Tropics of Arrangement: A Theory of Dispositio

FRANK J. D'ANGELO

In his bibliographical essay "Structure and Form in Non-Narrative Prose," Richard Larson complains that "although there is a large body of literature about invention, . . . structure and form in non-narrative prose beyond the sentence have only recently become the subject of serious, many-sided theoretical investigation" (39). Larson goes on to say that "most discussions of form that are available to teachers of writing . . . are enumerations of plans and stock formulas from which writers can choose" (53).

Like Larson, I believe that many of our traditional methods of talking about form in composition, rather than describing the relationships that obtain among the parts of discourse, merely name the parts. To say, for example, that a text has a beginning, a middle, and an end; a thesis followed by supporting details; or an exordium, narratio, propositio, confirmatio, refutatio, and peroratio is not to describe structure, but to name parts. In this paper, therefore, I would like to propose a theoretical model of organizing texts that uses four "master" tropes as a conceptual framework to represent the processes of selecting, ordering, and placing words, ideas, and images into a text—for troping across the text.

To some teachers of writing, a tropical approach to organizing texts may seem a fanciful approach to form and structure in nonfictional prose, since figurative language has been traditionally associated with form and structure in imaginative literature. But as Jonathan Culler and other literary theorists have pointed out, rhetorical figures can "provide models that are applicable to discursive formations of all sorts. That is to say, rhetorical figures can be used to describe not just particular deviations from literal meaning, but also basic strategies for producing meaning by establishing connections and associations" (21).

The Centrality of Tropes

During the past ten years or so, a great many disciplines, including rhetoric, philosophy, history, ethnography, and literary theory, have recognized the great explanatory power of tropes. Classical rhetoricians have classified and defined a large number of these tropes, four of which—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony—have been considered the most impor-
Kenneth Burke, in *A Grammar of Motives*, has labeled these tropes the “master tropes” (503-17).

The master tropes have a long and interesting history. Aristotle discusses three of them—metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche—in the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*. In their treatises on elocutio, the Ramists separated metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony from the other figures for special attention. In the eighteenth century, Giambattista Vico, in developing a cyclical theory of history, used these four tropes to represent the stages through which all societies must pass from primitivism to high civilization. In his lecture notes on rhetoric, Friedrich Nietzsche privileged metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche as he moved the study of rhetoric from persuasion to figurative language. Finally Hayden White, in developing a hermeneutics of history, has proposed that the four master tropes underlie and inform every historical text where they serve as “the deep structure” of historical consciousness.

The idea that tropes are not merely rhetorical strategies that transfer meaning from one word to another but strategies that transfer meaning across a text is not new. In classical rhetoric, for example, allegory is not only a trope; it is an extended metaphor, a generic form that operates through a comparison, as the following example illustrates: “For when dogs act the part of wolves, to what guardian pray, are we going to entrust our herds of cattle?” (*Rhetorica ad Herennium* IV, xxiv, 46). The fable, too, is both a trope and a generic form, a kind of naive allegory that relies on personification to give human qualities to animals. Aristotle refers to the fable in the *Rhetoric* as one kind of inductive proof, as a *parabole* or comparison that illustrates the point at issue by comparing and applying cases. And is there not more than a hint of tropological movement across the text in Aristotle’s discussion of the rhetorical enthymeme in the *Rhetoric* and the importance of plot in the *Poetics*? Is not the movement from the major premise to the minor premise to the conclusion in the syllogism a tropological move from genus to species or from whole to part?

In his discussion of metaphor in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle maintains that the tropological movement from the known to the unknown in metaphor is similar to the logical movement from the known to the unknown in the enthymeme. Both the metaphor and the enthymeme predicate one thing in terms of another. Both connect one thing to another by means of a middle term (*Rhetoric* III, ii, 9-14). In fact, so close is the connection between trope and enthymeme and trope and plot that J. Hillis Miller has been led to conclude “that there is no conceptual expression without figure, and no intertwining of concept and figure without an implied story, narrative, or myth” (443).

