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Commentary on Snoeck Henkemans

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Commentary on A. Francisca Snoeck Henkemans “Manoeuvring Strategically with *Praeteritio*: An Analysis of Manifestations and Effects of Pseudo-Omissions”

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1. INTRODUCTION

Professor Snoeck Henkemans raises questions about the communicative and interaction effects of the figure of thought, *praeteritio*, in order to obtain insight into the strategic potential of stylistic manoeuvres in fulfilling dialectical duties and rhetorical ends of argumentation.

In general, *praeteritio* is a matter of emphasizing and hiding. *Praeteritio* “enables speakers or writers to focus the attention on the fact that they are not going to perform a certain speech act and meanwhile smuggle in the information they allegedly are going to omit. The fact that they are not going to tell something is presented as new information, whereas the information they provide under the pretense of omitting it is presented as if it had already been accepted by the audience, and therefore requires no particular attention.” The figure can be examined by analyzing examples that fall within the felicity conditions of assertives and take certain forms to justify why a full discussion is not being made. My analysis proceeds to extend professor Snoeck Henkemans observations by creating a field of choice where a speaker can decide between enacting a reluctance to bring materials literally into an argument and a figurative reluctance, emphasizing the ‘fiction’ of not calling attention while bringing a matter for discussion – the latter move – it goes without saying – being a noticeable rhetorical flourish.

2. LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE ENACTMENT

In its literal enactment, *praeteritio* may be a statement that mentions a topic to be considered later, on a subsequent occasion but not now. To me, this use seems to suit a business-like rendering of a situation involving speaker and audience where the speaker divides topics, subject matter, or issues into more or less discrete units for presentation, reception, and judgment. The appearance of innocent division may be misleading, however. As we all know, agenda setting is an important move in a discussion when items for discussion are put in a certain sequence. Placement may make issues easier or more difficult to be discussed. The maneuver in this case is to make the audience think that an issue can be treated later because the one at hand is either more urgent or merely a

preference for organization. What is revealed is the schedule, what is hidden from sight are the strategic calculations of the organizer.

In its figurative enactment, *praeteritio* has a different tone. In the figurative case, the claim to not bring up an issue is a fiction; indeed, the precise reason for claiming one is not bringing up an issue, and yet talk on, is to create notice of an unusual manner of speaking—the traditional function of all figures of speech. In these cases, the arguer makes it clear that there is an implicit motivation to consider a point at some length. The evidence warrants it. The interests of the audience demand it. The argument would be well-served by it. But, while mentioning this matter, the arguer breaks off further overt development in the speech or essay. Why would a speaker do this?

3. TO HIDE OR BRING ATTENTION TO MATTERS?

Professor Snoeck Henkemans alerts us to the fact that there are mutually contradictory explanations. On the one hand, some scholars believe that constraining the full development of a discussing a subject, but cutting it off is a shoddy form of reason creating the illusion of covering a matter without its full disclosure. On the other hand, some scholars hold that the figure is not to hide an argument, but to call attention to it.

I think Professor Snoeck Henkemans is closer to the truth when she finds in the figure the capacity to conceal and reveal. Depending upon context, a speaker can bring notice and invite further thinking, or bring notice in a way that renders the “wink, wink,” “goes without saying,” “we all know” an affirmation of audience presumption, prejudice or belief.

The figure performs the communicative function of unifying the speaker and audience. I am not going to bring up X, but X should be considered by us. In this respect, X becomes a background consideration that the audience should think about, or think through with the arguer. Not talking about something because it is too obvious to need proof, too unlikely to be dis-proven, what no one of taste would bring up, or perhaps relevant generally but not to this situation—all these conditions position and unify the arguer, audience, and claim. It is not only that the figure calls attention to a matter not to be discussed, but the manner in which ‘passing by’ is justified positions the un-discussed item in a way that confirms grounds for common agreement, agreement to get on with what is bothering and needs discussion.

4. CONCLUSION

Rhetorical figures can be viewed as speech acts that manoeuvre validity conditions of meaning in ways that audiences recognize but are not easily codified as rules. Figures address cognitive problems, predicaments where the situation does not accommodate reasonable argumentation easily. *Praeteritio* plays with decorum conditions where matters are apt to an argument but the speaker judges the audience not sufficiently attentive or receptive to an immediate, full discussion. Especially when confronting a rival, the performance of a rhetorical trope calls attention to the performance of an argument and stylistic force to its informational content, formal correctness, and weight. *Praeteritio* in classical advocacy often calls attention to the arguer’s skill and daring—to address a matter not to be addressed, in a clever way. In its

COMMENTARY ON A. FRANCISCA SNOECK HENKEMANS

modern form, this stealth-figure gathers agreement by passing successfully without notice into agenda setting manoeuvres. Either way there is a dialectical risk in pursuing rhetorical effect by saying what goes without saying.

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