasonable fashion. (Tindale 2004, pp. 84-85).

Tindale's commentary is significant for many reasons. Before elaborating further, however, and before offering my own extension of his regard for the importance of the

figure in argumentation—especially in regard to what he terms the “ethotic payoff”—I would like to turn my attention to a variety of *prolepses*; before elaborating why the figure is not simply a “feint,” I would like to consider a few representative samples. (Over the years, I’ve collected perhaps hundreds of examples of *prolepses*, ones appearing in a wide variety of texts: advertisements for toothpaste or skin cream; examples culled from the sports pages, newspaper editorials, and letters to the editor; political arguments; and arguments about civil rights [e.g., King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”], just to name a few.)

SAMPLE *PROLEPSES*

In one of my university courses, a 200-level argumentation and composition class, I offer students extra-credit if they find a “real-life” example of a *prolepsis*; soon after that offer, they begin bringing me newspaper clippings, pages photocopied from their textbooks for other courses, and magazine ads, for instance. *Prolepses* are that common and frequently or easily spotted. (A side note: The frequency with which this figure or strategy appears, contrasted with the scant attention it seems to have received in argumentation scholarship, has always puzzled me.)

Several years ago, for instance, a student brought in an advertisement from a fashion magazine, an advertisement for “Lipoduction Body Perfecting Cream.” Alongside a picture of a woman’s bare leg against a dark background, the stark white copy reads, “Sure, it might be the most expensive cellulite cream. But it works 700% better.” Although neither the student nor I knew the exact or even the approximate cost of the cream, we both agreed that *hyperbole* (“the use of exaggerated terms for the purpose of emphasis or heightened effect” (Corbett 1990, p. 451) was employed in the text. Nevertheless, we also agreed that *prolepsis* was also at work: First, the copywriters anticipate a likely response or reaction by consumers, one along the lines of “Gosh, that cream is expensive!” or “Who would pay so much for skin cream?” Next, the copywriters respond with their own counterargument to those anticipated claims. It must be noted, too, that even though they almost certainly exaggerate the cream’s effectiveness (how exactly would one gauge “700% better,” by the way? *and*, better than what?), the copywriters anticipate a weakness to their own condition, perspective, or position. A fundamental, implicit claim to almost any product or pitch, it would seem, would be something along the lines of “our product is a good value” or “our product is worth it.”

Another student shared this example with me, one he found on amazon.com. It is from a customer’s review of Bruce Dowbiggin’s hockey book, *Of Ice and Men*: The reviewer questions Dowbiggin’s skill as a sports writer, for he notes several “factual errors that any competent editor would have caught.” For instance, the reviewer observes that “Dowbiggin writes of Clint Malarchuk’s life-threatening injury, but has him playing for the Washington Capitals.” The reviewer immediately follows this charge with his *prolepsis*: “*I am being picky, sure*, but how do you write about a scene no one ‘will ever forget,’ and then get the team wrong?!” (emphasis added). As with the cellulite cream advertisement, here we have a similar (and common) type of *prolepsis*: the anticipation and subsequent answering of an argument about the arguer’s own position, perspective, or stance before the audience has the opportunity to offer that criticism. (And in this forum—customer reviews of books found on amazon’s website—one certainly can offer

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a criticism or response: all one needs to do is login and write a follow-up post, something along the lines of “That one guy sure was being picky! So Dowbiggin got Malarchuk’s team wrong? So what?”)

Two more typical, conventional *prolepses*, before I turn my attention to *prolepses* appearing in perhaps one of the most important political works from the 20th century, Dr. King’s 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Both examples come from a textbook from a 300-level ethics course one of my students was enrolled in while concurrently taking my argumentation and composition course. In “Plain Sex,” reprinted in *Morality and Moral Controversies*, Alan Goldman turns his attention to sexual desire—or, more specifically, the causes of sexual desire. Early in his work, he writes

Our definition of sex in terms of the desire for physical contact may appear too narrow in that a person’s personality, not merely her or his body, may be sexually attractive to another, and in that looking or conversing in a certain way can be sexual in a given context without bodily contact. Nevertheless, it is not the contents of one’s thoughts per se that are sexually appealing, but one’s personality as embodied in certain manners of behavior. Furthermore, if a person is sexually attracted by another’s personality, he or she will desire not just further conversation, but actual sexual contact. While looking at or conversing . . . (Goldman 1999, p. 486)

Here, when Goldman proposes, “Our definition of sex . . . may appear too narrow,” he anticipates a probable or likely objection from his readers, however varied those readers may be. Goldman subsequently responds to this objection with his own counterargument, his own defense of his definition. Two markers that seem especially relevant here are Goldman’s transition “nevertheless,” which signals the forthcoming counterargument to the anticipated objection, and “furthermore,” which signals the continuation of that counterargument.

