James Muilenburg, in his 1968 SBL presidential address, suggested that rhetorical criticism offered the hope of pulling biblical interpretation from out beyond the limitations of form criticism. Muilenburg recognized that one of form criticism’s defining features—its ability to situate a text socially on the basis of its literary form—was also one of its most problematic. Like all manner of classification exercises, when form becomes the interpretive key, it by necessity searches for sameness, for that which is held in common. As Muilenburg recognized, this proclivity towards generality comes at the expense of the particular. A text’s unique and most powerful features could potentially become obscured in the search for matching like with like. Muilenburg concluded that a sharper emphasis on a text’s rhetorical features could help move biblical interpretation out from beyond the confines of form criticism.¹

Biblical interpretation tends to travel within well-worn interpretative grooves. No sooner had Muilenburg suggested rhetorical interpretation as a means of refocusing on a text’s distinctive particularities over form-driven generalities, some biblical rhetorical analysis began to settle into a cataloguing of rhetorical forms. Rhetoric by definition, however, is discourse which aims to persuade. It calls on interpreters to seek out how it performs its persuasive task, it is concerned with function rather than form.

Others did take up Muilenburg’s challenge, notably Vernon K. Robbins’ work with socio-rhetorical interpretation. In the 1990s Robbins published two texts—Exploring the Texture of Texts and The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse²—that outlined his vision for a rhetorical approach that he coined socio-rhetorical interpretation, or SRI. As Robbins conceived it, SRI involves viewing texts as rich tapestries, formed by deeply interwoven textures. The interpretative initiative would investigate five constitutive textures: innertexture: where an

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Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation as a *Topos*-Directed Analytic

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The interpreter focuses on a text’s inner lexical, narrational, and thematic patterns and its argumentative structure; intertexture: examining phenomena such as historical events, social and cultural norms, and influences of other literature external to, yet operative within the text; social and cultural texture: situating the text in relation to relevant contemporaneous social and cultural concerns; ideological texture: investigating what particular worldview the text evokes and sacred texture: how texts “address the relation of humans to the divine.” Later Robbins suggested that texts exhibited distinctive clusters of elements located throughout these various textures, and moreover that these elements were often configured argumentatively in a particular manner. These he coined “rhetorolects” from rhetorical dialects.

SRI has attracted a growing field of scholars, a number of whom are currently working on the Rhetoric of Religious antiquity commentary series. As SRI moved from conceived theoretical model to applied analytical tool this particular trajectory of biblical rhetorical interpretation has continued to point toward new directions. One of these has been discovering that, put into practice, SRI leads to investigating texts from a *topos*-directed approach.

*Topos* in the classical and literal sense meant “place,” or more generally, a place or “storehouse” for argument, referring both to conventional subject matters for argument as well as forms of argument such as argument from opposites or contraries. *Topoi* are the DNA of rhetorical discourse: a rhetorical entity is constituted through its topics of concern and the manner by which the author deploys them argumentatively. Viewing SRI as a *topos*-directed analytic implies that a text’s topics of rhetorical concern and how these are configured argumentatively become the principal focus of interpretation. In practical terms when SRI is approached as a *topos*-directed analytic, investigations of a text’s various textures are navigated by the *topoi* that constitute a text’s rhetorical fabric.

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Aristotle, the first to formally explore topoi and their workings also recognized that topoi often require inference in order to complete their argumentative tasks. In particular the enthymeme, which George Kennedy reminds us, “literally means ‘something in the mind’,” calls an audience to draw upon its social and cultural knowledge in order to complete the argument. Aristotle illustrated the enthymeme by noting that it would be sufficient to say “Dorieus has won the Olympic games” for an audience to infer that the athletic Dorieus had also won a crown, since, advises Aristotle, “there is no need to add that the Olympic games have a crown as a prize; for everyone knows that.”15 SRI understands that audience inference is a key operative element of a topos, for a topos draws an audience into the storehouses of its conventional social, cultural, and historical knowledge.

Topoi’s innate ability to trigger elaborative mental connections in an audience has led L. Gregory Bloomquist to define topos in terms of this key effect. According to Bloomquist, “Topoi...can be understood as those landmarks on the mental geography of thought, which themselves evoke a constellation of networks of meanings as a result of social, cultural, or ideological use—and the argumentative embedding of these topoi in the presentation of the argument(s) of the text.”16 Understood as the building blocks of rhetoric, topoi both mark the rhetorical terrain of a text and also dynamically evoke entire networks of related elements in a listening audience. In fact a key attribute of topoi is the manner in which they draw and co-join clusters of elements both on and off the page. If topoi mark a rhetorical landscape and evoke constellations of networks of meaning then locating these topoi involves concurrently searching out their satellite constellations and investigating how they function in developing the rhetoric of a text. Spotting rhetorical forms or figures is but a subset of the broader interpretive venture of identifying topoi and proposing how these function to advance the rhetoric of the text.