In his discussion of plot in the *Poetics*, Aristotle suggests that the movement in the plot from incident to incident, from the initial involvement to the subsequent unraveling, is a tropological move from genus to species and from part to whole, similar in some respects to the tropological move
from genus to species and from part to whole in the enthymeme. In other words, there seems to be a close connection between plot and enthymeme, with tropes mediating between the two. Aristotle makes an explicit connection between plot and enthymeme in his discussion of the kinds of recognition related to plot. To illustrate the fourth kind of recognition, recognition by inference, Aristotle gives an example in enthymemic form: "Someone like me has come, there is no one like me except Orestes, therefore Orestes has come" (On Poetry and Style XVI, 33). This example suggests the following analogies: story is to essay as plot is to enthymeme and as trope is to topos.

Mythos and logos, story and essay—all texts use tropes. In composition studies, however, we seem to have embraced the plain style and the logical organization of ideas as ideals. But writers who advocate a plain style or a logical organization of ideas depend as much on tropes and topoi as do writers who advocate other styles and modes of organizing texts. In so-called nonfictional or logical discourse, the figures are displaced into the interior of the text. On the surface of the text, the patterns appear to be literal and abstract. In fictional discourse, however, the figures are foregrounded on the surface of the text where their figurality seems to call attention to itself. But as Paul de Man and other critics have pointed out, nonfictional discourse is no less tropological or allegorical than literary discourse. This is apparently why Paul de Man has titled one of his books Allegories of Reading. If the basic structure of language is figurative, then not only does imaginative literature rely on figurative language, but so does criticism (one form of nonfiction) itself. Therefore, critical writing, since it is a figure of another figure, is allegory. In fact, so pervasive has this idea become in poststructuralist theory that allegory has taken on the signification of trope of tropes, the master trope that stands for tropology in general (Van Dyke 27-29).

It is easy enough to give examples of troping across the text from literary theory and practice. For example, Roman Jakobson's claim that the development of a discourse takes place essentially through similarity (metaphor) or contiguity (synecdoche) is one approach to tropological structure that literary critics have used to describe the organization of literary texts. In his essay, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," Jakobson maintains that metaphoric constructions dominate in lyric poetry, whereas metonymic constructions predominate in epic poetry. Metaphoric constructions characterize the romantic novel, and metonymic structures dominate the realistic novel (91-92). In The Modes of Modern Writing, David Lodge explores the distinction between the metaphoric and metonymic poles in the twentieth-century English novel. For example, Lodge describes the opening of E.M. Forster's A Passage to India as metonymic in structure, connecting topics on the basis of contiguity, not similarity" (98-99). In contrast, he describes the opening of Dickens' Bleak House as metaphorical writing, with the images and figures of the mud and the fog taking on symbolic significance (100).
In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye makes a direct connection between trope and genre in the first essay on the theory of modes. In this essay, Frye characterizes types of fiction “by the hero’s power of action” (33). This results in five modes: myth, romance, high mimetic, low mimetic, and ironic. Each of these modes is dominated by a particular trope. Myth, for example, “is an art of implicit metaphorical identity” (136). When myth is displaced into romance, however, its metaphorical structure is replaced “by some form of simile, analogy, significant association, incidental accompanying imagery, and the like” (137). Frye does not make connections between trope and genre for all modes, but we can envision a sequence of tropological structures for each of the modes ranging from metaphor, to simile, to metonymy, to synecdoche, to irony.

**Tropes in Nonliterary Texts**

I have said that it is easy to give examples of troping across the text from literary theory and practice. However, it is not as easy to give examples from composition theory and practice because in composition studies we have unconsciously set up binary oppositions between plain language and ornamental language, between literature and nonliterature, between literary discourse and figurative discourse, between literary discourse and composition. If we deconstruct these oppositions, however, we find that the four master tropes are not only basic strategies for producing meaning and making connections and associations across literary texts, but are also basic strategies for organizing all kinds of texts. In this respect, the tropes can function much like the classical topoi.

