

**Where is Wuellner's Anti-Hermeneutical Hermeneutic Taking Us?
From Scheiermacher to Thistleton and Beyond**

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It has been a great pleasure, and it has been a renewal of my initial edifying experience, to spend a significant number of hours during the last few months rereading many of Professor Wilhelm Wuellner's writings. Such an activity reminds one of the highly influential role he has played in moving rhetorical interpretation into a position of recognition and prominence in biblical studies today. It also nurtures humility, for one finds over and over again that he formulated issues and addressed topics during the 1960s, 70s, 80s, and 90s that we struggle daily to articulate as well as he did.

Today I will address only one topic of many that could be profitably addressed: Prof. Wuellner's analysis and discussion of hermeneutical tradition in many of his writings. Wilhelm Wuellner often has defined a rhetorical approach by placing it in opposition to a hermeneutical approach. In his 1988 essay on Luke 12, he asserts:

In the *hermeneutical* approach to the rhetorical structure of a text, the exegetical goal is, and always will be, "to determine the referential mode of text." The exegetical task ... is considered accomplished when "sense and reference," "text and reality" have been identified and their propositional contents understood.

But in the *rhetorical* approach I am advocating we shall see that religious texts, like fictional texts, in the act of reading "*undermine any particular determination of referentiality, and thus put in question the possibility of distinguishing the referential from the rhetorical.*"¹ Culler, however, rightly and emphatically adds immediately that such undermining of referentiality does in no way "dispense with referentiality,

¹ Quoting Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction. Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982) 249.

which always reappears.”² ... [T]he question (in exegesis) is ... “*in what way* [emphasis mine] does the text refer to reality.”³

Later in the essay Wuellner asserts:

Hermeneutics sees in “the final direction” only the final coherence of thought, or at least thinking.

But rhetorics sees in “the final direction” the final coherent *power* activated in the act of reading. What undermines referentiality in rhetorics, what makes it abhor “the idolatry of the single sense” (Kermode) or single reference, is the integration of convincing and persuasive discourse in the (always concrete, always unique) act of reading. It is the integration of thought and action, mind and intentionality, theology and ethics. It is the (largely collective) reading activity, the experience of textuality, either as identification or transformation (K. Burke), or as empowerment.⁴

We must notice as we begin that this sequence of Wuellner’s text first places “the hermeneutical approach” in opposition to “the rhetorical approach,” then it sets “hermeneutics” (plural) in opposition to “rhetorics” (plural). The use of both terms in plural form is important for Wuellner. Rhetorics, Wuellner explains in his 1989 essay on “Hermeneutics and Rhetorics,” is critical theory, while hermeneutics is “theory of interpretation.”⁵ In the span of text quoted above, he asserts a fundamental difference between “hermeneutics” and “rhetorics.”

The title of this present essay, which obviously borrows from Wuellner’s classic 1987 essay “Where Is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?”,⁶ describes Wuellner’s approach as an anti-hermeneutical hermeneutic.⁷ Sometimes, Wuellner describes hermeneutics as something to move beyond, rather than something simply opposed to rhetoric.⁸ For

² Quoting Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 250.

³ Wilhelm Wuellner, “The Rhetorical Structure of Luke 12 in its Wider Context,” *Neotestamentica* 22 (1988) 284; quoting Bernard C. Lategan & Willem S. Vorster, *Text and Reality. Aspects of Reference in Biblical Texts* (SBL Semeia Studies; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 1.

⁴ Wuellner, “Rhetorical Structure,” 288.

⁵ Wilhelm Wuellner, “Hermeneutics and Rhetorics: From ‘Truth and Method’ to ‘Truth and Power’,” *Scriptura* S 3 (1989) 1.

⁶ Wilhelm Wuellner, “Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?,” *CBQ* 49 (1987) 448-63.

⁷ See his title “Rhetorics in Conflict with Hermeneutics” in Wuellner, “Hemeneutics,” 1.

⁸ Wuellner, “Where Is,” 448-9; idem, “Hermeneutics,” 1.

Wuellner, the singular “hermeneutic” refers to interpretive/exegetical practice.⁹ Throughout his essays, Wuellner works very hard to make his interpretive/exegetical practice rhetorical rather than hermeneutical.¹⁰ He asserts that “the interpretive/exegetical practice” called “hermeneutic” introduces limited, restrained interpretation.¹¹ This limited approach must be overcome, and a rhetorical approach provides the fullest resources to overcome these limitations.

I. Four Steps toward Hermeneutics

Wuellner appears to agree with Hans Georg Gadamer, and subsequently Klaus Dockhorn, that hermeneutics arose from rhetoric.¹² Once hermeneutics began, it gradually moved further and further from rhetoric. Assertions in various essays by Wuellner suggest that he sees at least four major times in the history of interpretation when rhetorical criticism stepped away from “rhetorics, the critical theory” toward “hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation.”

The first time occurred when the rhetoric of Aristotle presented “the first systematic hermeneutic of everyday life.”¹³ The use of the singular “hermeneutic” is important here, since in Wuellner’s terminology he is referring to “interpretive/exegetical practice.”¹⁴ Wuellner sees Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric* as a “systematic hermeneutic.” The object of its interpretation is “everyday life,” and the modern heir and extension of this approach is “structuralism, with *its* theory and method.” Structuralism “systematiz[es] the analysis of human *objects* ... produced by ... ‘the organized and organizing social practices’ – objects like words, ideas, literature, etc.”¹⁵ Rhetorical interpreters who use categories that systematize the study of words, ideas, and literature can be described, from Wuellner’s perspective, as structuralist rhetoricians.

⁹ Wuellner, “Hermeneutics,” 1.

¹⁰ E.g., Wuellner, “Rhetorical Structure,” 305.

¹¹ Wuellner, “Where Is,” 450-3.