A similar *prolepsis* appears soon after in Goldman’s text. Addressing the interrelated functions of love, marriage, and monogamy, he writes, “It can be argued similarly that monogamous sex strengthens families by restricting and at the same time guaranteeing an outlet for sexual desire in marriage” (p. 488). The attentive reader of Goldman’s text realizes, upon seeing the clause “It can be argued . . .,” that in fact Goldman is not arguing that position, that instead Goldman is anticipating that position as a likely response on the part of his audience—again, however varied that audience may be. Consequently, Goldman follows up the anticipated argument with the claim

But there is more force to the argument that recognition of a clear distinction between sex and love in society would help avoid disastrous marriages which result from adolescent confusion of the two when sexual desire is mistaken for permanent love. (p. 488)

Goldman’s text, not surprisingly, contains several other *prolepses*, but King’s skillful uses of the figure deserve attention.

PROLEPSES IN KING’S “LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL”

The *prolepses* examined thus far seem to fall into two general categories, and it is these two general categories, I argue, that constitute the wide varieties of the figure: Again, in the first category, the arguer anticipates objections to the position being advanced, and these objections serve as a *recognition of one’s own weaknesses*. The advertisement for

Lipoduction Body Perfecting Cream is an example of this type of *prolepsis*. Recall that the copy read, “Sure, it might be the most expensive cellulite cream. But it works 700% better.” So too was the review of Bruce Dowbiggin’s *Of Ice and Men*, when the reviewer noted, in relation to his objections to the book’s factual errors, “I am being picky, sure.” In the second category of *prolepses*, as in the first, the arguer also anticipates objections to the position being advanced. However, now these objections relate not to weaknesses (real or perceived) to the arguer’s position; instead they relate to what I term *recognition of strengths to the other side*. The two examples from the Goldman text, especially the second one, fall into this category. (Recall that in the second, Goldman recognizes the strength to the alternate or opposing perspective, that monogamous sex strengthens families, before he advances his own counter-position.)

Not only do we see these two types of *prolepses* in advertisements, book reviews, and college textbooks, but we also see them in political texts as well. Such is the case with Dr. Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” First, though, let me offer my own *prolepsis*: King wrote his “Letter” in response to an already-published argument, the “Statement by Alabama Clergymen,” which appeared in the *Birmingham News* in April of 1963. King read this statement in his jail cell on April 12, 1963 (Good Friday) and subsequently penned his response, his “Letter.”

Thus, in many instances, King is not so much anticipating as-yet-unstated arguments or objections as he is responding to claims already set forth. Early in the letter, King writes, for instance, “You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations” (p. 1).

Similarly, soon after that, King writes:

One of the basic points in your statement is that the action that I and my associates have taken in Birmingham is untimely. Some have asked: ‘Why didn’t you give the new city administration time to act?’ The only answer that I can give to this query is that the new Birmingham administration must be prodded about as much as the outgoing one, before it will act. (p. 2)

In “The Public Letter as a Rhetorical Form,” Richard Fulkerson has already commented, somewhat briefly, on King’s use of Rogerian argumentation strategies. Fulkerson observes, for instance, that throughout the letter King pays “his clerical audience the compliment of having listened carefully to their views.” So, Fulkerson concludes, “His essay thus fulfills Carl Rogers’ demand that one must first hear a position and be able to repeat it with understanding and clarity before real communication can occur” (Fulkerson 1979, p. 132). Also, Fulkerson has commented at some length on the *ethos* King establishes in his letter; Fulkerson argues, for instance, that readers (including the immediately intended audience, the clergymen; and the larger audience, you and me) would find King “able and honest and worthy of belief” (p. 129) because King “knows his subject, . . . his audience, . . . and his art” (p. 129). Nevertheless, although many of King’s arguments in the “Letter” are accurately classified as Rogerian restatements of his audience’s position—restatements, it must be noted, that King uses to segue into his own arguments—King’s “Letter” also contains a number of noteworthy and effective *prolepses*.