The work of Hayden White offers interesting possibilities for making the transition from literary to nonliterary texts in developing a tropological theory of arrangement. In such books as *Metahistory* and *Tropics of Discourse*, White uses the Vichian scheme of the four master tropes to describe the rhetorical operations that can occur at various organization levels in a historical text. In his theoretical studies, White’s aim is to deconstruct objectivist approaches to history. Historians tell their students to go out and find the facts and then “write them up,” he complains. But there are no facts out there to be written up. The past is not “given”; it is “constituted” by the historian. In the writing of history, there is interpretation from the very beginning. What the historian actually does, White maintains, is to take a chronicle of events and “turn it into history” by emplotting it as a story of a certain kind. To do this, historians make use of four kinds of pregeneric plot structures that Northrop Frye identifies in *Anatomy of Criticism* as romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire. When readers following a story perceive it to be a story of a certain kind, they experience the effect of having the story explained to them.

But before the historian emplots these events as a story of a certain kind, he or she must “prefigure” them and “constitute” them as an object of
thought. This is done by means of the four master tropes. These tropes constitute the "latent" or "deep structure" of the text. Like the topoi of classical rhetoric and the methods of development of composition theory, the tropes describe "relationships" among events in the world of experience. They also describe textual relationships. As the historian seeks to understand the relationships that obtain between parts and parts, and parts and wholes, in the historical field, he or she must necessarily use tropes because tropes represent the power of the imagination to grasp the world figuratively. The tropes lead to modes of emplotment and to other strategies of interpretation. Each trope corresponds to a particular mode of emplotment, so that the dominant trope in a historical romance would be metaphorical identification, metonymic displacement in tragedy, synecdochic integration in comedy, and ironic detachment and reflexivity in satire. But tropes do not only constitute the deep structure of literary and historical texts; they also constitute the figural and organizational structure of all discourse.

Following Hayden White's suggestion for dividing historical texts into dominant tropological modes, we can divide nonfictional texts into metaphoric, metonymic, synecdochic, and ironic modes. This kind of division suggests that just as it is possible to organize a nonfictional essay using a particular method of development (for example, comparison/contrast, division into parts, cause and effect), it may also be possible to organize an essay using a dominant tropological mode (for instance, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony).

For example, if a writer sets out to write an essay and stresses the similarities that bind the elements of experience together, he or she would be working in the metaphoric mode. If a writer moves from one element of experience to another, that is, from part to part, he or she would be working in the metonymic mode. If a writer tries to make sense of experience by trying to understand the nature of the parts and the whole that make it up, he or she would be working in the synecdochic mode. Finally, if a writer takes a reflective stance toward experience or toward the other tropological views of experience, he or she would be working in the ironic mode. In brief, to organize a text tropologically, a writer would move from a metaphorical identification of units of experience, to their metonymic displacement, to a synecdochic representation of their part/whole or genus/species relations, to an ironic awareness of the disparity between what is stated and what is intended.

**Tropic Ratios**

These, then, are the basic strategies for organizing texts using the four master tropes. If we next inquire into the internal relationships that exist between and among the tropes, following Kenneth Burke's dramatistic conception of "ratios" as formulas that can account for the relationships among the terms of the Pentad, we can work out "ratios" between and among
Burke's theory of dramatism was intended as a method for analyzing human motives: "What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?" (Grammar xv). It is based on the metaphor of the drama which emphasizes human behavior as "action." In order to apply his dramatistic theory to the analysis of motives, Burke worked out a system of procedures based on five terms: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. As applied to discourse analysis, these five terms can be used to investigate and to understand any human action: (act) what was done, (scene) where and when it was done, (agent) who did it, (agency) by what means, and (purpose) why (Grammar xv). But any one term can also be considered from the standpoint of others, producing what Burke has called "ratios," such as act-scene, act-agent, act-agency, and act-purpose, and so forth. A ratio, according to Burke, is "a formula indicating a transition from one term to another," an analogical method of combining and using the terms of the Pentad (262).

If we apply Burke's theory of ratios to the four master tropes, we can describe a text as being organized in a metaphoric-metonymic mode, a metaphoric-synecdochic mode, a metaphoric-ironic mode, continuing the process until we consider every term from the standpoint of the others. The result would be the following tropological ratios: metaphor-metonymy, metaphor-synecdoche, metaphor-irony, metonymy-synecdoche, metonymy-irony, and synecdoche-irony.

