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**The Rhetorical Full-Turn in Biblical Interpretation  
and Its Relevance for Feminist Hermeneutics\***

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In her address at the Rhetoric and Religion Conference held at the University of South Africa, Pretoria (August, 1994), Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza asserted that those who have reintroduced rhetoric into biblical interpretation during the last quarter of a century have "become stuck in a rhetorical half-turn."<sup>1</sup> Recently, her essay has been republished in *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies*.<sup>2</sup> Her assertion is that in the context of the revival of rhetorical criticism "biblical scholarship has not yet made the full epistemological turn to a rhetoric of inquiry insofar as it has barely recognized the contributions which feminist and liberationist scholarship have made to the New Rhetoric."<sup>3</sup>

Schüssler Fiorenza proposes both a rationale and a justification for the rationale in order to explain the situation. The reason rhetorical biblical scholarship has not incorporated feminist and liberationist scholarship,

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\* This essay is a substantially reconfigured version of one that was presented at the 1998 Florence Rhetoric Conference and that appeared in print in 2002 (Vernon K. Robbins, "The Rhetorical Full-Turn in Biblical Interpretation: Reconfiguring Rhetorical-Political Analysis," in S. E. Porter and D. L. Stamps (eds.), *Rhetorical Criticism and the Bible: Essays from the 1998 Florence Conference* [JSNTSup 195; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002], 48-60). It describes my sense of what a rhetorical full-turn in feminist interpretation might look like. The essay invokes Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as a discussion partner, since she contrasted a rhetorical full-turn with a rhetorical half-turn in an earlier treatment of sociorhetorical interpretation (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn: Feminist and Rhetorical Biblical Criticism," in S. E. Porter & T. H. Olbricht (eds.), *Rhetoric, Scripture & Theology: Essays from the 1994 Pretoria Conference* [JSNTSup 131; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], 28-53).

<sup>1</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn," 29.

<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 83-102.

<sup>3</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn," 29-30; and idem, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 3, 84.

she asserts, is that interpreters remain in "captivity" to "empiricist-positivist science." This captivity takes the form of spending "much of its energy in applying and reinscribing to Christian Testament texts ancient rhetorical methods, disciplinary technology, terminological stylistics and the scattered prescription of oratorical handbooks in antiquity."<sup>4</sup> Later in the essay she proposes a reason for this captivity. Rhetorical interpreters, she asserts, find themselves unable or unwilling to acknowledge "their feminist and liberationist critical partners" because of "the contested character of the field" of rhetorical studies. This means that "the 'fear' that it could be seen as 'unscientific' prevents engagement with such critical political intellectual discourses."<sup>5</sup>

Schüssler Fiorenza continues in her Pretoria essay with a critical discussion of sociorhetorical interpretation, since it "is one of the few Christian Testament studies that attempt to take rhetorical and feminist theoretical insights seriously."<sup>6</sup> As she continues, her goal is "to illustrate how even a sociorhetorical analysis that is aware of gender studies in the end resorts to a positivist social-scientific approach in order to validate its interpretation in terms of the logic of identity as the best reading and 'reliable scientific' interpretation."<sup>7</sup> When Schüssler Fiorenza wrote this in 1994, she did not have my *Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*<sup>8</sup> to consult, and I have acknowledged this in my response to her criticisms at the 1998 Florence Rhetoric Conference.<sup>9</sup> She did not revise her response, however, in the 1999 republication of the essay. As a result, her description does not fully apply to the strategies with which I perform sociorhetorical interpretation and the goals I have for those strategies.

Schüssler Fiorenza's description was based on a perception that sociorhetorical interpretation "discusses rhetorical, literary, social-scientific, and ideological approaches as separate methodological investigative procedures."<sup>10</sup> It is true that I did not explicitly draw these procedures together in my earlier work. However, the goal of my approach has been,

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<sup>4</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn," 32; and idem, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 86.

<sup>5</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn," 47; and idem, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 97.

<sup>6</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn," 33; and idem, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 86.

<sup>7</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn," 33; and idem, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 87.

<sup>8</sup> Vernon K. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Robbins, "Rhetorical Full-Turn," 51.

<sup>10</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn," 33; and idem, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 87.

and is, to use an interpretive analytics that brings disciplines together, rather than drives them apart. Indeed, the overall goal of my interpretive analytics is to perform a full-formed rhetoric of inquiry in the field of biblical studies. The basic strategies of an interpretive analytics emerge from the work of Michel Foucault. "An interpretive analytics approaches texts as discourse and 'sees discourse as part of a larger field of power and practice whose relations are articulated in different ways by different paradigms'."<sup>11</sup> According to Dreyfus and Rabinow, an interpretive analytics moves through three steps:

- 1) [T]he interpreter must take up a pragmatic stance on the basis of some socially shared sense of how things are going;
- 2) the investigator must produce a disciplined diagnosis of what has gone on and is going on in the social body to account for the shared sense of distress or well-being;
- 3) the investigator owes the reader an account of why the practices he [or she] describes should produce the shared malaise or contentment which gave rise to the investigation.<sup>12</sup>

The sense of distress in the social body of biblical interpretation that I addressed in 1996 was its dividing of exegetical strategies into separate methodological investigative procedures. This means that Schüssler Fiorenza has not acknowledged the manner in which sociorhetorical interpretation directly confronts the problem of methodological division she dislikes. One of the results of the division of exegetical strategies was and is the isolation of feminist studies from various arenas of biblical interpretation. One of the goals of my interpretive analytics was and is to articulate how feminist studies and other developing modes of interpretation are internal participants in the movement of biblical studies into a new paradigm.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Location of Sociorhetorical Interpretation in Transmodernism**

It may be helpful at the outset to explain, as I understand it, the philosophical location and ideology of sociorhetorical interpretation. The

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<sup>11</sup> Robbins, *Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, 12, quoting Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), 199.