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Consider the definition of a *prolepsis* in relation to an activity in an argumentation textbook, Missimer's *Good Arguments: An Introduction to Critical Thinking*. In "How to Create Alternative Arguments," Missimer advises students to use what she calls "a wonderful three-part technique for developing a sophisticated argument" (Missimer 1994, p. 36). She offers that "its 'point, counterpoint, point' structure really engages opposing arguments" (p. 36). First, the arguer makes the strongest case possible for her position. Next, the arguer offers the strongest reasons possible *against* her position. Finally, the arguer takes her first position again, granting the truth of the reasons against it, but then going on to show how her first position is still better (p. 36).

Does King utilize this "Engulf and Devour" strategy? Perhaps. Consider an argument near the end of the "Letter," when King address the clergymen's praise for the Birmingham police, the police who have handled the demonstrations, in the clergymen's terms, in a "calm manner." King, however, cannot join the clergymen in their "praise of the Birmingham police department" (p. 8). He admits that the "police have exercised a degree of discipline in handing the demonstrators. In this sense they have conducted themselves rather 'nonviolently' in public" (p. 8). However, King "devours" that position: "But for what purpose?" he asks (p. 8). In other words, why have the police conducted themselves nonviolently? His answer: "To preserve the evil system of segregation" (pp. 8-9).

Continuing—that is, in Missimer's terms, "devouring"—even further, King affirms that "it is just as wrong, or perhaps even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends. . . . they have used the moral means of nonviolence to maintain the immoral end of racial injustice" (p. 9). And ending racial injustice is, of course, King's ultimate goal, both in his "Letter" and in his public or professional life.

There are, perhaps, other "engulf and devour" *prolepsis* examples in King's "Letter," but I have some misgivings about the metaphor: "Devour" seems too close to "argument as war," which, as I observed previously in this paper, I am not comfortable with, especially in relation to King's rhetorical style and ultimate goals. Someone who ends his letter with "Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood" (p. 9), for instance, is arguably not out to "engulf and devour" his opponents' arguments. Nevertheless, Missimer's larger point is perhaps fitting.

More productive, however, is a consideration of several of King's *prolepses* vis-à-vis the work of a social psychologist. What are, after all, the psychological effects of a *prolepsis*? What likely effects, that is, does a *prolepsis* have on the argument's audience, especially their attitude toward both the arguer and the argument? What is the *ethotic* payoff, for instance? Recall what Aristotle offers at the very start of Book Two in *On Rhetoric*, when he turns his attention to the *pisteis*, or means of persuasion in public address: "Since rhetoric . . . exists to affect the giving of decisions . . . the orator must not only try to make the argument of his speech . . . worthy of belief; he must also make his own character look right *and put his hearers, who are to decide, into the right frame of mind* (emphasis added, Aristotle 1954).

Levine, in *The Power of Persuasion*, offers insight. But first, another *prolepsis* of my own: To my knowledge, nowhere does Levine directly, specifically address *prolepsis*. The figure is not listed in his table of contents or index, and several readings of the text turn up no specific mention of the term. However, while first reading Levine's text

several years ago, I was immediately struck by the parallels between *prolepsis* and what Levine calls “The Contrast Principle.” This principle

relies on the fact that human minds magnify differences: When two relatively similar stimuli are placed next to each other, they’ll be perceived as more different from each other than they actually are. (Levine 2003, pp. 94-95)

Levine notes two examples: “A loud noise on a quiet night sounds even louder. A cool breeze on a hot day feels that much cooler” (p. 95). (Comedian George Carlin’s observation that “anyone who drives slower than you is an idiot but faster than you is a maniac” comes to mind as yet another example of the Contrast Principle.)

Levine elaborates—and this is the parallel to *prolepsis* that I noted upon my first reading—that “social psychologists call this process ‘social comparison.’ Cognitive psychologists refer to it as ‘framing’” (p. 96). Earlier in the text, Levine examines the methods used by mentalists, “people who use psychological tricks to imply they possess special knowledge or powers” (p. 37). When he discusses his own forays into the field—learning and practicing the techniques mentalists use—Levine reports that he begins by telling his audience that he can “mentally transport psychic energy” (p. 41). He also explains to his audience that “most people who make these claims are phonies,” but his skills are based on “doctoral-level training” (p. 41). Levine does this—tells his audience most mentalists are phonies—because, as he explains, “Since most of the audience is skeptical of psychic powers to begin with, this is a good way to defuse their resistance” (p. 41). In other words, Levine anticipates (from previous experiences, perhaps) that his audience likely holds this view already. Then he “regains the offensive by offering the reason why” he, himself, is different (p. 41). Now, while considering King’s uses of *prolepsis*, by no means do I mean to suggest that King is a “flim flam artist” like the mentalists Levine debunks. I do think, however, that Levine’s discussions of “defusing resistance” and “framing” are relevant in relation to King’s applications of the figure.