Further, we can subdivide each master trope into related categories, so that a discourse organized in a metaphoric mode might also include personification, simile, allusion, the pun, ellipsis, parallelism, schemes of repetition including anaphora and epistrophe, and schemes of sound devices including the homophone, alliteration, assonance, and consonance. Similarly, a discourse organized in a metonymic mode might include figures such as anthimeria, metalepsis, prolepsis, traductio, polyptoton, epithet, and euphemism. A discourse organized in a synecdochic mode might include figures such as inductio, partitio, enumeratio, merismus, enthymemus, and syllogismus. Finally, a discourse organized in an ironic mode might include oppositional figures such as antithesis, antimetabole, zeugma, paradox, irony, oryromoron, litotes, and hyperbole. In sum, we can conceptualize the organizational patterns in nonfictional discourse by identifying the tropological operations that govern their structure.

Practical Applications

Thus far, I have been operating at a fairly high level of abstraction. In the remainder of this essay, I want to be more specific about possible practical applications of tropical operations to nonfictional discourse. During the past year, I have been teaching a course in nonfiction, using essays by Annie
Dillard, Richard Selzer, Lewis Thomas, Loren Eiseley, and other writers. The informal essay has been characterized as intimate, conversational, reflective, aphoristic, loosely structured, digressive, incomplete, and tentative. In contrast, the formal essay has been described as being relatively impersonal, propositional, logical, tightly structured, and complete. The global structure of these two kinds of essays is apparently very different. But whatever the surface differences, I would surmise that the deep or latent structure is tropological rather than logical, relying more on the texture of style than on macrostructural principles of organization.

To illustrate the differences between the global patterns of these two kinds of essays and their relationship in underlying tropological structures, consider Annie Dillard's essay "Seeing," taken from her book Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. This essay has a global organizational pattern that might be described as follows. It begins with the general subject: "I've been thinking about seeing." It has no explicit thesis sentence, as in a formal essay, but it does have an implicit controlling idea: "ways of seeing." This idea pervades the essay as a whole, embedded in the texture of style. The body of the essay contains several anecdotes about seeing, which lead to a series of questions about different ways of seeing and knowing. The essay then concludes with a few provisional answers.

Although Dillard's essay has a loosely structured organizational plan, it could easily be put into a more logical, tightly structured pattern in the manner of a formal essay by using a simple enumeration pattern. The resultant pattern might be described as follows. The essay begins with an analytical thesis sentence ("There are two ways of seeing: the analytical and the intuitive") which helps to organize the essay as a whole. The first part of the body of the essay deals with the analytical way of seeing. The second part deals with the intuitive. Each way of seeing is supported by anecdotes from personal experience and by analogies. For example, the analytical way of seeing is like walking with a camera. The intuitive is not. The analytical way of seeing depends on verbalization. The intuitive depends of "gagging the senses." The essay concludes with provisional questions and answers relating seeing to knowing.

What I want to convey by this analysis and restructuring of Dillard's essay is that despite superficial differences in the global organization of these two versions of the essay, the most important principle of form and structure is neither the paralogical nor the logical, but the tropological. This essay "bristles" with what Kenneth Burke, in his discussion of form in Counter-Statement, calls minor or incidental forms: metaphor, simile, allusions, quotations, rhetorical questions, and so forth (27). From the tropological point of view, Dillard's essay is a matrix of metaphors, similes, allusions, and images that convey the idea that seeing is a gift, a total surprise. But the dominant idea is built up incrementally, as one figure leads to another. In
brief, the elements of style in this text can be discussed as formal events in themselves, or as functional parts of a greater whole.

If the study of form and arrangement in nonfictional prose is to move beyond the superficial description of patterns of arrangement and the naming of parts, then we will need approaches to text construction and analysis that will not only be able to describe the logical relations that exist among the parts of discourse, but also the tropological relationships, including the basic rhetorical strategies for selecting, arranging, and apportioning the parts. A rhetoric of tropes can provide such a model.

Arizona State University
Tempe, Arizona

Works Cited


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