<sup>12</sup> Robbins, *Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, 12, quoting Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, 200.

<sup>13</sup> To this end, writings by twenty-one women appear in the bibliography of Robbins, *Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, which was published in 1996.

philosophical ideology of sociorhetorical interpretation is most appropriately identified as relational transmodernism.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, this ideology is an alternative to particularist modernism. On the other hand, it is an alternative to antimodernism and ultramodernism.<sup>15</sup> With the triumph of historicism in biblical interpretation during 1775-1875, particularist modernity began to drive biblical exegesis.<sup>16</sup> Freedom meant a denial of authority, and historical criticism was its champion. Rejecting Aristotle's concept of form as a designation of essence, philosophers treated form as an external, sensuously perceived, aspect of existence.<sup>17</sup> In this context, biblical interpreters valued particularist and individualist phenomena. Content (*Inhalt*) was separated from other aspects of form, and individualistic interpretation guided the reconstruction of sources.<sup>18</sup> The feminist hermeneutics of Schüssler Fiorenza has continued in the tradition of a denial of authority nurtured by modernism. Her approach combines historical criticism with a rhetorical hermeneutics of suspicion to deny the authority of malestream interpretation. As a result of a merger of modernist and antimodernist strategies in its procedures, it is difficult for the approach to enact a rhetorical full-turn in biblical interpretation.

According to Martin J. Buss, postmodern approaches began to emerge after 1875 and have only gradually found their way into biblical studies. Three major postmodern lines, he asserts, functioned alongside

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<sup>14</sup> Recent publications by Martin J. Buss, my colleague at Emory University, provide helpful resources for locating sociorhetorical interpretation within postmodern analysis. See the Festschrift in his honor by Timothy J. Sandoval and Carleen Mandolfo, eds., *Relating to the Text: Interdisciplinary and Form-Critical Insights on the Bible* (JSOTSup 384; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Martin J. Buss, *Biblical Form Criticism in its Context* (JSOTSup 274; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 156-66.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>18</sup> Between 1807 and 1817, e.g., W. M. L. de Wette divided the Hebrew psalms into groups based on content and focused on each psalm individualistically as "the living effusion of an emotion-filled heart." He emphasized the lack of poetic similarity among the various psalms: "Every writing requires its own hermeneutic; it can be known and understood only in its own form" (Buss, *Biblical Form Criticism*, 152). Interpreters of the NT, focusing on particularist features in the earliest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, overturned the centuries-old view that the Gospels were written in the chronological order of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (their canonical order) to argue that Mark was the earliest narrative gospel to be written. Stylistic particularities, guided by "special hermeneutics," emphasized analysis and interpretation of individual books, writers, and sources throughout the Old and New Testaments. The highest goal was to move beyond the writing itself to an understanding of the person who produced the writing (*ibid.*, 154-55).

one another during the twentieth century: antimodern, transmodern, and ultramodern. As Buss defines them, the antimodern line "opposes the disorderliness that is inherent in modernity, especially individualism and a strong sense of historical change." The transmodern line believes that major features of modernity are valuable "but problematic when they are emphasized one-sidedly." The ultramodern line attempts to eliminate generality, moving "from moderate nominalism to extreme nominalism" into "scepticism or nihilism, especially when held without a belief in God."<sup>19</sup> In terms of my interests here, the emergence of relationism as a new paradigm in the transmodern line is particularly noteworthy. In Buss's words:

According to this theory,... relations, which can recur, are real. At the same time, the theory holds that the particular objects, the items that stand in relations, are also real, even to the extent of having a semi-independent existence, for real relations must have endpoints with some independence, so that they are not simply absorbed into a larger whole. Thus it is said that relations "both combine and separate."<sup>20</sup>

Buss contrasts relationism, on the one hand, to nominalism, which can handle only the extremes: "monadism (radical pluralism) and monism (tight connectivity within a large unit)."<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, essentialism "considers some associations as necessary ("essential") and others as accidental."<sup>22</sup> Relationists replace a theory of causality with a notion of probability, including both conditional probability and correlation. In this context, a new paradigm emerges for form: "Form is held ... to be *a complex of relations* which are shared (at least potentially) with some other existents and can thus be understood, but which together form a whole that evades complete understanding; for, since relations even within a whole require some distancing between the items related, a real whole cannot be completely unified."<sup>23</sup>

For sociorhetorical interpretation, the following conclusion is central:

Since relationism (like nominalism) makes no distinction between essential and accidental features, a given object can be classified in terms of several different forms, according to one's principle of selectivity, which depends on one's purpose. However, while nominalism holds that a

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<sup>19</sup> Buss, *Biblical Form Criticism*, 156.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 159 (emphasis original).

form or structure is in the mind of the observer rather than in the object, relationism holds that form emerges interactively as an aspect of a reality revealed to a subject with its questions, thus formed cooperatively by object and observer.<sup>24</sup>

The statement "form emerges interactively" is especially important for sociorhetorical interpretation. Sociorhetorical interpretation is an "interactive" mode of interpretation, always perceiving "form" to be "an aspect of reality revealed to a subject with its questions, thus formed cooperatively by object and observer." This means, in fact, that the best sociorhetorical interpretation results from teamwork. When a group of specialists work together in a sustained manner to interpret a set of texts they perceive to be "somehow related," the "interactive" product regularly is an exhibition of "forms" that many interpreters are never enabled, through interactive interpretation, to see and communicate to others.