For instance, addressing the clergymen’s point that the demonstrations have been “unwise and untimely,” King takes the clergymen’s argument one step further. He writes

We are sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of Albert Boutwell as mayor will bring the millennium to Birmingham. *While Mr. Boutwell is a much more gentle person than Mr. Connor*, they are both segregationists, dedicated to maintenance of the status quo. I have hope that Mr. Boutwell will be reasonable enough to see the futility of massive resistance to desegregation. But he will not see this without pressure from devotees of civil rights. (emphasis added, p. 2)

Nowhere in their letter do the clergymen assert that Mr. Boutwell is much more gentle than Mr. Connor. Nowhere do they specifically address the character, the *ethos*, of either Boutwell or Connor. However, what King does is precisely what happens in many of the *prolepses* I’ve studied, ones from texts or sources other than King: When King calls Albert Boutwell “a much more gentle person,” he anticipates a likely response to his argument that Boutwell as mayor will not bring an end to racial injustice: One could charge, for instance, that Boutwell is not the same as Connor, for Boutwell, being more gentle, will surely work *with* desegregationists. But King anticipates this response, this response relating to Boutwell’s and/or Connor’s characters, and by doing so, King, in part, *frames* the issue how he wants it framed: in terms of character and its relationship to the ending of segregation. In other words, “sure, Boutwell, compared to Connor, is

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gentle, but not gentle enough to end segregation”—both men are committed to the *status quo*, according to King. Additionally, not only does King frame the issue in his terms, King also defuses some of his audience’s resistance when he explicitly recognizes that Boutwell is a “gentle man.” King shows his audience that he is able to recognize Boutwell’s strength, even though this strength is not sufficient enough for King.

King defends the timing of the protests in Birmingham. Immediately after, he turns his attention to justifying his actions, his choices. He writes, “You may well ask: ‘Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? Isn’t negotiation a better path?’” (p. 2). Now, to clarify, the clergymen have actually written, “We agree rather with certain local Negro leadership which has called for honest and open negotiation of racial issues in our area” (Carpenter, et al 1963, p. 1). So, perhaps this is yet another instance of a Rogerian response instead of an out-and-out *prolepsis*/anticipation of an unstated argument. Notice, however, that the clergymen did not specifically ask “Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, and so forth?” What they had done was support negotiation, not call for King to clarify his support for direct actions such as sit-ins and marches. Perhaps I’m quibbling. Perhaps I’m stretching. But, again, Levine’s brief discussion of cognitive frames seems relevant: First King anticipates that, although the clergymen have explicitly stated their support for negotiation, these clergymen may, at the same time, wonder “why engage in direct action?” In other words, King anticipates, “If we, the clergymen, support X (negotiation), why do you do Y (direct action)? What are the merits of Y?” Doing so allows King to frame direct action and negotiation together. He writes,

You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to so dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. (p. 2)

Controlling this frame allows King to control the terms of the discourse.

Another way King controls the terms of the discourse in his letter is the *ethos* he constructs for himself over the course of the text. Consider, first, what Aristotle argues about the construction of *ethos* in the discourse itself. Early in *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle observes,

There is persuasion through character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence; for we believe fair-minded people to a greater extent and more quickly [than we do others] on all subjects in general and completely so in cases where there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt. And this should result from the speech, not from a previous opinion that the speaker is a certain kind of person; for this is not the case, as some of the technical writers propose in their treatment of the art, that fair-mindedness [*epieikeia*] on the part of the speaker makes no contribution to persuasiveness; rather, character is almost, so to speak, the controlling factor in persuasion. (1991, p. 38)

If a “fair-minded” character is so important—so much so that Aristotle terms it the “controlling factor”—how does King’s text, especially his use of *prolepses*, contribute to or construct such an *ethos*? One way King does this is through his own admitting to weaknesses in his own position, real or perceived.

