

**RESEMBLE ASSEMBLE REPLY; OR, THE USE OF MISFIT TROPES IN STUDENT  
WRITING**

by

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# **RESEMBLE ASSEMBLE REPLY; OR, THE USE OF MISFIT TROPES IN STUDENT WRITING**

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University of Pittsburgh, 2018

This dissertation examines rhetorical troping, specifically how students use the misfit tropes of metalepsis, catachresis, and enstrangement as lines of argument. I borrow the definition of “troping” from Richard Poirier, who argued that it evinced “the human involvement in the shaping of language, and it prevents language from imposing itself upon us with the force and indifference of a Technology.” I ask: How and why does a writer work through the complexities of invention processes, arguments, or conclusions with tropes that have been historically considered misfit or difficult? Methodologically, I read student writing in the light of Reuben Brower’s idea of “slow reading” and the frame of ordinary language as developed by philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell. The tropes I consider disrupt typical academic patterns and allow space to trope off the commonplace or cliché. Troping also works as a heuristic to work through writing problems or find compelling ways to move through classical topics. My aim is not for the student work to elucidate the tropes, but the tropes to help elucidate the student work. I demonstrate that writing pedagogy needs to return to a conscious use of rhetorical tropes and how students can trope on academic and ordinary language, fulfilling their argumentative needs, and how troping is effective and necessary for conceptual clarity.

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## 0.0 INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS TROPING, AND (IF YOU KNOW WHAT IT IS) WHY DO WE DO IT?

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

“The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for our past act or word, because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loath to disappoint them. But why should you keep your head over your shoulder? Why drag about this corpse of your memory, lest you contradict yourself; what then? It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past for judgment into the thousand-eyed present, and live ever in a new day.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance”

Quintilian was no friend of metalepsis. The ancient rhetorician dismissed metalepsis (a metonymy of a metonymy), claiming it is “by no means to be commended” and that “[i]t is a *trope* with which to claim acquaintance, rather than one which we are ever likely to require to use” (8.6.38). It was only seen fit for comedic writing, at best. Catachresis (when an inappropriate word is used for something which has no name) was also seen as abuse or unfit and (in Latin) is known as *abusio*. But why? Why were these particular tropes so outcast?

In this dissertation, I offer an examination of troping in student writing through a complex of three unusual rhetorical tropes (two classical, one not): metalepsis, catachresis, and

enstrangement. The tropes are unusual because they're considered abusive to, and unfit for, proper language. These tropes pushed the boundaries of language to the point of losing sense, losing the point of the author, or losing the attention of the audience. And I will be referring to these tropes as misfit, inspired by my reading of I.A. Richards's *Practical Criticism* and the chapter on readers' stock responses to poetry.

A stock response, like a stock line in shoes or hats, may be a convenience. Being ready-made, it is available with less trouble than if it had to be specially made out of raw or partially prepared materials. And unless an awkward misfit is going to occur, we may agree that stock responses are much better than no responses at all. Indeed, an extensive repertory of stock responses is a necessity. (228)

I do not agree with Richards. Stock responses (whether mine or the students') aren't better than nothing. But what's most compelling here is *the misfit*. I want to know more about it and what it is and how to make it reoccur. I think the misfit response is a potential act of troping, a productive artifact in the grey mash of stock responses.

But before I get there, I will have to stop and ask: "What is troping?" Throughout this dissertation the words "trope" and "troping" are explicitly drawn from Richard Poirier's explanation of the word/action as he finds it manifesting in Ralph Waldo Emerson's work and elaborated upon by William James, as described in *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (1988) and *Poetry & Pragmatism* (1992). In these books, Poirier explains, "Troping is the turning of a word in directions or detours it seemed destined otherwise to avoid" (*Renewal* 131). Troping is a strong handling of language and "gives evidences of the human involvement in the shaping of language, and it prevents language from imposing itself upon us with the force and indifference of a Technology. It frees us from the predetermined meanings" (131). Turning

language in the way of puns, inventive metaphor, or the shifting of a word's meaning—these all fall into the realm of troping (33).

Poirier focused on troping as a positive, generative act in writing, because it can loosen “the predetermined meanings,” the implication being that predetermined meanings are, if not outright pernicious obstructions, then at least speed bumps to comprehension or action. Predetermined meanings, like preconceived ideas, are detritus in the activity of writing, seemingly proving themselves as sources of invention, when instead they are constantly becoming familiar sinkholes of thought. His comparison of language to an imposing “Technology” plays up the clichéd imagery of automation and rigidity settling into, or controlling through, our speech and writing. And while much has radically changed with Technology in the intervening thirty years since his book was published, I still find it appropriate to keep Poirier's terms and extend their original intentions. Even if Technology is more intelligent and adaptive today, it still has a force; and it was this force—this unwanted force, benign or no—that Poirier and I are concerned with.

Poirier does discuss troping mostly as a part of what he terms “Literature,” capital-L. But while troping *does* happen in literature and elsewhere, I don't think troping is so specialized or aristocratic as to only happen there. Poirier doesn't discuss student writing or freshman composition, but I think troping is democratic and found anywhere language is.

Troping itself has been mentioned but barely and off-handedly among composition and literature articles for decades; it's never been zeroed in on as a central idea. Not the way Poirier discusses it, anyway. The online database CompPile is helpful here. “Troping” brings back 3 results, none of which focus on student writing or writing instruction in general. “Trope” brings back 179 results, but the majority of these discuss tropes as recurrent themes. A parallel search

through JSTOR finds articles like Phillip K. Arrington's 1986 *College English* article "Tropes of the Composing Process," which discusses the definitions of tropes from Edward P.J. Corbett to Giambattista Vico. What's most found in articles that choose tropes as a subject is what they are or how they're found, how they move through discourse. The articles don't discuss *how students trope*. I wonder if that's because troping is seen as above students' abilities. I'm not sure. I don't believe troping has been emphasized because of what Poirier claims about Emerson's view of language, that it's "impos[ing]" and "something which human power could only sporadically resist" (33).

The only remedy [for Emerson] was to be found *in* language itself, by continuous acts of troping, syntactical shiftings, rhetorical fracturings of the direction set down by the grammar of a sentence. Even these, however, can turn into habits of conformity. (33)

Troping is a shared action, one available to all, one that should occur cyclically and on a consistent basis. It's also an action that can reach staleness just by its own enactment. In this sense, troping isn't a salvation; it's not even an answer. It's the creation of a fund of possibilities for language from the refurbishment of the language currently passed around. Poirier elaborates that troping is "in itself an act of power over meanings already in place; it distorts 'verbal solutions'" (17). In an essay on Poirier, David Bartholomae sharpens Poirier's argument:

His is not a trickle-down theory. Nor is it a form of the New Criticism. He argues for a very specific and determined form of work, with certain kinds of texts and with very local rewards or consequences. His attention is to the sentence and to style—and these were not the usual points of reference when first-year writing courses were built around a standard set of literary texts. ("Teacher" 34-35)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See my reference to this and "slow reading" below.

Bartholomae's focus is on Poirier's "very local rewards or consequences." I like very much that phrasing. The stakes are realistic. Once again, troping and sentence-work isn't salvation, it is, as we'll see, merely salutary. A composition teacher struggles with student placement, authority, and approval in the teaching of first-year writers. College writers want good grades for patterned writing. As Poirier argues in *Poetry & Pragmatism*,

when you [in this case, a student] put yourself into words on any given occasion you are in fact not expressing yourself. In choosing to be understood, you are to some extent speaking in conformity to usages and in harmony with assumptions shared by your auditors. At best, then, you are expressing only some part of yourself. (67)

Poirier locates where student writing *already* forms itself. Students are already in a shifting pattern from high school to the university and they try to shed the ownership of language instead of harboring it and cultivating the turning of words.

Furthermore, Poirier writes that Emerson's pragmatism—which includes troping—means skirting around solid and steadfast meanings. He lists terms that Emerson eluded nailing down: "action," "turning," "nature," and "privacy," among others. He goes on to claim that "[w]hile some delimited understanding of these [terms] is necessarily assumed as a starting point, the dictionary will be of little help in determining how they function...they are constantly troped within sentences that insist that readers, too, must involve themselves in the salutary activity of troping" (129). Why salutary and not a solution? Because verbal solutions are conventions. They are staid. They overpromise and underdeliver. They are the student's misrecognizing an utterance for a justification, or worse yet, sheer enthusiasm for justification. The salutary aspect is the therapeutic aspect. The one that is "healthful," so to speak. We would tend to think that solutions are positive, but too often solutions in language are what's readily

available and not what's forged through consideration. If just the act of troping is what matters, it's because there should be a way for students to resist the conformity of language, a way for them to use language before it finds a way to use them.

In *The Plural I*, William E. Coles's narrative study/account of a composition course and students' responses to their own writing, Coles humorously pins down the obstacles that he, and all of us as writing teachers, may confront on some level: a paucity of rhetorical know-how within student writing, specifically metaphoricity. "Again I was facing a set of papers most of which were only *one sentence deep*. Again the problem, though I wasn't about to talk this way in class, was one that involved an inadequate understanding of language as metaphor" (87, emphasis added). I've received and read papers one sentence deep. This either means the paper possesses only one sentence keeping it alive or that there's just one sentence that the paper keeps trying to revive to no end. Coles's diagnosis of a lack of the metaphoric structure of language can be treated with rhetorical troping.

Applying this form of troping to the classroom, I want to re-consider what David Fleming argued for in an article for *College English* in 1998: the need for more undergraduate "rhetorical education" and not just "rhetorical theory," despite the upswing and interest in rhetoric generally as a field of study (169). Fleming, in discussing a certain kind of rhetorical education—a first-year composition course, really—finds that it promises very little: "It is a rhetoric doomed to educational marginalization" (172). A contemporary "rhetorical education" would then need to take shape as a "*practice* in speaking and writing well, that reaching after discursive excellence, undertaken by the student, guided by the teacher, and manifest in the gradual acquisition of rhetorical competence and sensibility" (181). I agree with Fleming, but I want to push it a bit further. In a 2003 issue of *Enculturation* entitled "Rhetoric/Composition:

Intersections/Impasses/Differends.” Michael Holzman defines the ways the word “write” can be understood, one of which is “writing error free sentences,” and ends up assessing what it means to write within that framework:

Studying good writing, that epitome of education, and teaching students to write well (the product and sign of education), lead to the study of education, of culture—high, popular and commercial—and the study of the displacement of both high and popular culture by a commercial culture with hegemonic ambitions. (n.p.)

It turns out that Holzman’s view of rhetoric runs somewhat parallel to Fleming’s (thus they share some starting points), but Holzman’s comment above points to how certain rhetorical methods or functions can still set in motion frameworks that dictate outcomes despite a writer’s intentions. Indeed, Jeanne Fahnestock writes that tropes are “the formal embodiments of certain ideational or persuasive functions” (23).

In the same issue, Victor J. Vitanza’s “Abandoned to Writing: Notes Toward Several Provocations” inhabits the veering and error-embracing style he’s known for and takes Holzman’s concerns to the breaking point, exclaiming that “It is simply *not safe* for students to write ‘in’ or ‘at’ the university. Any university. What is taught at the university is not-writing” (n.p.). For him, how writing gets “taught” or “learned” isn’t of “interest.” Vitanza sees at least two kinds of writing. Writing done in universities...and writing done somewhere else.

Obviously what goes for writing in the academy *can be taught!* That’s the problem! It is necessary to dis/engage by *wayves* of *abusio*. *Catachresis*. Rather, I prefer not to write, except at the outside, or at the threshold, of ‘writing’ in terms of a third *aplace*, *atopos*. (n.p.)

I think Vitanza is advocating for certain *methods*—methods for creating alternatives to rhetorical commonplaces. By “commonplace” I mean seemingly easy reference to received wisdom as defined by Bartholomae (*Writing* 138). The three aforementioned tropes at the beginning of this introduction each harbor a wide theoretical outlook with regard to writing. The tropes aren’t merely misfit, abusive, or good for comedic writing. Indeed, they may open up opportunities for creating the opposite of commonplaces—as Vitanza mentions above, “third places,” or, if you like, what I’ll call oddplaces. This creation of oddplaces can be broached often by the sheer grammar (i.e. the order of operations) of the trope. For example, tropes like catachresis or metalepsis, the compounding of multiple tropes, a metonymy of a metonymy.

I will question the kind of leads set up by Poirier, Bartholomae, Coles, Fleming, Holzman, Vitanza, and others, but also ask: “How can working ‘erroneously’ within language with misfit and mis-fitting tropes be as much of an inventional strength as following proper usage?” That is, why seek out misfit tropes in student writing?

My aim is two-sided. First: I want to reclaim certain tropes from their ancient haunts to investigate writing in the classroom. Despite certain efforts, like Harold Bloom’s repositioning of metalepsis as a poetic revisionary ratio (dubbed *apophrades*) in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), the capability of misfit tropes still lie in wait to work within and alongside student writing. Gestures like Bloom’s are geared toward describing how “strong poets” operate, not how freshmen composition writers can mobilize tropes for idea generation and not merely idea management. Second: A concern in composition has been the appearance (or plague) of the commonplace in student writing (I.A. Richards would call it “the stock response.”) That is, in order to slip from the established writing, student writers may trope away from the commonplace and into an oddplace.

## 0.1 HEURISTICS IN STUDENT WRITING

Before analyzing student writing, it's important to note that in the examples I've chosen, the writers are trying to handle what I recognize as "a writing problem." I was pleasantly surprised by this pattern because it echoes with work already done in composition scholarship on the solving of writing problems. Namely, I'm drawing from Shelley Reid's (2010) suggestion of reorienting the field of composition in order to see teachers as people who solve writing problems. If writing teachers help solve writing problems, then the assumption is that students are making them. It also means that they don't know they exist—or rather, they're not knowing *how* they exist. I would contend that, while Reid's re-framing of composition pedagogy is compelling, students are already using an available rhetoric to work out compromises in the writing. These rhetorical attempts don't absolve the writing teacher. On the contrary, they make our role more vital to the acknowledgement, identification, and elaboration of the attempts at revision or in future work.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that James Slevin has written that, as he sees composition "as a category of thought" it is, for him, "a response to a difficulty of writing" (13). "Difficulty" is his watchword, not "problem." For Slevin, a "problem" seems to indicate "absence," and that if we see student writing as dealing with problems or problems in themselves, we are not understanding how difficulty can be seen as a positive, as an engaging struggle. Instead we should identify difficulty "as [a] serious intellectual demand requiring a response that depends on the critical and extended interpretive powers of the writer and/or teacher" (14). He continues: "...the work of composition always and of necessity begins with interpretation. Interpretations, of course, are sometimes more, sometimes less original and adequate to the case under consideration" (14). Slevin lists the ways that difficulty can be wrenched negatively into different meanings other than the positive one he's arguing for, e.g. difficulty as absence or lack. While I understand Slevin's point, I still think we can use the word "problem" as in "writing problem" because the issue that the student is faced with is one that isn't caused by themselves or is their fault. It's generic or institutional or tropical.

There's a compelling link that subtends Reid's idea, connecting it to movements among literary studies and cognitive studies of figurative language. For example, in his book *Shakespeare, rhetoric and cognition*, Raphael Lyne lays out the argument, through the plays of the Bard, that rhetoric and cognitive linguistics share elements that can inform each other. He aims to show how tropes are cognitive heuristics that, potentially, "are, in effect, a kind of cognitive science before such a thing was considered" (49). Analogically, this is what I claim a few particular tropes are doing in the following student essays in this chapter, and the next two chapters—that is, tropes working as a heuristic, as a way to think through an issue or problem in the moment without knowing precisely what the problem or solution may be. Further, this kind of thought is related to Fahnestock's previously mentioned work. Lyne agrees that "cognitive scientists, philosophers of language, and rhetoricians" understand how tropes work as lines of argument; and, moreover, that "[t]hey do so to the extent that metaphor, metonymy, metalepsis, and others may be treated not only as ways of conveying the results of complex thought, but also as maps of the way complex thought might actually happen" (9). It isn't the job of this chapter, or this dissertation, to explore cognitive linguistics, but I point out these connections here, at the start of a series of chapters on particular tropes, because I do want the reader to keep in mind how vital, volatile, and sweeping a trope can be when placed against an impasse or turnaround of thought. And I'd also have the reader remember that, on a compositional level, tropes can point toward heuristics and potential solutions.<sup>3</sup>

This dissertation brings together areas of study that aren't often introduced in composition studies to both track how the tropes have been discussed or encouraged (or

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<sup>3</sup> For more on heuristics and rhetoric, see Lauer 1970 & 1979. In the former, Lauer offered a bibliography eight pages long, mostly made up of psychological scholarship in invention and heuristics, in order to assist the interested reader.

discouraged) *and* to borrow methods for reading them in student work. Some areas of study include: musicology, medieval biblical exegesis, classical rhetorical studies, narratology, and elements of Russian Formalism. Part of this disparateness means having to tie together writers and scholars (who tackled their own writing problems) as unlikely as Viktor Shklovsky, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Gerard Genette. But most importantly, I pull from the work of student writing as the core object of analysis. I examine and read both writing done recently in my own classroom and essays collected by the Pitt English Department over the years. Whether we're looking at problems, obstacles, or impasses, student writing in the first-year course is liminal and striving at the same time. To start, the dissertation begins historiographically by retracing the concept of troping. Then the four main chapters move into a close reading of student writing with misfit tropes by searching for how my own students inhabit and use the tropes and how student writing outside of my classroom encounters them. The final chapter examines essays outside my own courses; these essays are from the University of Pittsburgh's English Department collection of undergraduate writing award submissions.

## **0.2 SLOW READER, DUMB READER: METHODS**

Students possess a rich history of language, form, and meaning behind them. In this introduction, I'm arguing that this history is leveraged by troping in student work and that this leveraging is done as a response to the difficulty of the work itself. To do this, I will rely on "slow reading." This should be distinguished and set apart from that popular notion of "close reading" or the cartoon version of New Criticism that we hear of but rarely get familiar with. "Slow reading" was coined by Reuben A. Brower. Brower taught at Harvard through the 1960s and 70s and

taught Theodore Baird's influential English 1-2 course at Amherst College, a course that could be described as "an ongoing activity rather than transmission of a codified philosophy" which encouraged "explicit disavowals of any professional expertise on the teaching of writing, and a treatment of the work of the course as a common activity shaped by the collective efforts of the teaching staff and students" (Horner 382).<sup>4</sup> In other words, it was a class that attempted to avoid the commodification of writing by avoiding the explicit teaching of writing. Brower also held influence on famous students (like Paul de Man and Richard Poirier) in his creation of the Humanities 6 class when he moved to Harvard (see de Man "Return" 23-24; Poirier "Reading Pragmatically" 177-184).<sup>5</sup> According to Brower, slow reading meant "slowing down the process of reading to observe what is happening, in order to attend very closely to the words, their uses, and their meanings" (4). Such a way of reading may seem simplistic. But we can add that slow reading "lies in a shared concern for describing what it is 'like' to read a particular work" as opposed to excavating a work for its meaning (x). As Poirier experienced it, the slow reading

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the Amherst 1-2 course, see Robin Varnum's excellent and well-researched history of the course in *Fencing with Words*. The book, while being a historiography of the course created by Baird, is also rich with interviews of Baird himself and many teachers and students of the course who subsequently went on to then teach altered versions of the curriculum elsewhere.

<sup>5</sup> These two have distinctly differing views on the Hum 6 course. De Man saw it as occasionally "subversive" and closer to engaging in I.A. Richard's "practical criticism"; while Poirier disagrees with de Man, claiming more individuality than mere methodology, and pushing back on the subversive, "Many thought of Hum 6 as a more subtle and ideologically neutral version of New Criticism, a mode of criticism which in my view, and for reasons I will get to presently, was in fact subservient to quite specific social and even religious forms of authority" ("Reading" 178-179). Poirier takes umbrage with de Man's "mak[ing] equations among New Criticism, close reading, Derrida, and himself, to the point where he gives the unintended and erroneous impression that any kind of critical-linguistic study which focuses on texts is by nature subversive" (179). For de Man, Hum 6 was transformative and he witnessed "a course, then, utterly devoid of subversive intentions as well as of theoretical objections. The conceptual and terminological apparatus was kept to a minimum, with only a few ordinary language terms for metalanguage. The entire stance was certainly not devoid of its own ideological and methodological assumptions, yet they managed to remain implicit without interfering with the procedures" ("Return" 24). It would seem the truth is somewhere in the middle.

approach meant that “reading ideally remained *in* motion, not choosing to encapsulate itself, as New Critical readings nearly always ultimately aspired to do” (*Poetry* 180-181, original emphasis).

Slow reading tries to separate out language, words, and sentence sounds. The last idea comes from Robert Frost’s comments on “sentence-sounds” in his letters to Sidney Cox, and Frost’s essay “Education by Poetry” where he praises metaphor and presses upon the reader that “unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don’t know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don’t know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you” (106). What this dissertation displays is how many students *do* possess an ease with “figurative values” but that, for some reason, it’s been dropped in the curriculum or in their everyday practices. More up to date takes on slow reading and its ilk can be found in something like the “deep reading” recommended by Sven Birkerts’s *The Gutenberg Elegies*, Marjorie Garber’s *Loaded Words* (60-71), and David Mikics’s *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age*. For Mikics, “slowness means discovery” (31), and he connects his book to the slowness movement taking over television, food, and travel. He also tips his hat to Brower’s slow reading; Garber relies more on de Man’s view of Brower’s influence. What’s at stake is something much smaller than a wholesale *comprehension* or *understanding* of Writing or Reading or Rhetoric or anything else with a capital letter.

It is much closer to what Bartholomae’s extolling “very local rewards and consequences” and what Poirier claimed about reading—that it “is nothing if it is not personal” and that it should be “a struggle between what you want to make of a text and what it wants to make of itself and of you” (167).

Normally, slow reading is done between teacher and students in a class, together. But I want to suggest that Brower's method allows something else for teachers: "The student who looks at poems as carefully as we have suggested will understand that poetry begins in grammar and that to express a just appreciation of a poem demands fine control of grammar on the part of the appreciator" (*In Defense* 16). Also, slow reading "should be taken not as a program but as a rendering in general terms of our experience in teaching ourselves and our students" (x). To me, "rendering" in this sense means either a performance of the experience of reading or the yielding or surrendering of the reading.

From this slow reading of student writing, I want to show how complex and swift their work can be, and what writing teachers can do with that writing once the misfit tropes are dealt with. In other words, *What is afforded and as yet undisclosed?* I also want to ask, "What is it *like* to read this student paper?" before I run headlong into questions that go "What does this student paper *mean?*" or "What *could* this student paper mean?"

This attitude is much like Poirier's one-time colleague at Amherst College, Walker Gibson, who started a 1979 *College Composition and Communication* article this way:

My first object as a teacher of writing is to dramatize for my students how *dumb* a reader is. 'No one,' I tell them, 'will ever again in your lifetime read what you have written as carefully and attentively as I am doing right now.' The boast may or may not prove true: my purpose is to convince them how easily and often a careful and attentive reader can go wrong. (192)

My attitude is Gibson's attitude. And my goal is his goal. Gibson contextualizes his rather brash statement by explaining that "the dumb reader" is him. And the reason he's performatively dumb is because all a reader has to work with is what's on the page. "The failure of the unsuccessful

writer is a failure of imagination,” Gibson goes on, “a failure to forecast what it’s going to be like to be a dumb reader of the document,” meaning, the teacher’s role is to scour and scrape the text for all the moments that a potential, less-attentive Future Reader will either trip over or miss (192). Gibson calls this kind of tripping up “back-tracking” and what causes back-tracking “present huge and complex problems of organization and argument, style and tone, defying summary” (193). To me, the reading of student papers is a deeper engagement, a dance, almost. It is, if anything a performance, but a slow, drawn out one. But a performance for the student’s behalf. Again, if anything, a performance as described by Wallace Stevens.

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw

Or heard or felt came not but from myself;

And there I found myself more truly and more strange. (65)

Part of this reading is precisely to have the students (and you, the reader) see their language as more true and more strange than a first pass would (could) offer, since that is how I also find it. Strange and true (the latter meaning correctly positioned, rhetorically contextual).

All of these methodological approaches I’ve discussed so far locate themselves in an ordinary or everyday appreciation of how language moves and is taken up. Therefore, I want to add one more method to my tool kit. Slow Reading and the Dumb Reader are, I think, Wittgensteinian approaches to the game (genre) of student writing. And so I will draw on the later philosophical writing of Wittgenstein, in particular, that I will also read the student papers—through Wittgenstein’s talk of “language games” in *Philosophical Investigations*. His was not a methodology that called forth rigid, pre-articulated tactics, but rather, for my purposes, exfoliating orientations toward language and the use of words and the overlapping uses of certain words for certain purposes—in my case, academic writing. For Wittgenstein, language games

start with the forms of language with which a child begins to make use of words. The study of language games is the study of primitive forms of language or primitive languages.

If we want to study the problems of truth and falsehood, of the agreement and disagreement of propositions with reality, of the nature of assertion, assumption, and question, we shall with great advantage look at primitive forms of language in which these forms of thinking appear without the confusing background of highly complicated processes of thought. (*Blue Book* 17)

But some years later, he elaborated this notion of language games, and in §2 of *Philosophical Investigations*,<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein describes a scenario wherein two builders (A and B) are working. Builder A calls out to Builder B certain terms for the limited amount of construction objects he needs. E.g. “block,” “pillar,” “slab,” “beam.” When A calls to B, “slab!” and B gives A the slab, this entire activity is what Wittgenstein calls “a complete primitive language” (*PI* 2). Thus, according to Wittgenstein, “[g]iving orders and obeying them,” “[f]orming and testing a hypothesis,” or “[m]aking a joke; telling it” can be considered language games, not just children’s language or primitive tribes, and moreover, new language games sprout, last, and eventually wither (*PI* 23).

In §65, Wittgenstein focuses on the overlapping qualities of language games. He goes on this way:

Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all,—but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways.