A *topos*-directed approach has certain implications which arise from SRI’s original conception as a textural analytic and yet also points to a further shift in the model. This paper suggests that a major implication of approaching SRI as a *topos*-directed analytic is a heightened focus on investigating how a text rhetorically develops its argument, rather than describing its rhetorical features. This sharper focus on rhetorical purpose and function has brought with it ensuing interpretive challenges and I will be discussing three of these today: the first challenge is privileging function over form, the second is understanding the foundational nature of innerertextual analysis, and the third is situating intertextual analysis by the *topoi* and elements unearthed in innerertextual analysis.

Distinguishing between rhetorical form and function can indeed be challenging and the speeches in Acts make for a good case study in the type of interpretative shift that a *topos*-directed approach implies. In any endeavour of rhetorical analysis investigating the rhetoric of a unit of discourse is its self-evident objective. Less evident, however, is the process by which an interpreter initially delimits the boundaries of a rhetorical unit. In outlining how rhetorical analysis might be applied to NT texts George Kennedy had suggested that although a unit’s boundaries are not always self-evident, in the case of speeches found in NT narratives the interpreter’s task is made easy. Where speeches are embedded in narratives, the rhetorical unit would correspond to the boundaries of the pro-typical form of rhetorical oratory—the speech. A rhetorical form—the speech—would self-evidently define the boundaries of the rhetorical unit. But the question needs to be asked: is privileging a rhetorical form embedded within a broader narrative sufficient for identifying the boundaries of a narrative’s rhetorical landscape?

A *topos*-directed analytic would suggest that alternative criteria are required. Taking Stephen’s speech in Acts 7 as an example, the term for wisdom—σοφία—repeats two times in

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7. "A rhetorical unit must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. In some cases the determination of the unit is obvious: a speech attributed to Peter or Paul in Acts is clearly intended as a rhetorical unit.” George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation Through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 33.
the course of the speech (Acts 7:10, 22) and remembering that in SRI any term that repeats warrants a second look, it would be tempting to interpret the role of the term wisdom within the boundaries of the speech. However, a careful eye would notice that σοφία first surfaces in Acts 6:3 as one of the criteria for appointing the seven, from within which Stephen is chosen. σοφία repeats again in Acts 6:10 in describing Stephen’s disputational faculties in the synagogue. The term σοφία, repeats only four times in Acts, twice in reference to Stephen’s capabilities and twice within Stephen’s speech. The four-fold repetition of σοφία suggests that wisdom somehow functions as a topos in relation to Stephen and does so beyond the confines of the speech. From a rhetorical perspective the term “wisdom” seems to be in play and suggests that the rhetorical landscape is formed not by the boundaries of the speech within the narrative but rather by boundaries suggested by the location of key elements or terms. Salient elements and topics constitute the rhetorical structure of a text not the rhetorical forms and figures that support it. Privileging rhetorical function over form involves redefining the constitutive ground of a rhetorical landscape.

The second challenge presented by a topos-directed analytic, related to the first, is permitting intertextual analysis to guide the interpretive process. More particularly, repetitive analysis, the ostensible point of departure for SRI receives, at times, only a cursory treatment in the rush to get to what is nearest and dearest to most interpreters’ hearts: expounding upon the true meaning of a text.

Although SRI is a multi-disciplinary analytic encompassing rhetorical, historical, literary, and socio-scientific criticism as well as cognitive linguistics—possibly suggesting at first glance to some a scatter-shot hodge-podge interpretive free-for-all—it is on the contrary, grounded in a systematic, disciplined investigation of the inner, inter, and ideological textures of a text. Intertextual analysis—the starting point for SRI—begins with the groundwork of repetitive and progressive textural analysis, where an interpreter looks for repeated words, grammatical forms

8. Also κατασοφιζομαι in 7:19.
or patterns of topics and sequences. Repetitive and progressive textural analysis constitutes the foundation for an SRI analysis because repetitions and patterns are the signposts that flag the topics of concern to the discourse.

Repetitive textural analysis surveys a rhetorical unit for initial pointers to its key elements while progressive texture displays linkages between these and other elements as well as sequential patterns that undergird argumentative structures in the discourse. These two textures—repetitive and progressive—help to bring to the interpreter’s eye those elements which the rhetoric privileges as important to its aims. By alerting interpreters to prominent elements in the discourse the inner-textual enterprise relates closely to an aspect of rhetoric that Chaîm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca term “presence.” Presence, to paraphrase The New Rhetoric, is created by the rhetoric’s selection and presentation of certain elements as salient to the discussion.  