¹² Wuellner, “Hermeneutics,” 24.

¹³ Wuellner, “Hermeneutics,” 24, citing Klaus Dockhorn’s review of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 13:3 (1980) 160-80 and Gadamer’s positive response to Dockhorn in “Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik: Metakritische Erörterungen zu ‘Wahrheit und Methode’,” in *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971) 57-82 = *Kleine Schriften*, I. Philosophie. Hermeneutik (2d ed.; Tübingen: Mohr, 1976) 113-30.

¹⁴ Wuellner, “Hermeneutics,” 1.

¹⁵ Wuellner, “Hermeneutics,” 24.

The second step occurred during the first Christian century when rhetoricians began to focus on “strategies of exegetical exercises.”¹⁶ The strategies focused on “style” in discourse and created a split between rhetorical practice and rhetorical theory. When the early critics or interpreters discussed “the interpretive act” in terms of “exegetical exercises,”¹⁷ a fundamental split emerged between the intention of the rhetor or writer (*dianoia/voluntas*) and the expressed polysemous meaning (*hyponoia/suspicio*) of the writing.¹⁸ The modern heirs of this approach would be interpreters like Burton Mack, myself, and all others who focus on the rhetorical elaboration of the chreia, other rhetorical exercises from the *Progymnasmata*, or on any other “strategies of exegesis” formulated on the basis of definitions and discussions in rhetorical treatises from the ancient past, the recent past, or the present. In Wuellner’s view, rhetorical interpreters of this kind could be called either “stylistic” or “intentionalist” rhetoricians.

The third major step toward hermeneutics occurred during the 12th century when “in nascent universities” biblical exegesis begins to be treated as “an academic discipline.”¹⁹ Most of us in this room are heirs of biblical exegesis as an academic discipline rather than a contextual, argumentative/persuasive practice outside a classroom – even if that context be in a church, synagogue, temple, mosque, home, apartment, or dorm room. All who pursue biblical exegesis as a “disciplinary” activity would appear to be heirs of this step away from rhetorics toward hermeneutics, and any who perceive biblical exegesis to be a “scientific” or “wissenschaftlich” activity have moved the furthest away from rhetorics. Rhetorical interpreters of this kind, in Wuellner’s view, can be called academic, scientific, disciplinary, or wissenschaftlich rhetoricians.

The fourth step occurred from the 16th through the 19th centuries when, under the influence of Peter Ramus (1515-1572) and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) exegesis became an epistemological activity designed to ascertain “the meaning” of the text rather than “the power” of the text.²⁰ In Wuellner’s view, anyone who uses

¹⁶ Wuellner, “Hermeneutics,” 2.

¹⁷ Wuellner, “Hermeneutics,” 2, quoting Kathy Eden, “Hermeneutics and the Ancient Rhetorical Tradition,” *Rhetorica* 5 (1987) 60.

¹⁸ Wuellner, “Hermeneutics,” 2, quoting Eden, “Hermeneutics,” 75.

¹⁹ Wuellner, “Hermeneutics,” 3, citing G. R. Evans, *Old Arts and New Theology: The Beginnings of Theology as an Academic Discipline* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980) 3, 18-19, 70.

²⁰ Wuellner, “Hermeneutics,” 9-10.

rhetorical interpretation for the purposes of displaying the understanding in the text can be called a hermeneutical rhetorician.

II. Seven Principles of Hermeneutical Exegesis

Since Wuellner's work depends so heavily on the thesis that hermeneutics gradually but surely moved away from rhetorics, the next step in this presentation will be to test Wuellner's assertions about hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, and hermeneutic, the interpretive/exegetical practice. Many of us here are predisposed to associate ourselves with any discourse that champions rhetorical interpretation. For this reason especially, it behooves us to probe Wuellner's assertion that traditional hermeneutics has lost a relation to rhetorics. An excellent place to probe this, I suggest, is Anthony C. Thistleton's *New Horizons of Hermeneutics*.²¹ Thistleton thinks that the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, which dramatically reformulated the discipline of hermeneutics at the beginning of the nineteenth century and set it on a trajectory that has deeply influenced the field of biblical studies to the present day, is somewhat misunderstood by biblical interpreters and, if properly understood, points the way forward. Thistleton presents seven principles of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics that he thinks should correct significant misunderstandings and help to set the new horizons for hermeneutics in our day:

1. Instead of conceiving of hermeneutics as serving some particular areas of studies, Schleiermacher saw it as the *problem of human understanding as such*. In other words, he placed hermeneutics in the context of theories of knowledge, asking how do we understand something as the thing which it is.²²

2. Instead of asking how an assumed understanding had been arrived at, Schleiermacher asked what the conditions were under which human understanding could take place at all. *In this sense it raised transcendental questions: it enquired into the basis and possibility of human understanding*, like Kant's approach to the theory of knowledge.²³

²¹ Anthony C. Thistleton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992.

²² Thistleton, *New Horizons*, 204-5.

²³ Thistleton, *New Horizons*, 205.

3. Instead of focusing on logical deduction and rational reflection that the human mind may test but not create, Schleiermacher stresses a role of creative processes with the human mind within the process of understanding. *Human understanding is more akin to what is involved in seeking to understand a friend.* This requires a double focus: a concern about the individuality of the author who produced the text, and a study of the language-situation and language-world out of which the text arose.