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<sup>6</sup> This book will be abbreviated as *PI* henceforth. And as is tradition, I will be referencing the paragraph numbers for Part I of the book. Anything from Part II will have a page number citation.

Part of what I'm asking of the student writing I read in this dissertation is, "What language game are you playing, do you *think* you're playing, are we playing *together*?" It isn't hard to see academic writing, or as we may call it The Kind of Writing We Ask Students to Write, as a language game through Wittgenstein's frame. I am not searching for one particular way of troping in the student examples, but there is a common element to them, a common approach or feel to them. And often I find that it is one of the misfit tropes I'm attending to here. For example, while teaching English Composition II at the Community College of Allegheny County, I encountered this sentence in a student essay about Malcolm X's self-education in prison.

While looking at his writing, I am painted with a picture of what it was like for him to be committed to learning while in prison.

My first instinct here is to totally rewrite the sentence in my head and say, *While looking at his writing, I am painted a picture...or...A picture is painted for me by...* But that is not what was written. What was written is more compelling. The writer is painted by a picture (an example of metalepsis, a reversal of cause and effect, as we'll see in chapter two). I would not want to change this sentence for the world. Her version sounds, and means, more than the "correct" version could. Especially since I'm asking, when I read this, "What does it mean to be painted by a picture?" I can take this literally or figuratively. Her potential misstep in the writing leads me, the reader, to see a picture/text reaching out and assigning or creating messages and meaning *on* the writer's mind or even face. Or, instead of being painted by a brush, she's painted with an actual picture. The image is immediately endless in its novelty. (To say nothing of the unexpected play on words with "committed" and "prison"—although, I do think a revision should attend to this linguistic generosity.) The endpoint of using Wittgenstein's ideas here (and

elsewhere through the dissertation) is to speak back to the student writing (as with my questions above), “Are we playing the same language game together, and if so, how can I, as a teacher, not be stymied by the changing rules of the game? And if we’re not playing the same language game, what can be done so we both meet in the same arena?” I look at my student’s sentence above and think, “Her game is better than my game. She’s troped her way into another place here. She’s troped into a thirdspace, an oddplace.” And so I follow and see where it leads.

Wittgenstein writes in §83:

Doesn’t the analogy between language and games throw light here? We can easily imagine people amusing themselves in a field by playing with a ball so as to start various existing games, but playing many without finishing them and in between throwing the ball aimlessly into the air, chasing on another with the ball and bombarding one another for a joke and so on. And now someone says: The whole time they are playing a ball-game and following definite rules at every throw.

And is there not also the case where we play and—make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them—as we go along.

Often, I see my assignments in composition go out into the classroom, and what is produced in light of them evolve over and above my expectations (gladly so!). They change the rules of the game I thought I was playing. Then, I’m forced to adapt to that game because wrenching the student writing toward my arena would be either pyrrhic or unimaginative or a waste of time. I simply need to read the situation from a different angle. Student writing, then, in this sense, is a Wittgensteinian language game right next to the language game of Big Deal Academic Writing. And sometimes these two merge and create something else, a Third Game (who knows, really, what to call it?), not knowing what the rules *exactly* are or may be or even can be. I’m willing to

play these language games with student writing because of what they can afford the writer going forward in the way of linguistic richness, history, and rhetorical awareness. I want to be painted by their pictures.

Again, this should all sound amenable to Poirier and Brower's slow reading approach. As a methodology alone, and in what I baptized above as an *exfoliating orientation*, my occasional turns to Wittgenstein and ordinary language<sup>7</sup> in general should be seen as guide rails, not as platforms. The philosopher Stanley Cavell hones in on the kind of readings (and attunement) I'm giving (and getting from) student writing, and describes why I'm focusing on certain turns of phrase that *seem* misfit (and mis-fitting) by the students.

This is all that "ordinary" in the phrase "ordinary language philosophy" means, or ought to mean. It does not refer to particular words of wise use, nor to particular sorts of men. It reminds us that whatever words are said and meant are said and meant by particular men, and that to understand what they (the words) mean you must understand what they (whoever is using them) mean, and that sometimes men do not see what they mean, that usually they cannot say what they mean, that for various reasons they may not know what they mean, and that when they are forced to recognize this they feel they do not, and perhaps cannot, mean anything, and they are struck dumb. ("Avoidance" 270)

What I appreciate most in this quotation is Cavell's insistence on the potential "unknowability" of what we mean and say and write. That our words can outstrip our intentions, "for various reasons." (Just so with the reversal of the picture painting the reader.) You, me, and the student

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<sup>7</sup> Despite the name "philosophy" appearing in the label, ordinary language, according to the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "was not developed as a unified theory, nor was it an organized program, as such [...] Ordinary Language philosophy is (besides an historical movement) foremost a *methodology* – one which is committed to the close and careful study of the uses of the expressions of language, especially the philosophically problematic ones" (Parker-Ryan, emphasis in original).

writers may see this as a blessing or a curse. But this is what is. I am trying to rescue the fallout of the combination of certain language games, trying to stop and reclaim what could easily be considered *worthless* and turn it *worthwhile*. For Cavell, as for me, “we need to remind ourselves that ordinary language is natural language, and that its changing is natural” (42) and ordinary language “is that which explains how the language we traverse every day can contain undiscovered treasure” (“Must We Mean” 43).<sup>8</sup> I hope the readers of this dissertation will see the “undiscovered treasure” of the student writing, as I, and many other compositionists have found it (here I’m thinking specifically of Walker Gibson, William Coles, Mina Shaughnessy, Donald Murray, James Slevin, David Bartholomae, Geoffrey Sirc, Stacey Waite, Peter Wayne Moe, among others). As a genre, as a language game, “student writing” is odd. It obeys, and hews closely to, all-too-dutifully to, certain traditional forms while simultaneously pushing against them. It makes awkward moves and sometimes nails them, sometimes fails them (Bartholomae, “Inventing”). Student writing can be treated as boilerplate, or it can generate as many interpretations as a Lewis Carroll poem. In an essay about Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, Cavell clarifies the former philosopher’s ideas about rules in language, namely, how they’re “inessential” (“Availability” 52). I know it does a certain violence to Cavell’s original subject, but I am partial to his summary of this idea as a way of thinking of and reading student writing, and I quote it at length.

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this

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<sup>8</sup> In *Why We Need Ordinary Language Philosophy*, philosopher Sandra Laugier pushes Cavell a bit further than he lets on here when she writes of the complexity in ordinary language, “the fact that there is, so to speak, nothing ordinary about ordinary language (that it is out of the ordinary, if one may say so); that the disquiet summed up in the question *Must We Mean What We Say?* to quote Cavell’s title, is everywhere in it” (12).

projection will take place...just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, sense of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls “forms of life.” Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying. (52)

Terrifying because it all works. And what follows in this dissertation is to say that there are latent writing talents in students, that they have read much and that they *know* things. They’ve written for a long time, as well (at least a decade) in these “forms of life.” But because classroom and academic commonplaces, which exist in ordinary language, speak so loudly in their heads and on the page, they need a way to shut them down and escape them. The misfit tropes I consider in this dissertation disrupt those patterns and, again, I believe, allow a space to trope off, and out of, the commonplace. Most importantly, the aim is *not* for the student work to elucidate the tropes or methods, but the tropes and methods to help elucidate the student work.

So the first chapter, “On the Uses and Abuses of Troping in Language; A Historiography,” prepares the contextual perspective for the rest of the dissertation and works through moments where troping is suggested, advocated, or discouraged in primary sources from Ancient Greek rhetoricians through to twentieth century literary criticism. The aim is to put these moments on a spindle to see how they reflect or refract each other; to put them into a conversation about rhetoric’s figurative knowledge. I find that troping is a distinctly evaluative action in language, one that has brought about derision and distrust, but which has just as easily

brought upon itself praise and support. Some of the authors in the chapter range from ancients like Aristotle and Quintilian to the Medieval era with the *Glossa Ordinaria* (a well-known study bible), Gregory the Great, and St. Bonaventure. I also make a knight's move into the discipline of musicology where pre-modern hymns were sources of "tropes" and "troping," wherein this term's meaning is unique to musicology, breaking off from the literary use. A look at Early Modernity follows with Puttenham and Peacham, leading into how troping was viewed by late nineteenth and twentieth century critics and scholars, e.g. Nietzsche, Burke, Bloom, De Man, and Gates.

In chapter two, "When Will I Deliver Myself from Myself?; or, Troping as Metalepsis," I explain why metalepsis has been so hard to understand and explain. Metalepsis, as a trope, has had multiple definitions—four main ones for my purposes—and in the chapter, I show examples in both literary writing and student writing how it manifests itself across all four. Then I move to work with student writing which is read two ways: as enacting the trope of metalepsis and negotiating a writing problem through it. And then metalepsis is shown as a method and framework, where the trope (in all of its incarnations) helps dissolve certain persistent issues in student composition (viz. anagnorisis), while also raising interesting questions for teachers of writing. Chapter three, "Who Rules the Empire of Names?; or, Troping as Catachresis," considers how catachresis has been defined and portrayed by rhetoricians like Quintilian and George Puttenham and examine how the trope is treated rhetorically by scholars like Patricia Parker, Raphael Lyne, and Madhavi Menon. From here, I move into discussing how catachresis can manifest and transform student writing; why students veer away from catachresis; and why, based on what their starting drafts offer, it is in their favor to embrace the abusive trope. The chapter's aim is to demonstrate why and how the trope under discussion not only does

transgressive work inside sentences, that is, but also explores how misuse can induce invention. In chapter four, “‘Tentacles will soon be reaching into affairs’; or, Troping as Enstrangement,” I am indebted to the idea of enstrangement as established by Viktor Shklovsky in his essay “Art as Device” (1917). I explain how its use in literary studies has prepared it for work in composition and rhetoric. I also experiment with formalized constraints in student writing assignments and focus on a past class’s essays that show writing before and after the introduction of the trope of enstrangement. I aim to demonstrate how the exercise can be theorized and applied, and *why* and *how* Shklovsky’s trope/device opens up the compositional opportunities for student writers and how the concept adds value to language-use and not just trivial change for change’s sake. In chapter five, I compare my students’ work to essays collected for awards consideration by the Pitt English Department. With these latter, “control” essays, I’m looking for an engagement of metalepsis, catachresis, or enstrangement. When I come across what I suspect to be troping, I read the work in the same fashion as I read my own students’ essays. Part of my working hypothesis for the rest of this dissertation is: If these other essays are troping, what does that say about the tropes I’m offering?; what does it say about the kinds of commonplaces that exist in student writing?; and what does it say about how troping is instigated?

## 1.0 ON THE USES AND ABUSES OF TROPING IN LANGUAGE; A HISTORIOGRAPHY

“What I am pointing out is that unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don’t know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don’t know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are safe in science; you are not safe in history.”

Robert Frost, “Education by Poetry”

Following the introduction, and Fleming’s call for a more rhetorically-centered undergraduate education, in this chapter I want to consider the arguments rhetoricians make in favor of, or against, the sort of language that’s ornamented, that’s popularly considered “flowery language,” that relies on figures and (for my main interest here) tropes. How can we see the history of rhetoric as an advocacy for, or disinvitation from, troping? This inquiry isn’t removed from the wider scope of the project, which is student writing in composition courses, and I would argue the historiography I’m engaging in here has much to respond back to our current teaching practices with regard to style and troping. As Frost warns in the epigraph to this chapter, you aren’t safe in history unless you know how far metaphoricity can go. In his book *Out of Style: Reanimating Stylistic Study in Composition and Rhetoric* (2008), Paul Butler laments,

In its neglect of style as a topic of serious scholarly inquiry (as well as grammar and literacy, to varying degrees), the discipline of composition and rhetoric has ceded the

discussion to others outside the field. . . . It is time for composition and rhetoric to take back the study of style—to redefine the way the conversation is being framed and to rethink that concept in the public sphere. (122–23)

My project, and especially this chapter’s historiography, is in direct response to calls like Butler’s. But I want to add to his reorientation of scholarship that we should rethink the concept and study of style in (and for) *student writers*. Not just the public. Students are often the ones who need a deeper practical knowledge and experience of the ways toward troping and what it offers, and eventually they will be (and already are) the public. A first year writing course in college should be a rhetorical laboratory, and encouraging student work into areas that can productively and enthusiastically try out troping is a part of what Fleming and Butler support. So it seems important for rhetorical education to have a sense of troping now, and this project needs this kind of cross-sectioning through the ages. My aim is to give a wide picture of how tropes and troping get labeled and trundled about through history. As scholars and teachers of rhetoric and composition, we often have recourse to turn constantly and consistently to these rhetoricians and writers, and it behooves us to know what their pedagogical imperatives or inhibitions were.

In what follows, I lean hard on the terms “propriety” and “impropriety.” But why focus on this specific dichotomy and not some other? Many other dualities could be chosen and tracked down when investigating figurative language and rhetorical tropes: literal/figurative; plain/stylistic; technical/poetic; mundane/spiritual; truth/deceit; real/fake; trustworthy/skeptical, and so on. Quintilian devoted a chapter to the propriety of words in book 8 of *Institutio Oratoria*. There he writes of propriety and impropriety, “Clearness results above all from *propriety* in the use of words. But *propriety* is capable of more than one interpretation. In its primary sense it means calling things by their right names, and is consequently sometimes to be avoided, for our

language must not be obscene, unseemly or mean... But while there is no special merit in the form of *propriety* which consists in calling things by their real names, it is a fault to fly to the opposite extreme. This fault we call *impropriety*” (8.3.1-3). Quintilian would have us believe, I argue, in a controlling dichotomy within rhetoric. In his book *Sophistical Rhetoric in Classical Greece*, John Poulakos tells us that the *to prepon-to aprepes* (proper-improper) dichotomy is an old and strong one in rhetoric. It’s the one pairing that appears to persist tenaciously, because it’s strongly based around what’s rhetorically worked in the past and how to mobilize those words in the present and for the future. *To prepon* (the proper) only makes sense because the now “resembles” the long ago, and as history locks in meanings that are useful and acceptable, we rely on those to navigate our way through situations (60). The ancient rhetorical sense of *to prepon*, while referring to mostly oratorical situations, can and should be applied to written discourse, as well (as later writers and rhetoricians support). Poulakos describes the boundaries, norms, and forms of *to prepon* this way.

*To prepon* is the result of general agreements on how to address recurring topics and occasions properly. As we grow within a set of parameters of rhetorical practice, we learn that on certain occasions and before certain audiences only certain utterances are appropriate. In this regard, we also learn that speaking in public is highly regulated according to established norms of appropriateness that we are expected, more or less, to observe. Over time, these norms tend to harden and become highly specific types of rhetoric (i.e., the apology, the eulogy, the encomium). When this happens, most orators tend to address typical situations in typical ways. In other words, they tend to speak following *predictable rhetorical forms* and searching for *predictable responses* from their audiences. (60, emphasis added)

At bottom there are boundaries and restrictions in place, and in many cases, long-standing traditions that weigh heavily on the person speaking or writing. The composition classroom is, I would argue, one such place. As David Bartholomae writes, “It is not a huge leap to include student writing as one of the less distinguished genres—one more genre to which criticism must learn to attend” (“Teacher” 29). Student writing is a place where “predictable rhetorical forms” and “predictable responses” are nurtured (by students) and expected (by teachers). The set of expectations for incoming first-year college students can be hard to pin down, except for the basic and often lamented assumptions that they (a) want to get good grades to get a good job (b) often dislike writing because of a lack of experience or exposure and (c) are at a loss how to manipulate, expand/contract, and overall play around productively with language in an academic or classroom environment. Perhaps the classroom doesn’t invite or speak to them as the sort of kairotic environment that composition and rhetoric teachers hope and expect to foster. What the students know, and as Poulakos claims any ancient rhetor would’ve known, is that the “unfamiliar should be understood in terms of the familiar” (61). In *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, James Murphy traces how ancient rhetors split tropes and figures into separate areas:

the rhetoricians’ attitude toward the figures and tropes seems to have been affected by the way in which rhetorical training was conducted in Roman Schools. This attitude carried through the early middle ages as well. In Cicero’s time, and as late as Quintilian, it is clear that certain figures were regarded as proper subjects only for the most elementary levels of schooling; since grammar was regarded as a subject preliminary to rhetoric, the figures taught by the grammarian were necessarily less important to the *rhetor*... This tendency may have served to crystallize support for certain sets of figures and tropes as “proper” to rhetoric rather than to grammar. (188)

In my time teaching writing, I've had very few encounters with students who thought that stylistically aggressive writing (read: writing that tropes rhetorically) was obviously acceptable or necessary. This could be because many writing courses in high school and college are based in argumentation or persuasion solely. That is, focused on structure. Maybe. And maybe students are apt to turn away from tropes and figures because it's too "creative" or has a whiff of the "show off" of "colorful language"—"Look what I can do with language!", etc. Indeed, Murphy writes that rhetorical ornamentation "rests upon a principle of deviation from a norm" and that "[w]ith [Roman grammarian] Donatus and later theorists in the grammatical tradition, a common justification [for ornamentation] lay in the beautification of language by purposeful change" (186). Again, as Bartholomae asserts, "[i]f you have taught [first-year writing], you've received...a standard theme, student writing—the writing produced from a certain well-defined (and over-determined) cultural and institutional space" ("Teacher" 25). Bartholomae's over-determined institutional space is nearly identical with the required course that all students must take and need passing grades in. There would be good reason, then, *not* to rock the boat with regard to rhetorical experimentation, to say nothing of the "beautification of language by purposeful change."

But I can hear a countering voice saying, "Argument and persuasion are parts of rhetoric, as is style—so what's the issue?" Good question. That's what this project is about. Trying to answer that question, among others. Students are wary of rhetorical excess and trapped in a hyper-literalism of the Enlightenment Dream that has wormed its way into the Apple of Discourse. And what I've found through the compiling of this historiography is that the rhetorical tradition is frequently about navigating the space between the extreme poles of the

appropriate and the inappropriate, propriety and impropriety. Or, if you prefer, excess versus literalism.

Through troping, though, a student can aim to create something unexpected or unique, take something *to prepon* and make it *to aprepes* by breaking boundaries and tradition. Moreover, it should be the aim of any composition student to create language that can “fall on receptive ears and make unexpected sense” thereby “eventually find[ing] its place in the audience’s standard linguistic currency” in order to get used on a regular basis, much like any other reliable phrase, word, or thought (Poulakos 62). Peter Wayne Moe writes that the epideictic, the branch of rhetoric housing language that’s not necessarily argumentative or after any kind of decision, has an etymology, *epi-deixis*, meaning “the rhetoric of showing forth, of display, of demonstration, of making known, of shining” (436). Is it this “showing forth” that disturbs the student writer? I don’t think there’s a satisfying answer to this question.

Through Quintilian’s dichotomy of *to prepon-to aprepes* I have chosen a chain of writers that contribute to the continuing conversation about how to bring troping to bear across a spectrum of mediums, genres, and occasions. Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian are included first. Necessary concessions were made for space, so rhetoricians like Isocrates are not included. Or, say, Demosthenes. I’ve tried to follow the letter and spirit of “troping” throughout history, and it has lead me to biblical exegesis and medieval musicology. It does turn out that these are more linked to the main threads of rhetorical history than one may first imagine.

## 1.1 CLASSICAL GREEK AND ROMAN RHETORIC

### 1.1.1 Aristotle, *Rhetoric* & *Poetics*

For references to troping in Aristotle, it will be best to approach his work split between two books: the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*.

In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle keeps most of his discussion on style (and thus troping) to book three. At 1404b, Aristotle starts immediately by stating that style is “defined as ‘to be clear’ [*saphe*]” and adding that “[t]he poetic style is hardly flat, but it is not appropriate for speech.” And here one could state definitively that the lynchpin to Aristotle’s tropology (and arguably his whole philosophy) is *moderation*. Nothing should be too wayward, too foreign, or too familiar. To partake in any of these adjectives would be to alienate, confuse, or irritate the listener/reader.

The Greek idea of *to prepon* or “appropriateness” and the middle way or golden mean of Aristotle’s overarching philosophy is meant to steer writers, orators, and rhetors *away* from excess or oddness or (intentional) error. The idea that one could capitalize on error after the fact doesn’t have a place in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* or *Poetics*, since the author would have logically chosen what words would find their way into a composition. And if one made a move that falls flat or proves the orator possesses a tin ear, then the rules of correct composition weren’t followed.

Aristotle makes much of clarity as a virtue in speech, yet also recognizes that “making strange” language is worthwhile. But again, what is “elevated” should only be employed when appropriate; for example, in verse. Aristotle creates a dichotomy that allows only for artificial or natural styles. And orators/writers should, or so he believes, “compose without being noticed.”

Being artificial in language, that is, using elevated language, which includes troping, isn't being persuasive. In fact, that kind of language is far from persuasive; it is basically alienating.

He writes: “from among these [nouns and verbs] one should use glosses and double words and coinages rarely and in a limited number of situations” (1404b7-8), and its usage goes straight toward “excess”—which is to say, there are certain pursuits of language that, from the start, will put off an audience and prove the orator or writer *unrestrained* from Aristotle's perspective. This is important to keep in mind, since in a contemporary setting, the kind of language that is often considered “outstanding,” “excellent,” or “creative” is that language which can often verge on excessive, both in poetry and prose.

At 1405a Aristotle delineates between prose and verse: “In speech it is necessary to take special pains to the extent that a speech has fewer resources than verse. Metaphor especially has clarity and sweetness and strangeness, and its use cannot be learned from someone else.” While this may sound heartening to poets and novelists, the question is: *What* can't be learned? Use? If by “use” Aristotle means the moment in discourse *when* metaphor is deployed, then one could counter with claiming that a judicious amount of reading and observation could remedy this. A deep study of *kairos*, perhaps? But right after at 1406a Aristotle discusses how a number of methods can be “frigid.” These methods include compound adjectives, borrowing foreign terms, long epithets, and far-fetched metaphors—the latter I find appropriate to call *catachresis*. About these, Aristotle claimed: “These are too poetic.” That is, poeticisms (through figuration) are dangerous when brought to prose, as if there was a clear line between what's called poetry and what's called prose. Although, in antiquity, there *was* a distinction. The line was one that separated speech and writing that was ornamented, rhythmic, patterned, with writing and speech

that wasn't, that was aimed at conveying information rather than something else on top of it or alongside it.

Then at 1408a Aristotle claims that when *lexis* (translation) is out of proportion “the result seems comedy”—much like Quintilian would claim, to some degree. What one notices is a sense of propriety, a need to be serious and say serious things. That is, troping is welcomed if it “brings-before-the-eyes” or does well with *allogria*, that which is alien (or a metaphor), or made strange from the everyday and familiar. To bring-before-the-eyes is Aristotle's way of encouraging striking visuals in the hearer's or reader's mind. This produces a pleasurable education or a taking-by-surprise in the language. What Aristotle doesn't seem to approve of is the strong poetic sense of certain tropes, since he prefers the smooth communication over the overly emotional or poetic. It would be hard to believe that anyone purposely aims for bathos. As such, I don't think troping needs to be framed a dangerous act of crossing the clear lines of non-ornamented (or less ornamented) speech and writing and poetic speech and writing. Overall, the *Rhetoric* approves of troping but only if done within certain bounds and for certain reasons, i.e. with *to prepon*—a belief that will continue to ripple out through discussions of troping and oscillate in unexpected directions. That is, what's appropriate will change through history, from the unornamented to the ornamented with certain conditions.

In the *Poetics*, all discussion of troping is in chapters 20-22 where Aristotle explains the diction of poetry. It is a much shorter section, despite being *the one place* where Aristotle seems to believe troping best belongs. The focus is on metaphors, compounds, and strange words, or barbarisms, much like in the *Rhetoric*.

Once again, Aristotle instructs the reader to obey the middle way at 1458b: “the rule of moderation applies to all the constituents of the poetic vocabulary; even with metaphors, strange

words, and the rest, the effect will be the same, if one uses them improperly and with a view to provoking laughter.” Aristotle appears to be more permissive of the poetical in this book than in the *Rhetoric*. This is odd, especially because he repeats much of what was written in the *Rhetoric*; the same examples and the same points. In this way, the *Poetics* doesn’t add much that the *Rhetoric* hasn’t already established for us, and in a fuller way. There is a sense that Aristotle knows and understands the uses and abuses of troping in both books, but will always advise the middle way<sup>9</sup> as the best for those composing.

### 1.1.2 Cicero, *De Oratore*

In 55 BCE, Cicero composed *De Oratore* (On Oration) as a dialogue including Crassus and Marcus Antonius among others figures. In book three of the dialogue (sections 149-170), Cicero briefly addresses figures and tropes. Cicero hews closely to Aristotle’s basic assumptions about tropes. To wit: Be appropriate to the occasion, and do nothing that comes off as too ornate. There’s natural language use; and then there’s “terms used metaphorically” and set up in ways that aren’t common (sec. 149). For example: “In the case of proper words therefore it is the distinction of an orator to avoid what is commonplace and hackneyed and to employ select and distinguished terms that seem to have some fullness and sonority in them” (150). Leading up to

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<sup>9</sup> At 2.6.9 of his *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle famously declares that what’s in the middle is always preferable: “This, then, is how each science produces its product well, by focusing on what is intermediate and making the product conform to that. This, indeed, is why people regularly comment on well-made products that nothing could be added or subtracted; they assume that excess or deficiency ruins a good [result], whereas the mean preserves it. Good craftsmen also, we say, focus on what is intermediate when they produce their product.” See also book 2 chapter 9 for how attaining the mean is possible, especially in section 2 where he states unequivocally, “not everyone, but only one who knows, finds the midpoint in a circle” and thus, “getting angry, or giving and spending money, is easy and everyone can do it; but doing it to the right person, in the right amount, at the right time, for the right end, and in the right way is no longer easy, nor can everyone do it.”

tropes themselves, Cicero delineates three main parts of style: “rare words, new coinages, and words used metaphorically” (152). This is most reminiscent of Aristotle. Cicero is concerned about how these three parts of style find their way into oratory. In poetry, one needn’t worry so much (also Aristotelian). Yet there’s a loss of dignity if these tropes are brought to bear in oratory/prose.