One of the most important presentations of "transmodern" thought, specifically using the term, is Couze Venn's *Occidentalism: Modernity and Subjectivity*.<sup>25</sup> The present essay uses this book extensively to present a full rhetorical turn in biblical interpretation. A major goal of Venn's book is "to subvert the conventional opposition between a philosophy of experience and a philosophy of concept" by refiguring historicity and transforming the discussion of subjectivity into inter-subjectivity.<sup>26</sup> Focusing on both the materiality and sociality of the world we inherit, inhabit, and transform, Venn emphasizes that we learn to dwell in this world by relying on the hospitality of those closest to us and on order in the surrounding world, the regularities of which we can learn through an apprenticeship. Language is central in this process and thus inter-subjective action, and thus, crucially, this relation to the other... This involves both the culturally normed mode of this relation and what Levinas calls the face relation.... So apprenticeship involves a way of learning to be ethical beings, at the same time as one learns to be a particular subject and to act on the world according to particular technologies of transforming and appropriating the world, that is to say, apprenticeship instructs us into the ways of coupling with the objectal and inter-subjective worlds in which we dwell.<sup>27</sup>

An implication of this approach is that the most mature human being is not an isolated, autonomous being but a being who engages continually in interhuman apprenticeship in

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Couze Venn, *Occidentalism: Modernity and Subjectivity* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 33-34 (emphasis original).

the world one inherits, inhabits, and transforms.<sup>28</sup> This apprenticeship “includes learning to deal in culturally specific ways with both the liminal and the material side of beingness, so that we learn to figure and refigure our experiences, and so give meaning to them, in terms of a whole set of rules and stories, beliefs and values inscribed in performative as well as in reflexive practices of becoming instituting particular subjectivities.”<sup>29</sup>

This focus on continual interhuman and inter-objectal apprenticeship is central to sociorhetorical interpretation. Analysis and interpretation is an ongoing process of learning, because "The world of other bodies and the world of objects constitute the 'dwelling' for subjectivity."<sup>30</sup> Venn uses the notion of choreography to describe our manner of working with others in contexts of hospitality, generosity, pleasure, suffering, mourning, "attachment, mingling the time of the body with the 'time of the soul'."<sup>31</sup> Since "The models for the emplotment of experience already exist in the culture,... they circumscribe the discursive and 'textual' world from which we draw in order to question ourselves regarding the meaning of our experiences, and to rectify our 'selves', since the subject is always in process."<sup>32</sup> Analysis and interpretation, then, is a journey of inter-subjective "being-with and being-towards-the other."<sup>33</sup> Sociorhetorical interpretation invites a commentator into a never-ending journey through multiple textures, social systems, cultures, ideologies, and discourses for the purpose of redrawing, refiguring, and transfiguring intersubjective boundaries of understanding. This transmodern nature of the journey emphasizes its continual movement. It is not a matter of posturing one's analysis and interpretation against modernism in a manner that creates new polarities or binaries, but a matter of working through alternatives that modernism, feminism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, postdeconstruction, and postcolonialism have made accessible to us. Sociorhetorical interpretation as an interpretive analytics introduces choreographies for translocational,

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<sup>28</sup> See Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991) for her emphasis on the analytical poverty of holding on to the dualities of nature and culture, the human and the machine, as a result of their profound interrelationships. Cf. Venn, *Occidentalism*, 31, 221.

<sup>29</sup> Venn, *Occidentalism*, 35.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*; and vol. 3 of Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (3 vols.; trans. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-88).

<sup>32</sup> Venn, *Occidentalism*, 43.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

transtextural, transsocial, transcultural, transideological, and transtraditional analysis, interpretation, and commentary.

### **Oppositional Rhetoric as a Half Turn**

In her Pretoria essay, Schüssler Fiorenza describes the task of rhetorical biblical scholarship in the following manner: "How meaning is constructed depends not only on how one reads the social, cultural, and religious markers inscribed by the text but also on what kind of 'intertexts,' preconstructed 'frames of meaning,' common sense understandings, and 'reading paradigms' one utilizes when interpreting linguistic markers and textualized symbols."<sup>34</sup> I agree fully with this description of our task. In the essay she refers to her book *Discipleship of Equals* and calls for "a political rhetoric of inquiry in biblical studies" grounded in "the *ekklesia* as the public assembly of free and equal citizens in the power of the Spirit."<sup>35</sup> Yet, instead of enacting a procedure of "equality" that would have invited a full rhetorical turn in an assessment of the contexts of interpretation for analyzing and interpreting the various versions of the story of the woman who anointed Jesus, for example, Schüssler Fiorenza uses oppositional rhetoric containing inner attributes of domination and separation.<sup>36</sup> Characterizing my work as objectivist, scientific, empiricist, and male-stream,<sup>37</sup> in contrast to her work as open, free, and based on equality, she took a political half-turn that set her work in opposition to mine in a manner that did not invite further deliberation about the issues involved.

