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# Commentary on Halsall

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# ARGUMENTATIVE TOPICS AND THE RHETORIC OF LITERATURE

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The topics of argumentative invention have provided our culture with an extremely versatile resource over a very long time, and so it is not surprising that it would be impossible to give a complete account of their variegated developments and uses in anything less than a book, probably encompassing several volumes. Realizing this difficulty, Professor Halsall has taken us on an engaging *tour d'horizon* of the topics in classical and modern theories of argumentation, while placing special emphasis on the usefulness of these topics in the analysis of literature. Following his lead, I will provide a series of footnotes to his sweeping overview, which I hope will further support the case which he makes for the significance of argumentative patterns for a fuller understanding of style as well as substance in literature beyond the bounds of argumentative discourse more narrowly conceived.

## I

My first note concerns the treatment of the topics in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Professor Halsall discusses the lists of twenty-eight lines of argumentation in Book II chapter 23 and the ten fallacies in the following chapter 24 (1397a ff., 1400b ff.). It may be worth noting that in addition to the common topics (*koinoi topoi*) which do not pertain to any particular area of expertise, Aristotle also discusses so-called *idia* (specifics) or *stokhei* (elements) of enthymemes (1.2.21-22, 1358a; 1.6.1, 1362a), which in Book II chapters 22 and 26 are equated with *topoi* (1396b, 1403a); these *idia*, or field-specific topics, are propositions useful to the particular species of rhetoric, and thus especially to the fields of politics and law, and they are considered in chapters 4-15 of Book I (1359a ff.).[1]

This discussion of field-specific topics could actually be seen as an anticipation of Stephen Toulmin's idea of field-dependent standards and warrants of argument.[2] It also implicitly points to the possibility of field-specific propositions useful for the construction of persuasive literary messages; but in literary contexts, the term *topos* is often used to refer more to recurrent descriptive commonplaces, such as the *locus amoenus*,[3] a use in which Curtius equates topics with tropes, and which needs to be carefully distinguished from the inventional-argumentative conception of *topoi* which we find in Aristotle's *Topics* and *Rhetoric*, as well as in Cicero's *Topics*, as discussed by Professor Halsall.[4]

## II

Nevertheless, as he points out, we can posit a link between these inventional topics and tropes: stylistic tropes can often be shown to have argumentative underpinnings and implications. This was noted by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* in his discussion of metaphor in Book III chapters 2 and 10 (1405 a, 1411a ff.), where he points to a

link between metaphor and analogy, an observation also elaborated in his *Poetics* in chapter 21 (1457b). In more recent times, the link between tropes and logical topics such as "correspondence," "opposition," and "connection" was emphasized for instance in DuMarsais' *Des Tropes* (1730),5 and also in Vico's *Institutiones oratoriae* (1711), where metaphor is characterized as the result of rhetorical (and thus argumentative) invention, and where an explicit link is drawn between poetic *concetti* and the topics enumerated in Cicero's *De inventione*. At the same time, the Ciceronian rhetorical functions of proving or teaching and delighting (*docere* and *delectare*) are seen as jointly carried out in such conceits, which thus combine the rhetorical and poetic functions of metaphor (*Institutiones* [ed. Fausto Nicolini] sec. 35). Vico specifically discusses Bouhours (though not by name), and it would be interesting to investigate whether there may also have been a link with the work of DuMarsais.6

The argumentative implications of tropes are also explored further in works from our own century which use the idea of the four "master tropes" (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony), already identified as such in the tradition, to analyze discourses which are not primarily aesthetic, but make definite truth claims. I will here no more than mention Kenneth Burke's essay "Four Master Tropes,"7 and Hayden White's book *Metahistory*.8

*III*

While I agree with Professor Halsall that tropes in literary works can be fruitfully investigated for their persuasive topical implications, I would urge great care in such endeavors, and recommend particular attention to the argumentative ambivalence of tropic patterns. Let me illustrate this caveat with two examples discussed in Professor Halsall's paper.