On dealing with tropes directly, especially metaphors, Cicero writes that in a metaphor “the meaning we desire to convey is made clear by the resemblance of the thing that we have expressed by the word that does not belong. Consequently, metaphors in which you take what you have not got from somewhere else are a sort of borrowing...” (156). What’s clear here is how, sometimes, it’s necessary to turn to the unknown, the foreign, or the *unbelonging*, if you will, to get across a point. Moreover, he admits that there are moments where our current stable of words isn’t satisfying. Well, what of resemblance?

In sections 157-158 Cicero, like Aristotle, wants to stick to resembling, to likenesses. But the flip-side of all of this is the strangeness of the trope. “To turn”—as in the case of metaphors—is to acknowledge that it is possible—and necessary—to get across one’s meaning with unlikeness combined with resemblance. I point this out because, to bring in resemblances is to *move away* from identicalness, the one-for-one relationship. As the comparison gets further away, the foreignness in the metaphor increases. (Rhetoricians called the most distant of these metaphors, catachresis.) There is a fear on the part of the rhetors of letting the language get away from them. Or, conversely, there’s a fear of the audience not being capable of following the more unique turns of language use.

Cicero remarks that, possibly, metaphors are so well-liked and preferred so often because one jumps over the obvious word and the commonplace topic to retrieve a new and unusual

word. “This [preference] happens, I imagine, either because it is some manifestation of wit to jump over such expressions as lie before you, and catch at others from a greater distance; or because he who listens is led another way in thought, and yet does not wander from the subject” (160). Audiences like that maneuver, Cicero intimates, because they like to *work* for the meanings. There is a welcome stress on the language that makes it seem delightful. There’s also a quality of cleverness which haloes metaphors. The making of a metaphor displays the workings of the metaphor-maker’s mind. And perhaps from an antique viewpoint, contemporary readers are to understand that a catachrestic mind is a mind not worth wondering around? This catachrestic quality perhaps leads to Cicero’s dislike of the unseemliness of certain metaphors and his encouragement of those which are visual and, like Aristotle says, are a “bringing-before-the-eye” to the hearer/reader. Regarding harsh metaphors, Cicero advocates a kind of subterfuge so “the metaphor ought to have an apologetic air...to look as if it had entered a place that does not belong to it with a proper introduction, not taken it by storm, and as if it had come with permission, not forced its way in” (165). The reader comes away understanding that troping is in need of apologies and caution—to say nothing of subtlety and deceiving cover. This, despite the fact that Cicero goes on to say that nothing else adds more to style than metaphor. We come away reading Cicero less as a pusher of moderation (compared to Aristotle) than as a contextualist, reading the situation for the best approach, casuistically.

### 1.1.3 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*

One hundred and fifty years later, Quintilian wrote *Institutio Oratoria*, one of the core sources of rhetorical knowledge for the next millennia. In book 8, chapter 6, Quintilian gives his impression of tropes. Tropes are, he writes, “the artistic alteration of a word or phrase from its proper

meaning to another” (8.6.1-3). Ostensibly, they are for elucidating content; not for adorning the fringes. And while there are tropes that focus on getting the point across while also being flashy, there are also those that focus on embellishment over content. Heed the difference, he seems to imply. Quintilian takes the view, differing from his predecessors Aristotle and Cicero, that tropes aren’t just substituting a word for a word. Rather, a trope can encompass a larger group of words, even on a sentence level.

His longest discussion of a trope is that of metaphor (8.6.4-13). To him, we use metaphor because we believe it may make our “meaning clearer”—but this seems antithetical to, not only the previous rhetoricians, but to the popular way metaphor is contemporarily viewed. I’d venture that metaphor now is viewed as an obscuring trope, one that is lavish or flashy or indirect. Quintilian then gives examples of metaphor and the different kinds, e.g. genus to species; animate to inanimate; rational to irrational. He states that “[f]or if it be correctly and appropriately applied, it is quite impossible for its effect to be commonplace, mean or unpleasing” (8.6.5). This seems to imply that a metaphor can’t *fail* but that it can only go *awry*. In other words, no metaphor is so bad that it’s absolutely not understandable, but it can be bad enough that it makes one grit their teeth or become bored.

Again, in sections 14-18, he details mistakes made with metaphor. Don’t use too many in a row, or you risk sounding obscure and muddy in your meanings. If you do, you’ll lose your audience. You’ll sound enigmatic. Therefore, be proper, appropriate, temperate. (Hear the echoes of Aristotle.) There is, again, a giant saddle upon the suggested use of metaphor—keep it reined in. Also, what’s allowable for poets isn’t on the menu for prose writers. Quintilian goes so far to admit that sometimes poets *need* metaphors because the meter necessitates it.

In the following sections, Quintilian continues to mention tropes that are best suited for poets, including synecdoche, metonymy, antonomasia, onomatopoeia (which he allows is easier for Greek than Latin and that, anyway, many of the terms fall out of use), and at 35-36, catachresis. Following this, at 37-39 is the mysterious metalepsis. It is “a transition from one *trope* to another.” There is no real explanation to what this may mean. Quintilian seems stymied and has this to say: “We need not waste any more time over it. I can see no use in it except, as I have already said, in comedy.” But why? He doesn’t say why it’s better suited in that genre. What about the move from trope to trope is so well-made for comedy over anything else? Perhaps because metalepsis “provides a transition from one *trope* to another” means more than one trope is condensed inside a phrase and can be unpacked. Or perhaps the chain of logic that one takes from trope to trope is the kind that spurs surprise. Quintilian gives some credence to this in section 44, when discussing allegory. He writes, “for it is novelty and change that please in oratory, and what is unexpected always gives special delight.” There is a connection here with Cicero who said earlier that the going out of the way for a metaphor was enjoyable.

Although Quintilian’s above sentiment is positive and well-taken, mere approval of “novelty and change” still sidelines tropes like metalepsis and catachresis that could equally surprise the listener or reader.<sup>10</sup> There is a tension, or a near contradiction sometimes, in Quintilian’s consideration of tropes. For example, in Section 62 while discussing hyperbaton--

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<sup>10</sup> Although, there is a moment at 8.2.4-6 where he raises catachresis to a rather high status in language use: “there are, in the first place, many things which have no proper term either in Greek or Latin. For example, the verb *iaculari* is specially used in the sense of ‘to throw a javelin,’ whereas there is no special verb appropriated to the throwing of a ball or a stake. So, too, while *lapidare* has the obvious meaning of ‘to stone,’ there is no special word to describe the throwing of clods or potsherds. Hence abuse or *catachresis* of words becomes necessary...” No doubt Quintilian would state that the necessity is line with propriety, whereas just being catachrestic for the sake of the moment is improper. Many centuries later, Vico will take a similar stance regarding the creation of language.

the inversion of normal syntax--he writes that “if the words were always arranged in their natural order and attached each to each just as they occur” our language would be a disappointment and ungainly, “despite the fact that there is no real bond of union. Consequently some words require to be postponed, others to be anticipated, each being set in its appropriate place.” Even within the action of troping, which moves and turns language around, making it strange, odd, and pleasant through surprise, it’s telling that there’s still a need, *a desire*, to keep the chaos in order. This shouldn’t be an unusual to read in Quintilian, though, considering that he was highly influenced by Cicero and Aristotle before him—all rhetoricians that advocated for even-handedness.

## 1.2 MEDIEVAL ERA

According to biblical scholar and literary critic Northrop Frye, “Above the allegorical level [of reading], in the medieval system, is the moral or tropological level, *the reading of the Bible that takes us past the story into the reordering and redirecting of one’s life*. The clearest examples of this kind of meaning are probably the parables of Jesus, explicitly fictions, but fictions that end with ‘Go, and do thou likewise.’” (229, my emphasis).

In order to move from Classical and Hellenistic Greece to Pax Romana and then to the Medieval era (approx.. 5<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century), it is necessary to follow how the notion of “troping” and tropological reading changed from what the Greeks and Latins understood. In other words, troping wasn’t merely the use of rhetorical tropes in oratory or written prose. With the rise of Christianity in Western Europe throughout the first thousand years, the reading of the Bible (for the literate) created, or necessitated, multiple methods of understanding biblical content in more than just a literal way. As rhetoric scholar Renato Barilli writes, “The tropes suitable to the

Scriptures will be those that stress the parallelism between literal material meaning and spiritual meaning (like allegory, enigma, parable)” (42). Troping can also be thought of as tropological reading and “can also take the form of literary invention,” writes Ryan McDermott; that is, it is “a responsive re-creation of the biblical material in surprisingly original yet recognizable renderings” (11). Tropology becomes an interpretative method for the transformation of “words into works” (21). And while rhetorical troping is geared toward persuasion and ornament, to say nothing of surprise and pleasure through the turns of language use, biblical tropology is meant to assist the reader in salvation. It can “draw a moral from something that is not explicitly ethical, to enact a *translatio* by shifting the frame of reference around the object of interpretation” (13). This change in the role of troping should create an alarming perspective in how rhetoric can be used through application to life. For the Greeks, allegory and metaphor were meant to help rouse an audience to an understanding of whatever aim or goal the rhetor desired to see done. For the Christians in the Medieval Period, the exact same tropes were used to draw out, interpret, and frame ethical actions, and so we’ll need to start with Gregory the Great, who established the method of tropological reading.

### 1.2.1 Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*

Gregory the Great, also known as Pope Saint Gregory the First, lived from 540 to 604 AD and was one of the most prolific writers of the Catholic Church. Upon the request of Leander, the Bishop of Seville, Gregory composed a commentary on the Book of Job, in Latin, *Magna Moralia*. According to Gregory, there were three ways he would read the scripture. During the discussion of each chapter and verse, he goes through three readings: the literal, the allegorical, and the moral—the last understood here as the tropological, the turning of the trope to action. In

the “Letter to Leander” that prefaces the actual commentary on Job, Gregory writes: “to this burden that they asked me to assume, they added as well that I should not only search the literal words for the allegorical sense but that I should then bend the allegorical sense to the exercise of moral action, a more serious obligation still” (49). He confesses that he frequently dispenses with the literal reading for the figurative, especially the one reading that will lead to moral action.

In the third section of the “Letter” Gregory ties together two competing notions of troping in a creative and productive manner. Discussing this methodology, he considers, “Sometimes we neglect the exposition of the clear words of sacred history lest we be too long in reaching those that are more obscure; sometimes the words cannot be understood literally because taken literally they do not produce knowledge in the readers *but instead produce error*” (51 emphasis added). In a chiasmic reversal, the literal is taken as erroneous and the figurative as the knowledgeable. This move is interesting for the fact that, up to this point in history, many ancient rhetoricians espoused moderation in troping, fearing that the auditor or reader would stumble amid mixed meanings. Yet, here Gregory the Great advocates for the figurative as a superior method of reading: “Obviously, when the words taken literally are inconsistent with one another, they show that there is something more in them that must be searched out, as though they said in so many words, ‘When you look for us in our outward appearance and we disappear, look for that in us that is well ordered and self-consistent and may provide deeper understanding’” (53).

In order to fully grasp Gregory’s method, look at an example of his moral/tropological reading of Job 1:3, the last line of which is “Yes, Job was the greatest of the Easterners” which uses the trope of epithet. The literal meaning of the trope produces error in that it’s clearly hyperbole. With what yardstick are we to judge or measure the greatness of Job? Beyond this, we have to understand that “Easterners” does not necessarily meaning those who live in the East. As

we'll read below, it's half-way figurative claim. Those in the East are those who are with the godly. But still, reading it literally without these meanings, it is hard for us to see Job as *the actual greatest* without the tone turning into a fairy tale. Thus, it's hard to read the trope literally. So, on the other hand, we read Gregory's moral interpretation:

We too will become the greatest of the Easterners when we become united by means of the rays of our discretion, as far as it is possible for us, with the spirits who stay in the eastern light, forcing the clouds of fleshly decay to disperse. That is why Paul says, 'Our conversation is in heaven.' Anyone who goes after the defective things of time is riding for a fall, but anyone who desires heaven proves that he lives in the East. He is the greatest of the Easterners, not of the Westerners, for his ambitions lie not among the deeds of those who seek lowly and passing things but among the choirs of the citizens of heaven. (104)

The reading here encourages a life that steers clear of "fleshly decay" or sins of the flesh, which could be any bodily corruption from gluttony to lust to sloth. And it is pivotal for this dissertation that even within Gregory's tropological readings he includes even more troping in his explanation. Gregory's tropological method and lifting up of troping is, I think, the beginning of my argument and examples of student writing later on. As if it needs pointed out, this kind of reading is distinctly anti-Aristotelian—thus literally a turning point—and goes quite squarely against the mean and intermediate in the interpretation of the biblical scriptures. We should note that this carries only *for* biblical scripture and not, say, personal letters or private poetry. It is a specific tool for a specific purpose. This tool, though, will unscrew itself from its position and escape the toolbox later in history.

### 1.2.2 Saint Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* (approx. 1257—exact date unknown)

Some 600 years later, Saint Bonaventure continued, as a theologian, the multi-tiered reading that Gregory established. It is simply a continual uplifting of tropes and troping. Again, oddly, it's as if the Christians in the medieval era flipped the Platonic notion of what's seen and unseen.

Whereas the Greeks considered language in its non-tropic form as upright and proper, the Christian fathers found literal language not enough, or perhaps unfitting for the grander truths hidden underneath. And so what was on the surface, the non-figurative, was passed-by in favor of the figurative, the tropic, that which could assist in higher order reality.

*Breviloquium* means “brevity of speech” or “conciseness” and it is considered a masterpiece work in Bonaventure's career; but it's in the Prologue that he lays out his analysis of scripture. In the section titled “The Depth of Holy Scripture” he echoes Gregory the Great's methodology.

Finally, Scripture has depth, which consists in the multiplicity of its mystical understandings. For, besides its literal meaning, in many places it can be interpreted in three ways: allegorically, morally, and anagogically. Allegory occurs when by one thing is indicated another which is a matter of belief. The tropological or moral understanding occurs when, from something done, we learn something else that we should do. The anagogical meaning, a kind of "lifting upwards," occurs when we are shown what it is we should desire, that is, the eternal happiness of the blessed. (13)

Interestingly, there's a metaphor of depth with regards to scripture. There's a hiddenness or shrouded essence in the truth. What this depth-metaphor does, though, is justify, in some sense, how important and vital tropes can be for right-living and understanding, not to mention pure invention. This is another return to the overall dichotomy of proper and improper. Language, as

previously seen, can be beautiful in its own right without a need for turning. But in fact, it is here, with Bonaventure, where turning is exactly what's needed to get the most out of the scripture.

### 1.2.3 Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon* (1130)

In Ivan Illich's commentary on Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon*, he suggests that "Reading, as Hugh perceives and interprets it, is an ontologically remedial technique" (11). Reading is remedial because it's a remedy or a curative. And although reading is restorative, there still needs to be a way or a guide to get there. Hugh was a philosopher and theologian, and he composed *Didascalicon* as a guide to the divine through the arts. Reading—moreover, reading the scriptures—was yet another way toward getting closer to Christ. In book 5, chapter 2 of *Didascalicon*, Hugh offers the same approach that Gregory established before him and Saint Bonaventure would continue afterward. Hugh's reading method follows the triad of "history, allegory, and tropology" (120)—that is, a literal reading, an allegorical reading, and the moral reading. Where he differs from the other patristic readings is his reluctance to "over-interpret" or see signs where there may be none. It is, in a way, a return to the proper—the Greek *to prepon*.

To be sure, all things in the divine utterance must not be wrenched to an interpretation such that each of them is held to contain history, allegory, and tropology all at once. Even if a triple meaning can appropriately be assigned in many passages, nevertheless it is either difficult or impossible to see it everywhere. [...] *Thus also is honey more pleasing because enclosed in the comb, and whatever is sought with greater effort is also found with greater desire.* (120, emphasis added)

Hugh ends with a pithy statement that doesn't refute his prior sentiment but which at least complicates it. He enacts this complication by way of, again, a *rhetorical trope*: the maxim. Here the maxim compresses the difficult work of reading scripture into apiary imagery. The trope suggests, and almost delights in, the difficult as the most uplifting; a disposition toward exegesis that repeats the depth metaphor. Adding "depth" to "difficulty" leads back to the original debate about language as beautiful in and of itself and in need of turning. In this sense, does scripture need turning or is it proper just as it is? It should be noted that, quite fittingly, the trope Hugh uses, the maxim, itself offers a comment on moral action, if not an outright call for it—which is by design in tropological reading.<sup>11</sup>

#### 1.2.4 "The Ordinary Gloss on Jonah"

In biblical terminology, a "gloss" was an exegetical tool for studying the Bible; it was both formally and educationally inventive. Glosses started as notes and commentaries by the patristic writers. Ryan McDermott's introduction to his translation of "The Ordinary Gloss on Jonah" explains how the "gloss" worked in the medieval period: "As the foremost vehicle for medieval exegesis, the Gloss framed biblical narratives for a wide range of vernacular religious literature, from Dante's *Divine Comedy* to French drama to a Middle English retelling of the Jonah story, *Patience*" (424). A gloss could, depending, contain one, or all, of the three typical readings: the literal, the allegorical, and the tropological. In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, what's now known as the *Glossa Ordinaria* was established, being an accepted compiling of commentaries. The following commentary on the Book of Jonah is from the *Glossa Ordinaria*.

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<sup>11</sup> It's hard not to interpret the beehive image as an analogy for the hard graft that readers of biblical scripture will and must endure. But the maxim is designed to have the reader of the Bible as the thing or person hunting out the honey from the honeycomb.

A direct and clear example of a tropological reading is at Jonah 1:5. “And Jonah went down to the inner parts of the ship, and slept with a heavy slumber.” The marginal gloss (the commentary printed to surround the scripture) reads as follows for the words “and slept”:

Tropologically: Many are those who, sailing with Jonah and having their own gods, hasten to go to the contemplation of joy, but after Jonah had been caught by lot, and by that man’s death the storm of the world was calmed, and peace was restored on the sea, then the one God will be adored, and spiritual offerings will be sacrificed, which, according to the literal sense, they did not have in the midst of the waves. (429)

Without diving too deep into interpretation here, one could assume that the moral action to be taken from the tropological reading of “and slept” is about “spiritual offerings” and making a sacrifice in the absence of having nothing to sacrifice, much as the sailors on the ship. What’s even more striking about the whole system of interlinear and marginal commentary is that the literary apparatus still exists, to some degree, in current study bibles and in the methods of homilies or biblical preaching, wherein a pastor turns scripture into a call for spiritual and moral action. In this way, troping is a long and well-established mode of reading in the Christian world.

### 1.3 MEDIEVAL MUSICOLOGY

From a biblical method of reading the holy word, tropes and troping move into a Catholic form of singing or praising god starting in and around the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> Tropes become,

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Evans, in his article “Some Reflections on the Origin of the Trope” (1961), writes that “By the middle of the 11th century, the art of troping in its original sense was for all intents and purposes dead” (130), which makes one wonder if the job of the trope—to notify and educate—had done its job so thoroughly or so poorly; either way, it was destined to die.

compositionally, a section of chant in the Mass, used in conjunction with the Introit, often a psalm sung as the priest approaches the altar with the Eucharist. Musicologist Richard Taruskin explains that connecting a novel musical theme (the trope) with an established one (the Introit) “was by casting the new one as a preface, to amplify and interpret the old one for the benefit of contemporary worshippers” (n.p.). What, if anything, is carried over from ancient rhetorical notions of troping in the medieval musical version? If troping can continually be thought of as a play between proper and improper, then it seems clear the *tropus* as a musical element is full of propriety. Rhetorically, troping, in theory, walked the line between obscurity and clarity, propriety and impropriety, whether or not that was *actually* the case. Yet in the Catholic Mass, tropes and troping created conformity and harmony in a sacred setting. This knitting together is important for where the troping took place. Taruskin elaborates:

The primary sites of troping were the antiphons of the Mass proper. Attached most characteristically to the Introit, the trope became a comment on the Mass as a whole, as if to say, “We are celebrating Mass today, and this is the reason.” ... While troping became a very widespread practice as the Cluniac reform spread over large areas of France, Germany, and northern Italy, the individual tropes were a more local and discretionary genre than the canonical chant. A given antiphon can be found with many different prefaces in various sources, *reflecting local liturgical customs*. (n.p.)

What’s telling about the *needs* of the trope is its hyper-local sensibility, especially with respect to the liturgy, or the established form of worship. In other words, the necessary orderliness of the Introit, the Mass—the whole liturgy, really—also came to turn on the few words of the trope that *daily* kept the Mass a living and local event. The trope becomes a pragmatic compositional act, one that performed a complex of aims: to inform, to create pleasure, to aid in worship, to be a

reminder or liturgical calendar, and so on. What should be clear from the musicological definition of the trope is that it was an autonomous piece of writing that prefaced an existing piece to help build onto and off of it. Thus, the need for a harmonious interaction in melody and word. That tropes were dependent on prior existing work in order to come into being would prove the regenerative ability of turned/troped language to stay fresh on a day-to-day basis.

## 1.4 HIGH MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN

### 1.4.1 Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova* (1210)

Not much is known about Geoffrey of Vinsauf's life. What is extant of his writing is the *Poetria Nova*, a medieval guide to the arts of poetry. He approaches troping positively and eagerly, and while working through the "Ornaments of Style," he claims that the adornment of language has two sides: internal and external. According to Vinsauf, "First examine the mind of a word, and only then its face; do not trust the adornment of its face alone. If internal ornament is not in harmony with external, a sense of propriety is lacking" (42). Before looking into his notion of propriety, note his use of tropes. Both metaphor ("mind of a word") and catachresis ("face [of a word]") appear. I label the phrase "face [of a word]" as catachresis because while a word can't have a mind or "an inside," a word is, for all intents and purposes, a symbol and a surface; although the phrase can also be seen as a metaphor, of course, but in this instance, Vinsauf's referring, not to graphology, but to the *initial* meaning of the word. That's why "face" seems more of a stretch. Also, catachresis is where metaphor is employed to give a label to something that doesn't yet have one. In this case, a word has an immediate impression upon a person—"a face"—but it would be harder to say just exactly what the "mind" of a word is. It may be difficult

to understand a phrase like “the mind of a word,” so metaphorically rich in itself. But Vinsauf’s use of “inside” and “outside” could be substituted as the equivalent terms for “mind” and “face.” In his method, he is much like Aristotle—proposing the dichotomy of propriety vs. impropriety.<sup>13</sup> Yet it may be hard to reconcile Vinsauf’s acknowledgment of a classical sense of propriety while simultaneously pushing the boundary of that propriety in the “mind” metaphor. Which is to say that Vinsauf is one of the few grammarians/rhetoricians who’s been so free in dropping-in tropes while explaining them.<sup>14</sup> His tropes aren’t merely mentioned as examples but used with the aim of harnessing explanatory power. Here’s another example in his description of metaphor: “When you transpose a word whose literal meaning is proper to man, it affords greater pleasure, since it comes from what is your own. *Such a metaphor serves you as a mirror, for you see yourself in it and recognize your own sheep in another’s field*” (44, my emphasis). Why is this important? Because to have propriety is to have a sense of context, audience, setting, and where else could one feel free to trope than in a discussion of tropes? Yet, this isn’t an frequent habit in grammars and rhetorics of the medieval period, to say nothing of the classical era. The tendency is to keep impropriety—an outgoingness and ultra-ornamental quality—hidden or reigned in. Leave the flash to the poets, as it were.

In a subsection titled “Difficult Ornament,” Vinsauf proceeds through examples of ten tropes<sup>15</sup>, offering his own examples of the tropes as used. The first is metaphor. In using what’s non-human to describe a human, he suggests this: “When I see what that object’s proper vesture is, in the aspect similar to man’s, I borrow it, and fashion for myself a new garment in place of

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<sup>13</sup> E.g. while discussing the craft of metaphor, Vinsauf writes it is to be “ready visible to the mind’s eye” (45-46), an echo of Aristotle’s injunction, including the latter’s belief in the inspired talent needed to fashion a metaphor.

<sup>14</sup> As noted by Marjorie Curry Woods in *Rhetoric as Pedagogy*, pg. 74.

<sup>15</sup> Metaphor, onomatopoeia, antonomasia, allegory, metonymy, hyperbole, synecdoche, catachresis, hyperbaton, and anastrophe. All of which are usual suspects in discussions of tropes.

the old” (43). In other words, Vinsauf is definitely of a prescriptive metaphoric model: there are proper and improper ways to fashion them and understand them. He’s often giving examples to the reader to guide them. So perhaps what at first blush seemed improper is actually quite proper, seeing that the *Poetria Nova* can be considered a pedagogical setting. And while his outlook on troping is overwhelmingly positive, his explanation for it focuses on *otherness* and *foreignness*. He does this, again, with more metaphors: “if a word is old, be its physician and give to the old new vigour...Let it avoid its natural location, travel about elsewhere...There let it stay as a novel guest, and give pleasure by its very strangeness” (43). The idea that a word is a traveler and can find places—*topoi*—that see it as strange and odd, pre-dates what later will be called by the Russian Formalists “defamiliarization” or “enstrangement” (and with a little stretching, catachresis). But Vinsauf also calls the old word “a guest” and so guests leave at some point. His controlling metaphor of travel indicates that there’s a coming and going of foreign or odd words.

And despite his encouragement of troping both in treatise and in the writing of the treatise, Vinsauf is set against obscurity or layering: “Yet be weighty in such a manner that your subject is not hidden under a cloud...Words are instruments to unlock the closed mind; they are keys, as it were, of the mind. One who seeks to open what is closed does not set out to draw a cloud over his words” (54).<sup>16</sup> He goes on to warn writers and speakers about being too lofty or recondite in their speech and word choice. It’s recommended to back down from erudite displays of wordsmithing. “Be of average, not lofty, eloquence,” he says. “The precept of the ancients is

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<sup>16</sup> I would offer that being “weighty” and thus “hidden under a cloud” is a mixed metaphor at worst, and at best, catachresis. One would think that in order to be hidden in a cloud, the words would need lightness in their manner.

clear: speak as the many, think as the few” (55). Vinsauf even gives solace to those enthusiastic verbalists who are desperate to show off (much like Vinsauf himself...).