Thus, there is substantive disjunction in Schüssler Fiorenza's Pretoria essay between what she says and what she does. She says many excellent things about the manner in which rhetorical scholarship should proceed, but her discourse enacts an oppositional mode of rhetorical argumentation that would appear to conflict with the openness, freedom, and equality she states as her *modus operandi*. The issue is what kind of full rhetorical turn we can make as we construct a context of interpretation for a particular text. The scholarly issues at stake become lost when oppositional rhetoric dominates. Schüssler Fiorenza claims a goal

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<sup>34</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn," 40; and idem, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 92.

<sup>35</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn," 36; and idem, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 89.

<sup>36</sup> Contrast Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993).

<sup>37</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn," 30-31, 35; and idem, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 84-85, 88.

of enabling "biblical scholars to investigate the discursive arguments which perform particular kinds of actions in particular historical situations and at particular political sites."<sup>38</sup> I agree with this aim. The question, then, is the particular historical situation and political site that caused Schüssler Fiorenza in 1994 to use oppositional rhetoric in her essay rather than rhetoric that would invite discussion and debate among equals.

Schüssler Fiorenza's adoption of oppositional rhetoric as a preferred mode of discourse in a context where she was pleading for a full-turn in rhetorical biblical scholarship presents an opportunity to reflect on the nature of oppositional rhetoric not only in our own personal discourse but in New Testament discourse more generally. Stephen D. Moore has made the point that as we interpret literature we reenact certain rhetorical practices present in that literature.<sup>39</sup> Feminist scholars have helped us to understand how easy it is to reenact certain male rhetorical practices in the literature we interpret. It also is easy for feminist interpreters to reenact oppositional rhetoric in biblical literature. In an address I delivered at the University of Stellenbosch at the Second African Symposium on Rhetoric (July 1996), I briefly described oppositional rhetoric in the New Testament as follows:

Central to opposition discourse is the reasoning that people to whom God has given a tradition of salvation in the past currently enact a misunderstanding of God's saving action that must be attacked and replaced by an alternative system of belief and behavior ... It presupposes an alignment of the speaker with God, against people who claim to understand God who really do not know the will and the ways of God.<sup>40</sup>

Such oppositional rhetoric is present in many places in the New Testament. One immediately thinks of Jesus' controversy with "the Jews" in John 8:43-47, which reaches a point where Jesus asserts that the Jews are "sons of the devil." This is not the time and place to present a sociorhetorical analysis and interpretation of this oppositional discourse. Gail R. O'Day has many excellent observations about it in her *New Interpreter's Bible* commentary on John. In particular, O'Day speaks directly to one of the major pleas made by Schüssler Fiorenza, namely,

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<sup>38</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn," 36; and idem, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 89.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen D. Moore, "Deconstructive Criticism: The Gospel of Mark," in Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (eds.), *Mark & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 93.

<sup>40</sup> Vernon K. Robbins, "The Dialectical Nature of Early Christian Discourse," *Scriptura* 59 (1996): 360. Online: <http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/dialect/dialect353.html>.

"to investigate the discursive arguments which perform particular kinds of actions in particular historical situations and at particular political sites."<sup>41</sup> Many New Testament scholars join with O'Day in viewing the Johannine community as a minority group speaking out in protest against a majority culture.<sup>42</sup> She expresses concern about the resultant oppositional rhetoric and explains the difficulty of reconciling it with other discourse in the New Testament.<sup>43</sup> In other words, she does not herself wittingly or unwittingly enact the oppositional rhetoric in the text. The discourse attributed to Jesus introduces strong polarities to separate Jesus fully from "the Jews." For various reasons which she explains in her commentary, she does not wish to replay this kind of rhetoric in her commentary but calls attention to other modes of discourse in the New Testament that stand in relation to it. When O'Day makes this move, she takes major steps toward a rhetorical full-turn in interpretation.

### **Sociorhetorical Interpretation as Translocational and Transdiscursive**

There is a beautiful moment in Schüssler Fiorenza's Pretoria essay when she introduces the metaphor of the African American circle dance or the European folk dance to destabilize a binary frame of reference for figuring the practices of a critical feminist biblical interpretation. Within this description, I suggest, lies an image very close to the one that has guided my development of sociorhetorical interpretation. Schüssler Fiorenza proposes

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<sup>41</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn," 36; and idem, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 89.

<sup>42</sup> Gail R. O'Day, "John," *NIB* 9:648: "The virulent language of chap. 8 must be read against this backdrop of being cast out of the synagogue, of being excluded from the religious centers that once helped to define one's religious and communal identity. The language of this chapter is the language of the minority group spoken in protest to the majority culture. The Johannine Jewish Christians had no way to back up this language – that is, they had no power to take any actions comparable to their own exclusion from the synagogue. They were outnumbered by the Jewish community and had no political resources at their disposal. Their only "power" rested in the force of their rhetoric, in their ability to denounce those who had excluded them."