4. Schleiermacher explicitly raised for the first time the question if we can interpret the meaning of texts purely with reference to their language, or purely with reference to their author's intention, *or does textual meaning reside somehow in the inter-relation or inter-action between both?* To grasp the content of a text as a flow of thought emerging from a given situation, an interpreter must have not only a capacity for critical reflection and comparison but also the capacity to "divine," or proleptically to perceive in a way that is more than merely logical or rational.²⁴

5. Interpretation involves "listening," and *stepping out of one's own frame of mind.* This is not a concern with "the subjectivity of the isolated individual," but the relationship between individual consciousness and an individual's capacity for *inter-personal communication on the basis of shared language.* In other words, Schleiermacher "presupposed a linguistic and inter-personal interaction in which the individuality of the self was not only enhanced but also transcended and perhaps transformed."²⁵

6. Schleiermacher formulated the comprehensive significance of a work's being understood only by the joint consideration of the *content* of the text and the *range of effects.* Thus, Schleiermacher's theory was not merely "genetic" or reconstructionist. Schleiermacher's conception of the hermeneutical task "involves the author's thought, experience, and situation; the content, context, language, and effects of the text; the first readers of the text, including their linguistic and other capacities and competences; and the consciousness and experience of later interpretation."²⁶

7. Schleiermacher raised for biblical studies the question "of how far the biblical writings themselves may be said to exemplify the issues which are raised in general

²⁴ Thistleton, *New Horizons*, 206.

²⁵ Thistleton, *New Horizons*, 207.

hermeneutical theory.”²⁷ In other words, since the Bible is a “text written in language addressed to human situations and human persons,” a general hermeneutical theory should be used to interpret it, rather than a particular theory of inspiration by the Holy Spirit. In this way, “Schleiermacher led the way in addressing a new range of hermeneutical questions to the language of the biblical writings.”²⁸

These seven principles would seem to confirm Wuellner’s assertion that hermeneutics focuses on the “final coherence of thought, or at least thinking” rather than “final coherent power activated in the act of reading.”²⁹ Schleiermacher’s focus was on the possibility of “understanding” within interpretation, even when his focus was on the “range of effects” of the text. The goal for interpreting the past, present, and future of a text is the “understanding” in the text. Wuellner explains that, for Schleiermacher, this was a way of unifying hermeneutics and rhetorics. Both rhetorics and hermeneutics, Schleiermacher would claim, concern understanding. Wuellner explains it as follows:

... Schleiermacher saw the unity of rhetorics and hermeneutics resulting ... “from the fact that every act of understanding is the obverse of an act of discourse in that one must come to grasp the thought that was at the base of the discourse.”³⁰ ... The liability of Schleiermacher’s psychological hermeneutics with its focus on style remains the liability of all stylistic-rhetorical studies in isolation from their matrix within a “conceptual rhetoric” where expressive elocution is an integral part of topical, propositional, logical concerns.... What became increasingly lost from sight, as hermeneutics aspired, and attained, its “scientific” status in the Schleiermacher era was, what Kennedy put so succinctly, the hermeneutics of the *power* of a text, and not just “its sources.”³¹

²⁶ Thistleton, *New Horizons*, 208.

²⁷ Thistleton, *New Horizons*, 208.

²⁸ Thistleton, *New Horizons*, 209.

²⁹ Wuellner, “Rhetorical Structure,” 284.

³⁰ Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, “*The Hermeneutics*: Outline of the 1819 Lectures,” *New Literary History* 10 (trans. Jan Wojcik and Roland Haas; 1978) 2.

³¹ Wuellner, “Hermeneutics,” 22, quoting George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) 158.

III. Three Steps toward Rhetorical Criticism

A major challenge that Wuellner places before rhetorical biblical interpreters, then, is to figure out how to claim the resources of “rhetorics, the critical theory” and “rhetoric, the argumentative/persuasive practice” in biblical exegesis. In his 1991 essay on “Putting Life Back into the Lazarus Story and Its Reading,”³² Wuellner describes and displays an interpretive/exegetical practice focused on “rhetoric, the argumentative/persuasive practice” and guided by “rhetorics, the critical theory.” He calls his practice “a rhetorical reading.” He introduces his “reading” with these comments:

A rhetorical reading works on three levels: (a) the author and the produced text; (b) the reader interacting with the text, thereby bringing the text to life, as orchestra and audience do when both together make up the “performance”; and (c) the scholarly critic, nowadays fully aware of the ambiguous legacy of the modern sciences in a post-modern era.³³

At the first level, Wuellner says, the textual constraints produced by the author and the narrator “facilitate the *reader* to produce meaning.” This does not mean that the textual constraints “generate by themselves either semantic meaning or pragmatic effect.” Rather the textual constraints, which are “one (of the *three* parts) of the distinctively Johannine narrative world,” enable and empower the reader to produce meaning. This world “is narrated with consummate skill and profound intentionality,” and the rhetorician’s task is to keep the focus “on the argumentative, i.e., persuasive function of the discernible techniques.”³⁴

This first level is very interesting in relation to Thistleton’s numbers (3), (4), and (5). Schleiermacher, Thistleton asserts, “stresses a role of creative processes with the human mind within the process of understanding.” The context of this creativity includes the “individuality of the author who produced the text, and a study of the language-situation and language-world out of which the text arose” (no. 3). Much of this stands in common with Wuellner’s emphases. Wuellner differs by turning away from the process

³² 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) 113-32.

³³ Wuellner, “Putting Life,” 113.

³⁴ Wuellner, “Putting Life,” 114.

of understanding to the process of persuasion. One notices that Wuellner's discourse in fact "limits" the rhetorician's focus. Does Wuellner's approach create a new kind of restrained rhetoric, a rhetoric that is not allowed to enter into the domain of understanding as well as persuasion? Schleiermacher raised the question if textual meaning resides "somehow in the inter-relation or inter-action between" language and the author's intention. The interpreter needs a "capacity to 'divine,' or proleptically to perceive in a way that is more than merely logical or rational" in order "[t]o grasp the content of the text as a flow of thought emerging from a given situation." Wuellner says that the textual constraints produced by the author and the narrator "facilitate the *reader* to produce meaning." The misguided words, for Wuellner, are "to grasp the content of the text as a flow of thought." One wonders about the differences here. Schleiermacher turned hermeneutics away from "strategies of exegetical exercises" to "the problem of human understanding." Does Wuellner think that Schleiermacher's move was in any way a gain? Should the rhetorical interpreter move entirely away from the tradition of understanding? Is persuasion in any way a process of understanding?