In using the seventeen Ciceronian topics from the book of that name, he sees the topic of analogy exemplified in a passage from Shakespeare's *Tempest* in which Sebastian says of Gonzalo "Look, he's winding up the watch of his wit; by and by it will strike" (2.1.12). There is no doubt that there is an analogy here, but I would argue that the effect of these lines depends not, as is usually the case with analogy, on its appropriateness, on the similarity between the items compared, but precisely on their dissimilarity, on the inappropriateness of the analogy. I think we are meant to conclude that Gonzalo is really not witty, because nothing which has to be wound up and will strike like clockwork deserves to be called by the name of wit; if we accept this reading, the similarity is in fact invoked ironically, to actually argue for difference here.

The second example I would like to comment upon also comes from Shakespeare, this time from *Hamlet*, where Hamlet in his imagination traces the noble dust of Alexander till he finds it stopping a bunghole (5.1.223-35). This can indeed be seen as a case of the topical pattern of cause and effect, more specifically metalepsis, defined by Lanham as the attribution of a present effect to a remote cause.9 But again I think some caution is in order; Hamlet's opening line in this passage, "To what base uses we may return, Horatio," alerts us to the fact that the point here is not so much to link the stopped bunghole with the remote cause Alexander, but rather to compare the greater cause of Alexander to its much lesser effect of stopping a bunghole, thus raising in our mind some doubts about the enduring greatness of Alexander, and *a fortiori* about the lasting significance of any of us.

*IV*

Professor Halsall rightly argues for a perception of literary works as rhetorical not merely in the narrow sense of an elocutionary emphasis on tropes and figures, but from a broader perspective as "discourses which make ethical, logical and emotional appeals in order to persuade readers or spectators of the ideas, norms or attitudes which they embody," and concludes that therefore "analysis of their argumentative techniques is considered not merely desirable, but indispensable." His theme limits him to the exploration of the use of the topics in such analytical endeavors. But I will use the freedom of the commentator to draw in this fourth note your attention to rhetorical analyses of the persuasive workings of literary works which focus not so much on the stylistic level of individual figures and tropes and their topical underpinnings, but rather explore larger-scale narrative elements and structures for their rhetorical implications and persuasive effects.

This tradition can of course be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, and among authors in this century I would like to mention again Kenneth Burke, who has pursued such efforts in several of his works, especially in *Counter-Statement* (2nd ed. 1952 [1931]) and *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (3rd ed. 1973 [1941]).[10] The most sustained contemporary effort in this vein is Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* (2nd ed. 1983 [1961]),[11] which provides an eloquent plea against the *l'art pour l'art* conception of literary fiction, as well as a very detailed analysis of narrative techniques, enriched by extensive discussions of specific examples from a wide range of authors.[12]

More recently, there has been a tendency to reverse the equation of narrative with argument, claiming that fundamentally all communication in general, and persuasive discourse in particular, can be understood as narration. A strong exponent of this view has been Walter Fisher, especially in his book *Human Communication as Narration*.[13] While this approach clearly does produce some interesting insights by encouraging us to look for elements of storytelling in unusual contexts, I am not sure that the need to maintain such a sweeping conception of the role of narrative always avoids the danger of extending and thereby thinning out the concept of narration almost beyond recognition.