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 9:647: "John 8 presents the reader of the Gospel of John with some of the Gospel's most difficult interpretive issues. The Jesus who emerges from these verses speaks with staggeringly sharp invective to his opponents and holds nothing back in his attack on his theological adversaries. It is very difficult to harmonize this picture of Jesus with the images of him that shape our theological imaginations: Jesus as the one who eats with outcasts and sinners, who cares for the lost sheep, who is the model of how we are to love."

an image of interpretation as forward movement and spiraling repetition, stepping in place, turning over and changing of venue in which discrete methodological approaches become moving steps and artful configurations. Clumsy participants in this dance that figures the complex enterprise of biblical criticism may frequently step on each other's toes and interrupt each other's turns but they can still dance together as long as they acknowledge each other as equals conscious of dancing through a political minefield.<sup>44</sup>

This image of movement and spiraling repetition introduces a very different mode of procedure than one that places oppositional rhetoric at the forefront, and I applaud it. It is an image that evokes well the goal of sociorhetorical analysis and interpretation.

In sociorhetorical terms, the movement and spiraling to which Schüssler Fiorenza refers takes the form of translocational, transtextural, and transdiscursive interpretation. The translocational covers a spectrum of social locations from the inter-subjective body to the household, village, city, kingdom, and empire. The transtextural weaves through inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture.<sup>45</sup> The transdiscursive enacts stepping in place, turning, and changing of venue from wisdom discourse to miracle discourse to prophetic discourse to pre-creation discourse to priestly discourse to apocalyptic discourse.<sup>46</sup>

Schüssler Fiorenza's oppositional rhetoric runs the risk of attempting to corral its audience into one location and targeting the audience with one major kind of discourse. Emphasizing only one location, the *ekklesia* as the public, political assembly, and championing only one major mode of discourse, Divine Wisdom, reinscribes only one major location and one major discourse in early Christian literature. NT literature itself shows us a better way. It is not all Divine Wisdom discourse, and it is not all located in the *ekklesia* as public, political assembly. Patterns of negotiation in multiple discourses and locations

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<sup>44</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Challenging the Rhetorical Half-Turn," 51; and idem, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 101.

<sup>45</sup> And, if possible, psychological texture should be included as well.

<sup>46</sup> Robbins, "Dialectical Nature"; and idem, "Argumentative Textures in Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation," in A. Eriksson, T. H. Olbricht, and W. Übelacker (eds.), *Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts: Essays from the Lund 2000 Conference* (ESEC 8; Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2002), 27-65.

Online: <http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/Pdfs/LundArgument.pdf>.

in the literature interweave diversity, conflict, separation, and conciliation into a thick configuration of history, society, culture, and ideology.

Venn's description, using the work of Emmanuel Levinas, describes well one's ethical embodiment among others in the enactment of sociorhetorical analysis and interpretation: "Generosity and (vigilant) passivity, readiness to receive what exceeds the I, the welcoming of the Other, a kind of dispossession of the ego: these are the modalities of the face relation. It is in that sense that the relation with the Other is an ethical relation."<sup>47</sup> A patience of reception with a "readiness to receive what exceeds the I" guides sociorhetorical analysis and interpretation. The interpreter seeks to engage in heteronomous responsibility rather than autonomous freedom, in inter-subjective exploration rather than egological imposition. Both the text and the interpreter negotiate the other with particular goals, that is, modes of desire. Becoming conscious of these desires requires continual crossing and redrawing of boundaries,<sup>48</sup> movement across textures of texts,<sup>49</sup> and movement through multiple argumentative modes of discourse.<sup>50</sup>

My hypothesis is that transtextural sociorhetorical analysis and interpretation<sup>51</sup> yields six major *rhetorolects*<sup>52</sup> that interweave in early Christian discourse: wisdom, miracle, prophetic, precreation, priestly, and apocalyptic.<sup>53</sup> Each rhetorolect embodies conventional religious goals in the first century Mediterranean world. In Venn's terminology, this means that each rhetorolect enacts social, cultural, and ideological desires. The *wisdom* rhetorolect uses household imagery to bring divine knowledge into inter-subjective bodies, namely, all the secrets that lie within an ordered universe, to enable people to prosper and flourish in the world we inherit, inhabit, and transform. The *miracle* rhetorolect uses imagery of inter-subjective bodies to bring God's powers at work in the created universe inside an inter-subjective body that, for one reason or another, is not fully operational, positively functional, or constructively interactive. The *prophetic* rhetorolect uses imagery of a kingdom to transmit the will of God to

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<sup>47</sup> Venn, *Occidentalism*, 211.

<sup>48</sup> Robbins, *Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, 18-43.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-236; and *idem*, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1996).

<sup>50</sup> Robbins, "Dialectical Nature"; and *idem*, "Argumentative Textures."

<sup>51</sup> By this I mean programmatic sociorhetorical analysis and interpretation of inner, inter, social and cultural, ideological, and sacred textures (Robbins, *Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*; and *idem*, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*).

<sup>52</sup> I define the term thus: "A rhetorolect is a form of language variety or discourse identifiable on the basis of a distinctive configuration of themes, topics, reasonings, and argumentations" (Robbins, "Dialectical Nature," 356).