Wuellner's second level concerns what all readers – past, present, and future – "*experience* in the ever changing, never static reading of John's narrative rhetoric."³⁵ This is interesting in relation to Thistleton's numbers (5) and (6). A major difference is the shift from "listening" and stepping out of one's own frame of mind in Schleiermacher's approach to "experience" in Wuellner's approach. Wuellner emphasizes that the "reading response and responsibility is always ultimately a corporate, cultural experience, and never mainly a private, individualistic one...."³⁶ The performance of the text as *a reading* "turns the encounter with the text, even the most critical, into a 'dialogic relation [requiring] two consciousnesses and two subjects'."³⁷ Schleiermacher emphasized the "interpersonal communication on the basis of shared language" and he emphasized the "transformation" of the self in the process (no. 5). Also, he emphasized the range of effects in "the consciousness and experience of later interpretation" (no. 6). A major difference is Wuellner's emphasis on the "power of the

³⁵ Wuellner, "Putting Life," 114.

³⁶ Wuellner, "Putting Life," 115.

³⁷ Wuellner, "Putting Life," 115, quoting Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (ed. M. Holquist; Slavic Series 1; Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1981) 125.

Lazarus story,” which is “largely a function of its argumentative force.”³⁸ Will Wuellner allow a rhetorical interpreter to analyze capacities, competences, and consciousness in later interpretations as a way of investigating the power of the text as a function of its argumentative force?

The clearest parting of the ways emerges at the third level of Wuellner’s procedure. At this level “the rhetorically critical reading ... focuses on the rhetoric of rhetorical theory and of rhetorical criticism itself.” The interpreter recognizes that all of the reading and the cultural deliberations are “a profoundly rhetorical activity” and engages the ethics of scholarship and of reading.³⁹ In contrast, Thistleton’s number (7) focuses on the degrees to which biblical writings exemplify issues of understanding raised in general hermeneutic theory.

One of the major items a rhetorical interpreter at the beginning of the 21st century observes is an absence of any discussion of ideology in Thistleton’s seven principles. Schleiermacher embeds hermeneutics in epistemology, the issue of human understanding, in such a way that that which is hidden to most interpreters is the “creativity” of the author. A major task of the interpreter is to “divine” the “creativity” by entering into the mind of the author with the aid of insights into consciousness, experience, psychology and, to some extent, aesthetics. This approach welcomes insights into the nature of history, society, and culture; but it does not raise the issue of the ideology of the biblical texts, of later interpretations, or the discourse one uses at present to interpret the texts. Another topic that does not appear is empowerment by the text, though Thistleton does refer to “transformation.” Thistleton argues that Schleiermacher was interested in the “effects” of the text, but by this he means effects upon the “understanding” of later interpreters.

In his own work, Thistleton shifts Schleiermacher’s epistemological orientation toward “the nature of texts.” Interpreters should not keep their focus on the “understanding” that exists in the language and the effects of the language of the text, but they should turn their attention to the nature of texts themselves. This is a promising move that leads to chapters on the multiple modes of hermeneutics available to

³⁸ Wuellner, “Putting Life,” 115.

³⁹ Wuellner, “Putting Life,” 115.

interpreters today: a hermeneutics of self-involvement, metacriticism, suspicion and retrieval, socio-pragmatism, socio-critical theory, liberation, reading, and pastoral theology.⁴⁰ In all of this, Thistleton does not see a rhetorical hermeneutics on the horizon. His index lists three pages referring to “Rhetoric, rhetorical distance, 352, 451, 474.”⁴¹ The absence of any substantive role for rhetorical interpretation in Thistleton’s reconfiguration of biblical hermeneutics into “the theory and practice of transforming biblical reading” would appear to validate Wuellner’s assertion that rhetorical interpretation is significantly different from the modes of interpretation that emerge naturally out of biblical hermeneutics in the tradition of Friedrich Schleiermacher.

IV. Taking Steps toward Transcultural Rhetorical Criticism

If we ask what major constituent of rhetorical interpretation is lacking in the tradition of biblical hermeneutics, then, I suggest it is any significant discussion of ideology. In his 1988 essay on Luke 12, Wuellner quotes David Tracy to emphasize the role of ideology in rhetorical interpretation:

To acknowledge that language is discourse is [to rediscover society and history, and] to admit the need for ethical and political criticism of the hidden, even repressed, social and historical ideologies [both] in all texts, in all language as discourse, and, above all, in all interpretations.⁴²

What is hidden, then, is not simply the “creativity” of the author but also the “repressed social and historical ideologies in all texts.” Ideology also emerges in the final sentences of Wuellner’s classic 1987 essay on where rhetorical criticism is taking us:

With the significance of the text changing as cultural conditions and beliefs change ... the discipline of rhetorical criticism will emerge as “a dynamic process,” not as a system, least of all that of a neo-Aristotelian or neo-Ciceronian system. Rather, it will be imaginative criticism (E. Black), a criticism of the dialogical imagination (M. Bakhtin) which is cognizant

⁴⁰ Thistleton, *New Horizons*, 272-620.

⁴¹ Thistleton, *New Horizons*, 690.

⁴² Wuellner, “Rhetorical Structure,” 283, quoting David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 61.

of the Bible as “ideological literature” (M. Sternberg) and of biblical hermeneutics as part of the “politics of interpretation.”⁴³

Here we notice the extension of rhetorical criticism beyond ideology into a politics of interpretation. How can the rhetorical interpreter address this issue?