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The admittance of weakness is a type of frame that seems to serve a number of functions. Each of us carries with us, undoubtedly, our own values, biases, ideas, morals, etc.—our own affective and cognitive frames, in other words. When we encounter an argument that conflicts with our existing frames, the argument creates dissonance for us, and this dissonance is unpleasant. Consequently, it would seem, most people at least disagree with or at most dismiss the conflicting argument in order to minimize dissonance. Thus, to minimize this resistance, the arguer must first implicitly honor the audience’s existing cognitive framework: The arguer must anticipate and admit to or recognize the perceived weakness, for instance. Next, the arguer must attempt to show how the new material can be incorporated into the existing frame without undue conflict. One way to do this, of course, is to “reframe” the issue by overtly admitting to the weakness and then show how, from a different perspective, said weakness is actually a strength.

King does this early in his “Letter.” In the spirit of Rogerian argumentation, responding to the clergymen’s disdain for King’s willingness to break laws, King writes, “You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws” (p. 3), to which he answers

This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court’s decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. (p. 3)

He continues, though, by clarifying in *prolepsis*-like fashion: “One may want to ask: ‘How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?’” (p. 3). Certainly, breaking laws or encouraging others to break laws would cause the staid clergymen dissonance. Thus, when King answers the *prolepsis*, he reframes the issue. He writes

The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that “an unjust law is no law at all.” (p. 3)

King has deftly turned around the weakness—the fact that he advocates breaking the law—by getting the clergymen to see that St. Augustine (and one can safely assume the audience not only knows of but also respects St. Augustine) has also addressed the differences between just and unjust laws. By extension, King “reframes” his breaking of law with that of Augustine’s dictum that “an unjust law is not law at all.”

The second type of *prolepsis* reframe relates to how the arguer anticipates and addresses a perceived weakness, one that may be true in general but either does not apply in this particular case or is less troublesome than it first appears to be. King demonstrates this when he addresses the means and ends of nonviolent direct action. He writes,

Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to so dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. (p. 2)

He continues, adding, “My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent-resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of

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the word ‘tension’” (p. 2). Here, King anticipates and admits to a perceived weakness in his position, but he demonstrates, then, that this weakness is not as troublesome as it first appears—either to him or to his audience. King clarifies just what type of tension applies in this case:

I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. (p. 2)

This adept reframe allows King to combine his position and goals with the *ethos* of Socrates, the philosopher who died for his beliefs, who died knowing that his resistance, his nonviolent tension, would bring about social change.

Earlier, I argued that it is the anticipatory element to a *prolepsis*—as opposed to just or primarily the explicit use of a clause such as “you may be thinking” or “perhaps you are wondering”—that constitutes a *prolepsis*. I also argued that one of the main types of *prolepses* is when an arguer explicitly recognizes weaknesses to his own position—as opposed to the other type, where the arguer recognizes strengths to the “other side.” Consider the first type of *prolepsis*, when King begins his “Letter” with what may be the most noteworthy *prolepsis* of them all. At the very start of his text, he writes, “While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities ‘unwise and untimely’” (p. 1). Nothing particularly *prolepsis*-like in that, of course. But consider what King does immediately after he explicitly recognizes that his intended audience, the clergymen, have criticized him and his work. He writes,

Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. (p. 1)

In other words, “Let me begin by admitting weaknesses: You criticize me and my work. What’s worse, others criticize me and my work—so many, in fact, that if I tried to deal with all of that criticism, that is all my staff and I would have time for. I would spend all my time addressing perceived weaknesses that I would get almost nothing else accomplished.” Certainly, King is exaggerating in a self-deprecating style. As an adept arguer, however, one who can and will control the terms of the discourse, King immediately tells his audience, “But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statements in what I hope will be patient and reasonable term” (p. 1).

In many ways, King’s “Letter” can be considered a type of negotiation with his audience. If so, consider that his admittance of weakness here—his *anticipation* that such a move will engender him to his audience—is but one way King builds rapport and establishes trust with that audience.