You may be a genius, he concedes lamentingly, but don’t flaunt it.

#### 1.4.2 George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589)

In the third book and first chapter of Puttenham’s handbook *The Arte of English Poesie*, wherein style—what he calls “exornation”—is explored, he proclaims it should “delight and allure as well the mind as the ear of the hearers with a certain novelty and strange manner of conveyance, disguising it no little from the ordinary and accustomed” (149). Puttenham lines up with, say, Vinsauf three and a half centuries before, by suggesting a “strange manner of conveyance” for ornament and troping. Novelty and strangeness become keywords for these kinds of rhetorical handbooks, but not the kind of novelty or strangeness often thought of today. Even in the realm of “the strange” propriety still takes hold; for example, Puttenham, using similes, writes that troping makes up “the flowers as it were and colours that a Poet setteth upon his language of art, as the embroiderer doth his stone and pearl, or passements of gold upon the stuff of a Princely garment” (150)—and he goes on to describe how using the art of poetry—figures and tropes—is to be done in a temperate manner, because if not, it would be like a woman applying lipstick to her forehead or chin instead of her lips, and she’d look ridiculous.

Once again, there’s deep seated need to make thoughts and speech even, just, harmonious; in short: Aristotelian. It appears the whole idea is not to scare or wobble or provoke the reader. The idea is to keep some kind of steady keel for them. Which isn’t bad, necessarily. But it’s interesting in that one may retroactively ask these rhetoricians: Who’s to say what is moderate and what isn’t? The writer? The reader? The critic? Moreover, what if you don’t want

to stay even or calm in troping? If we consider that Puttenham died in 1590, and that Shakespeare began to write his first play *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* sometime between 1589 and the first years of the next decade, we would be hard pressed to say that some of the most read and watched writers in England obeyed this balanced approach. Further, we may safely assume that Shakespeare was familiar with the *Arte* and, if so, didn't necessarily abide by the suggestions laid out therein. So the answer to "Who's to say what is moderate and what isn't?" is everyone—the writer, the audience, the language, everything working together.

In chapter two, which is exhaustively titled "How our writing and speeches public ought to be figurative and if they be not do greatly disgrace the cause and purpose of the speaker and writer", Puttenham tells us that figuration/troping is necessary because it's in writing and public speeches and is necessary to differentiate from "ordinary talke" (151). He then relates a story about a "Knight of Yorkshire" who ends up in Parliament, and while a smart and upstanding gentleman, spoke "an alehouse tale" in front of the Queen during an assembly. Puttenham goes on to say that this is unfortunate, since his position in Parliament required him to know how to speak publicly. And while he was still a Knight, and good and fine, etc., he still had a clear *need* of figurative speech; that is, for Puttenham, speaking eloquently and cunningly cannot be done without figuration (152).

Puttenham critiques figures and tropes having a duplicitous and wily way about them. They can trick judges in court. But if a pleader is using them to make a case, then they are acceptable. But then he veers toward moderation again, and by way of an astute and precise knowledge of audience, he claims, one can "keep[ ] measure" with figures and "cannot lightly do amiss" should the speaker possess "special regard to all circumstances of the person, place, time, cause and purpose he hath in hand" (167); if someone possess all this correct orientation, then

they can steer the improper parts of rhetoric into the properly artful. By this point in history, regarding troping, especially with Puttenham, there is a sense that the action/art of troping is working best if in the hands of a sociable and knowledgeable person, one who has a hold on the ways the world works. Cosmopolitanism and urbanity are the required traits of the one who would trope well and trope for greatest effect. This may be because in order to turn anything in your direction, for your own fortunes, you need to have the widest vision of the world. But then, this doesn't help explain how an untraveled glover's son from Stratford changed the future of the English language for centuries to come.

#### 1.4.3 Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (1593)

Defining tropes, Peacham calls them “an artificall alteration of a word, or a sentence, from the proper and natural signification to another not proper, but yet nigh, and likely” (n.p.). Peacham doesn't stray too far from most traditional notions of troping and style. And I'll just give one longer quotation to show an example of how excessively middle-of-the-road he is when speaking of troping.

This excellent Art of translating [i.e. troping], among other profitable rules commendeth to us this necessarie observation to begin with, that is to say, that those things ought to be equal in proportion, which we purpose to compare by translation, that is, of foure things two ought always to be compared to two, as for example, we say the flower of age, here in this translation the herbe and the flower is compared to man and his youth, for the same that the flower is in the herbe, the same is youth in man. By the same proportion the Poet saith, unhappy Dido enflamed is, in this example Dido and her love is compared to the wood and the fire. (n.p.)

This almost burdens troping with a mathematical obligation by creating a one-for-one lock-and-key procedural system. Yet, what this kind of notion points toward is a conception of troping as *a reversible activity*. Why reversible? Because if a poet or writer can trope their way *into* a pleasing phrase, then it's the reader's job—after enjoying the ornament—to untrope the trope and read the “actual” or “true” meaning. To find a way *out* of it. Troping, especially here with Peacham, is taught as a way to enthusiastically keep readers from falling asleep or staying aurally tickled—in short: it's brain candy. And like candies or sweets, it's to be taken in moderation for fear of rotting the mental teeth.

#### 1.4.4 Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*

Giambattista Vico, a major figure of Enlightenment rhetoric and philosophy, is known primarily for *The New Science*. This book, Vico's deals with philosophy, history, sociology, rhetoric, and (in a nascent form) anthropology. Vico argues for a cyclical movement in human civilizations from poetic and theologically based societies, to those establishing law, order, and rationality. *The New Science* meant to counteract the then dominant Cartesian strain of rationality. Vico's goal aimed at carving out a space for what couldn't be pinned down and mathematized. With regard to language, Vico believed it was essential to developing societies and was a (Kenneth) Burkean pre-cursor, in that he made central to rhetoric the four tropes of metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and irony. (His highlighting of these tropes not only influenced Kenneth Burke, but also much later, Harold Bloom.)<sup>17</sup> In the section “The Poetic Logic,” Vico contends that “All the

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<sup>17</sup> In *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom writes that “Vico's poetic logic charmingly associates tropes with...necessary errors” (94). I agree. In fact, the whole dissertation could be seen in a Vichian light—that tropes themselves are errors, or instigated impropriety, and that the misfit tropes are troping Vico's origins of tropes. Bloom's playing up of metalepsis deflates this a bit.

first tropes are corollaries of [a] poetic logic” (116). For Vico, poetic logic was an extension of a poetic metaphysics, a whole way of seeing and living, wherein the earliest sophisticated human cultures gave attribution of worldly matters to unseen forces (prior to a development of systematized rationality or empiricism). So, for example, “the first poets attributed to bodies the being of animate substances, with capacities measured by their own, namely sense and passion, and in this way made fables of them. Thus every metaphor so formed is a fable in brief”—and so when the “theological poets” of pre-literate days spoke, they “denot[ed] all flowers...by Flora, and all fruits by Pomona” (116, 115). These were moves that condensed imagery and explanation into an informative and linguistic short-cut. And, as Vico writes:

From all this it follows that all the tropes (and they are all reducible to the four types above discussed [i.e. metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, irony]), which have hitherto been considered ingenious inventions of writers, were necessary modes of expression of all the first poetic nations, and had originally their full native propriety. But these expressions of the first nations later became figurative when, with the further development of the human mind, words were invented which signified abstract forms or genera comprising their species or relating parts with their wholes. And here begins the overthrow of two common errors of the grammarians: that prose speech is proper speech, and poetic speech improper...(118)

It’s hard to overstate the last sentiment. But it would make sense, as seen through Vico’s thesis, that grammarians (or philosopher, historians, mathematicians, rationalists of any stripe, etc.) would claim that poetic speech—and by extension tropes—isn’t appropriate or worthy or useful.

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Although, he still recognizes that, as a trope, metalepsis is a vital component of poetic invention. Point being, what I’m pointing at is how, while tropes are necessary mistakes, to some degree, there are still a sub-set of tropes that are over and against the original impropriety. They are, I suppose, *properly improper*.

As we saw with Gregory the Great, troping is *creative* for a way toward making “clear” what one thinks and writes and is *creative* for conceptual thoughts, though not just in a creative writing kind of way. Tropes aren’t just ornamentation here. They are effective and necessary for getting right what one is thinking and trying to communicate.

## **1.5 FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE & TWENTIETH CENTURY CRITICISM**

### 1.5.1 Friedrich Nietzsche

Barilli writes that in the nineteenth century the avant-garde writers like Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Valéry started to “reject the generic notion of poetic diction, and therefore somehow help bring about the divorce of poetry from rhetoric” and, more importantly, they dispensed with “transparency of language and reintroduce[d] the idea of its opacity” (110). This reversal “emphasiz[es] language, which will shake rhetoric from its fixed routine and force it to rethink tropes and schemes”—a move that carries momentum into the work of their contemporary Friedrich Nietzsche (110). It was toward the end of the century that Nietzsche drove a decisive wedge between the notions of tropes as misfit, overstepping propriety, and tropes as a way forward into a new way of speaking or thinking; this is especially germane where the most aberrant (or shocking) error in language can be capitalized on and accepted. For Nietzsche troping formed a drive in the human, one of many. And this “drive-to-metaphor” will continue to pump and push forward in blind creative fashion even though the new tropings and metaphors the drive builds will eventually turn solid and into “a regular and rigid new world...built up...as a prison fortress” (254). Meaning, every new verbal strangeness, however formed, is destined to become banal.

With Nietzsche, one should abandon literal notions that there's a "mind of a word," that there's any literal depth or height to a language or a word. Shed the Platonic view of things in favor of the rhetorical one. In his notes for a university course on rhetoric, Nietzsche says, All language is troping and figuration. And in the marketplace of linguistic ideas, what works or doesn't work is in the hands of the language user, what Nietzsche calls "the individual speech artist": "but [language] is determined by the fact that the taste of the many makes choices. Only very few individuals utter *schemata* [figures] whose *virtus* [virtue, worth] becomes a guide for the many" (25). These utterers represent artists—or even those who may fall backwards into a figure: the kairotic student, the inspired politician or teacher, etc.—who coin or craft newer words and phrases and in newer ways. Though their creations are under judgment from "the many," by a process Nietzsche isn't clear on, there's still the lifecycle of troping. "If [the figures] do not prevail, then everyone appeals to the common *usus* [use, practice] in their regard, and speaks of barbarism and solecism. A figure which finds no buyer becomes an error. An error which is accepted by some *usus* or other becomes a figure" (25). Nietzsche's most fascinating point here is how those who take on new figures risk loss. *Caveat emptor*, it seems.<sup>18</sup> To bring forth new language in a trusted setting—to risk impropriety in society, whether immediate or wide-ranging—is to test the limits of *to prepon*. Perhaps to test *to prepon* with the hope of bending or breaking it.

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<sup>18</sup> Arthur Danto argues that Nietzsche's theories on language use and error becoming figures is much more philosophically and psychologically significant for societies: "Deviant speech and deviant experiences are dangerous in two distinct ways. They are dangerous to society insofar as they pose any threat to the conceptual scheme so long ago worked out, so easy and so comfortable, with which we have housed ourselves in the shifting world" (41). To create new speech is to suggest a new way to think, which threatens the status quo, and thus threatens the utterer's future place in society.

These lecture notes prefigure, as it were, Nietzsche's more famous essay on language, "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense" wherein he proposes a yet more bolstered, and poetic, account of just how arbitrary and groundless language is. The most famous passage begins with the question, "What is truth?" Nietzsche's answer is as follows:

a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations which were poetically and rhetorically heightened, transferred, and adorned, and after long use seem solid, canonical, and binding to a nation. Truths are illusions about which it has been forgotten that they *are* illusions, worn-out metaphors without sensory impact, coins which have lost their image and now can be used only as metal, and no longer as coins. (250)

To justifiably unpack this passage could take hundreds of pages, but suffice it to say that Nietzsche's outlook on truth is based around language—and language is an ever-shifting construction of the human animal who began to communicate millennia ago through poetic language and which, over time, slowly lost its poetry and metaphoricity and then *died*, becoming what one understands as literal phrases. The same goes for concepts as made up of language. And if language is considered true, and concepts built with language are true, then where are language users, he seems to imply?

Nietzsche calls these initial poetic utterances "the mass of images that originally gushed forth as hot magma out of the primeval faculty of human fantasy" (252). Thus, when one literally says the phrases "the face of a mountain" or "the leg of a table" these once started as metaphors but they have now encrusted into literal truth. Nietzsche didn't find this process dispiriting or negative: on the contrary, he found it liberating, especially from limiting philosophies based on

Platonic or Kantian thought. Which is to say, if language was built the way he described, then there is no *noumenal* thing-in-itself or an ethereal plane of perfect forms.

Troping becomes more legitimate at this point because Nietzsche lays out the long history of it as the basis of human language. All there had been, has been, and will be is figuration and the constant birth and death of odd and erroneous words. “[O]nly insofar as man forgets himself as a subject,” Nietzsche writes, “indeed as an *artistically creative* subject, does he live with some calm, security, and consistency”—because to focus on the creation of language is to constantly question the notion of truth, which, while “made up” to some extent, is necessary for human life (252). Humans need “everyday truth,” “truth-as-lived,” truth in a phenomenological sense. And so Nietzsche’s devastating point is that while humans need “calm, security, and consistency,” they also need to *not forget* that they’re “an artistically creative subject” that sculpts language to our requirements and desires.

Humans always make up new words and always have, and so troping and erroring is *a part of the linguistic process*. This isn’t a radical idea or new with Nietzsche—far from it. Aristotle knew what was going on but he had to put a governor on speech—which may look from our contemporary view like a *real and true moderation*, but which is actually much more restrictive than it needs to be. One could conceivably ask: Is it any wonder that Modernism followed on the heels of Nietzsche?<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Right after Nietzsche came Ferdinand de Saussure and his semiological claim that the “sign is arbitrary.” And before Nietzsche’s observations on language, there was Vico, Condillac, and Rousseau; there was Percy Bysshe Shelley’s beautiful claims in the *Defence of Poetry* (1821) that “In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry...Every original language near to its source is in itself the chaos of a cyclic poem” (676-677); and finally, there was Nietzsche’s hero, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s claim in “The Poet” (1843) that “Every word was once a poem. Every new relation is a new word” (294) and the striking claim, “Language is fossil poetry” (296)—a claim that, in four words, can summarize all of “On Truth and Lying.”

### 1.5.2 William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*

In focusing on the rhetoricity of language, Nietzsche also pointed out the multiple perspectives inherent in words—not just from their etymology or their history, but in their different uses within a sentence.

Fifty-seven years after “On Truth and Lying” was written, British critic William Empson presented seven of what he called “ambiguities” in literature, specifically English poetry.<sup>20</sup> To call Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* a study of “tropes” would be a bit of a stretch. Because while ambiguities aren’t classically tropes, they do borrow trope-like qualities. They are device-like in that they may create ambiguity in grammar, use, or rhythm. For Empson, an ambiguity is “any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language” (1). That is, one can appreciate a verbal confusion in the words and language without “sheer misreading”(x), which would instead be a mere solecism. To go over every ambiguity here is beyond the scope of this brief historiography, but I do want to highlight one example to display Empson’s importance for my arguments later.

Empson’s second ambiguity is based in word or word order and “occurs when two or more meanings are resolved into one” (48). I draw on his example of Shakespeare, where Empson finds an ambiguity in a preposition (“of”) in *King Lear*.

Blasts and fogs upon thee.

The untented woundings of a father’s curse,

Pierce every sense about thee. (I. iv. 320.)

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<sup>20</sup> I would argue that these ambiguities, while, naturally, ripest in literature, simultaneously exist in ordinary language use. In fact, I find Empson most elucidating when I apply the ambiguities to student writing.

Empson claims that “The *wounds* may be cause or effect of the *curse* uttered by a *father*; independently of this, they may reside in the *father* or his child” (89, Empson’s emphasis). Which is to say, the reader knows the curse belongs to the father, but is it his to *mete out* or to *suffer*? Is *of* here meaning “belonging to” or “caused by”? There are multiple readings of the line because of the ambiguity of the preposition (and because of whom the curse is from—Lear himself, Goneril, Cordelia? and where is it going?), and Empson’s point is that no matter which meaning the reader takes—despite the author’s intention—the preposition invites sound, valid readings of the *curse* as apt, no matter the origin or the destination.<sup>21</sup>

This kind of ambiguity does point forward to a trope I’ll discuss in the next chapter, that of metalepsis, where one definition explains it as cause and effect swapped. But what makes Empson’s ambiguities so persuasive as mechanisms in language, under the umbrella of troping, is their ability to force a hesitation in the reader—and by extension, the writer, if they’re aware—and a reconsideration in the meaning and direction of words that are often skipped over or assumed to be too plain for subtlety.

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<sup>21</sup> “Further, it is quite unimportant how ambiguity arises...For it is clear in all cases that two interpretations are possible, and as far as the written or spoken word is concerned, it is equally important for both parties. It is therefore a perfectly futile rule which directs us to endeavour, in connexion with this *basis*, to turn the word in question to suit our own purpose, since, if this is feasible, there is no ambiguity. In cases of ambiguity the only questions which confront us will be, sometimes which of the two interpretations is most natural, and always which interpretation is most equitable, and what was the intention of the person who wrote or uttered the words” (sec. 14-15). Quintilian’s take on ambiguity is simpatico with Empson’s, except that Empson wouldn’t seem to buy that the best interpretation is the most natural one.

### 1.5.3 Kenneth Burke, “Four Master Tropes” from *A Grammar of Motives*

“Four Master Tropes” is a short appendix in the back of Burke’s *A Grammar of Motives*. For Kenneth Burke, the four master tropes are metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. And they are all essential to human motivation and to the communicative structure of human language, which is symbolic action. Yet Burke, while never commenting on troping per se, does implicitly approve of and find necessary—possibly fundamental?—the actions of troping.

Using the four master tropes is more than just a rhetorical choice; they appears to be the way our lives are filtered. Since each trope represents another action, Burke shows how some of the basic methods of language-use are funneled through one of the four. Moreover, he claims that in many instances all four of them will, like multiple rivers, reach a confluence and merge. The idea being that if you partake in one trope, you are by some degree partaking in another at some remove. This isn’t as far-fetched as it may seem, considering that some tropes closely share operations.<sup>22</sup> Burke also offers literal correspondences to the tropes, like so:

- Metaphor can be *perspective*
- Metonymy can be *reduction*
- Synecdoche can be *representation*
- Irony can be *dialectic* (503)

For example, the trope of metaphor or *perspective*, can be shown through Burke’s favorite subject: human motivation. Since one can only know about the subject through “a variety of perspectives that we establish [as] a character’s [or subject’s] reality,” one can

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<sup>22</sup> E.g. chiasmus, the reversal of word order, and the cause and effect reversal of metalepsis: “Humans created science, but science created humans.” That is an example of one sentence taking part in two tropes. And there’s an argument to be made that the second part of the sentence is a metaphor.

understand something like human motivation in various ways. Thus, it can be understood as “conditioned reflexes” or “neurosis” or “the love of God” (504). Which is to say that one can only come to a more “complete” understanding of a subject through multiple passes at differing perspectives. As the next three chapters plan to show, this has serious implications for the contemporary composition student, in particular if they’re aiming to subvert the commonplaces of a society, discipline, or a micro-community like a classroom.

So it’s not necessarily troping in the way that Aristotle, Cicero, or Quintilian had described it; it’s not the eloquent use of rhetorical tropes for the turning of a single word in a sentence. As he says, “my primary concern...will be not with their purely figurative usage, but with their role in the discovery and description of ‘the truth’” (503). The master tropes are, to Burke, *ways of getting at reality*. This says something larger about troping—that the power inherent in the tropes, and how they frame our reality, goes unnoticed by most people when they use them, whether knowingly or unknowingly. We should see Burke as taking an important stand in rhetorical theory, using tropes (and troping) and social navigation tools and critical methods to understand human motivation, speech, and writing.

#### 1.5.4 Angus Fletcher

Into the twentieth century, there is no poetry—no writing—without tropes and troping. In his book *A New Theory for American Poetry*, critic Angus Fletcher follows critic John Hollander in supporting not mimesis as a creative impetus but troping. Fletcher renders the motivation this way, that “poets do not so much imitate the world, as they trope poetic forms. Poems are made by troping their own shape, that is, by making a metaphoric or other figural change in some previously invented available form” (148). Thus, there is a necessity, or a future, in troping.

Literality through figurality (a call back to the tropological readings of Gregory the Great). Fletcher explains that writers don't simply work on or change the topic or "subject" in a poem but that "they stretch the form" (148). Why is form more important in this sense than subject? Because "[t]he poet...tropes form, but not substance; the latter act comes into play to serve the former, more fundamental poetic purpose" (151). This reminds me of Gertrude Stein's famous analysis from "Composition as Explanation": "Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition" (513). Stein can be understood to mean that if a composition, the form, is the thing seen, and as each subsequent generation only sees difference in fashion, technology, knowledge, food, and so on, then it would make sense that the form, the shape of the thing seen has to trope to keep up with the times. Troping is adaptation and tradition in the same package. An acknowledgement of the past in the present.

In *The Topological Imagination*, Fletcher continued to investigate "the current linguistic conditions for the use of metaphor" (63) and finds that the cultural change from metonymy to metaphor in the Renaissance and into the Modern era can be explained by I.A. Richards's analysis of metaphor—that of "the tenor and the vehicle." Moreover, he points toward Richards quoting Hamlet's use of the word "crawling" to describe himself: "What should such fellows as I do crawling / between earth and heaven?" The fact that the English language proliferated so much post-Renaissance, says Fletcher, is because Richards's theory is based on an "antithetical troping" of tenor and vehicle. That is, metaphorical transfer, and perhaps troping in general, is powerful not just because of the resemblances between objects, but also because of their dissimilarities. Fletcher adds that this is due to troping wrenching words about so that "meaning acquires a different cognitive shape, a new topology" (66). But what is signally important in his

observation is how meaning's landscape can shift through the displacement of terms through troping. And how troping can help redraw the boundaries of well-worn concepts.

#### 1.5.5 Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*

Bloom claims two main sources of inspiration for his small treatise on poetic influence: Emerson and Nietzsche. It may not come as a surprise to find the latter name because of Nietzsche's opening the way to language as a rhetoricizing element, as mentioned earlier.

According to Bloom, there is a specific and processual movement to the creation of poetry and literature. He seems to imply that without the revisionary "ratios"—the turning from precursors, or troping—that he describes, there literally would be no literary history: "Authentic, high literature relies upon troping, a turning away not only from the literal but from prior tropes" (xix). The ratios are as follows with Bloom's term (from ancient Greek) and the rhetorical term:

*clinamen*, irony  
*tessera*, synecdoche  
*kenosis*, metonymy  
*askesis*, metaphor  
*daemonization*, hyperbole  
*apophrades*, metalepsis

Each new writer not only will, but *must*, turn or, more appropriately for Bloom "repress," the past writer's words (which weigh heavily on the new writer) against themselves and impose a variation on the trope with a different trope by following a series of the above ratios. This whole activity will happen with mistakes. It will be improper and imperfect. It is also expected and accepted.

To clarify, though, "trope" here can mean both a rhetorical trope, e.g. metaphor or simile, or "trope" as an oft-used image or theme or form (if referring back to Fletcher on troping). For

example, a common trope of science fiction is “the first contact story.” In student writing, depending on the class, a common trope could be a literacy narrative or, oddly enough, (to trope a trope) another version of “a first contact” story: that of a relative’s death or a major lifestage event. The point here, as opposed to the past explanations of troping seen, is that Bloom’s work of troping is conscious *and* unconscious at the same time that it’s willed. Troping is conscious because the new writer is always trying to overcome/overwrite the past; and it’s unconscious in that the new new writer represses or unknowingly de-fangs past influences so as to incorporate them in an acceptable fashion. Impropriety was risked in troping by the ancient rhetoricians up to Nietzsche, when tropes were “carried too far” or in the “wrong way,” but Bloom claims that this willfulness is the model for poetic creation.

a trope is *a willing error*, a turn from literal meaning in which a word or phrase is used in an improper sense, wandering from its rightful place. A trope is therefore a kind of falsification because every trope (like every defense, which is similarly a falsification) is necessarily an interpretation, and so a mistaking. Put another way, a trope resembles those errors about life that Nietzsche says are necessary for life. (93)

It’s as if, through Nietzsche to Bloom, the fault and vice of certain tropes—or of just troping too much—is accepted and made a *virtue* of language. (A metaleptic move that would’ve been familiar to Nietzsche.) Or, it’s *not* “as if”—it *is* what Bloom accepts and makes. As opposed to the moral and moderate stance that previous thinkers had put forth—(Aristotle’s moderation and so on)—Bloom capitalizes on this reversal of values. Troping “defend[s] ultimately against the deathly dangers of literal meaning, and more immediately against all other tropes that intervene between literal meaning and the fresh opening to discourse,” he writes, which echoes Richard Poirier’s claims that troping “frees us from the predetermined meanings” (94).

Later, in *A Map of Misreading* Bloom writes that “meaning, as difference, rhetorically depends upon troping, [and] we can conclude that tropes are defenses, and what they defend poems against are tropes in other poems, or even earlier tropes in the very same poems” (75). And as if to condemn the tropes and forms of expression to a sacrificial world elsewhere, he claims that they “can relate to life, but only after first relating to other figurations” (75). This can be read as saying that tropes are, in a way, cannibalistic. That is, in whatever work they find themselves in (poetry, high prose, student writing), tropes are necessarily active in reconstituting themselves and digesting their previous versions for the future. For Bloom, it seems, tropes are endlessly struggling in a push/pull of metabolizing each other or fending each other off.