*V*

In my fifth and final note I will return from this digression into the rhetorical exploration of literary form and narrative analysis to our more specific theme of the argumentative topics. I would like to refer briefly to a period in the development of the topics which is not given much attention in Professor Halsall's survey: the transition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages; and within that period to the work of Boethius, specifically to his book *De differentiis topicis*, in which he initially draws on Cicero's *Topics* for an understanding of the topics as seats of arguments, or places from which arguments appropriate to the question at hand could be drawn (PL 64, 1174 D).[14] But going beyond Cicero, he distinguishes between topical *maxims* and topical *differentiae* as topics of different scope. He characterizes topical *maxims* as "universal, principal, indemonstrable, and known per se propositions, which in argumentation give force to arguments," either by themselves appearing directly in the argumentation, or by providing the implicit foundation for an explicit argument ratifying the conclusion; an example would be the proposition that "things whose definitions are different are themselves also different," which would found the argument that an envious man is not wise, because he disparages the good of others, and this is not consistent with the definition of a wise man (PL 64, 1185 D-1186 A). With such topical maxims he contrasts the more universal topical *differentiae*, which refer to the distinguishing characteristics of groups of topical maxims, usually indicating the kinds of logical relationships upon which the topical maxims in the group focus, which in the example just given would be definitional (PL 64, 1186 A-B).[15]

What may give this Boethian innovation some interest for contemporary scholars of argumentation is the observation by Otto Bird that the topical maxims are somewhat similar to Toulmin's conception of argumentative warrants, which likewise support the transition from the data to the conclusion of an argument.[16] But I think we should not too broadly invoke the maxim *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* in this particular context, because the relationship between warrant and backing is not, as Bird claims, exactly parallel to that between topical maxim and topical difference:[17] The topical difference does not back up the topical maxim, but rather links it to the conclusion.

To illustrate, the topical difference "'Man' is related to 'animal' as species to genus" links the topical maxim "Of whatever the species is predicated, so is the genus" to the conclusion "Man is an animal";[18] but the fact that man is related as species to genus in no way backs up the contention that of whatever the species is predicated, so is the genus. By contrast the backing "the class of mammals includes taxonomically all whales" does indeed make plausible the warrant "all whales are mammals,"[19] which in turn authorizes the argumentative transition from the datum "this is a whale" to the conclusion "this is a mammal." But in spite of such differences beyond points of contact between ancient and modern argumentation scholarship, the fact remains that not only Chaim Perelman, who invokes the topics explicitly, as Professor Halsall has shown, but also an author such as Toulmin, who does not refer to this tradition, may well be seen to carry it forward into our own day.

## *Notes*

1. See George A. Kennedy, tr. & ed., *Aristotle On Rhetoric. A Theory of Civic Discourse* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 51f.

2. See Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), pp. 36ff., 98.

3. See the extended discussion of topics in this sense in Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and Latin Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, pb. ed 1990 [1952]).

4. See also for further discussion of this distinction, and of its roots in antiquity, Peter Hess, "Zum Toposbegriff in der Barockzeit," *Jahrbuch Rhetorik*, vol. 10 (1991), pp. 71-88.

5. See Thomas M. Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pb. ed. 1994 [1991]), pp. 197f.

6. See also the (often highly problematic) discussion of Vico in John D. Schaeffer, *Sensus Communis. Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), pp. 55ff.

7. In Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1969 [1945]), pp. 503-517.

8. Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), especially pp. 31ff.

9. See Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of

California Press, 2nd ed. 1991), pp. 99f.

10. Both these works are published in Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

11. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 3ff., 149ff.

13. Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, pb. ed. 1989 [1987]).

14. PL = J.P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Latina* (cited by volume number, column, and part of column); vol. 64, Paris, 1891.

15. For further details of the development of (especially legal) topics in the Middle Ages and for additional references see Hanns Hohmann "Logic and Rhetoric in Legal Argumentation: Some Medieval Perspectives," *Special Fields and Cases. Proceedings of the Third ISSA Conference on Argumentation 1994*, edd. Frans H. van Eemeren et al. (Amsterdam: SicSat, 1995), pp. 14-30.

16. See Otto Bird, "The Re-Discovery of the Topics. Professor Toulmin's Inference-Warrants," *Mind*, vol. 70 (1961), pp. 534-539.; and cf. Toulmin, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-143.

17. Bird, *op. cit.*, p. 537.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Toulmin, *op. cit.*, p. 112