Repeated terms tend to mark the development of a rhetorical progression leading an audience to make connections to the previous material. Robbins has described repetitive terms as “stepping stones to other phenomena in the text.”  

Repeated elements generally cluster with other key terms such that progressions develop unfolding the rhetorical argumentation of a text. Ezekiel 28:3–9 demonstrates a casebook example of progressive texture in action. We can watch how the topos of wisdom operates in the passage: In verse 3 the Prince of Tyre is told “you are wiser than Daniel, no secret is hidden from you” (Eze 28:3). This is a good thing, the Prince of Tyre seems to be presented as an exalted ruler, almost omniscient. But then in the following verse, wisdom repeats but draws in new elements, those of gold and silver, which on their own are not necessarily a bad thing, they may just emphasize how blessed and well-endowed the Prince of Tyre is. But when wisdom repeats once more in the next verse it does so by

sequentially joining Tyre’s gold and silver with their source: trade. What begins as a reference to
Daniel’s wisdom—a divine wisdom—in three short verses progresses and transforms into
mercantile wisdom. As the text will make abundantly clear, this can no longer be perceived as a
good thing. Verses 6 through 9 will indict the Prince of Tyre as an imposter, appearing as one
endowed with the wisdom of God but who—by means of an ignoble death—will be revealed in
his true corrupt essence. As Ezekiel 28:15–17 will later emphasize the wisdom of Tyre, once
pure, had devolved through its wealth-generating trade into a corrupted form of wisdom. The
repeated term of wisdom becomes a stepping stone to clusters of new elements dealing with
wealth, trade and ultimately corruption. Progressive or sequential repetition is a component of a
building process that rhetorically moves the audience along. As Quintilian said, ‘Before
proceeding to the next step, one stops on those below.’ Repetition brings key *topoi* into relief,
establishing the presence of important rhetorical markers.

Repetitive textural analysis tends to get short shrift for two reasons: one is the
misconception that lexical recurrences are to yield sameness, and the second is that preconceived
notions as to what the text is about tend to obscure unanticipated patterns of its elements. The
misconception that repetitive analysis yields sameness probably arises because from one
perspective repetitive analysis most certainly does target similarities: an interpreter laboriously
combs through the text spotting repeated words, phrases, synonyms, grammatical forms and
themes. Any element that recurs is “a find” in this treasure hunt for rhetorical signposts. But the
potential insights from this exercise are often left untouched as recurrences are rejected on the
basis of different meanings.

Although intertextual analysis was designed by Robbins as a “pre-interpretation” phase of
analysis that calls for a careful examination of patterns held within the text prior to ascribing
meaning or intent to these, most interpreters find digging into a text and looking at patterns for
the sole objective of spotting patterns well nigh impossible. As a result if a term recurs in the text

but “means something different” it is rejected as a candidate for repetition. I’m willing to wager that at least one person, when hearing me speak about the repetitions of σοφία in Acts 6 and 7 immediately thought, “wait a minute, when σοφία refers to the wisdom of God it is not the same as when it refers to the type of wisdom Moses attained during his Egyptian upbringing, granted the lexica are the same but the meaning is different, you can’t call that repetition.” Well, yes, actually you can, and to really begin to understand a text rhetorically one needs to. As pointed out in *The New Rhetoric*, repetition, in contrast to reiterating sameness, “really aim[s] at suggesting distinctions.”

Take the term ἄδελφος for example, the first twenty-three times it occurs in the Gospel of Luke it refers to a familial relationship, the twenty-fourth and final time it occurs in Luke 22:32 it refers to the disciples. Undeniably this shift from familial to communal is deliberate. The way that a recurring term like ἄδελφος takes on a different meaning is a good example of rhetorical movement in action. Rhetoric is often at its most powerful when it takes a common meaning of a term and replaces it with something else. At the pre-meaning phase of analysis recurring terms remain recurring terms without judgment or classification, they just need to be noted and catalogued for further investigation.

The possibility of prematurely pre-selecting rhetorical constituents, while overlooking other potentially significant ones is reduced by a full repetitive analysis. This “pre-interpretation” phase of analysis calls an interpreter to forestall the pull of interpretation and instead look carefully at repetitive words, structures and patterns that are prominently displayed by the text itself before moving on to ascribing meaning and intent.

A third challenge of SRI as a *topos*-directed analytic is situating intertextual analysis within the findings of innertextual analysis of the text and, as a result, connecting the text with its appropriate resource pool of elements. Intertextual analysis investigates historical, social, cultural, political, economic, and literary influences on a text. In as much as innertextual

analysis is focused on words, patterns and argumentative structures located in the text, intertexture broadens the outlook to the world that houses the text. And here lies the crux of the challenge: a text’s world is a vastly broad world indeed. An interpreter can begin casting about that world and quickly sink into a quagmire of fascinating, yet not particularly rhetorically relevant, pieces of information about the first-century Mediterranean environment of antiquity. SRI however, is by its very nature a rhetorical analysis where the role of intertextual analysis is to illuminate the rhetorical function of certain elements that might be obscured by historical and/or socio-cultural differences. Intertextual analysis needs to remain rooted in a text’s argumentative and rhetorical development.