#### 1.5.6 Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading*

Turning, literally, to Paul De Man, one faces a controversial literary critic who endorsed deconstructionism and tropological readings. With de Man there is a strong emphasis on the Nietzschean view of rhetoric-as-tropes (rather than rhetoric-as-persuasion) and the re-imposition of rhetorical theory as a method of criticism. For him the “turns” of literature, the figurative elements making up the texts (what Bloom claimed as necessary), were to be read tropologically—which is to say that, at the bottom of everything, there was always, and always will be, rhetoric. Rhetoric as an interactive collection of tropes was seen to prove the instability of language as a system. This is because “Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of *referential aberration*” (10, emphasis added). Deconstruction, the method embodying this, removes the explicit boundaries between what is traditionally called novels, poems, belle lettres, and any other written text. Which is to say, what a text might be saying, or trying to say, and what a reader/critic can eventually come away with is always at

odds; and so one is left with “referential aberration.” For some, this is a boon, since all texts will fall onto a level playing field for the deconstructing critic. (Which makes sense since, both a notice posted in a city hall bulletin board and a contemporary lyric poem can both use rhetorical tropes or figures in their composition, much as a student in college can along with a professional novelist.) Thus, with a returned focus on figurality (and on reading for figurality), it’s no surprise that de Man gives over three chapters in *Allegories of Reading* to Nietzsche and the rhetoricity and figural make-up of his philosophical works like *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Genealogy of Morals*.

For de Man, rhetoric has gained a see-saw reputation in that, on one hand, it’s a questionable tool that abets lies, subterfuge, and casuistry; on the other, it’s a shrunken assistant to Roman orators and their grammar books (130). Then there are those in the history of philosophy and literature--i.e. Nietzsche--that congratulate and applaud the power of rhetoric as an epistemological destabilizer. These, and others (viz. Rilke, Proust, Rousseau), he reads with a rhetorically astute eye for the tropes that motivate and undermine their work. De Man’s point being that tropes and tropological reading is the “fundamental” way of reading (despite there being no fundament...). Through rhetoric, and turning tropes, a reader can best, but not finally, get at what texts are up to.

Via Nietzsche de Man argues that “[c]onsidered as persuasion, rhetoric is performative but when considered as a system of tropes, it deconstructs its own performance” (131)—but it doesn’t deconstruct for any reason other than tropes are tiny methods, and clear ones too. De Man continues in this vein, stating, “Rhetoric is a *text* in that it allows for two incompatible, mutually self-destructive points of view, and therefore puts an insurmountable obstacle in the way of any reading or understanding” (131). And yet, somehow, readers persistently glean

meaning and reason from narratives rife with rhetorical tropes! It's instructive to compare de Man's insistence on "insurmountable obstacles" and "incompatible" perspectives with Empson's ambiguities. At least in Empson there's a nod toward the rhetorical as a performance and as a system of tropes, and a system that works both sides, not for obstinance, but for the layering that enriches meaning.

What is the propriety level in de Man? It seems nearly non-existent. There is no evaluative element here. Every word is almost set to screw (or unscrew) and couple with (or decouple) the next, and so on down the line. And perhaps deconstruction goes way too far here in de Man. Readers are left to ask whether troping, as the "free play of signifiers" that de Man advocates, is a plague or a pleasure upon human consciousness and its rhetorical endeavors.

#### 1.5.7 Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse*

Echoing the tropological elements of de Man is the historian of literary criticism Hayden White, specifically in his *Tropics of Discourse*, where White finds all discourse to be tropological. Thus, all methods of trying to source the truth or make sense of history or literature are tropological or figurative in nature, and as such, discourse prefigures and figures—or makes up and populates—the present world, including history, literature, and sociological observations. This is because the *forms* of discourse are more important than the *contents* of discourse (this is also reminiscent of Fletcher's ideas).

Speaking specifically about historians and historiography, White claims that "if the historian's aim is to familiarize us with the unfamiliar, he must use figurative, rather than technical, language" (94). Why is this the case? Because there is no agreed upon set of terms that have been used throughout history that a historian can reliably deploy to "render[ ] the strange

familiar,” except that which is figurative, in so far as “[a]ll historical narratives presuppose figurative characterizations of the events they purport to represent and explain” (94). Said simply: any discourse that claims objectivity is drenched in figuration, and that discourse should acknowledge this fact.

For White, troping is natural<sup>23</sup> and proper—actually, it goes beyond that to being ineluctable. Troping changes the improper (or unfamiliar) and makes it proper (familiar), not forgetting that the whole process is figurative, not literal. Moreover, our human understanding is undergirded by the action of troping and figuration. According to White—who follows Burke’s list of master tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony—understanding boils down to “rendering the unfamiliar...familiar” and then transferring it to a place “felt to be humanly useful, nonthreatening, or simply known by association” (5). That transformation will be “tropological in nature” and turns on a “troping that is generally figurative” (5).

#### 1.5.8 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. focuses on Signifyin(g), which can be thought of as a black vernacular form of troping in other instances. It comes directly from the Monkey Tales of “Afro-American mythic discourse” which star the titular character. In the basic version, the Monkey tells the Lion he’s been insulted by the Elephant, and the Lion goes to confront the Elephant. In the ensuing misunderstanding, the Elephant beats the Lion who returns to punish the Monkey. The tales revolve around the use and misuse of figurative and literal language. From these tales come the rhetorical trope of Signifyin(g).

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<sup>23</sup> By “natural” I mean nothing metaphysical, but something like “inherent” or “intuitive.”

Gates lays out the history and lineage of Signifyin(g) through a series of readings in African-American literature, in novels like Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*. The troping is vernacular because of the oral history, and because "[f]ree of the white person's gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms" (xxiv). Double-play leads to "double-voic[ing]," the switch-backing, tricking, and messing with language that always has a hand in ludic ways. And double-play leads to "[r]epetition and revision [which] are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use" (xxiv). For Gates, revision is specifically "tropological revision": "the manner in which a specific trope is repeated, with differences, between two or more texts" (xxv).

Signifyin(g) is aimed at indirection and implication and is learned between children--or passed between adults to adolescents--as rhymes or linguistic dexterity that can include playful insults or shaming, and much else besides (72-75). Gates compares Signifyin(g), which can be incredibly hard to define, as an "exceptionally complex system of rhetoric," something on the order of the Ancient Greek *paideia* (75).<sup>24</sup> It is made of black rhetorical figures and figuration, and Gates claims that Signifyin(g) itself is a trope-of-tropes *and* a metaphor for black troping. Signifyin(g) also means the use of rhetorical tropes in highly rhetoricized situations; situations that are unusually aware of language use and figuration. It also relies on a playing up of the signifier against the signified; and, the troping emphasizes the unstated message over the stated one. In the Monkey tale, it's the Lion, tricked by the monkey, who "reads...discourse literally,"

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<sup>24</sup> Gates elaborates on why it's so difficult: "This difficulty of definition is a direct result of the fact that Signifyin(g) is the black term for what in classical European rhetoric are called the figures of signification" (81).

while the monkey “speaks figuratively” (85). Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, a scholar on signifying, elaborates: “the correct semantic...or signification of the utterance cannot be arrived at by a consideration of the dictionary meaning of the lexical items involved and the syntactic rules for their combination alone” (qtd. in Gates, 85-86). This prefigures Richard Poirier’s statement in *Poetry & Pragmatism* about troping being salutary and the dictionary being no help in trying to nail down certain terms constantly troped. So with troping there is no classically stable and explicit reference. Not that troping is wholesale relativism, but that it needs and thrives on indirect means.

Black troping, or Signifyin(g), also maps onto Harold Bloom’s revisionary tropes from *The Anxiety of Influence*, and Gates creates a chart to show how this relationship looks and how classical tropes overlay with Bloom’s ratios and the Yoruba or Afro-American equivalents.

It should also be noted that not just literature possesses the power of Signifyin(g) or troping. Musically, jazz best embodies Gates’s troping and Signifyin(g). It’s a form rife with repetition and difference; a form that playfully toys with innovation while knowingly keeping a hand on tradition. Gates describes, for example, how Jelly Roll Morton troped on Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” (1916) with his own “Maple Leaf Rag (A Transformation)” (1938). The rhythm and order is changed just enough that “Morton’s composition does not ‘surpass’ or ‘destroy’ Joplin’s; it completely *extends* and tropes figures present in the original” (63). This extension is *vital* in jazz; it’s lifeblood, really. It’s also *a key* that allows the author/musician to work with a rich tradition of material and *surprise* or *pleasantly shock* the reader/listening audience. This musical extension reaches back to the *tropus* of the medieval period that elaborated or “re-introduced” the *introit* of the chant. Repetition and variation is the bedrock of troping, and troping is the foundation of *creative extension*. It is also an homage in many

instances. Gates asserts that the more “fixed” the text--e.g. “‘April in Paris’ by Charlie Parker, or ‘My Favorite Things’ by John Coltrane”--the greater and “more dramatic” the Signifyin(g) revision. Thus, the most effective trope is the *turning over* of what seems incapable of moving.

## 1.6 IMPLICATIONS

Here at the end I want to return to Paul Butler, whom I quoted at the beginning of the chapter: “It is time for composition and rhetoric to take back the study of style—to redefine the way the conversation is being framed” (123). The forgoing gaze back at troping’s history is one of these (small) steps in redefining the conversation. I turn to Butler again because the next step is deconstructing the notion that a plain style—what I construe as the default, house style of composition students—is all that’s possible, preferable, or better. A plain style as opposed to a style that tropes, a style that I advocate for in his project. In a short section of his entire book *Out of Style*, Butler writes: “much of our discussion of style today stems from beliefs about ‘plain style’ that have become part of our popular culture” (53). This discussion also subsumes the way students are talked to about style and figurative language. Butler goes on to quote historian Kenneth Cmiel, who labels plain style as “a contemporary form of the commonplace...The impulse for simple, declarative sentences is strong in twentieth-century culture” (qtd. in Butler 53). We should expect this impulse to trickle down into education, too. If the style is as ubiquitous as Cmiel holds it is, then it would naturally permeate not just journalism, advertising, or pop culture, but also schooling. As Butler explains,

The way that “plain style” became accessible to all is through its notion of a transparent correctness. If style is transparent, then the only thing left to be concerned about is

correctness, which everyone ostensibly can master. This idea means that the plain style is for everyone—not just the elite. (54)

In contrast to plain style, we've seen throughout this chapter that rhetoricians have given varied attention and various explanation for figuration and troping. Butler's above points are well-taken if what we see throughout the previous centuries is an instinct to separate out and castigate troping as an excess, not an option. But what I've shown is that troping has been seen as a way for communities and societies in religious orders to keep structure and acknowledge daily changes; it's been a way to bring a reader's attention to a spiritual message, or as a way to get closer to a deity; we've seen troping as a method for artists, poets and musicians, to contribute to the greater creative conversation of which their craft takes part. But we've also seen it discussed as a kind of candy shell on top of "raw language." Butler's wider point—and Cmiel's—is that this can't or doesn't stand up. The center cannot hold.

In his book *Motives for Metaphor*, James Seitz considers the teaching and reading of metaphor and figurative language in the composition classroom, and why so many composition textbooks over the past century have downplayed or nearly erased figurative language, leaving metaphor as the sole option or example of figuration or troping (30-35). What he finds is that students aren't "encouraged" to enter into the stream of troping or figuration for fear of losing the reader's attention amidst the overabundant imagery and potential failure of the metaphor.

To close, and to repeat—what I've aimed to do with this radically condensed and selective historiography is put together, in a form of chronological narrative, a display that tries to parse and discuss the various ways troping has taken hold of or been promoted or negotiated among disparate genres, thinkers, and disciplines. Not every definition of troping was consonant with another. In fact, troping turns out to be unique, in some form or fashion, to each rhetorical

generation. Yet what seems evident is that the manner in which troping should be deployed changed quite radically around the late eighteenth century with Nietzsche and has only continued to return, recursively, to the subject of itself, how it operates, how it means, and why it means. From here, I'm going to use this historiography in the subsequent main chapters as a lodestone to the ways students approach their writing, within the types of language games they play, and as a background to the long history they're immersed in. I want this chapter to act as a scaffold for the reader, as a spinal column that the chapters about misfit tropes can link back to and create contrast and context for their use—that is, by first-year students trying to escape *to prepon* for *to aprepes*.

## 2.0 WHEN WILL I DELIVER MYSELF FROM MYSELF?; OR, TROPING AS METALEPSIS

“The fact is that every writer *creates* his own precursors.”

Jorge Luis Borges, “Kafka and His Precursors”

### 2.1. INTRODUCTION & ARGUMENT

In Oscar Wilde’s essay/dialogue “The Critic as Artist,” two aesthetes are discoursing on the role of the critic as opposed to that of the artist. Gilbert, Wilde’s stand-in and mouthpiece, tells his interlocutor, Ernest, that “the critic as being in his own way [is] as creative as the artist,” wherein Ernest replies that he believes all critical work is “purely subjective, whereas the greatest [artistic] work is objective always” (1044-45). Gilbert counters that the greatest of artistic creations, e.g. Shakespeare’s, are entirely subjective, which means “[Hamlet and Romeo] were elements of his nature to which he gave visible form” (1045). Gilbert supports his thesis, too, with an apothegm as Wildean as any written: “For out of ourselves we can never pass, nor can there be in creation what in the creator was not” (1045). The key terms in that sentence are “creator” and “creation” and they are important for how they turn away from their historical meanings.

Essayist and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes of this sentence that “the creator and creation here [is] *secularizing* and *parodying* what Wilde took to be the increasingly outworn

vocabulary of Christianity: Christianity being a language—despite, or because of, his youthful flirtation with Catholicism—he found it intermittently more difficult to speak with conviction” (13, my emphasis). What’s harder to ignore, knowing the context of Wilde’s religious background, is that he finds himself in a constricting situation regarding not just his beliefs but his written composition; it’s a situation where the current terms familiar and available to him appear stale or stagnant or unforgiving. Yet how did he mobilize those terms (“creator” and “creation”) to his needs? Phillips claims Wilde “secularized” and “parodied” them, by turning their meanings around and by transplanting them from the past to the present. Of course, those terms can’t lose their original meaning *entirely*, or the whole rhetorical move would be void.

Wilde, I would argue, troped what was commonly known or accepted about those words and reformed them. Or said a better way: he *redefined* them. Wilde’s use of Christian language to redescribe pagan/artistic modes of being is what’s known rhetorically as metalepsis, or what Harold Bloom alternatively calls “metaleptic reversal,” which is when a present writer attempts to push aside an earlier writer, “substituting early words for late words” (*Map* 74).<sup>25</sup> In Wilde’s case, the earlier terms lose their religious affiliation and are transformed into secular terms. This allows Wilde to move ahead in his argument with the terms he desires, wrested from their

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<sup>25</sup> In a felicitous turn of scholarship, R.J. Williams finds metalepsis (or what he calls “metaleptic transfiguration”) figuratively at the heart of Nietzsche’s idea of “eternal recurrence” in his article “Metaphysics and Metalepsis in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.” Moreover, Williams describes Nietzsche’s use of metalepsis “a parody” much as Phillips found Wilde also engaged in parody. Williams calls Nietzsche’s outlook on parody (found in *The Gay Science*) “invention and creative imitation”—qualities that I claim troping, writ large, espouses (31). Metalepsis and catachresis (discussed in the next chapter) are also analyzed with respect to the New Atheist writings of Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins in Wayne Glausser’s article “The Rhetoric of New Atheism.” Glausser’s prime example of metalepsis is with Sam Harris’s use of “prayer” in a secular context—again, echoing Phillips’s comments on Wilde.

original meaning.<sup>26</sup> But we must see that Wilde's (perhaps unconscious) employment of metalepsis still takes shape as a *form of an argument*.

In her book *Rhetorical Figures in Science*, rhetorical scholar Jeanne Fahnestock has addressed how figures and tropes work as lines of argument. She claims that it may seem unusual, but readers can identify certain figures with “forms of argument or reasons” which traditionally were the “topics”—or *topoi*—of classical rhetorical education (23).<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Fahnestock's point is that this action, i.e. the use of argumentative lines, still exists, but that we may not be fully aware of it. In fact, we may even shun it.

When distinguishing among particular lines of argument or topics ceased to be an educational goal, it is not surprising that the cognate notion of the figures as epitomes of those lines was lost as well. A repertoire of lines of argument is also part of the material of rhetoric and of its sister art of practical reasoning, dialectic...[and] listing types of arguments and using such a prefabricated, one-size-fits-all list as an inventional resource is completely antithetical to contemporary notions of...the spontaneity of invention...For someone to say that they are driven or inspired by general topics or lines of argument rather than by personal insight...would probably seem absurd to most people. (23-24)

Note what Fahnestock is saying between the lines: that we can extract from the form of figurative language “a line of reasoning” or “a condensed or even diagram-like rendering of the relationship among a set of terms” (24).

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<sup>26</sup> The original terms potentially, or most probably, being tropological in and of themselves. And taken tropically, “creator” and “creation” can already be seen to be previous tropes that Wilde then tropes on himself, thus living up to the more classical definition of metalepsis given by Quintilian, which I explain below.

<sup>27</sup> Fahnestock focuses on *antithesis*, *incrementum*, *gradatio*, *antimetabole*, *pluche*, *polyptoton*, but not on the tropes I'm investigating here: *metalepsis*, *catachresis*, and by extension, *enstrangement*. For other interesting work done on figurative language and cognition, see Hart; Turner; Lakoff and Johnson.

What we should take away from the example of Wilde's terms and from Fahnestock's research is that writing difficulties can be dealt or negotiated with by troping. And in the face of a writing problem (nevermind the creative/poetic crisis that Bloom dwells over), student writers have at their disposal, whether consciously or not, a rhetorical trope—metalepsis—that can act as a lever, a time machine, and form of parody all at once, depending on the context or employment. It can act as an argumentative and strategic maneuver.

For student writers, metalepsis shows itself most importantly as a means of choosing one's own source of inheritance. Metalepsis makes it *seem* as if one's compositional and rhetorical choices had *always* been the lineage one descended from, that "every writer creates his own precursor," as Borges oracularly states at the head of his chapter.

## 2.2 SOME VERSIONS OF METALEPSIS

Metalepsis has been given multiple definitions, many of which compete with or confound each other.<sup>28</sup> But Paul de Man has pointed out that "tropes are transformational systems rather than grids" and cannot be expected to, or generally don't, stay static across time (63 n.8). Quintilian explained that metalepsis was meant "to form a kind of intermediate step between the term transferred and the thing to which it is transferred, having no meaning in itself, but merely providing a transition. It is a *trope* with which to claim acquaintance, rather than one which we are ever likely to require to use" (8.6.38). Quintilian's "example" (which I find thin) shows how the Latin words *cano* ("to utter melodious notes, to sing, sound, play") and *dico* ("to say, tell,

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<sup>28</sup> Raphael Lyne also underscores the ambiguity in exactly locating *where* a trope is, and recommends looking at the trope in context, since "[d]eciding whether something is catachresis or metalepsis can come down to judgment rather than logic" (31-32). This is where I find myself often in the delineation of the tropes I've chosen.

mention”) are linked by a third term *canto* (“to sing in praise of something, or to recite to music”). After this example, metalepsis is quickly dismissed. There is no quotation of past literature; there is no example that puts these terms into context. *Cano/dico/canto* are simply laid out to show a transitive relationship and then left alone.

Why would this be problematic? Shakespearean scholar Madhavi Menon, discussing the trope’s ambiguity, asks: “Is metalepsis that which suppresses or that which is suppressed? [...] By figuring the *relation between words*, metalepsis both denies us a face that we can recognize, and provides us with a form that continually changes shape. It is the figure of figurality and, in a sense, the essence of rhetoric” (74-75, emphasis in original). Keeping the trope’s protean nature in mind, it’s for the purposes of this chapter that I rely on four definitions of metalepsis.

(i) *Metalepsis is a compounding of multiple rhetorical tropes in one sentence or phrase* (this version hereafter M1). Both the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *The Handbook to Literature* offer this definition. The latter authors believe that “*metalepsis* seems to be the adding of one trope or figure to another, along with such extreme compression that the literal sense of the statement is eclipsed or reduced to anomaly or nonsense” (Harmon & Holman 307). Since Shakespeare is so rich with this kind of rhetorical troping, consider the example I gave my class in Spring 2017 from *The Winter’s Tale*:

If I prove *honey-mouthed*, let my *tongue blister*,

And never to my *red-looked anger* be

The *trumpet* any more.

(II.2.33-35, my emphasis)

These lines are spoken by Paulina who’s trying to defend her confidant, the queen, against the king’s accusation of adultery. I wouldn’t claim Paulina’s line is nonsense, although it is compressed enough that it does take a number of readings to give up a generative parsing. The

reductive gist of the line is something like, *Let my tongue stop working, if I keep talking so persuasively*. I'll point out four tropes and figures in this line. There's *metaphor*, where the speaker refers to herself as a trumpet (to say nothing of the mixing of metaphors); there's *epithet* in her description of herself as "honey-mouthed"; then there's the lesser known *apagoresis*, which is a statement crafted to stop a certain action: here the action being her own talking; and finally, *cataplexis*, which is a threat for ill-doing, also self-directed toward talking. Again, more often than not, the more popular tropes and figures will show up in student work, e.g. rhetorical questions, hyperbole, simile, personification, etc. But this example should suffice to show how M1 operates.

(ii) *Metalepsis is the reversal of cause and effect, i.e. to have the outcome influence the cause* (M2). Examples of this would be phrases like "pallid death" or "breakneck speed." Death is what causes a person to be pallid as an effect not the other way around. And the speed at which a person moves is the cause of the broken neck.

(iii) Following Harold Bloom in *A Map of Misreading*, *metalepsis is the transfiguration of an old literary work's terms within a new* (M3), i.e. Wilde's example above. Bloom states that "transumption [the Latin name for metalepsis] murders time, for by troping on a trope, you enforce a state of rhetoricity or word-consciousness" (138). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Bloom draws much of his tropological inspiration<sup>29</sup> from Nietzsche and Freud,

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<sup>29</sup> Bloom has recently written in *The Anatomy of Influence* (2011) that he's since stopped recommending his sixfold ratios of creative influence anymore due to their being abused. It's interesting that even Harold Bloom realizes how an idea can grow and move beyond the original boundaries and escape the creator's intentions.

especially when building metalepsis off the Freudian repression model.<sup>30</sup> I will expand past simply literary works and show how M3 works in student writing.

(iv) And then, to a lesser extent, *metalepsis is a narratological move of frame-breaking*, following Gerard Genette (M4). According to Genette's *Narrative Discourse*, metalepsis is the stepping through the narrative frame from diegetic to extra-diegetic or vice versa. For example, when a real-life author mentions to the reader what she plans to do explicitly and directly with the characters, or the inverse where the characters plead or communicate with the presumed author or reader to engage with them, as in *Tristram Shandy* or in much of postmodern fiction (234-237). Genette admits the effect is odd and either contributes to a comedic outcome or one that edges on fantasy (235); and, that "the most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis...that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative" (236). With M4—and this is a key point—the student can bring exactly this absurdity and irreverence to the essay. The student can also generate a sense of doubt in the reader that what they thought they objectively were reading is now subjectively aware of them, and not just the other way around.

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<sup>30</sup> This Bloomian revision through troping also can be seen on a larger level in how most writers work when trying to trope on a trope or renew a trope. E.g. in the fantasy and science fiction genres, certain tropes—say, first contact, time travel, discovering a magical ability, etc.—become places (topoi) of invention, an interesting crossing of place and method. In fact, one could argue that F&SF are dependent on new writers overturning and revising the tropes. For more, see John Clute. See also the site *TV Tropes* for a wider application of this idea across multiple popular media. (One quickly realizes how mired in tropes we are reading the latter, and moreover, that trying to revise a trope is more difficult than it seems.)

## 2.3 STUDENT EXAMPLE ONE

This first example exhibits what I've called M3 & M4. The assignment was the sixth one of the semester, about a month into course called "The Unexamined Life," wherein we read Plato's *Apology*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, and essays by the psychoanalyst and essayist Adam Phillips. In the sixth week, I wanted them to try and establish a preliminary list of key terms for the course, since each semester every class uniquely throws out different concepts for us to focus on. Here was the assignment as I gave it to them.

#6) a. Create a vocabulary—a list of key terms—for this course. Define them in the context of the course.

The responses ranged from traditional essays to straightforward vocabulary lists. The following is in a list and mostly written in Twitter format.<sup>31</sup> There's troping going on in the writer's choice of that form, too—but the context here is that the definitions are untraditional in their execution. They are more like exempla than dictionary definitions.

Philosophical - Tweet: Isn't it crazy how we buy pizzas in circles, cut them into triangles, and store them in cardboard squares man?

Early - Tweet: Sometimes i wake up early and wonder what I'm doing with my life. Evolution didn't have to do work in the morning so why do i?

Confusing - Tweet: \*raises hand\* "kyle what do you think the answer is?" \*kyle answers\* "I don't know, I don't have the answer or expect anything"

Mind-altering - Tweet: Maybe Stevens from *The Remains of the Day* is actually the most happy person ever. Deep

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<sup>31</sup> All student essays in this dissertation will be unchanged from how I received them from the student during the original semester. Revisions will be noted as needed.

Care - In my writing I care a lot. At least I think it seems like I do. When I speak I don't give a fuck. Why is that? We talk in class about grammar and syntax and the use of language and it really seems like in the end none of it actually matters. Our ideas get across one way or another. I write to people, or teachers, or friends (besides texting which involves no thought) maybe 10-20% of the time. When it really boils down, and the solution that is language cools and becomes some gross bubble-filled solid, I come off as a some poser liar but in reality I don't care enough. I can talk in class about how I like milk or how some people add ketchup to jello, but in my writing I feel like I take myself too seriously. Apart from the occasional use of parentheses or expletive seen above, my writing does not reflect who I am and what my opinions truly are. Even here in this very paragraph I'm coming off as too serious or careful. I feel like at least here in this paragraph I'm moving closer towards actually expressing myself, but as you would say this is a "dad lesson" and there is no way I am a dad. I am not responsible enough and I don't like kids.