If we ask what has not yet been brought into the open in this statement by Wuellner, one of the major issues is ethnocentrism. What should rhetorical interpreters do when they become aware that they themselves function in contexts where their own ideologies are hidden from them? One of the people who has worked most energetically and thought most profoundly about the nature of a rhetorical hermeneutics and the kind of interpretive/exegetical practice it should nurture is Steven Mailloux, who is here with us at this conference. Mailloux’s investigation of ideology takes him to the topic of ethnocentrism – a topic I have not found in the writings of Wuellner I have read. I want to argue that if we follow the insights of Wuellner into the 21st century, we will develop a transcultural rhetorical criticism that addresses ethnocentrism as a major topic.

The issue of ethnocentrism emerges for Mailloux in dialogue with the work of Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor. Against Taylor, Mailloux asserts:

... a rhetorical hermeneutics argues that ... judgments are always ethnocentrically located within the culture making them.⁴⁴

But 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.⁴⁵

As Mailloux develops his argument, he refers to “transcultural judgments” and crossing boundaries:

⁴³ Wuellner, “Where Is,” 463.

⁴⁴ 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) 387-8.

⁴⁵ Mailloux, “Articulation,” 388.

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.⁴⁶

This takes us into an issue of understanding. Thus, I think we must include in a transcultural rhetorical criticism the epistemological issue of transcultural understanding. 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.⁴⁷

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 also with the thought and practice of 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. His co-authored book *Transcultural Experiments* appeared with Martin's Press in 1999,⁴⁸ and I think it displays for us much of where Wuellner's anti-

⁴⁶ Mailloux, "Articulation," 388; cf. Vernon K. Robbins, "Redrawing the Boundaries with Socio-Rhetorical Criticism," in Robbins, *Tapestry*, 18-43.

⁴⁷ Mailloux, "Articulation," 388-9; cf. Robbins, *Tapestry*, 170-6; idem, *Exploring*, 88-9; 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; Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1993) 2:1161-83.

⁴⁸ Ellen E. Berry and Mikhail N. Epstein, *Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

hermeneutical hermeneutic is leading us, if we can overcome the oppositional language and learn how to go through the doors transcultural rhetorical criticism opens before us.

Moving across boundaries is a very challenging task in the context of interpretive/exegetical practice. It calls for a “transcultural context of interpretation.” As Wuellner says, a rhetorical reading must be “a corporate, cultural experience, and never mainly a private, individualistic one.”⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ This includes interpretive cultures, discursive cultures, ethnic cultures, national cultures, and many other kinds of cultures. Transculturalism avoids “oppositional binaries – especially center and periphery – and emphasizes cultural identity as a dynamic, unstable, and ongoing construction.”⁵¹ The goal is “a model of cultural interaction that would not unify cultures but diversify them further through their mutual interaction.”⁵² This approach invites and welcomes interference, “the spontaneous interaction between various kinds of cultural activity.”⁵³ “Within a transcultural model, spaces between diverging cultures are filled by the effects of their interferences.... Instead of isolated spots or separate points, interference produces polychromatic patterns” and three-dimensional cultural spaces.⁵⁴ Interference “transposes the borders of interacting cultures, mentalities, and disciplines in multiple

⁴⁹ Wuellner, “Putting Life,” 115.

⁵⁰ Berry and Epstein, *Transcultural*, 3.

⁵¹ Berry and Epstein, *Transcultural*, 4.

⁵² Berry and Epstein, *Transcultural*, 8.

⁵³ Berry and Epstein, *Transcultural*, 9.

⁵⁴ Berry and Epstein, *Transcultural*, 9.

directions.”⁵⁵ A major goal, then, is “transforming a divisive politics of identity into a politics of creative interference.”⁵⁶

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 the destruction of multiple cultures, including Israelite culture, in a manner that introduces “canonical transculturalism.” The NT 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.

One of the practices Mikhail Epstein recommends for the production of transcultural interpretation is “collective improvisation.” He gathers four talented people who are located in different cultures – whether those be the differing cultures of interpretation in the humanities, sciences, arts, and business; or United States, Russia, India, and Middle East.⁵⁷ All people agree to write on a particular topic for a period of one hour. Then all of them read their essays aloud, and all persons agree to write commentaries on the texts of the others. This new round of activity then turns into the next round of communication.⁵⁸

V. Transcultural Rhetorical Interpretation of *Topoi* in Early Christian Discourse

In an uncanny way, 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. The key for rhetorical analysis and interpretation is to approach this process with rhetorical insights concerning the *topos*. In a publication in 1978, Wuellner discussed the twofold function of *topoi* as: (1) argumentative-enthymematic; and (2) amplificatory-descriptive.⁵⁹ Abraham J. Malherbe and his associates have made extensive investigations of the amplificatory-descriptive function of *topoi* of the

⁵⁵ Berry and Epstein, *Transcultural*, 10.

⁵⁶ Berry and Epstein, *Transcultural*, 12.

⁵⁷ Berry and Epstein, *Transcultural*, 31.