More importantly, however—not only with this particular *prolepsis* from King but with perhaps all *prolepses* in general—is the idea of reciprocity. The work of social psychologist Levine is again relevant. Midway into *The Power of Persuasion*, Levine

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elaborates on what he and other psychologists call “the reciprocity rule.” Put simply, “most of us are driven by a sense of equity and fairness,” so

when someone does something for us or gives us something, we feel obligated to do something for that person in return. . . . [the favor] activates one of the most powerful of social norms, the reciprocity rule, whereby we feel compelled to repay, in equitable value, what another person has given to us. (Levine 2003, p. 65)

Levine offers the example of Hare Krishnas at airports, for instance, in the 1960s. Seeking contributions, the Hare Krishnas would hand passersby free flowers or pin the flowers on their jackets. Or, in San Diego, “which has a high concentration of military personnel and retirees,” the Hare Krishnas would pin a small American flag on people’s jackets (p. 71). The reciprocity rule—a powerful, unspoken rule of social engagement and social order—told recipients they should give something in return for the “free gift”: a small donation, most likely. “This gimmick,” Levine explains, “has made the Krishnas a wealthy organization” (p. 71).

Though Levine characterizes the Hare Krishna’s distribution of flowers or flags as a “gimmick,” he offers numerous examples of the rule at work in a wide variety of interpersonal, social, and business settings—too numerous to go into here. He concludes

The reciprocity norm not only allows trade and transactions to proceed in good faith; it lays the foundation for cooperative, prosocial, unselfish human relationships. It reminds us to balance giving and receiving, to share. At its best, the norm both induces generosity and provides the psychological security that our generosity will be returned in due course. (p. 89)

As humans engaged in argument, could such reciprocity be just what we strive for when we utilize *prolepses*? When I explicitly recognize good arguments to the other side, for instance, am I not also implicitly asking my audience (perhaps ones not at all invested in the other side, perhaps ones heavily invested in the other side) to grant me the same reciprocity? When King writes, “My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent-resister may sound rather shocking,” he is, I argue, utilizing a *prolepsis*: He is anticipating that his audience *will find* his citing the creation of tension on the part of the resister as “rather shocking.” King is, in a way, giving something to his audience. He grants them that concession, and psychologically, rhetorically, they become—according to the reciprocity rule—more likely to give him something in return. Perhaps that something is their undivided attention; perhaps it is agreement on the forthcoming particular point; perhaps it is agreement with the larger theses King advances. Nevertheless, here, as in so many other *prolepses*, the figure functions as a powerful *quid pro quo*: “I’ll give you this, if you’ll give me that.” Ethotically, the figure also functions thus: “I’ll be open and fair-minded if you will as well.”

CONCLUSION: A WRITING TEACHER’S PERSPECTIVE

You’ll recall that Trail, in *Rhetorical Terms and Concepts*, offers that “*Prolepsis* is the anticipation of and answering of an argument before it has been made” (Trail 2000, p. 144). It can be “a powerful tool if it can be handled in such a way as to appear to be a fair representation of an opposing position” (p. 144). He also notes, however, that “in writing it is less impressive than in a live situation” (p. 144). I would like to close by taking Trail

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to task on that observation. As a writing teacher first and a rhetorician or argumentation scholar second, I contend that in writing a *prolepsis* is often more impressive than it is in a live situation (such as a conversation).

I shall use this paper as my example: As I write this paper, I sit alone in my basement home office, books and papers strewn across my desk, my lap, and the floor. Soon I will send this paper to my commentator, Professor A.F. Snoeck Henkemans; I will also stand before you one day in June and read most or, time permitting, all of what I have written. Subsequently, the paper will be, I hope, read by others (on CD-ROM, for instance). But none of these various audiences is present as I compose and revise. I cannot turn to any of the audiences and ask, “Did I use sufficient evidence here? Does this claim seem clear and well-supported?” for instance. Also, I have no access whatsoever to body language cues, cues which would aid a great deal in my assessment of my audience’s responses or reactions.

Consequently, as I compose and revise, my attention needs to be focused not only on the text itself—or, my arguments in the text—but also on what I *anticipate* my various audiences’ reactions to be. A proficient writer, in other words, is one who can not only string together words, phrases, and clauses in such a way as to convey intended meanings as clearly as possible, but one who can also, to a large extent, *anticipate and respond to* what he thinks his audience’s needs, biases, perspectives, and stances will be.