The first four are clearly sarcastic. While I feel the terms chosen were done in earnest, the exempla written for them is back-handed, which says more about how the student views the terms; he severely questioned them and their use in class. The first and the fourth tweet are mocking and flip in attitude. Not all that unusual for some freshmen composition essays (and a tone I often encourage, if done well). In the third tweet, I am called out specifically, which is the first instance of M4 in his piece. And the term I'm named under is telling, i.e. "Confusing."

Confusing - Tweet: \*raises hand\* “kyle what do you think the answer is?”

\*kyle answers\* “I don’t know, I don’t have the answer or expect anything”

I’m being held accountable through mock dialogue; the character of me is quite nihilistic. This is more properly a caricature of me, because I had asked the class questions that I didn’t know the answers to (a typical pedagogical move of mine). The kind of give and take above was getting tiring to someone who just wanted to hear a solid and stable answer. In a way, this entry solves the “confusion” problem, because the student definitively solves the issue by placing it on me, or at least setting it back at my feet. But the writing problem isn’t just confusion. This student was direct and biting in his critique of me, and, by extension, his classmates (unless the voices in the entries are his own). Trying to create a set of terms to be guided by or work by is difficult, and I think this student’s main problem arrives in the last entry titled “Care” where he’s sussing out what these terms mean.

“Care” is a small essayette in itself. It could be taken as a representative expression of many freshmen level writers I’ve taught while at the University of Pittsburgh. M4 continues here and, while my name doesn’t show up in this one, it’s more of a direct address from outside the confines of the typical essay by falling into second person—“but as you would say.” This is not the kind of second person point of view generally employed by students where they want to ingratiate themselves with the potential reader, e.g. “Imagine if someone offered you a millions dollars, you probably wouldn’t say no,” etc. The student turns to M4 at the end of “Care” after a long build up of self-analysis into his writing-speech habits, and again makes me complicit in what appears to be his inability to “properly” express himself or show a true self. He claims that

what he's getting to in the end isn't actually his. Which leads me to ask: If it isn't his, then whose is it?

Apart from the occasional use of parentheses or expletive seen above, my writing does not reflect who I am and what my opinions truly are. Even here in this very paragraph I'm coming off as too serious or careful. I feel like at least here in this paragraph I'm moving closer towards actually expressing myself

The student is flinging himself into opposite directions in each sentence, trying to settle on where to be. At first, the *very writing* we're reading isn't even him. Then, in the next sentence, we receive confirmation—through a practical and formal analysis of his writing—on *how* this writing isn't his. Then there's reversal (or a paradox), and the writing (in the paragraph, at least, the whole "Care" essayette) is now edging towards a successful expression. So which is it? Is he writing well or is it a horrible failure? Or is it both? (I'm put in mind of the Cretan paradox as I read "Care.") It would be too easy to say this kind of frame-breaking tries to overcome the audience problem, i.e. the issue in freshmen writing where there's no immediate audience to address or convene with. Instead, the student's troping with M4 allows him to get out from under the issue of writing these key term entries with any kind of formal rigorousness.<sup>32</sup> In both cases, the student yokes me onto the situation as a cause and an effect. I instigate the confusion *and* also am confused by the whole class's work/entries. The student proleptically tries to cut his own legs out from under himself before anyone else can.<sup>33</sup>

And all of this comes before the "dad lesson" comment. To put this into context, I'd been telling the class that the typical pat endings to many student essays can sound like "dad lessons," or easily received pieces of folk wisdom or common tropes seen at the end of sitcoms where the

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<sup>32</sup> I still think the entry is rigorous, just not in the way I expected.

<sup>33</sup> This is itself a rhetorical trope called *anesis*.

father kneels down and explains the simplistic moral lesson to his kids in a few lines. “Once I was blind but now I see” kind of conclusions. The struggle for the class was not to end that way. And one method not to do that was to point right at me, the teacher, and thumb the nose by redefining my terms. So the student anticipates a comment from me about the entry being a “dad lesson” and subverts the term, edging on another version of metalepsis, M3. Even if the ending is a “dad lesson,” the student turns the term and drains it of meaning by ending with the impossibility of him being a dad because “I am not responsible enough and I don’t like kids.”<sup>34</sup> Another angle of the writing problem here is a frustration in trying to get around me, in trying to say something that makes sense of how he sees himself as a language user within and without my purview. “Dad lesson” is flipped on its head and made to be less pejorative. Since he feels it’s almost impossible to escape my criticism, the student redefines himself as a non-dad. Thus, a “dad lesson” can now be a classificatory term that can be used without entailing him within it.

Now, it could be easy to dismiss this essay as the product of a student who’s simply pissed-off or frustrated and evading the work—and I’d be willing to entertain arguments in that direction—but I can’t ultimately read it that way. These are serious key term entries and attempts at trying to make sense of the class.

So what’s the writing problem trying to be negotiated here? It is anagnorisis; or, more properly the *avoidance of anagnorisis*.<sup>35</sup> We can call anagnorisis Recognition or the Reveal or Discovery. The term is found in Aristotle’s *Poetics* 1452a (chapter 11), where he states, “A

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<sup>34</sup> A whole essay could be written on how this student defines “father” based off this sentence.

<sup>35</sup> See Johnstone, MacFarlane, and Cave. But Piero Boitani gives a thorough rendering of anagnorisis through early Christian times into the Medieval times in his *The Tragic and the Sublime in Medieval Literature*. It’s also worth mentioning how anagnorisis links up with literary epiphany in student writing and how the misfit tropes under discussion in this dissertation help avoid the classical epiphany for epiphany’s sake.

Discovery is, as the very word implies, a change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus to either love or hate, in the personages marked for good or evil fortune.” Later, in subsequent chapters, he states that Recognition (*anagnorisis*) is a quality of a complex dramatic structure and that there are multiple kinds ranging from less artful to more artful. The point is that the *anagnorisis* is a result of a necessary change in the characters of tragedy. I would argue that students similarly are compelled to end decisively and to discover change in themselves no matter what the assignment tends to be (I address this further in the Conclusion). In an Aristotelian tragedy, the story is over when a character realizes her true identity, e.g. Oedipus discovers he is his wife’s son, etc. But teachers are not often requesting or demanding these dramatic “self-realizations” from student writing. Few to none of my assignments ask for students to excavate their essences in an existential mode. If the general student drive is toward unmasking and realizing all the time (and a good question to ask is where that drive originates), inquiry is no doubt hard to engage in. It will be maddening for the writer trying to compose a list of key terms. What’s bothersome about *anagnorisis* is the inclusion of the ending—the immediate signal for conclusion where the end of the essay means closure. Or worse—insight.<sup>36</sup> In the article “The Dogma of Transformation,” Thomas Newkirk shows how a batch of student essays from the 1930s written at the University of New Hampshire inhabit the mindset and style of a *flaneur*, one who’s dispassionately recording the world around them without passing any kind of judgment or conclusions by arriving at clichéd moralizing. In one example, Newkirk writes that “There is a thoroughgoing ‘gentleness’...no sharp edges, no revelations or reversal, nothing uncomfortable or controversial, no generational tension” (259).

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<sup>36</sup> I could include a whole section here on how literary epiphany has transferred from short fiction in the early 20th c. to the popular media of the late 20th and 21st and has now become a trope/topos of composition.

In essays like my student's above, the format is treated like a math equation. It is treated linearly. They are searching for a decisive and cumulative solution instead of establishing a stopping point. Situations like this are struggles to Have Things Add Up. M3 is the initial attempt to avoid the "dad lesson," but does the final statement successfully avoid anything? At what cost? In his drive to avoid anagnorisis, the student forgets the class and the class's collective project to create key terms that speak back to them and help them map out their actions and thoughts. Instead, the student goes headlong into the validity of his writing, all the while attempting to avoid coming to the end. Anagnorisis is a "cessation of turbulence" according to historian of ancient rhetoric Henry Johnstone (7). This makes sense if we reread the "Care" essayette. The whole thing from front to back is a swirl of aggressive and energetic thought. The metaleptic turn at the end cuts the power on all of the energy and stops the "turbulence." Johnstone goes on to write that "*Anagnorisis* is essential to the seriousness of a tragedy...[because] a false *anagnorisis* could only be the recognition of a false enmity" (7, emphasis in original). This is because, according to Aristotle, anagnorisis either leads to friendship or enmity, where "enmity" is a feeling of ill will or hostility. False revelation leads to recognition of misplaced hostility. If that falls apart, then there is no tragedy; there is no purpose, no seriousness.

The student could very well have defined middle of the road terms, with boilerplate definitions. And yet he decided to go out of his way to burst the frame of the essay, address me, and then reverse the terms I'd been using to exculpate himself or redefine himself with his own terms. If we believe that the avoidance of anagnorisis is the main writing problem to be solved/negotiated, then it would make sense that the writer builds up such a dramatic structure only to have the "cessation of turbulence" at the end.

“Care” reminds me of, and resembles to some extent, a paper that David Bartholomae calls the “Fuck You” paper, a document he received in 1973, in his first composition course at Rutgers, a course he found filled with basic writers (“Tidy House” 313-314). The paper was written by one Quentin Pierce, who was to answer the question “If existence precedes essence, what is man?” after reading an essay by Jean-Paul Sartre. Pierce’s essay has lines like “Man will not survive, he is a asshole” and “This paper is meaningless, just like the book, But, I know the paper will not make it” (313).

My student wasn’t a basic writer; in fact, he was quite an advanced writer. But the similarities of the performance are striking. The trope is unmistakable. As Bartholomae admitted of his class, “I knew enough to know that the paper was, in a sense, a very skillful performance in words” (314). And he also knew enough to keep the paper over all others for decades because it was different, and surprising.<sup>37</sup> The “Fuck You” paper was a performance that deviated from what was normally acceptable (to the 1973-version-of-Bartholomae, anyway), and yet still was able to show that it acknowledged the moves of a certain discourse.

“Care” has none of those issues except that it, too, is a performance, but one that relies on a specific rhetorical trope, in this instance—metalepsis. It tropes on me and my terminology in order to make its point and make it with a level of energy unusual for a Seminar in Composition course. At the end of the essayette, I came away with a rather obscure idea of what “care” even meant for him. If the terms I introduced can be flipped and reversed—troped—then the writer

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<sup>37</sup> Geoffrey Sirc, in *English Composition as a Happening*, has an irreverent and compelling argument for why this Pierce Moment represents a burst of Punk in the early 1970s Composition scene. Sirc calls Pierce’s work “the excess that our pedagogy cannot process” in a jab at Bartholomae’s response to the paper, and as a representative of the “ultra-academic”—an insult, to be sure (260-261). I think Sirc wants more of Pierce’s writings in Composition. If what he wants from it is more explosive and creative composing, then I too support his call; but it still doesn’t even try to ask the work to be aware of itself, which, Punk or No Punk, is still a necessary aspect of writing.

can show how he cares; he can show how care manifests itself in the language and the writing. For other students, metalepsis turned out to be a great source of creative wealth that enables them to enrich their language in a small space.

## 2.4 STUDENT EXAMPLE TWO

The second example is from my Spring 2017 course on “Utopia, Atopia, Dystopia.” The assignment asked the class to try and explain “how language becomes idle,” or, what, to them, was “idling language”? I identified this paper as engaging mostly with M1 (but also, interestingly, with catachresis at some points). The bolding and underlining are my addition and used to explain the essay afterward.

This paper says nothing.

**Idling is the cavity filler of English. I cover the holes with large cement words but ultimately my tooth is still missing.** Idling is using words “perhaps” or “maybe” or a potluck of hedges because I am unsure. I do not start with a point but rather a word that undermines it. Idling is ditching the word angry because angry isn’t *angry enough*, I must be exacerbated because it is sophisticated and long and no one will know that I actually have nothing to say, just a collection of syllables. **Idling is a purple language cop out and I give three examples when I’m trying to make one point because my paper is too short and has more filament than concrete sentences. I am painting over the gaping hole in the wall with big bad profanity** because the shock of fuck is cooler than having something to say. I have no thesis, I have no evidence, but I

have thesaurus.com so I should be safe. **My idling is ten pages with two ideas because my margins look like an orgy of doubtfulness and words I just met a minute ago.** Perhaps this is what I mean. Maybe Christopher Robin was schizophrenic. I could be wrong but Atticus Finch wasn't a racist. Do I want to say, people in sweatshops are suicidal or do I say the body politic whose occupation relates to sweatshop work is fatally depressed with suicidal tendencies? If I idle I will never say what I mean but have an entire paper of meaningless words. And this is why Lewis Carroll got away with Alice because everything was the color of acid and the words meant nothing but sounded like poetry. Why do I need to question your point when the words you use make me feel it in my legs? And now, when I'm at the end of my paper and I have still made no point, at least I have left you with the impression that I have a large vocabulary and I'm never too confident. I guess.

This paper can, I know, sound like a similar type of paper (the first example), but the tone here is much different. It's more nuanced, controlled. It is a *compact* performance. Let's start with the first sentence, which I've bolded. These are the most dense spots of metalepsis. And the underlined sentence, to me, is the hinge of the paper, which I'll explain more below.

Idling is the cavity filler of English. I cover the holes with large cement words but ultimately my tooth is still missing.

The first sentence is a metaphor of a metaphor (M1). It is a trope of a trope. How is this? Firstly, English has no way to be filled in the way she's describing and has no cavities. Secondly, idling has become such a way to do this. This is precisely why George Puttenham referred to metalepsis as "the far-fetcher," as the kind of trope that goes far out of the way and needs extensive

unpacking to try and understand it. I would argue that even though there's a recognizable "dental" theme in these sentences, there's more than just that imagery to tease out.

First, there's "the cavity filler of English," bringing to mind the idea that language is a giant tooth or some kind of road with potholes. Idling, then, is a substance that fills those holes. It's interesting that she decided to run with figurative language from the start. It is telling that the figures carry through because she's adamant on trying to show how her explanation need not be stripped of rhetoric in order to make a point. In fact, her point is made just as well, or better, by her explosive rhetorical showing.) In the second sentence, the writer explains that the idling is a "large cement word" that "cover the holes," not properly filling them. Still, the "tooth is missing." The last part is nearly nonsense. Unless we follow her through her line of reasoning.

Richard Ohmann, writing about "Literature as Sentences" in a 1966 article, explains that deviancy in sentences is what makes the restrictions of grammatical categorizations clear, and by extension, worth reading (263). Further, "Such deviance is so common in metaphor and elsewhere that one scarcely notices it, yet it helps to specify the way things happen in the writer's special world, and *the modes of thought appropriate to that world*" (263, my emphasis). Pushing the sense and nonsense of "worlds" even further, William E. Coles—three years before Ohmann's article—also recognized this predicament while looking for a certain breed of sentences in placement tests. These sentences could've been written by people, Coles claimed, living on the other side of the moon. "Some of these were gauche, some bizarre, some unthinkable, but they all had in common a quality which argued a way of seeing, a level of apprehension that nothing was going to touch—not all the paraphernalia of education, not love, or death, or doomsday" (31). What both Ohmann and Coles point toward in their commentaries is a kind of writing that goes so far as to find itself just shy of idiosyncratic and alienating. And

in turn, this type of writing becomes alluring for its alien quality, written on the other side of the moon.

So, is the answer to read this student's work as literature? No, it isn't. Rather, a way to read the work could recognize the student's "mode of thought appropriate to [her] world." Metalepsis has allowed her to achieve this. We could, then, understand the writing this way: that English language is a tooth (yet another metaphor, I know). She keeps filling the tooth with idle words and hopes it'll hold. But in the end, there is no tooth at all; it's all just idle word-scaffolding. Her (theoretical) paper (that she's not written yet) is a travesty, a failure.

I want to argue that the last phrase of the of the sentences above is the hardest to parse because it is so *compacted* as a metaphor, as a mode of thought particular to her world, coming especially at the end. It feeds off all of the figurative language up to that point, and as a culmination, it is on the surface nonsensical. Again, we see "the far-fetcher" at work—because in order to keep up with the writer's speed of thought, the reader has to labor, and labor patiently, with no map.

Yet the labor of unpacking deepens when the writer keeps tossing out compacted metaphors of metaphors, as a few lines down she announces

Idling is a purple language cop out and I give three examples when I'm trying to make one point because my paper is too short and has more filament than concrete sentences. I am painting over the gaping hole in the wall with big bad profanity

Her first redefinition takes multiple passes to come into focus. I read it as *Idling is a purple language cop*—wherein idling represents the pedestrian language of academe and purple language is suspect. All of which should make sense, considering the way she feels about idling

language. Yet I also read it as *Idling is a (purple language) (cop-out)*. That is, idling is a cop-out instead of trying to engage in stylistic flourishes of purple prose; or you can read it in the exact opposite way, that *idling* is the purple language and that *it* is the cop-out. By dropping the hyphen in “cop out,” an interesting confusion sets in. It is an Empsonian ambiguity, and another metaphor of a metaphor.

There’s another potential nonsense moment at the end of the selfsame sentence when she writes her essay “has more filament than concrete sentences.” Interestingly, “filament” has a number of meanings, the most well-know that of a filament in a light bulb, the thin wire that glows. But surely that can’t be what she means, considering that in the phrase “more filament than concrete” *filament* is the negative term. (Although I would argue that her paper does have bright and incandescent moments.) So “filament” perhaps means the substance that often is in animal or plant structures, a filling fiber of sorts. If we follow this meaning, then the inclusion of concrete sentences is odd because previously a similar term “cement” was also negative. But here I think “concrete” means something akin to “substantive.” This is why the next sentence is isolating her falsifying actions, her painting over instead of writing down or dealing with substantial ideas. “Painting over a gaping hole with...profanity” is catachrestic (which I discuss further in the next chapter), a metaphor that is stretched beyond its limit. The phrase is also yet another metaleptic move by the inclusion of “big bad profanity,” troping on the Big Bad Wolf of “Little Red Riding Hood” nursery rhyme fame. In most versions of the tale, the Big Bad Wolf is defeated despite all of its (profane) attempts.

The writing difficulty/problem here, at first blush, could also be anagnorisis, as it was with the first one. I find the writing problem here is trying to write sardonically about “idling” while not actually writing an idling paper. It is also about having one’s cake and eating it, too.

The student is savvy enough to try and get close to the edge of being *mistaken* for idling, when in reality she's doing the exact opposite as a way to mock it. All around, is a sophisticated move in such a short paper. This is not unusual, though. Both Richards and Coles mention similar moves. For Richards, in *Practical Criticism*, it happens in both the poetry and in the reader responses to the poem, in this case, Thomas Gray's "Elegy." "The *Elegy* is perhaps the best example in English," Richards writes, "of a good poem built upon a foundation of stock responses" and the "stock responses do not exhaust the *Elegy*" (*Practical* 239). Over and above the poem composed of stock elements, a response composed of stock elements "will find nothing new, will only enact once more pieces from their existing repertory" (240). A good question to ask is where the existing repertory is stocked from? General culture? Internet? Television? Social media?

In trying to answer what she thought idle language was, my student used her own paper as a set piece to perform a subversion on idle language, or again, what Coles often called "Themewriting," writing that relies on stock language to say such watered-down platitudes that the whole essay has no reason to exist other than as a container for that kind of language. (It would be hard to see Coles's coining of Themewriting not influenced by Richards's stock responses.) Here's how he defined "Themewriting" in an article from 1969:

Themewriting is a language, a way of experiencing the world. It is used not for the writing of papers, but of Themes. Invented originally by English teachers for use in English classrooms only, it is as closed a language as the Dewey Decimal System, as calculatedly dissociated from the concerns of its user and the world he lives in as it has been possible to make it. But the selling points of it as a commodity are irresistible. For since the skill of Themewriting is based upon the use of language conceived of entirely in terms of communication, the only

standard that need be applied to it is whether it succeeds in creating in the reader—that is, in another Themewriter—the desired response. (“Circle” 136-137)

Coles takes umbrage with Themewriting because it shirks a kind of responsibility with words that is incumbent upon students in college composition. (Or incumbent upon all of us who take ourselves seriously or as adults.) The writer of “This paper says nothing” wants to avoid idly describing idle language by going in the opposite direction without overstepping the stylistic pale. The paper is an answer by example, an answer that isn’t familiar or Thematic; that’s not a closed language, but a compressed idiolect; that doesn’t simply fulfill a readerly desire but which thwarts short-term enjoyment in favor of a more scrutinizing read. Metalepsis offers her a way to possess *her* language that is undecidedly non-commodifying and compelling.

But why would she do this? I presume it could be a litany of reasons: to press boundaries (hers and mine); to test her own linguistic abilities; to engage in the rhetorical tropes and strategies of the past 2,500 years; or simply to be funny. The versions of metalepsis that she uses aren’t a dodge, like the first paper’s. These are rhetorical moves of condensation. And condensation is the compaction of multiple images into one representative, possibly elusive, image. One that requires plenty of work to untie. What’s also occurring in this paper is ironic in that the title (“This paper says nothing”) claims a pre-determined failure when she’s actually saying, not everything per se, but much more than she can possibly claim.

Is it true that “out of ourselves we can never pass, nor can there be in creation what in the creator was not,” as Oscar Wilde proclaimed? In this foregoing paper, I would argue *yes*, if through metalepsis the writer of “This paper says nothing” has tried to deliver herself *from*

herself; and if she's found that with enough linguistic compression she can mask herself so that she can pass out of herself.

## 2.5 STUDENT EXAMPLE THREE

I want to end with a reading of a student paper also written for my Autumn 2015 Seminar in Composition course that engages M2 & M3. This paper tropes key terms, established both by the class it was written in and the professional discourse of composition at large. The paper also performs a certain struggle against the writer's own language sentence by sentence, while reconsidering her past writing methodology. Poirier claimed that "troping" is a "salutary activity...Because though troping involves only words, it might also, as an activity, makes us less easily intimidated by...terminologies inherited from the historical [or personal] past or currently employed in the directives of public policy" (*Poetry* 129). Here, I want to argue that the following paper expands "public policy" to include the conventions and pretend absolutes of the writing classroom.

The essay is titled "Progress Process" because I'd asked the class to dispute certain terms-evolving-into-key-terms that we'd been throwing around in class. E.g. "improvement," "break down," "correction," and "examine." Here's the assignment as I gave it to them:

#2

- a. Write one page explaining a time you tried to improve your writing.
- b. What needed the improvement? That is, how was it "wrong"?
- c. How did you know how to make the writing "correct"?
- d. Define the way you use the word "improve."

The assignments reflexively built upon themselves and made it a point of disputing terms, so I can't pretend that they magically felt free to counter the established norms. But I was surprised to read a number of papers that wavered in a liminal space, saying something to the effect of "I know I should be trying something different, but I'm too worried that I'll mess up the attempt."

### Progress Process

I could say that improving my writing would mean making it better. But then I would have to define "better." Quite impossible if my definition of its non-comparative form fluctuates when I use it to describe my writing. In my laziness, or lost-ness since I am unable to and not merely refusing to define good, I will use improve to instead mean progressing. It is a vague term, broad enough to accommodate my whims but concrete enough to give improving my writing a definition that I can accept.

For the greater part of my writing development, I was afraid of moving backward. Progress is supposed to be forward after all. In terms of improving my writing this means that once I committed to an element of a style then I would just build off of it to further improve. The problem was that I had been committed to this style for three years, but it never felt right to me. This was during a period when I chose to add artificial emotion to my pieces so they would be more appealing to others. Sure some enjoyed reading a synthetic stance on a topic but no matter what I added to this style I found the emotion unnerving where others found it entertaining. Frankly my artificial emotions had created a madwoman persona. And she could not be placated with any additions.

I must have gone mad myself when removing this madwoman persona from my writing style because before I knew it I was left with the skeleton of my writing. Back where my writing had started. And being back frustrated me. But that is where the root of the problem was. In the beginning I intended writing to be a well-crafted vessel for my thoughts, and artificial emotions had corrupted that purpose. I did not really think as that madwoman did and so by adding a false personality I had actually distanced myself from my own writing. I would have to start again but in the sense of progressing, my writing did “improve.” Put more simply I could call it my own again even if it had reverted to its formerly bland state. While progress is generally understood to be moving forward and returning to the start understood to be moving backward, is it not possible to keep moving forward and end up back at the beginning?

A distinguishing move of this paper is redefinition. The author carefully instructs the reader to follow her shiftings with sign-posting—with words like “mean” and “understood to be.” In some sense, I can’t help but read the essay as a self-conscious dictionary entry, one that flips terms on their head, that is M3.

Another move of this essay is how the writer addresses the practicalities of “improvement,” how it’s possible for a present self to misrecognize what the future self wants or needs. That is, the writer admits that what counts as “better” “fluctuates” and that her fear of “moving backward” in her style as a writer needs to undergo complication and sharpening. What she’s received as standard wisdom and claims to work for most people, doesn’t actually work. That is—it doesn’t do anything. Thus, she took on a “madwoman persona,” a move that she thought would appeal to her audience.

The problem is—and this is important—the move worked. Such a move raises the question of how much the student writer owes her audience if the rhetorical persona taken on is disingenuous or troubling to the writer. And I want to pause here to quote a longer passage from *The Plural I* that addresses exactly this situation. Coles addresses his class.

Let's be clear that it's not the character of the writer we're talking about or concerned with here. The subject here is writing what these sentences represent this writer as. What the writer is we can never know and is up to him anyway. The question I'm interested in here, the question that this paper and the last one and all the other papers written for this Assignment raised for me is the cost of choosing to talk one way, to see experience one way, over and over again. What's the relationship, in other words, between an habitual way of talking or writing and the way one sees? (73)

Coles insists that no matter what the writing on the page is doing, it cannot equal the writer. All the writing can do is represent the writer as. *As* not *is*. The “writing as” is a rendition.

Performance is built into the entire endeavor. Furthermore, Coles calls the writer on the page a character. In a sense, the writer of “Progress Process” also sees herself as a character, but a false one. Coles would probably say that there is no false or true character, there's just the character given. So do what you will. The metaleptic troping the writer inscribes on her style attempts to break the conventional notion of the terms “progress” and “improvement.” Many of her peers were committed to seeing improvement linearly, as “gains” over “losses.” Or adding “something new that you had no knowledge of before” to one's writing. But she wants to try to make sense of her movements through the history of her writing, to create a useful narrative out of it. So she tropes it. And here, through metalepsis, “returning to the start” is what she's calling “progress.”