<sup>53</sup> Robbins, "Dialectical Nature"; and *idem*, "Argumentative Textures."

people and groups who will challenge others – kings, priests, elders, interpreters, lawyers – to bring justice, love, care, and nurture to all people. The *precreation* rhetorolect uses images of the household of an emperor to bring eternal forces of life into inter-subjective bodies for a complete realization of well-being. The *priestly* rhetorolect uses imagery of the temple to create beneficial exchange between humans and God. The *apocalyptic* rhetorolect uses imagery of an empire to enact total annihilation of powers (including earthly leaders and institutions) that disrupt and destroy the comforts of well-being – food, water, shelter, and supportive community, and to create new beginnings in divine time.

The presence of these major rhetorolects in early Christian discourse means that the interpreter must recognize major modes of desire in early Christian discourse, in traditions of interpretation of this discourse, and in current interpreters of this discourse. Some NT texts negotiate these desires with loud, totalizing discourse. Others set totalizing discourses in dynamic dialogue with one another. Still others gather local voices in ways that create lively communities of alternative points of view.

Interpreters must negotiate the desires of the text, rather than simply allow the desires to seduce them. Some interpreters, following a hermeneutics of suspicion, try to "negate" the desires of the text. Sociorhetorical interpretation exhibits desires of the text and refigures contemporary narrations of these desires. In this way, interpreters choreograph activities of a heteronomous subject interpreting the heteronomous desires of texts.

Following Venn's terminology further, "every self is a storied self. And every story is mingled with the stories of other selves, so that every one of us is entangled in the stories we tell, and are told about us."<sup>54</sup> Each storied world splices phenomenal time, or temporality as lived, into the cosmological time of history and of the sublime, that is into the "time of the soul."<sup>55</sup> Each storied world enacts an apprenticeship in the lifeworld. This apprenticeship "concerns learning a particular language game and an (alchemical) practice, that is, it involves at the same time a discursive and a material, transformative and transmutative practice."<sup>56</sup> This means that each early Christian rhetorolect is a storied world that intertwines temporality as lived and the cosmological time of history and the sublime in particular ways.

To put it in other terms Venn uses, the six early Christian rhetorolects invoke in particular ways "both the inhospitable world into

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<sup>54</sup> Venn, *Occidentalism*, 42.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 223; Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>56</sup> Venn, *Occidentalism*, 220.

which being is thrown and the world as the homely shelter for being-in the world."<sup>57</sup> Following Venn still further, time is the horizon of both the cosmological and the phenomenal dimensions of inter-subjective being. The major interhuman rhetorolects in early Christianity present time in these alternative ways.<sup>58</sup> Venn's discussion leads to assertions about the interhuman project of becoming responsible for humanity and the world humanity inhabits. In his words, "the becoming-responsible of humanity is the result of a difficult apprenticeship, requiring explicit critical narratives of being, implicating an ethics of responsibility and solicitude for the other, extending to the natural world in which being exists as 'flesh' of the world. Modernity has been a crucial stage in that apprenticeship."<sup>59</sup> Sociorhetorical interpretation as I apply it represents an exploration and explication of early Christianity as a crucial stage in the difficult apprenticeship of "the becoming-responsible of humanity." Wisdom rhetorolect initiates one into the apprenticeship of learning how to live in basic, everyday interhuman relationships (filial commitment, friendship, community). Miracle rhetorolect invites one into the apprenticeship of bringing the bodies of others to powers of healing, recognizing the illnesses within one's own interbody, and moving toward powers

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 223. Wisdom rhetorolect thus grounds itself in the world as "the homely shelter for being-in-the-world"; then struggles with the "mysterious" manner in which righteous people suffer; miracle rhetorolect exists in the world as a place of disruption, illness, and crisis and then explores the amazing ways in which people experience moments of healing, restoration, and peace; prophetic rhetorolect is localized in the world as a place of disobedience then probes the courageous confrontation of leaders to reform their leadership toward justice and care for the needy; precreation rhetorolect is in the world as a place of darkness which light continually presses against and then searches for the source of light which can be a home away from a place always threatened by darkness; priestly rhetorolect is centered in the world as a place of unholiness and then evokes human sacrifice as a means of beneficial exchange between humans and God; and apocalyptic rhetorolect is grounded in the world as an evil-infested place into which being is thrown and then journeys beyond the inhabited world in search of a paradisiacal space.

<sup>58</sup> In wisdom rhetorolect, time is the moment of insight, the context of learning, of receiving instruction that leads one beyond the world into the mind of God; in miracle rhetorolect, time is the moment of healing, of becoming completely integrated with society as a well being who does not endanger someone else with disease, confront someone else with embarrassing deficiencies, or impede the efficient operations of society; in prophetic rhetorolect, it is the moment of confrontation, of exercising the courage to speak out for the enactment of justice in society; in precreation rhetorolect, time is the appearance and disappearance, presence and absence, of light in a world of darkness; in priestly rhetorolect, time is the moment of sacrifice that removes defilement and wrongs that fracture the well-being of communities who have a responsibility to enact God's love for the created world; in apocalyptic rhetorolect, it is the sequence through which all evil in the world is destroyed and God's goodness and righteousness is fully established.

<sup>59</sup> Venn, *Occidentalism*, 235.

that can energize healing of those illnesses. Prophetic rhetorlect motivates the apprenticeship of confrontation of leaders for the sake of others. Precreation rhetorlect offers one the apprenticeship of special knowledge that leads to the innermost mind of the divine and the innermost truth about being-in-the-world. Priestly rhetorlect introduces the apprenticeship of disciplined action and thought designed to purify the inner resources of one's own inter-body and of one's community of daily life, thought, and action. Apocalyptic rhetorlect throws one into an apprenticeship of rewriting the history of the world in terms of the emergence of aggressive evil in the world and its removal from the world.