⁵⁸ Berry and Epstein, *Transcultural*, 33.

hellenistic moralists in NT literature.⁶⁰ “Friendship” is a major *topos*, associated with flattery and frankness of speech.⁶¹ Stanley K. Stowers has used the *topos* of friendship to interpret the special dynamics of Paul’s letter to the Philippians,⁶² and Alan C. Mitchell has discussed the social function of friendship in Acts 2:44-47 and 4:32-37.⁶³ Another *topos* is covetousness or greed.⁶⁴ Malherbe has analyzed the Christianization of this *topos* in Luke 12:13-34.⁶⁵ Still another *topos* is household management, which has attracted significant studies in NT literature and promises more.⁶⁶ Other *topoi* are *philotimia* (love of honor or fame); *homonoia* (concord or harmony); and *eusebeia* or *pietas* (piety). Analysis of these *topoi* in NT literature reveals that, using Mikhail Epstein’s term, early Christians were engaged in “collective improvisation” with a range of *topoi* from biblical, Jewish, and Mediterranean discourse that were of particular importance to them. For rhetorical analysis and interpretation of early Christian discourse, it is necessary to move beyond analysis and interpretation of the *topoi* that occupied the Hellenistic moralists into other *topoi* as well. Bruce J. Malina, John H. Elliott, Jerome H. Neyrey, Richard Rohrbaugh, John J. Pilch and other members of the Context Group have broadened the scope of attention beyond the Hellenistic moralists by

⁵⁹ Wilhelm H. Wuellner, “Toposforschung und Torahinterpretation bei Paulus und Jesus,” *NTS* 24 (1978) 463-83, see 467: “eine zweifache Funktion: eine argumentativ-enthymematische und eine amplifikatorisch-darstellerische Funktion.”

⁶⁰ Abraham J. Malherbe, “Hellenistic Moralists and the New Testament,” *ANRW* 2.26.1 (1992) 320-5; idem, *Moral Exhortation, A Greco-Roman Sourcebook* (Library of Early Christianity; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 144-61. See an overall summary and discussion of the *topos* in Johan C. Thom, “‘The Mind is Its Own Place’: Defining the Topos,” in *Early Christianity and Classical Culture: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (ed. John T. Fitzgerald, Thomas H. Olbricht, and L. Michael White; Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2001[forthcoming]).

⁶¹ John T. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Friendship, Flattery, and Frankness of Speech: Studies on Friendship in the New Testament World* (NovTSup 82; Leiden: Brill, 1996); idem (ed.), *Greco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship* (SBLSPS 34; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars, 1997); David Konstan et al, *Philodemus: On Frank Criticism* (SBLTT 43; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars, 1998).

⁶² Stanley K. Stowers, “Friends and Enemies in the Politics of Heaven: Reading Theology in Philippians,” in *Pauline Theology. Volume 1: Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon* (ed. Jouette M. Bassler; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 105-21.

⁶³ Alan C. Mitchell, “The Social Function of Friendship in Acts 2:44-47 and 4:32-37,” *JBL* 111 (1992) 255-72.

⁶⁴ Malherbe, “*Moral Exhortation*,” 154-57.

⁶⁵ Abraham J. Malherbe, “The Christianization of a *Topos* (Luke 12:13-34),” *NovT* 38 (1996) 123-35.

⁶⁶ Hermann von Lips, “Die Haustafel als ‘Topos’ im Rahmen der Urchristlichen Paränese: Beobachtungen Anhand des 1. Petrusbriefes und des Titusbriefes,” *NTS* 40 (1994) 261-80; V. Tfouna, *Philodemus: On Household Management* (SBLTT; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars, forthcoming).

identifying common social and cultural *topoi* and values in all the writings in the NT.⁶⁷ David A. deSilva's recent book *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity* shows that the *topoi* of the Hellenistic moralists, addressed by Malherbe and his associates, are intrinsic to honor and shame; patronage, reciprocity, and grace; kinship and the household of God, and purity and pollution in the New Testament.⁶⁸ John J. Pilch, in particular, has analyzed the presence of Mediterranean social and cultural *topoi* in NT miracle discourse.⁶⁹ In the midst of this work, Jerome H. Neyrey has moved beyond social and cultural *topoi* to the *topos* of "without beginning of days or end of life," which he calls a *topos* for a true deity.⁷⁰ From the perspective of rhetorical interpretation, Neyrey's essay contains insights about a *topos* in NT discourse that extended throughout broad transcultural regions of Mediterranean discourse, rather than being of primary interest to Hellenistic moralists. A challenge for rhetorical interpreters is to investigate and interpret this and other transcultural *topoi* with "a 'conceptual rhetoric' where expressive elocution is an integral part of topical, propositional, logical concerns."⁷¹ In other words, NT interpreters should produce rhetorical analysis and interpretation both of the amplificatory-descriptive function and the argumentative-enthymematic function of the *topoi* and values in all major kinds of NT discourse: wisdom, miracle, prophetic, suffering-death, apocalyptic, and pre-creation discourse.⁷²

⁶⁷ For the basic range of these topics, see Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (3d ed.; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993); Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991); John H. Elliott, *What Is Social-Scientific Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Bruce J. Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992); John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina (eds.), *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning: A Handbook* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993); John J. Pilch, *The Cultural Dictionary of the Bible* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999); cf. Robbins, *Tapestry*, 159-66; idem, *Exploring*, 75-86. For publications of the Context Group see online: <http://www.serv.net/~oakmande/index.html>.

⁶⁸ David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000).

⁶⁹ John J. Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

⁷⁰ Jerome H. Neyrey, "'Without Beginning of Days or End of Life' (Hebrews 7:3): Topos for a True Deity," *CBQ* 53 (1991) 439-55.

⁷¹ Wuellner, "Hermeneutics," 22.

⁷² Vernon K. Robbins, "Argumentative Textures in Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation," in *Argumentation in the Bible* (ed. Anders Eriksson, Walter Überlacker, and Thomas Olbricht; Emory Studies in Early Christianity; Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, forthcoming); cf. idem, "The Dialectical Nature of Early Christian Discourse," *Scriptura* 59 (1996) 353-62. Online: <http://www.emory.edu/COLLEGE/RELIGION/faculty/robbins/dialect/dialect353.html>.