The whole essay struggles to metaleptically redefine two words: “improve” and “progress.” And by the end, the writer settles on a (surprisingly) deflated definition. For her, the key term “progress”—which in Latin literally means “forward walking”—resists her, and her it; the buried, etymological meaning entails circling back around.<sup>38</sup> Again, troping, according to Poirier, “makes us less easily intimidated by [words], by terminologies inherited from the historical past,” and here, I claim, a significant term from the framework of student writing—“progress”—in this sense is metaleptic. “Progress” is a heavy and charged term, “conducive less to clarification than to vagueness” and linked to their final grades, and not just in Composition but in all courses. Progression is generally accepted as a positive quality. And yet the writer redefines “improving” to mean “progressing”—a substitution that elides a specific phrasing for another vague term. For her, the vagueness is a boon.

Other writers in class were quick to engage in clarification or dictionary definitions; or toward sounding as authoritative as they can sound in a student essay. Compare another student’s definition of “improvement” from the same class: “For me improvement really just means advancing my writing’s value in the above mentioned categories of being engaging and clear.” Students wanted to negotiate with the reader (me, the teacher) and prove that if they knew what improvement was, then I’d bestow them with Knowledge or Recognition. They wanted fixed and static meanings, comfortable notions. In fact, one student wrote what amounts to the opposite of the “madwoman” writer’s fluctuations: “I view improvement as simply learning to write in a manor [sic] more tailored to your audience. I have a wide vocabulary and an understanding of

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<sup>38</sup> I can’t help but think of lines from Eliot’s “Little Gidding”: “We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.” The last line is the crucial point of the line.

how to put sentences together but if I understand specifically how my audience wants me to put everything together, I can please the audience.”

The “madwoman” writer was trying to clear out a space for her actions, to give form to her frustration, none of which seem available to an average student writer. For her, imposed “distance” from her writing hurt her more than “intend[ing] writing to be a well-crafted vessel for [her] thoughts.” What complicates this essay all the more is the description of her “madwoman persona” and how it wrecked her writing. The persona may have added flourish to the style, but she’s decided that flourishes were “corrupting.” In the introduction to her book on style and ideology, *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, Kathryn Flannery writes that, “Historically, when writers have claimed to produce plain language or plain style, they have thereby claimed to speak the truth” (28). The “madwoman” writer would seem to buy this thesis. Style is corruption; plainness is truth. Flannery, breaking this coupling down, goes on to assert that, “No style, rhetoric reminds us, is inherently good or bad. To wish to simplify matters by declaring that one sort of style is closer to godliness, cleanliness, or truth is to wish for a prelapsarian world” (20). In any case, the student values ownership of her writing over mere stylistics, good or bad, and all the while refining a style. Yet it takes her backwards through M2. Metalepsis serves to shift the traditional cause and effect of the writing classroom. Often, the understanding is that one progresses through a consistent “growth” to a “mature” or “evolved” form. (The terms are in quotation marks because they’re what can be said of progress in writing.) Here, though, progress is a reduction to the skeleton. To the germ of the germ. Progress, as the reader is most familiar with, becomes a radical scaling back into an older and original form. Her taking on a new and interesting style (the madwoman), only ended up sending her to a “starting point.”

So at this point, it should be asked, what are the writing problems in this paper? Is it her need for a style? Or is it a need to get away from the “base” style she’s stuck with? How does her metaleptic shift of the term “progress” help her?

It helps her try, I would contend, to make sense of a failure of a style. The author’s struggle is reminiscent of Roland Barthes’s discussion of “style as craftsmanship” in the essay of the same name in *Writing Degree Zero*. In the essay, Barthes recalls how French writers of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Flaubert, Gautier, Gide, etc.) turned away from valuing writing by the inspiration it carried, and instead valuing the labor it took to create it.

There begins now to grow up an image of the writer as a craftsman who shuts himself away in some legendary place, like a workman operating at home, and who roughs out, cuts, polishes and sets his form exactly as a jeweller extracts art from his material, devoting to his work regular hours of solitary effort. (63)

Barthes maintains that writers needed a justification for the writing to exist outside of its “message,” and that the rationale arrived in the form of “work-value” instead of “usage-value.” The writer of “Progress Process” falls into this description by her need to justify the building up and stripping down of style. Barthes continues, “[t]here even arises, sometimes, a preciousness of conciseness (for labouring at one’s material usually means reducing it), in contrast to the great preciousness of the baroque era” (63). The author describes her former style as “bland,” but if it’s the style that is writing the paper we’re reading, then what could be bland about that? It is precise, thoughtful, and generous.

But it is metalepsis that stands out in this paper, not her style. It is her troping—the rigorous move to shift her meaning’s terms in order to reposition herself—that helps her get to the end of the paper. The title of this chapter, “When will I deliver myself from myself?” is a

good question to ask of both the author of “Progress Process” and the paper itself. And, in a sense, I think the only person who could deliver herself from herself is the author. Was the “madwoman persona” a *cause* of her progress or an *effect* of her progress? Or was it both? If it was a cause, then it was also an agent of return to a former state. But if it was an effect, then there should be no problem returning to said former state. Is this the *same* former state, though, or is it now finally acknowledged as having a value?

I’ve assembled a lot of words in this chapter to describe only a fragment of what we read when we read a just a handful of student papers. The drawn-out process of working through, redescribing, and annotating the student work, in those moments of troping, shows how compact and compelling the trope of metalepsis under question can be. This is almost certainly because, as Emerson wrote in “The Poet”: “An imaginative book renders us much more service at first by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterward when we arrive at the precise sense of the author” (301). By “service” Emerson means more than a minim, but we should read it as “doing a good turn by” or “attending to.” And notice that tropes are servicing the writing in two ways—through “stimulation” and through “precise sense,” although Emerson stymies as he stimulates with what a “precise sense” could be. It would appear that tropes turn the reader away from a precise *anything* in order to apply and supply stimulation cognitively, emotionally, or psychologically. In the foregoing, I’ve shown how student writers are “stimulating through tropes” via an imaginative “rendering” which, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is a performance or a surrendering through reading. The rhetorical performance of metalepsis represents a layered verbal act, spinning definitions around each other, whereas to understand a fixative trope like catachresis, one will need to discandy the writing—and that is what I plan to

do in the next chapter. If metalepsis can help rearrange time and influence, then how does catachresis help writers do something with that rearrangement?

### **3.0 WHO RULES THE EMPIRE OF NAMES?; OR, TROPING AS CATACHRESIS**

“Rhetoric has no subject matter to teach because its effects and procedures are known by every human communicator. Teaching metaphor or irony, or, for that matter, the more esoteric sounding antipodosis or zeugma, has only one indisputable result: it makes people do self-consciously what they were already doing spontaneously. From an aesthetic point of view, no one nowadays would argue that self-conscious rhetoricality is an unmixed blessing. From a cognitive point of view, the teaching of rhetoric turns out to have been less a source of self-understanding than a source of self-misunderstanding.”

Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson,  
“Rhetoric and Relevance”

“The owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the falling of dusk.”

G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*

#### **3.1. MINERVA’S OWL SHOULD FLY AT TEATIME FOR THE EMPIRE OF NAMES**

In this chapter I’ll be discussing the trope of catachresis, its difference from a very close relative, metaphor, and how catachresis works in student writing. Throughout, I’ll look at cognitive linguistics, poetics, and semiotics to help round out the interpretations and readings of essays that use catachresis as a misfit trope.

To begin, catachresis can generally be the use of a word in the wrong way, grammatically or otherwise. The most popular examples of this type are well-worn phrases like “the mouth of a river” or “the neck of a bottle.” Of course, we know a bottle has no neck and a river has no

mouth. The transfer of body parts to inanimate objects is a transfer of existing terms to places with no literal terms in existence. But these are useful adoptions that we've come up with over the millennia. It's worth quoting a longer portion of Quintilian's explanation of catachresis and the indulgence of this particular trope from his *Institutio Oratoria*.

We must be careful to distinguish between *abuse* and *metaphor*, since the former is employed where there is no proper term available, and the latter when there is another term available. As for poets, they indulge in the abuse of words even in cases when proper terms do exist, and substitute words of somewhat similar meaning. But this is rare in prose. Some, indeed, would give the name of *catachresis* even to cases such as where we call temerity valour or prodigality liberality. I, however, cannot agree with them; for in these instances word is not substituted for word, but thing for thing, since no one regards prodigality and liberality as meaning the same, but one man calls certain actions liberal and another prodigal, although neither for a moment doubts the difference between the two qualities. (8.6.35-36)

Notice in this small snippet of the backhanded proscription of no one but poets engaging in “abusing” words, “even in cases when proper terms do exist.” Despite this, one can safely assume that a poet didn't coin the phrase “mouth of a river.” Any contemporary teacher of college writing could safely assume that not just poets abuse language. So catachresis, presently, not only happens in poetry but also in prose, and even in student writing. Language use of this kind is, I'm sure Quintilian would say, “endemic”<sup>39</sup> to most people.

Although, what's more interesting within Quintilian's description for this chapter's argument is the range of his definition. Catachresis is the creation or adoption of a totally

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<sup>39</sup> This example potentially a catachrestic use of “endemic,” naturally.

unrelated term to describe or name something that has no term already in place. But what motivates catachresis?<sup>40</sup> To what end? Quintilian doesn't rightly state for what reason the abusive adoption takes place. We read his examples encompassing specifically human qualities, e.g. "prodigality" and "valour." This should signal a potential misunderstanding or confusion in Quintilian's analysis about why humans want to create *de novo* words (or misapply them) to describe their selves, others, and environment. (I return to this below.) On the other hand, why we create metaphors seems to make much sense to Quintilian and Cicero, and Aristotle before them. We do it for adornment or pleasure or emphasis.

As Patricia Parker argues in "Metaphor and Catachresis" from the collection *The Ends of Rhetoric*, the confusion or blurriness between the two tropes has stakes in the difference between propriety and figuration (61-65).<sup>41</sup> Metaphor has established itself as an acceptable and familiar-enough way to create figure in language, whereas catachresis is, to many, (unexplainably) beyond the pale and a "violent" wrenching of language. In short: inappropriate and improper.<sup>42</sup> Complicating Quintilian's definition of catachresis is his earlier explanation on the "necessity" of metaphor, and his discussion of Roman peasants' spontaneity and invention in language:

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<sup>40</sup> One might say: confusion, assumption, imagination, excess, playfulness.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Chapter 1, "On the Uses and Abuses of Troping in Language." I should also mention here the distinct lack of academic writing on catachresis as a trope in student writing. Nor is there much mention, generally, of catachresis in the disciplines of writing, pedagogy, rhetoric, or composition. One could surmise this is because catachresis is a minor trope, elusive, or too close to metaphor. I think the aforementioned reasons could be why, but I also think it's because there's a tendency not to work with tropes inside student writing.

<sup>42</sup> The right question to ask here is: *Violent to whom?* To language itself? To the user? The listener? Humanity? Violence needs a subject and an object. One almost has to imagine the ancient rhetoricians thinking that language had a soul and a temperament, and that the temper of words was quite testy. How odd. It should be obvious that stating that a metaphor is violent is *in itself* a metaphor. But then, what good is that metaphor? And is that metaphor proper? It would seem that adopting such a term like "violent" that has a long history with physicality and tangible injury to something so intangible as language would be inappropriate; or, dare I say catachrestic...?

As an example of a necessary metaphor I may quote the following usages in vogue with peasants when they call a vinebud *gemma*, a gem (what other term is there which they could use?), or speak of the *crops being thirsty* or the *fruit suffering*. For the same reason we speak of a *hard* or *rough* man, there being no *literal* term for these temperaments.

(8.6.6)

Notice the praise of the peasants in their inspired turns of phrase. They appear so obvious to Quintilian. “[W]hat other term is there which they could use?” (*The poor souls*, you can almost hear the rhetorician lament.) He is forgiving when there is no literal at-hand, in-current-use term for a thing.<sup>43</sup> Thus, it makes sense to say that the crops are thirsty or the fruit is suffering. These metaphors are apt and colorful. But what of the peasants’ coining of “gem”? How is that not more than a metaphor and a turn into catachresis? How is it proper or appropriate to call a vinebud a precious stone instead of what it literally is or something “closer” to what it literally is, e.g. a form of food (“a succulent victual”) or a part of the body (“a glorious or beating heart”)? Is there not a more appropriate term for a vinebud? The point here is that the boundaries of metaphor and catachresis are thin, at best. At worst, they’re a figment. The difference, then, between a metaphor and catachresis is the patience with which the speaker or listener has for elaborate or unorthodox comparisons. In both examples above, Quintilian is willing to allow the bending of language in order to bring something into existence that’s without a label, to bring a thing into the light of the lexicon and conscious awareness.

Quintilian is both wrong and right. Wrong about who does and can abuse language, and how; but also right about anyone creating the necessary metaphor or catachresis. Not just poets

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<sup>43</sup> This is not to go headlong into a discussion about how there is no actual *literal* term for anything. But should the reader be interested in a starting point, I would direct them to Nietzsche’s essay “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense.”

do this, remember—but field-working peasants!<sup>44</sup> Lastly, Quintilian dismisses the designation of catachresis from “thing to thing” where one calls “prodigality liberality,” and so on. But I would disagree. The reasons for this could, to some, seem like a simple mistake on the writer’s end.

That is, to call liberality prodigality is purely a solecism; yet it could also just as well be that the writer wants to readjust the boundaries or the reader’s understanding of the term being “abused.”

I think, to some degree, it all comes down to whose theory of, or approach to, language one subscribes to. Or rather, to whose rhetoric you buy. George Puttenham anglicized the Greek “catachresis” in *The Art of English Poesy* and labeled it “Abuse,” explaining that it’s when one takes an improper term and applies it where there is none available (264). He writes that we “do untruly apply [the improper term]” and fashions an example of catachresis where “on should in reproach say to a poor man, ‘thou rascal knave,’ where ‘rascal’ is properly the hunter’s term given to young deer, lean and out of season, and not to people” (265). Puttenham’s was the standard approach; nothing unusual about his tack. Much of what has been written on catachresis can be traced back to Quintilian or Cicero. Although, two centuries later, the Augustan poet Alexander Pope included catachresis in his satirical essay on bad writing, *Peri Bathous; Or the Art of Sinking in Poetry* (1727) and gives the following as an example of it:

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<sup>44</sup> I want to give a contemporary illustration to Quintilian’s definitions, to try and make him sound less conservative and try to suss out why he may’ve had such a washy reasoning for the metaphor-catachresis relationship. I’ll do this with a short anecdote. A college friend of mine and I were eating lunch and feeding his four year old, Aibi. As we talked and ate, Aibi—for lack of a better word—farted. But for Aibi there was no “fart,” no “flatulence,” no “passing gas,” no word at-hand for her. Embarrassed, Aibi said she made “stinky music.” This is a lived-practice example of how catachresis (and to some extent, synesthesia) is built into the language we use and how it fulfills the first epigraph of the chapter, but also the second. Moreover, was Aibi doing a violence to the language? If so, what could that be? How would that look? Is the violence unidirectional? Or duo-directional? Does she ruin the language for herself, or did she ruin it for her father and me?

*Mow* the beard,  
*Shave* the grass,  
*Pin* the plank,  
*Nail* my sleeve. (214)

Pope's perfect bathetic poet will never fail to switch out the proper for the improper. Indeed, "We cannot too earnestly recommend to our authors the study of the *abuse of speech*" (214, emphasis in original). This is stated ironically but, of course, I would use this as a motto for this dissertation and my classroom. Tropes like catachresis, for Pope, are used to fade what's "lofty or shining"; misfit tropes would "take off the gloss, or quite discharge the colour" of good writing (212). Compare this with Thomas Gibbons, a writer one generation after Pope. In his long but aptly titled book, *Rhetoric; Or, a View of Its Principal Tropes and Figures, in Their Origin and Powers, with a Variety of Rules to Escape Errors and Blemishes and Attain Propriety and Elegance in Composition* (1767), Gibbons, an English minister and hymnwriter, also found that catachresis was a borrowing of what was proper in its own context and abused when applied to a foreign context. Gibbons's difference from rhetoricians before him is an acknowledgement of the power of catachresis and mis-fitting language: "A catachresis is the most licentious as to language of all the Tropes, as it borrows the name of one thing to express another, which has either no proper name of its own; or if it has, the borrowed name is used either for surprising by novelty, *or for the sake of a bold and daring energy*" (98, emphasis added). Here Gibbons is willing to give over a certain amount of admiration, I'd argue, to the trope's power and ability. It may be licentious, but it's also daring and bold. Around the same time, in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, George Campbell (also a minister) took an incredibly balanced approach to catachresis, writing, "the name *catachresis* is no more than another word for impropriety" but that

“concerning the *catachresis*, which hath in like manner been improperly reckoned a separate trope...it is but rarely defensible in modern languages, which require the strictest regard to propriety” (303). One species of catachresis, Campbell continues, “rarely contributes either to ornament or to strength” and happens “when words are used in a signification that is very near their ordinary meaning, but not precisely the same” (303). For him, examples include saying “*high* man for a *tall* man, a *large* oration for a *long* oration, a *big* genius for a *great* genius” (303). It is also when a word originally referred to an object of a particular material, say, wood, which later on doesn’t include this element at all. E.g. the original Trojan horse was made of wood, and now any thing used to sneak in an ulterior object or motive is a Trojan horse. The adoption of the word for the later object is catachresis. Campbell, very interestingly, points toward synesthesia (as I will below) as a “species of the catachresis” and explains it as “the application of the attributes of one corporeal sense to the objects of another,” for example “as if we should say of a voice, that it is *beautiful* to the ear” (304). A term applied to the visual is used for the aural. There is an unraveling action to the catachresis—it unravels the reader/listener’s expectations, and the reader/listener is expected to unravel the word-enigma. In *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Umberto Eco breaks catachresis into two types: “institutional” and “institutive” (101). In the former, we’re considering phrases like “the mouth of a river” and in the latter, we’re considering the phrases that are under investigation in this chapter. As Eco writes, in a reverse echo of what I’ve declared above, regarding the impulse to catachresis, “language creates metaphors even outside of poetry, simply out of a need to find names for things” (101). He goes on to explain:

if institutive catachreses require interpretive labor, it is because the latent proportion (which could be expressed in a simile) does not exist before the metaphor; it must be

found, whether by the person who invents the catachresis or by the person interpreting it (at least, for a brief stretch of the trope's circulation), after which discovery language absorbs the trope, lexicalizes it, and registers it as an *overcoded* expression. (101, emphasis author's)

Eco's key takeaway is that which does not exist "before the metaphor" or before it falls into circulation. I take Eco to mean that there's an unconscious aspect to the catachresis, or an unknowingness. There must be if the finding of a catachresis can be either by the inventor or the interpreter. In this dissertation, it is happening almost all the time by the interpreter—that is, the teacher, me.

This briefly sketched history of catachresis tells us *how* the trope has been viewed. But for a moment let's ask about the *So what?* of catachresis. What are its uses? What is its value? It is important to this chapter's thesis to delineate why metaphor and catachresis have evaluative differences. That is, why has one been more acceptable than the other? If they were equivalent, or the differences erased, then run-of-the-mill metaphors would be *abusio* or "too far gone," and catachreses would be "mere" metaphors. But catachresis does exist and does a certain rhetorical job, as hazy as it may seem. I will argue that the rhetorical job it does has a bearing on how it works within the writing of college students and how it can affect their writing in subsequent revisions.

I see Parker focusing on this rhetorical job in what she calls the "progress narrative" (68-69) of metaphor and catachresis from Cicero to Quintilian up through Hugh Blair in the eighteenth century. This "progress narrative" idea states that catachresis is primitive and a base state of language that slowly evolves or progresses into what we now call metaphor. In other words, original uses of language all start off as catachresis, and then as language users become

more sophisticated, we begin to consciously craft (through technique) knowing metaphors. Beyond that, catachresis is the raw or unconscious formation of language; but metaphor—specifically, good metaphor—is considered the realm of genius or talent.<sup>45</sup>

According to Parker, metaphor “is related to a primitive lack in language—a lack that the later description of catachresis will associate exclusively with it—and contributes to extending the empire of names” (62).<sup>46</sup> Because there are so many words in English (over 200,000), and because we rely on, really, so few of them in the day-to-day, it is hard for us to notice this lack.<sup>47</sup> This is why, when an unexpected shift in meaning occurs in ordinary language, we sit up and take note. To put this into a more everyday context, Irish comedian Dylan Moran directly illustrates this in his stand-up when he comments that children have different ontological concerns than adults, when they ask questions like, “What is the name of the spaces in between the bits that stick out on a comb?” or “What do you call the place underneath the kettle?” (*Like, Totally*). Could this be what Parker means by an “empire of names”? Simply the sheer addition of “new words” for what’s unnamed? Or is it the application of existing names to wildly unrelated items?

No matter which one she means—and I think it’s both, the former happening much less than the latter—students can, and should be encouraged to, reroute their writing to *build* language; to *prepare* for catachresis; to *recognize* the moments where their language deviates from Themewriting, as Coles called it (*The Plural I* 36-37; “Circle” 136-137), or tropes from commonplaces to new places, or as I mentioned in the Introduction, “oddplaces.” I think it

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<sup>45</sup> See Aristotle’s discussion of metaphor (*Poetics* 1450).

<sup>46</sup> “The empire of names” is, of course, another metaphor. Troping is impossible to escape.

<sup>47</sup> Although this should expose an interesting question for metaphysics and/or ontology in freshmen writers.

worthwhile to stop and analyze this Empire of Names, because this is the crux of catachresis. And no one makes this more clear than Pierre Fontanier, the nineteenth century rhetorician, who held that “the use of a trope must be deliberate or conscious” (Parker 71); as Parker qualifies, Fontanier’s verdict on Quintilian’s Poetic Peasants is that they can’t be said to truly trope rhetorical because of this deliberateness; rather, there’s the difference of “poverty” and “refinement” between catachresis and metaphor, respectively. One is “forced,” and the other is “willed” (71). Again, Parker:

If metaphor that is beyond conscious manipulation or direction involves those involuntary and potentially unconscious transfers that Fontanier insists on limiting to catachresis, then the issue is finally not just a distinction based on the presence or absence of an original proper term but *the question of conscious control*. What is at stake, finally, is both a psychic hierarchy and a social one. And the stakes in the former are no less than the mastery of language itself, the question of whether its movements control or are controlled by the subject in question. (72-73, emphasis added)

The last sentence will help to explain why students veer away from tropes like catachresis; and why, based on what their starting drafts offer, it is in their favor to embrace catachresis, accidental or otherwise. I want to use Parker to demonstrate why and how catachresis not only does transgressive work inside sentences but also in the students’ “psychic hierarchy.” If, as Parker suggests, the question of catachresis eventually comes down to “the question of conscious control,” then I’d ask: *when* does it happen? And is it control in the *making* of catachresis? Or is it control upon *reflection* and *revision*? Cognitive linguist George Lakoff has pointed out in his book *The Political Mind* that most of our thought processes are 98% unconscious. Which means thought is mostly “reflexive,” bandying about with no map. Conscious thought is “reflective.”

Yet, Lakoff claims, “most thought is reflexive, not reflective, and beyond conscious control” (9). To create an analogy, Parker’s mention of conscious control falls under this dichotomy. Most catachreses are likely reflexive creations. The composition classroom, and the teacher, should be striving consistently to make the reflexive reflective and have the student control language and not the other way around, although that may happen in early drafts where catachresis first appears. Again, we are creating and developing “self-conscious rhetoricality,” if you will. And yet here it matters more than ever.

In this chapter’s first epigraph, the authors (a cognitive scientist and a psychologist, respectively)<sup>48</sup> make plain, as Quintilian did before them, that people don’t need to be taught the tropes of rhetoric—or rhetoric as a system of persuasion—because college students or fast-food workers or peasants in the vineyards already *intuit* and *use* them.<sup>48</sup> That is well and good. But this chapter’s second epigraph by Hegel points to an important aspect of intellection: We don’t often understand what we’re doing until way after the fact, if that. And that’s not a boon; it’s a bane. So while “From an aesthetic point of view, no one nowadays would argue that self-conscious rhetoricality is an unmixed blessing” (Sperber and Wilson 155)<sup>49</sup>—<sup>49</sup>a banality if there ever was one—those in college writing courses shouldn’t be left to wade in a rhetorical swampland, satisfied with some vague notion that they’re being rhetorical and using compelling

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<sup>48</sup> Sperber and Wilson are the creators behind a view of language (in the sub-discipline of pragmatics) called relevance theory, which states, broadly, “that intentional communication gives rise to expectations which help us to decide what the communicator intends to convey” (Clark 4). Moreover, with respect to rhetoric and composition, “relevance theory has reanalysed tropes and offered new accounts of how they are interpreted in the light of the more general theory of communication and in a way that is consistent with current psycholinguistic research. This reanalysis rejects the Gricean view that tropes deviate from a literal norm” (Pilkington 160). For more on tropes seen psycholinguistically, see Gibbs 1994. I am not wholly unamenable to this direction in language-use, but it’s a view of language and tropes that isn’t in line with how composition (broadly) practices writing instruction.

<sup>49</sup> Nietzsche would’ve seen it as an unmixed, i.e. pure, blessing.

tropes, especially if that trope is catachresis and they're trying (consciously or unconsciously) to put a word onto something they deem interesting and in need of bringing into the world.<sup>50</sup> Still, what isn't difficult to see in catachrestic moments is that students create things in these moments of "potentially unconscious transfers." In a union of rhetoric and poetics, they bring to bear their most core linguistic capabilities. Thus, the job of the college writing teacher in this scenario is, if you'll permit a metaphor, to try and goad Minerva's owl to fly at teatime, just a smidge before dusk. That way, imagination and spontaneity, intellection and self-consciousness, don't have to duke it out for dominance in the dark, but can work it out together hand in (boxing) glove.<sup>51</sup>

I want to give as an example of this working together—this productive misrecognition and catachresis—Marshall McLuhan's famous book *The Medium is the Massage*. According to McLuhan's website held by his estate and written by his son, the title is an error that should've been instead, "the medium is the message"—McLuhan's well-known phrase.