If our rhetorical analyses reenact only one or two rhetorical modes within this literature, then we are making only a quarter or half-turn within the rich discursive texture of early Christian discourse. To make the task complete, one must engage in political rhetoric both by joining voices and actions with feminist-critical scholars (male and female) and by employing liberationist modes of analysis within the wide regions of the global village. We must engage in translocational, transtextural, transdiscursive, transcultural, and transtraditional interpretations that include disenfranchised voices, marginalized voices, recently liberated voices, and powerfully-located voices. In order to make a rhetorical full-turn as we do this, we must learn how to enact confrontational strategies in forms and styles of rhetoric that enable free and open discussion and controversy. We must nurture a transmodern environment where we keep our colleagues on an equal playing field. Moving forward, spiraling, stepping in place, turning around, and changing venue, we explore with each other, debate with one another, and disagree with each other as equals, inviting other voices into the dialogue in a manner that makes a rhetorical full-turn through sciences, humanities, genders, ethnicities, geographies, races, economies, societies, and cultures, which thereby become arenas of disputation, dialogue, and commentary.

### **Sociorhetorical Interpretation as Transcultural Rhetorical Criticism**

In addition to being transtextural and transdiscursive, sociorhetorical interpretation is transcultural, wherein ethnocentrism is the primary issue addressed. Against Charles Taylor, Steven Mailloux asserts that judgments are always ethnocentrically located within the culture making them.<sup>60</sup> But

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<sup>60</sup> Steven Mailloux, "Articulation and Understanding: The Pragmatic Intimacy Between Rhetoric and Hermeneutics," in Walter Jost and Michael J. Hyde (eds.), *Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in Our Time: A Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 387-88.

this is not some kind of “wrong thing,” according to Mailloux. Rather, “it is our own ethnocentric web of beliefs and desires that gives us interpretive purchase on any object of attention, including the texts or classification systems of another culture. The validity of our interpretation is a function of the rhetorical context in which we argue them: who participates in the conversation, when and where, with what purposes, and so on.”<sup>61</sup> As Mailloux develops his argument, he refers to “transcultural judgments” and crossing boundaries thus:

If transcultural judgments are always cross-cultural translations, then such interpretations are liminal acts opening up a space in which boundaries are transformed yet paradoxically maintained even as they are crossed.

Boundaries are crossed in interpretation when one culture becomes the conversational topic or interpretive object of another; boundaries are maintained as the interpretive act in its rhetorical exchanges figures and persuades within the context of the interpreting culture; and boundaries are moved as interpretation changes the shape – trivially or dramatically – of the culture in which the interpretation is produced and received.<sup>62</sup>

This observation moves us into the arena of understanding the other. Relational philosophy understands, in the words of Buss, that the “other” is “neither completely strange nor completely familiar.”<sup>63</sup> This takes us one step further to the epistemological issue of transcultural understanding and the practices of transcultural sociorhetorical interpretation. In Mailloux’s words: “To understand an act within a foreign culture, the differences must be found in the margins of our own... [A]s we interact with other communities, traditions, cultures, we can reweave our webs of belief to take account of the other, and we do this more or less successfully from differing points of view within and outside our own groups.”<sup>64</sup>

Mailloux’s use of the term “transcultural” and his perception of the importance of finding differences “in the margins of our own culture” are thoroughly coherent not only with the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin but

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 388.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 388. Cf. Vernon K. Robbins, “Redrawing the Boundaries with Socio-Rhetorical Criticism,” in Robbins, *Tapestry*, 18-43. Online:

<http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/tapestry/TapestryCh2.pdf>.

<sup>63</sup> Buss, *Biblical Form Criticism*, 159.

<sup>64</sup> Mailloux, “Articulation and Understanding,” 388-89; cf. Robbins, *Tapestry*, 170-76; idem, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, 88-89; and idem, “The Reversed Contextualization of Psalm 22 in the Markan Crucifixion: A Socio-rhetorical Analysis,” in *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift Frans Neirynck* (ed. Camille Focant; BETL 110; 3 vols.; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 2:1161-83. Online:

<http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/Pdfs/ReversedPs22Mark15.pdf>.

also with the thought and practice of Ellen Berry and a successor of Bakhtin named Mikhail Epstein. After working in the Center for Mind and Thought in Moscow until 1990, Epstein came to the United States and accepted a position in the Department of Russian and Eastern European Languages, Literatures, and Culture at Emory University. Berry began to work with Epstein, and together they have produced *Transcultural Experiments*.<sup>65</sup> The work of Berry and Epstein displays yet another aspect of sociorhetorical interpretation as it participates in transcultural rhetorical interpretation.

Moving across boundaries is a challenging task in the context of interpretive/exegetical practice. It calls for a “transcultural context of interpretation.” As Wilhelm Wuellner asserts, a rhetorical reading must be “a corporate, cultural experience, and never mainly a private, individualistic one.”<sup>66</sup> But it is exceptionally difficult for Western interpreters located either in a humanistic or theological tradition to nurture truly corporate exegesis. Western tradition rewards individualism, not only in the academy but also in the marketplace of religion and the world of modern media. “Dialogue” in Western tradition regularly does not achieve a profound interweaving of webs of understanding, since while one person is talking the other person is thinking about an individual response that will bring attention to the respondent’s individual creativity and insightfulness.