A beginning point for bringing together Wuellner's insight into the twofold nature of *topoi* and the rich investigations by Malherbe and his associates and the Context Group is the understanding that "specific (*idioi*) *topoi*" attain the status of "common (*koinoi*) *topoi*" in regional, ethnic, and even imperial social and cultural rhetorical environments. In Walter J. Ong's words:

From at least the time of Quintilian, *loci communes* was taken in two different senses. First, it referred to the 'seats' of arguments, considered as abstract 'headings' in today's parlance, such as definition, cause, effect, opposites, likenesses, and so on (the assortment varied in length from one author to another). Wanting to develop a 'proof' – we should say simply to develop a line of thought – on any subject, such as loyalty, evil, the guilt of an accused criminal, friendship, war, or whatever, one could always find something to say by defining, looking to causes, effects, opposites, and all the rest. These headings can be styled the 'analytic commonplaces'. Secondly, *loci communes* or commonplaces referred to collections of sayings (in effect, formulas) on various topics – such as loyalty, decadence, friendship, or whatever – that could be worked into one's own speech-making or writing. In this sense the *loci communes* can be styled 'cumulative commonplaces'. Both the analytic and the cumulative commonplaces, it is clear, kept alive the old oral feeling for thought and expression essentially made up of formulaic or otherwise fixed materials inherited from the past.⁷³

The *topoi* Malherbe and his associates analyze are not the common *topoi* Aristotle listed; they are specific *topoi* that became common *topoi* in the writings of the Hellenistic moralists. Participants in the Context Group have broadened the range to focus on *topoi* characteristic of ancient, pre-industrial society and culture. For rhetorical analysis and interpretation, it is important to understand that: "Once a topical pattern has developed into common use, it will be used over and over in various manifestations and will be

⁷³ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York : Routledge, c1988, 1995) 110-11. I am grateful to Russell Sisson for this quotation.

effective by virtue of its recognizability.”⁷⁴ This recognizability sometimes is distinctive of a particular kind of culture in a particular region of the world. Another important point is an understanding of the expanding enthymematic-argumentative nature of *topoi*. Aristotle’s insight that enthymemes are the “substance” of persuasion itself⁷⁵ has been expanded in modern times to an awareness that “[a] cultural system can be envisioned as a set of major premises – similar to a philosophical, theological, or legal system – from which its more specific minor premises can be derived.”⁷⁶ The rhetoric of people “lead[s] staircase fashion from opinion ... to further opinion.... [I]ts syllogistic motion *generates* all the possible arguments in relation to a given case. At each point, the possibilities are not reduced or eliminated, as in dialectic, but multiplied... [T]he end is an ambidextrous wealth of arguments.”⁷⁷ The “background conventions” supporting the “provisional judgments” in enthymemes “are not simply private intuitions but ‘social knowledge’ that spills over into the common experience of many people. What is referenced by publicly articulated enthymemes is the mosaic of commonplaces, conventions, traditions, and provisional interests making up the *doxa* of [their] rhetorical culture...”⁷⁸ Early Christians interwove biblical, Jewish, and Mediterranean *topoi* and values together into enthymematic-argumentative and amplificatory-descriptive discourse that functioned as persuasive discourse in late Mediterranean antiquity.

In socio-rhetorical terms, the twofold function of *topoi* in early Christian discourse produced multiple, transcultural “rhetorolects.”⁷⁹ This occurred, because *topoi* emerge from a variety of conceptual locations with a “richness and connectedness of knowledge available for recombination” and function as “a source of patterns and relationships” within “the habits of thought, value hierarchies, forms of knowledge, and

⁷⁴ Barbara Warnick, “Two Systems of Invention: The Topics in *Rhetoric* and *The New Rhetoric*,” in *Rereading Aristotle’s Rhetoric* (ed. Alan G. Gross & Arthur E. Walzer; Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000) 110.

⁷⁵ Thomas B. Farrell, “Aristotle’s Enthymeme as Tacit Reference,” in *Rereading Aristotle’s Rhetoric* (ed. Alan G. Gross & Arthur E. Walzer; Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000) 94.

⁷⁶ James L. Peacock, *The Anthropological Lens: Harsh Light, Soft Focus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 35; cf. Vernon K. Robbins, “The Present and Future of Rhetorical Analysis,” in *The Rhetorical Analysis of Scripture: Essays from the 1995 London Conference* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht; JSNTSS 146; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 33-35.

⁷⁷ Margaret D. Zulick, “Generative Rhetoric and Public Argument: A Classical Approach,” *Argument and Advocacy* 33 (1997) 113.

⁷⁸ Farrell, “Enthymeme,” 99.

cultural conventions of the host society.”⁸⁰ Enthymematic argumentation functions as an important means of persuasion in this context, since it moves from probable premises to a probable conclusion, regularly “start[ing] with the conclusion (or ‘question’) and . . . searching for an argument to warrant thinking the subject and the predicate terms, or to warrant dissociating them if what one needs is a negative answer.”⁸¹ The issue is not one of “formal logic” or of “formal validity,” nor is it the presence or absence of all three parts of a dialectical syllogism. The issue is argumentation from “signs,” which are considered to be “sure assumptions,” or from “likelihoods,” which are considered to be probable assumptions, rather than from decontextualized philosophical thinking. *Topoi* reside at the base of enthymemes, since *topoi* function persuasively in descriptive and explanatory discourse on the basis of pattern recognition.⁸² The experience of “recognizing the pattern” gives credibility to the *topos*, evoking a conviction that the pattern is “sure” (based on a “sign”) or “probable” (based on a “likelihood”). This credibility unergirds enthymematic argumentation, which moves in an inductive-deductive-abductive manner.⁸³ The reconfiguration of *topoi* in early Christian inductive-deductive reasoning, which is especially grounded in transcultural wisdom discourse, establishes the overall environment of creativity for the new discourse. Abductive reasoning introduces imaginative transcultural leaps that secure substantively new metonymic, metaphoric, emotional, and aesthetic dimensions in early Christian wisdom, miracle, prophetic, suffering-death, apocalyptic, and pre-creation discourse.