Jennifer Glancy’s analysis of 2 Corinthians 11:21–12:10—the section of Paul’s letter containing boasts of his hardships, weaknesses and beatings—makes for an excellent illustration of an argumentatively grounded intertextual investigation. Glancy notes that many scholars have recognized that Paul’s boasting follows rhetorical protocols of self-praise. The rhetorical form—self-commendation—found in rhetorical practice and theory can be matched to Paul’s own boast-unit. However, as Glancy astutely observes, although the form of Paul’s boasting is consistent with other examples of self-commendation in classical literature, the content of his boasting, particularly the list of hardships endured, contains dissonant elements, especially the beatings received. Glancy writes that while numerous scholars have adduced “the Greco-Roman rhetorical practice of acknowledging hardships, often as demonstrations of virile fortitude. Few scholars distinguish among the hardships listed in 11:23–33, so that survival of a shipwreck appears to be as dishonorable—or honorable—as endurance of lash and rod.”

As Glancy’s careful investigations of the social and cultural understanding of public beatings demonstrate, a war wound was not culturally synonymous with a whipping wound. For, the two were sharply distinguished by the honour conferred through one and the abject dishonour

by the other. As succinctly put by Glancy, “dishonourable bodies were whippable, honourable bodies were not.” While balancing one’s boasts with a self-deprecating weakness was indeed consistent with rhetorical practice, admitting to being dishonoured and shamed was most definitely not. Yet Paul does boast—repeatedly—of beatings and imprisonments. The beatings are integral to the rhetorical argumentation of the text and in order to unleash the rhetoric, as it were, the salient social and cultural intertextual characteristics of beatings need to be connected to the argumentative structure of the text. In fact, intertextual analysis would have already observed the repeated element of beatings (πληγή, 6:3, 11:23, 25; lashes 11:24) and imprisonments (6:5, 11:23), and with respect to these would have spotlighted a key word in verse 12:10—hubris.

Alerted by recurring terms dealing with punishment and imprisonment, intertextual analysis is called to investigate where these rhetorical signposts might lead. While hubris might more abstractly suggest a concept such as arrogance, suitable to the characterization of the Prince of Tyre in Ezekiel for example, when co-joined with elements of punishment and imprisonment hubris inferred man-over-man dominance and humiliation. Much as honourable war wounds were not the same as dishonourable lashing wounds, physical assault as a general category was distinguishable from an act of hubris. Hubris implied that the maltreatment of a body was motivated by a desire to establish dominance over that body in the public eye.15 Publicly humiliating the victim was its objective and the resulting shamed status is a far cry from the sort of masculine virility proclaimed by typical hardship lists. It would be the task of ideological texture to deal with the rhetorical function of placing elements of shame, dishonour and humiliation within a rhetoric of boasting, but the job of intertextual analysis would be to unearth social and cultural elements such as these which are integral to the argumentation of the text. Intertextual analysis and a text’s argumentative structure help an interpreter sift through the vast array of social, cultural and historical intertextual elements that formed the first-century

Mediterranean environment and hone in on elements salient to the text’s argumentative development while discarding interesting but rhetorically irrelevant details.

For a number of years I’ve viewed SRI through the metaphor of the “magic eye” and was pleased when Prof. Klyne Snodgrass also drew on this metaphor in his remarks on SRI at the 2010 SBL. A Magic Eye image, or more technically, stereogram, contains a three-dimensional image embedded within the surface of a two-dimensional picture. One may see, for example, a two-dimensional picture of butterflies, but, gazed upon for long enough, the surface graphics yield to a full-bodied three-dimensional image of a star. A maddening exercise to some, the embedded three-dimensional image can only come into view if one looks beyond the picture’s surface-level visual distractions. In similar manner SRI calls interpreters to look beyond surface-level forms in order to investigate the fuller-bodied rhetorical make-up of a text. Repetitive textural analysis, located in the pre-meaning phase of analysis, calls an interpreter to surrender her or his pre-formed notions and look to the full array of elements shaping the rhetorical terrain. Bound by the innertextual structure of a text, intertextual analysis fleshes out the historical, cultural and social body evoked by a text’s topoi. Approach as a topos-directed analytic SRI moves beyond form, beyond themes, beyond generalities, and pulls into a view a text’s unique distinctive rhetorical configuration.