Transcultural rhetorical criticism begins with a presumption that any one culture is fundamentally insufficient and incomplete, and thus it needs “radical openness to and dialogue with” other cultures.<sup>67</sup> This includes interpretive cultures, discursive cultures, ethnic cultures, national cultures, alongside many others. Transculturalism avoids “oppositional binaries, especially center and periphery, and emphasizes cultural identity as a dynamic, unstable, and ongoing construction.”<sup>68</sup> The goal is “a model of cultural interaction that would not unify cultures but diversify them further through their mutual interaction.”<sup>69</sup> This approach invites and welcomes interference, “the spontaneous interaction between various kinds of cultural activity.”<sup>70</sup> As Berry and Epstein aptly note, “within a transcultural model, spaces between diverging cultures are

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<sup>65</sup> Ellen E. Berry and Mikhail N. Epstein, *Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).

<sup>66</sup> Wilhelm Wuellner, “Putting Life Back into the Lazarus Story and its Reading: The Narrative Rhetoric of John 11 as the Narration of Faith,” *Semeia* 53 (1991): 115.

<sup>67</sup> Berry and Epstein, *Transcultural Experiments*, 3.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 8; cf. Heikki Räisänen, *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma: Exegetical Perspectives on the Encounter of Cultures and Faiths* (London: SCM, 1997), 1-16, 189-203.

<sup>70</sup> Berry and Epstein, *Transcultural Experiments*, 9.

filled by the effects of their interferences. . . . Instead of isolated spots or separate points, interference produces polychromatic patterns” and three-dimensional cultural spaces.<sup>71</sup> Interference “transposes the borders of interacting cultures, mentalities, and disciplines in multiple directions.”<sup>72</sup> A major goal, then, is to transform “a divisive politics of identity into a politics of creative interference.”<sup>73</sup>

Both Judaism and Christianity have inherent within their formation multiple transcultural dynamics. Much of the genius of the biblical canon lies in its transcultural nature. The story of Israel recounts interaction among multiple cultures in a manner that introduces “canonical transculturalism.” The New Testament extends the Israelite story even further into transculturalism. Previously “canonical” modes of discourse are deconstructed and reconstructed into new transcultural modes. Transcultural rhetorical criticism investigates the power of the biblical texts in a manner that invites interpreters to produce transcultural meanings themselves.

One of the practices Berry and Epstein recommend for the production of transcultural interpretation is “collective improvisation.” They gather talented people located in different cultures – whether those are the differing cultures of interpretation in the humanities, sciences, arts, and business; or United States, Russia, India, and Middle East.<sup>74</sup> All the people agree to write on a particular topic for a period of one hour. Then all of them read their essays aloud, and all agree to write commentaries on the texts of the others. This new round of activity then turns into the next round of communication.<sup>75</sup> In an uncanny way, Berry and Epstein’s process of culturally diversified people writing on a particular topic has analogies with the process of invention among Christians during the first century. People in significantly different social, cultural, and ideological locations wrote in multiple ways on related topics in order to articulate their understanding of the relation of humans to Jesus, and the relation of Jesus to the attributes and actions of God and the Holy Spirit. Gathering authors together in dialogue from as many cultural locations as possible to write commentary on sacred texts from multiple traditions represents a significant step toward transcultural commentary in the twenty-first century. In fact, there are projects like this emerging.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>76</sup> See Vernon K. Robbins and Gordon D. Newby, "A Prolegomenon to the Relation of the Qur'an and the Bible," in John C. Reeves (ed.), *Bible and Qur'an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality* (Symposium Series; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 23-42. Online: <http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/Quran/Proleg.pdf>.

Interpreters should now analyze sacred texts, and other literature and media, using transmodern strategies of sociorhetorical interpretation interactively with their own strategies of interpretation and commentary. Engaging in such a diverse range of interactive commentary could begin to move biblical interpretation significantly beyond the circumscribed strategies of modernist commentary into significant transmodern modes of investigation and interpretation. To be sure, it is also an effective way of seeking to overcome the oppositional rhetoric embedded in the text – leading to expansive readings that hope to avert domination through the multiplicity (and sometimes ambiguity) generated in open-ended dialogue.

### **Conclusions**

The primary issues for me in this essay have concerned the nature of feminist hermeneutics. The thesis I have advocated throughout is that feminist hermeneutics can make a rhetorical full-turn in biblical interpretation by moving forthrightly beyond one major political location and one primary discourse. A rhetorical full-turn includes a journey through multiple locations, textures, discourses, societies, cultures, ideologies, and traditions. Feminist interpretation, in my understanding, is amenable to taking this journey too, and more and more the scholarship coming out seems to press forward in making ever greater strides toward exhibiting a rhetorical full-turn. As we diverse interpreters labor together, then, we may, in this community of discovery and dialogue, come to recognize more fully a rhetorical full-turn in biblical studies. Such collaborative recognitions and achievements with respect to a rhetorical full-turn may help us all to fulfill responsibilities of leadership, of assistance, and of transformation in a world that always too easily moves towards violence, abuse, and destruction, rather than reconciliation, healing, and renewal.