⁷⁹ Robbins, “Dialectical Nature.”

⁸⁰ Carolyn R. Miller, “The Aristotelean *Topos*: Hunting for Novelty,” in *Rereading Aristotle’s Rhetoric* (ed. Alan G. Gross & Arthur E. Walzer; Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000) 141-2.

⁸¹ Walter J. Ong, “Introduction” to “A Fuller Course in the Art of Logic (1672),” in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton. Volume VIII: 1666-1682* (ed. Maurice Kelley; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982) 161; cf. David Hellholm, “Enthymematic Argumentation in Paul: The Case of Romans 6,” in *Paul and His Hellenistic Context* (ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 119-79.

⁸² Warnick, “Two Systems,” 110.

⁸³ Richard L. Lanigan, “From Enthymeme to Abduction: The Classical Law of Logic and the Postmodern Rule of Rhetoric,” in *Recovering Pragmatism’s Voice: The Classical Tradition, Rorty, and the Philosophy of Communication* (ed. Lenore Langsdorf and Andrew R. Smith; Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1995) 49-70; cf. Vernon K. Robbins, “Enthymematic Texture in the Gospel of Thomas” (*SBL Seminar Papers, 1998*; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998) 343-66. Online:

<http://www.emory.edu/COLLEGE/RELIGION/faculty/robbins/enthymeme/enthymeme343.html>;

idem, “From Enthymeme to Theology in Luke 11:1-13,” in *Literary Studies in Luke-Acts: A Collection of Essays in Honor of Joseph B. Tyson* (ed. R. P. Thompson and T. E. Phillips. Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1998) 191-214. Online:

<http://www.emory.edu/COLLEGE/RELIGION/faculty/robbins/Theology/theology191.html>.

VI. Conclusion

Throughout Wuellner's publications, one sees a persistent desire to move beyond hermeneutics to rhetorics, the critical theory, and beyond a hermeneutic to rhetoric, the argumentative, persuasive practice. One notices how, in a number of contexts, Wuellner is concerned to say what this rhetorics and rhetoric is "not." A major implication of this focus is that, in his view, early Christian discourse is not Hellenistic moral discourse, even though it uses *topoi* important to the Hellenistic moralists, and it is not rabbinic legal discourse, even though it uses *topoi* important to the formulators of Pharisaic and Tannaitic tradition. In Wuellner's view, early Christian discourse is not restrained by any particular culture of its time, but it functioned powerfully, persuasively, and imaginatively in a manner that is somehow different.

As I have followed Wuellner's arguments and tried to implement them, I have reached the conclusion that he has led us to the transcultural nature of early Christian discourse. I think this is the reason he has, on the one hand, led interpreters into Greco-Roman rhetoric and argumentation, but, on the other hand, worked energetically to find appropriate Jewish genre-categories for NT discourse.⁸⁴ In his view, one must intimately explore Greco-Roman discourse and one must intimately explore Jewish discourse, but early Christian discourse is not one or the other, but it is somehow different from or beyond them.

Once one follows Wuellner's reasoning, argumentation, and exegetical work to the transcultural nature of early Christian discourse, his early work on the *topos* and "Torahinterpretation" becomes even more suggestive for moving ahead.⁸⁵ In that early essay, he was struggling to bring an insight from Greco-Roman rhetoric, namely the concept of *topos*, in the fullest possible way into analysis and interpretation of Jewish discourse. But the purpose was not to shed light on rabbinic tradition *per se*, but on early Christian tradition. Mailloux has observed, as noted above, that transcultural judgments occur "when one culture becomes the conversational topic or interpretive object of the

⁸⁴ E.g., Wilhelm Wuellner, "The Rhetorical Genre of Jesus' Sermon in Luke 12.1-13.9," in *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy* (ed. Duane F. Watson; JSNTSS 50; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991) 112-15.

⁸⁵ Wuellner, "Toposforschung."

other ...”⁸⁶ Interpreters know that both Jewish culture and Greco-Roman (Gentile) culture became conversational topics and interpretive objects within early Christian discourse. In turn, Christians became a conversational topic and interpretive object of both Jews and Gentiles during the first two centuries C.E. Wuellner’s approach to early Christian discourse enacts a similar procedure as Jewish, Greco-Roman, and early Christian discourse become both conversational topics and interpretive objects of his rhetorical approach. In my view, this means that Wuellner has not only, wittingly or unwittingly, led us to the transcultural rhetorical nature of first century Christian discourse; he has himself been articulating a transcultural rhetorical approach to early Christian discourse.

Earlier in this essay, we noted Mailloux’s observation that “... interpretation changes the shape ... of the culture in which the interpretation is produced and received.”⁸⁷ This statement applies not only to early Christian interpretation; it applies to Wilhelm Wuellner’s changing of the culture of NT interpretation during the time of its transition from the 20th to the 21st century. During the 1960s, and among some interpreters still today, the use of Greco-Roman rhetoric to interpret NT texts was considered to be cavalier, since NT texts were considered to be products of Jewish tradition. Wuellner ventured ahead with Greco-Roman rhetoric in this environment of interpretation, since he knew that early Christians were not only immersed in Jewish tradition but were engaging first century Mediterranean society and culture. Yet, Wuellner has never wanted to forsake his awareness of early Christianity as a Jewish movement. Some of us who feel a deep debt of gratitude for his life and work think a major effect of his work has been to lead us to the transcultural nature of early Christian discourse and, in the process, to the challenge to formulate a transcultural rhetorical mode of argumentative/persuasive practice in exegetical interpretation of NT literature.

⁸⁶ Mailloux, “Articulation,” 388.

⁸⁷ Mailloux, “Articulation,” 388.