In composition theory and pedagogy, we call such prose “reader-based,” as opposed to “writer-based.” Inexperienced writers, Meyer and Smith explain,

often compose associatively, as if writing down their thoughts as they occur. They do not communicate to a reader and are not conscious that their audience may not share the contexts or assumptions underlying the sentences. These writers leave out crucial information, producing prose that is elliptical or “writer-based,” as opposed to prose that is directed to a reader, or “reader-based.” (Meyer and Smith, 1987, p. 28)

One of the most challenging tasks for any writer, then, is communicating meanings by anticipating contexts, assumptions, and—perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this paper—counterarguments. (My own *prolepsis*: I am not suggesting that all writing, or all good writing, is, by extension, a *prolepsis*. Anticipating and subsequently responding to, rightly or wrongly, audience assumptions and larger contexts does not a *prolepsis* make. But in my experience teaching college-level writing for 15+ years, inculcating students’ abilities to anticipate and respond to the audience’s likely counterarguments is a challenging but important task for the instructor. With almost every sentence of this paper, I have asked myself, in one way or another, “What will my intended audience members likely think of this? What objections, questions, or assumptions might I be overlooking?” Anticipating all objections is not possible, of course. The key is anticipating the most important ones, the most likely ones, and these will almost certainly arise when my argument is at its weakest.)

In most writing situations (instance messaging comes to mind as a possible exception), the audience is not immediately present: no body language cues can be seen and interpreted; questions cannot be raised partway through the text. The reader can certainly ask herself, “Now, what does he mean when he asserts . . . ?” but the reader cannot ask the writer as the text unfolds or is (re)created in the reader’s mind.

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The problem of audience, especially as it relates to written discourse, is a complicated issue, too. Many composition teachers and scholars recognize the potential for at least two kinds of audiences, “audience addressed” and “audience invoked.” In the first,

those who envision audience as addressed emphasize the concrete reality of the writer’s audience; they also share the assumption that knowledge of this audience’s attitudes, beliefs, and expectations is not only possible (via observation and analysis) but essential. (Ede and Lunsford 1987, p. 321)

“Know your audience” may be, generally speaking, good advice to a writer. It is, nevertheless, often too simplistic to be of great value. (With this paper: I “know” my audience will be primarily philosophers and other scholars and teachers of argument—e.g., speech communication scholars, rhetorical theorists, etc.—but how well can I “know” that audience? I have never met the vast majority of you, and it certainly is not possible to locate and read all of your scholarship, for one, prior to my completion of this paper.)

Ede and Lunsford identify the second approach to audience and its role in written discourse as the “audience-invoked stance”:

those who envision audience as invoked stress that the audience of a written discourse is a construction of the writer, a ‘created fiction.’ . . . They do not, of course, deny the physical reality of readers, but they argue that writers simply cannot know this reality in the way that speakers can. The central task of the writer, then, is not to analyze an audience and adapt discourse to meet its needs. Rather, the writer uses the semantic and syntactic resources of language to provide cues for the reader—cues which help to define the role or roles the writer wishes the reader to adopt in responding to the text. (Ede and Lunsford 1987, p. 321)

One of the semantic and syntactic resources writers (and speakers, Ede and Lunsford note) use to provide cues for their audiences is metaphor. They briefly examine a speech by Jimmy Carter, a speech in which Carter explained to Americans that his program against inflation was “the moral equivalent of warfare.” Using “warfare” as a metaphor to define his policies, Carter was “doing more than merely characterizing his economic policies.” He was also, Ede and Lunsford assert, “providing an important cue to his audience concerning the role he wished them to adopt as listeners—that of a people braced for a painful but necessary and justifiable battle” (p. 327). They add, further, “were we to examine his speech in detail, we would find other, more subtle, but equally important, semantic and syntactic signals to the audience” (p. 327). Although the Carter example is a speech, Ede and Lunsford’s point about metaphor as a semantic and syntactic resource used by the writer (or, there, the speaker) to help define the audience is most germane to my purposes.

And like metaphor, *prolepsis* is, I conclude, one such semantic and syntactic signal. When a language user—a writer or speaker—employs *prolepsis*, that language user is not simply anticipating and responding to a counterargument before it has been offered. More often than not, several other important language acts are concurrently taking place: The language user is also framing the issue for or even with the audience; employing the reciprocity rule; moving out of writer-based (or, speaker-based) prose and moving toward reader-based (or, listener-based) prose; and, finally, employing a semantic

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and syntactic signal that tells the audience how the arguer wishes that audience to respond to both the argument and the arguer. Are there *prolepses* that function as little more than feints? Most certainly there are, but in most instances, the figure is a powerful argumentation strategy, one that can bring language users together as they search for “common ground.”

[link to commentary](#)

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