When the book came back from the typesetter's, it had on the cover "Massage" as it still does. The title was supposed to have read "The Medium is the Message" but the

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<sup>50</sup> To be fair, the sentence after the one I've quoted is just as, if not more, banal: "From a cognitive point of view, the teaching of rhetoric turns out to have been less a source of self-understanding than a source of self-misunderstanding" (155). How, from a cognitive point of view, is rhetoric a "source of self-misunderstanding"? Is it because we actually have titles and names for the shapes of language that pattern our lives? How, I wonder, is that a misunderstanding?

<sup>51</sup> E.g. Aristotle's brilliant move shifted the focus of those who questioned rhetoric's value from the practices to the reasons behind the practices. From the ground to the sky, as it were. "Until Aristotle, people studied how to gain approval, by more or less irrational means. But this study, according to Aristotle, is unscientific and has nothing to do with the real [*tekhne*]" (De Romilly 59). What's so strange about Aristotle's wrapping rhetoric into a *tekhne* was his surety, his formalizing an action (persuasion) that consistently resists formality, or is actually strengthened by challenges to its formality. One can arrive at moments in which rhetoric is used—moments that *aren't certain* and have no *determined outcome*—and rely on a particular method of reasoning. As Jacqueline De Romilly continues, "...if rhetoric is to be studied according to its manner of reasoning, it becomes a [*tekhne*] in full right. It becomes respectable" (59).

typesetter had made an error. When Marshall saw the typo he exclaimed, “Leave it alone! It’s great, and right on target!” Now there are four possible readings for the last word of the title, all of them accurate: “Message” and “Mess Age,” “Massage” and “Mass Age.” (“Commonly Asked Questions”)

Again, notice here that the troping is considered “a mistake.” But actually, it’s not. It started as a typo; but it wasn’t just a typo. It didn’t *stay* a typo because McLuhan consciously decided to keep it. (“Leave it alone!” he crowed.) He recognized it and set it into place by choice. I don’t know if McLuhan knew about catachresis, but that’s what *The Medium is the Massage* is. It’s not just a malapropism (where a word of similar sound replaces the correct one, saying “pacific” for “specific”), nor is it a mondegreen (where a mishearing results in a different phrase, e.g. “for all intensive purposes”). It would’ve been those, or close to those, if McLuhan had let the typo go; but instead he kept the word “massage” because he knew that it captured something that the word “message” couldn’t or didn’t. Which means that he had to “abuse” the language and adopt an unrelated term because there wasn’t a “proper” term available. So, we may ask: What is the message in this situation? It’s something that, I think, prior to that moment, had no “proper” name.<sup>52</sup>

After the following student examples, I’ll describe what it’s like to read these as a teacher and what goes on in the moment, how the sequences and associations of language work. I could’ve easily corrected these moments, or ignored them, and moved on, or I could’ve allowed them to bloom and flourish, turning the papers from exercises to exhibitions. Said another way,

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<sup>52</sup> Neil Postman offers a witty and perceptive take on McLuhan’s catachrestic title in his book, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*: “A massage is a process, and for health’s sake, you are better advised to understand how it is working you over than to know what it is called” (26). This is Lakoff’s reflective thinking in action, to be sure.

many of these examples were McLuhanesque in their execution. Although, this doesn't reduce their performances in any way because of that.

### 3.2 STUDENT EXAMPLES

You think that after all you must be weaving a piece of cloth: because you are sitting at a loom—even if it is empty—and going through the motions of weaving.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §414

I'll start with a paper that has two instances of catachresis. The paper was titled "Try Understanding Nothing." In this, the student was responding to his reading of Plato's *Apology*.

#### **Try Understanding Nothing**

If everyone subscribes to Socrates' definition of a what makes a man wise, very few "wise men", if any at all, have existed. Let me clarify what I mean. It is Socrates himself who says in his final speech addressing the Athenian council that he has yet to meet a man wiser than he. This should sound pretentious and or extremely unrefined, but he follows this statement up by saying that he is not a wise man himself. How can someone who is often regarded as one of the wisest men in history also be a self proclaimed middling? It seems, by his own standards, that it is an impossible accomplishment to be considered wise. Socrates' definition states that being wise is understanding that one is unwise, or not falsely claiming to have wisdom at all.

Socrates' concept is not overly complicated in any way. In fact, his characterization of a wise man is far easier to understand than the stereotypical wise man

who is some old sage that sits around his sanctuary and is somehow all knowing (think Master Pai Mei from Kill Bill). What makes Socrates' understanding of not understanding so profound is the time period he comes from, and the originality of this idea relative to this time period. Philosophers who came to be after Socrates have debated and interpreted his statement on the nature of wisdom for millennia. Therefore, the idea is nothing revolutionary to our modern society, but the substance behind it remains relevant. There isn't a straightforward list or yellow brick road to follow to wisdom, the path is far more involuntary than not.

**A blaring question arises from this notion. Has there ever been anyone who was “truly wise”?** Has there ever been someone who falls into Socrates' specific criteria of makes a man wise? The answer is without a doubt yes, but the distinction comes with an inevitable timer that starts counting down the second one is able to formulate a question.

The truth is that there have been many wise people, billions to be somewhat (not really) specific. Now, anyone who subscribes to Socrates' classic definition of what composes a “wise” person would say that clearly this answer is wrong, or that I am (which may very well be the case). Fortunately (and for the first and only time ever), children are the answer to my problem. Those who are wise, are those who question everything. Those who question everything are children. It may sound like a stretch, but children are perhaps the wisest of us all. Maybe Holden Caulfield is right, perhaps we are all phonies pretending to be wiser than we really are. Innocence and curiosity are definitely found in adults, but true wonder and academic humility are reserved for children. **We are all, for the most part, born with an ingrained sense of**

**inquisitiveness and a knack for being honest about our own intelligence and knowledge up until a certain age.**

Let me begin by starting with how this all sounds, how, like I said, the sequence and movement of the words go. The phrases I've chosen to frame are those with sound and linkages pressing most interestingly on them. The first main word in each phrase is from Middle English, and before that, Dutch ("blaring" and "knack"). The selection's main word is Latin in origin ("question" from *quaerere* and "honest" from *honos*). The balance between Germanic roots and Latin roots is a pleasing see-saw effect that plays upon the short, punchy sounds against the more sibilant sounds of the Latin. Not only are these examples of catachresis, but they are the most evocative sounds in the paper. Robert Pinsky notes this effect in his book *The Sounds of Poetry*. In a discussion of Wallace Stevens's "The Snow Man," Pinsky celebrates "a kind of delicious contrast between the Latin and Germanic roots, a little like that between crunchy and soft" (88). More importantly, though, Pinsky connects Stevens's use of contrasting roots (e.g. "junipers shagged") with John Keats's use of contrasting roots in phrases like "unravished bride" and "dull opiate." Pinsky creates a web of associations, via sound and sense, back through linguistic history. This combining "is a contrast that calls up the history of the English language and the people who have spoken it, often invading, enslaving, raping, and torturing one another, or converting one another, and changing the language in the process" (89). It is an important contrast and is precisely the leveraging of student troping that I've talked about throughout these chapters. The opposition between the abstract, scientific Latin roots and the more earthy, grounded Germanic roots.

Still, I'm halted by the student's *blaring question*. Specifically "blaring," which is an adjective describing harsh sounds. The sentence presumes there are "mumbling questions" or

“ululating questions.” I could imagine that the student meant something more like “forceful” or “urgent.” “Blaring” pushes way past the intended meaning into confusion (or comedy). On the surface, the use reads as inattentive, and thus, idle like a car sitting at a stoplight—turned on, but not moving. (See Wittgenstein’s at the beginning of this section.) Again, it’s idle not because I had to read slower to parse that particular term (a move that, like Brower and like Gibson, I’m happy to engage in); rather, it’s idle because it disconnects the rest of the sentence from itself. But through a McLuhanesque misrecognition, I can also imagine the *blaring question* as a candidate for catachresis. And a productive one at that. The phrase, in this way, then reintroduces itself to the sentence and, I argue, finds a new and interesting place.

As a writing teacher, my instinct is to correct his calling “prodigality liberality” and suggest the word “forceful” or “urgent” for “blaring.” But because I had to slow down to read the sentence—and question it—and actually ask what that might *mean* to have a blaring question, I am now in the realm of the catachrestic. I am playing his language game now. I suppose part of that is due to reading the student writing seriously, as opposed to reading it expecting errors or brilliance or drama. As professor and poet Samuel R. Levin writes in his *Philosophy & Rhetoric* article, “Catachresis: Vico and Joyce,” “Catachresis...arises when, in consequence of a need to express something newly come to consciousness, a requirement is imposed on the language which it is not properly designed to satisfy” (104). In this case, the question in the student’s mind, and then in print on the paper is: “Has there ever been anyone who was ‘truly wise’?” The required imposition on language in this moment is that static print becomes voluble, literally. As I read the student, he wants the impossible: for him, the question should speak out loud. In this case, catachresis partakes of synesthesia, the phenomenon where one sense is described or experienced in the frame of another, e.g. sounds are experienced as colors or numbers

represented by unique and consistent geometric shapes. Here the visual is auditory. (We should be reminded here of George Campbell's connection between these two senses in just the same way.) Again, a writing teacher could easily see this as idle language—as I previously have—and agree with Wittgenstein that the writer was making the motions of weaving at the loom without weaving. But this conflicts with Levin's notion, a notion I think that helps explain what it's like to read this particular paper. And in another sense, Wittgenstein's project was to clear away philosophical problems by focusing on how language was used, and then explain meaning through use; but his statements can just as well be used as a lens to try and *change* the use. That's the productive aspect of catachresis, as I mentioned earlier: to trope away from what's expected or usual—to create what has hitherto been uncreated or neglected. So what was the writing (or rhetorical) problem in this case? And what does keeping “blaring question” do for this writer?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the problem I recognize is rhetorical. The writer needs to get the reader to properly acknowledge his stance on the question, Who is truly wise? This may sound easy. Oftentimes, first-year writers in composition will filter their terms through italics, bolding, or the caps lock button. Typography takes the place of articulation. But here the writer wrenches the term “blaring” out of a comfortable meaning into a new one. Instead of italics or bolding, the student fell into a catachresis that allowed him to turn what is normally a formal/visual device (italics/bolding) directly into the content of the sentence. This is how I read it. There is no way to “blare” a sentence, except to read it out loud, and loudly. That option wasn't available; so we end up with a *blaring question*.

Here's the other catachresis from the same essay a few paragraphs further along: “We are all, for the most part, born with an ingrained sense of inquisitiveness and a knack for being

honest about our own intelligence and knowledge up until a certain age.” The phrase under consideration here is *a knack for being honest*. The *OED* has “knack” as “A trick; a device, artifice; formerly often, a deceitful or crafty device, a mean or underhand trick,” and so I wonder how the student meant for us to be born with an underhanded trick for honesty—those two latter terms opposing each other under any normal circumstances. I also wonder how one can have a knack for being honest about someone else’s intelligence, forcing the adjective “own” to stand out more conspicuously than I think the author intended. It’s easy to imagine that the “correct” or wanted word here was “habit.” But what I think the writer has stumbled onto here is, in an abstract sense, how the language subtly shifts itself from normal circulation and demands a renewed attention.<sup>53</sup>

As William Coles found five decades ago in his essay “The Circle of Unbelief,” incoming college students are already anticipating what they need to write in order to be graded to their satisfaction. He writes of such a student that “[i]t is to be expected then, that in the midst of the threatening unfamiliarity of his freshman year, the student will shape whatever he can of his academic environment into patterns that he is familiar with” (138). For Coles, as for me, (and as long as composition continues to grade essays and colleges grade students for a degree) it is the work of the composition course to upset expected themes and conventional wisdom. The point is to show how troping can aid student writers in dodging the inherited language promoted by what they think the classroom expects. In the above example, the subversion would be in

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<sup>53</sup> What’s hard to ignore with “knack for honesty” is the connection to Socrates’ claim about rhetoric being a “knack” in Plato’s *Gorgias*. For both philosophers, a knack isn’t knowledge. Honesty is arrived at by dialectic, by rationality. Socrates, who the student is ostensibly writing about, probably wouldn’t ever allow the capability for honesty to be called a knack.

calling attention to the misplaced “knack” and what it offers the sentence, paragraph, paper in lieu of “habit,” if that’s what the student intended.

The brand of idling language I’m talking about is akin to the words, phrases, sentences, or assertions that are often shuffled around in everyday language as if any term close enough to the most appropriate in the context will do. Said another way, idling language is language *glossed*. And at first, it seems that both “blaring question” and “a knack for honesty” are basically moments of glossed language. Yet, as I’ve pointed out, they are only glossed language at first because the writer hasn’t grasped what implications lie beneath them.

One of the most interesting problems students face in their writing, and why I think catachresis is a product of that problem, is the problem of lacking the exact or best or proper words in an environment that they think requires it of them; in other words, the problem of bringing something into existence through naming it. (This is potentially why the initial reading of certain moments in student papers seems idle.) By naming an object, concept, or structure with a term that’s close enough, students are giving the thing an opportunity to be examined, whether or not they actually do so in the selfsame paper. The point is to get it on the paper first. This is why, when Levin writes, referencing Vico, that “when properly understood, the use of catachresis by the first poets was not a mere formal mechanism but an index to a world view” (95), we need to understand that—short of calling students primeval poets—they, too, are “indexing a world view.” And they are doing this indexing, or trying to, against the tide of Coles’s “threatening unfamiliarity” of the first college term and the allure of safety that “shape[s]...academic environment[s] into patterns that [they are] familiar with.” They are trying to cognize their reality. As Eco states, following Aristotle’s declaring metaphor a cognitive function, “metaphorical knowledge is knowledge of the dynamics of the real” (102).

We can see this struggle of cognizing and indexing a worldview going on in student work. Below is an excerpt of a paper called “I Care Now,” written in response to the following assignment I wrote.

- a. Describe a time you were too lazy to learn a “new code.” Understand a “new code” to be any form of information shared between two or more people.
- b. What did you stand to lose from this laziness?
- c. Define the way you use the word “laziness.”
- d. Define the way you use the word “lose.”

[Please feel free to intermix these into a coherent response. No need to answer each section in order.]

The paper “I Care Now” turned out to be a motivating piece for the class as a whole, since it was read out loud. The catachresis (which I bolded below) also became a recurring image and term in the class for the rest of the semester.

### **I Care Now**

“If a bill has passed in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate and has been approved by the President or...” I don’t care! It does not bother me that my disinterest may make me uneducated and unsophisticated. I don’t care to learn about the processes of lawmaking, the branches of government, or the checks and balances. You are merely wasting my time right now. This information means absolutely nothing to me and I don’t feel like doing it. When is recess? Fifth grade self.

“Donald Trump has secured the nomination of the Republican Party to ...” Oops once again not too interested. Who is this guy? Never heard of him. Doesn’t really matter anyways. I will probably vote democrat. Maybe I should start learning more about the

election process and the candidates so I can make an informed decision when it comes time. Nah, rather watch Netflix. High school self.

Here we are, in the present. Trump administration. How nice? “My body, my choice...” “Grab her by the pu...” “President Donald Trump's move to ban more than 218 million people from the United States and to deny entry to all refugees ...” College self and I do care. In the past the word ‘politics’ was cringe provoking in itself. I have grown into a person who cares about what is being said and how it affects the country. What was once laziness is now panic.

Laziness is asking your mom to come from the kitchen to hand you the remote five feet away. Laziness taking the bus from Towers to the Cathedral. Laziness is finishing a test and not checking the answers because, “Shit, what I put is what I put.” Laziness is overwhelming and contagious. Laziness is something that will destroy you unapologetically. My laziness, though it did not leave me handicapped, did force me to quickly catch up with the mounting number of facts and alternative facts present.

I did not lose much from my laziness, if anything I gained time. **I gained time in my parentally developed cupcake world.** I gained time in the universe where people were civil and honest and treated each person like the last. I enjoyed that world. So, from the decrease in laziness I lost a lot. Understand that loss is not only applies to misplaced items and sporting events. Loss is gradual or immediate deprivation of a thing, person, thought, idea or understanding that you once had.

The main question here is, what is a “cupcake world”? We can go back a step further and ask, what is it *like* to read “cupcake world”? It is, at first, confusing and destabilizing. Maybe a tad babyfied. Like something from a Hallmark card. A literal take on the phrase puts one in mind of

a cupcake as large as a planet, revolving around a star. But that, of course, isn't—couldn't be?—what the writer intended. Further, we need to ask: How does a word like “cupcake” even make it into a paper like this? There is brisk phrasing and placement of quotations (a recurring pattern) at work in this paper that takes a distinct turn, which sharpens the writer's previous year of political awareness and sets it in juxtaposition with a baked confection. The association of words in this paper sets up a mood—one of dismissal and self-sarcasm (the short snippets, the rhetorical questions, the refrain at the end of each paragraph updating the reader on her age and place in the world). There's a structural technique here that makes repetition a major part of the paper. And “cupcake world” makes an entrance without any expectation. So it is not only the surprise of the catachresis, but of the unusual word “cupcake.”

The writer has performed what cognitive scientist and linguist Mark Turner calls *conceptual blending* which is “the mental operation of combining two mental packets of meaning—two schematic frames of knowledge or two scenarios, for example—selectively and under constraints to create a third mental packet of meaning that has new, emergent meaning” (10). If anything, “conceptual blending” sounds like a cognitive linguistic definition of catachresis, albeit one that takes a deflationary stance on the “correctness” or “brokenness” of the rhetorical trope. How does “cupcake world” follow this conceptual blending?

We are drawn to infer that there is some ideological mindset she partakes of that draws on the qualities of the cupcake: sugary, indulgent, childlike, fun, and so on. Not only that, but a cupcake world is provided (and developed) by parents, sources of nurturing love and support. This kind of environment seems positive. It was safe. Although, reading along, one understands that a cupcake world is dangerous precisely because of the parental overseers, the sugary-sweet atmosphere, and the indulgence of what's not good for us. In this case: laziness, political

ignorance. Her laziness protected her and then she lost it. Despite that, loss wasn't a bad thing in this situation, it was a boon. But it shattered the cupcake world, so to speak. The catachrestic element here is both *in* the naming of the thing, but also in the overturning of expectation of what a cupcake world means. "Cupcake"—associated with birthdays and fun—is an emblem of ignorance. The writer has crossed fields of positive and negative association/imagery with food and lifestyle (and the normal meanings of "loss" and "gain") in search of a way to make sense of her political apathy up to that point in her life.

We can also see how the conceptual frame for a cupcake world, if written in all-caps the way Lakoff and Johnson do in their classic *Metaphors We Live By*, it could be LAZINESS IS JUNK FOOD or FOOD IS CHARACTER.<sup>54</sup> Whether or not one can write a metaphor or catachresis into a large scale conceptual metaphor like this, the point is that we can see the blending going on. I'd also point out that "gaining time" is catachrestic, as well, since one can't properly store or squirrel away time. "Gaining" in this sense probably means something like "spending."<sup>55</sup> Perhaps what the writer aimed for was "spending time pleasantly" or "spending time how I wanted to," etc. These are both odd and potentially distancing tropings, merging distinct conceptual areas. (It is worth comparing this with the following chapter on enstrangement, especially the version of enstrangement practiced by Bertolt Brecht called "the distancing effect.")

The writer took a chance in trying out this emerging concept in a sentence that might not parse clearly for the audience. Paul de Man, in his essay "The Epistemology of Metaphor,"

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<sup>54</sup> In *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Lakoff and Johnson describe the various conceptual metaphors we live within and take for granted. E.g. LOVE IS A CONTAINER, LOVE IS WAR, LOVE IS TRANSPORTATION, etc. All of these large-scale concepts are written in all caps to help identify them from smaller, individual metaphors.

<sup>55</sup> Compare how close she was to Robert Frost's assessment from his 1946 essay "The Constant Symbol": "Strongly spent is synonymous with kept" (147).

explains how and why the oddness of catachrestic moments like this has bothered readers, philosophers, and ancient rhetoricians and still irks those in the present.

[Catachreses] are capable of inventing the most fantastic entities by dint of the positional power inherent in language. They can dismember the texture of reality and reassemble it in the most capricious of ways, pairing man with woman or human being with beast in the most unnatural shapes. Something monstrous lurks in the most innocent of catachreses: when one speaks of the legs of the table or the face of the mountain, catachresis is already turning into prosopopeia,<sup>56</sup> and one begins to perceive a world of potential ghosts and monsters. (42)

Or, in this instance, one perceives a whole potential world. What are the implications of de Man's claim in the wake of my student's writing? A revision of "I Care Now" could capitalize on the slipperiness of the trope by making more explicit what a "cupcake world" means for the writer and for her audience. There could potentially be a striking revision in cultivating and embellishing the "fantastic entities" that, at first, sound enticing, but in the end represent the voluntary repression of self-awareness.

The next paper is called "First is the Worst and So is the Second," and it's about how students, specifically the author, can improve their writing. What would that look like? How would they know what to do? The following is the first half of the paper.

### **First Is the Worst and So Is the Second**

Improvement is synonymous to less boring, which tends to be the objective when writing any paper. Improvement is when the first draft resembles highway roadkill but

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<sup>56</sup> Prosopopeia is a rhetorical device that makes inanimate objects speak or where a writer makes an absent or dead character speak.

the second is a pair of hands reviving it. Improvement doesn't mean twenty something metaphors and intimidating words, sometimes it's as simple as making sure the reader doesn't sleep through your writing. Before I begin to go deeper I'll state the obvious by recognizing that good and bad writing is subjective, any old schmuck could tell you that. And I sincerely don't believe there are strict stipulations for "good" and "bad" writing either. Mostly due to the fact that writing comes in many forms and each form requires a different social script. For example, when I try to improve a text message I look for basic spelling errors that I know I would easily avoid in a University essay. **For large papers, my revisions look like torching paragraphs while simultaneously creating new ideas that could change the overall thesis of my paper.** But what I see as "correct" in my writing could utterly piss off the writer next to me. I'm a sucker for metaphors, I like the way to sound in my head and the way they sound out loud. Some writers, however, consider this to be a waste of words and paper space.

There's a jaunty, shooting-from-the-hip quality here that manifests in certain stressed anchor points of the excerpt (e.g. "any old schmuck," "utterly piss off," "I'm a sucker for metaphors"). The paper performs its insouciance through an aging effect, as if the author has reached a wizened level of the writing life (again, "schmuck" and "sometimes it's as simple as..."). I find that the chain of word sounds playing off each other assists in her argument. If we return to Parker's claim about catachresis and that what's at stake is "the mastery of language itself," I read this excerpt as controlling sounds, not the writer being controlled by them. The echo of *uck* in "schmuck" and "sucker" have vivacity and playfulness, not least because of their allusive connection to a certain popular expletive, and the *uh* sound in both are strung across the essay in the words "subjective" and "utterly." While "torching paragraphs" not only matches the

destructive imagery she's already created (roadkill), it elicits a greater web of imagery that connects (or blends) conflagration with inspiration or rebirth. Her sentence on torching puts one in mind of the myth of the phoenix, its rising, the ash pile, etc. And though the catachresis itself, "torching paragraphs," isn't composed of Germanic and Latin, it is Latin and Greek roots together. "Torch" comes from French *torche* through Latin *torqua*. And "paragraph" from Greek *paragraphos*. All of this should be a callback to Pinsky's excursus on Latin and Germanic roots, but this—and the previous two examples, too—also recalls poet James Longenbach's idea of disjunction, "the leap from one semantic, discursive, or figurative plane to another" (27), and how catachresis is the vehicle for this action. Longenbach links disjunction with Modernism and Postmodernism, but it can also be in poems like James Wright's "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" where a lovely pastoral description is interrupted in the last line by the admission: "I have wasted my life." "Torching paragraphs," "cupcake world," and "blaring question" all acted as a disjunction for me, and I think, for anyone reading in slow motion with the words and relationships between the words. Or, for anyone reading as Walker Gibson's "dumb reader," thinking they're playing one language game, when really they were in the midst of another.

Up to now I've looked at how the words play off one another and sound, so let me now turn to a generous reading of the bolded sentence's context, a context that would insert "I am" between "like" and "torching"—thus, "my revisions look like I am torching paragraphs..." Only after reading this sentence more than twenty times (in and out of context), did I finally fall upon this (seemingly obvious) reading. That said, those words aren't there. If anything, they are elided. The ambiguous elision in the sentence could lead one to think that "torching paragraphs" is a new concept she's trying out with the reader; or that we're to imagine her drafts as the

controlled burning of a field, torching certain parts while rebuilding up others. I want to acknowledge the elided version of this line first because I believe that it exists alongside my catachrestic reading. The author even admits that she's "a sucker for metaphors," so I find her amenable to a push in that direction.

Since the phrase "I am" isn't in the sentence as presented, I instead acknowledge the potential for the phrase to fully become a catachresis controlling the paper. With "torching paragraphs" the author deftly acknowledges how willing a writer must be to trash, throw away, or destroy<sup>57</sup> full sections of their work. The problem I see her working against (though I want to say the problem she's *found* and then wrestled with) is boredom. She even claims as much earlier in the paper. In fact, she writes, boredom is "synonymous" with improvement. And she tackles it with metaphor; and then with catachresis.

As a found problem, boredom *inside* student writing can be difficult to discuss with students because it is so abstract, so affectively alive, so diverse in origin. I would argue that it is what drove the writer to her "torching paragraphs" and what novelist, philosopher, and semiotician Walker Percy described in his 1958 essay, "Metaphor as Mistake." In it, Percy focuses on "wrong metaphors," those that occur haphazardly and "scandalize the critic because they are accidental" (67). For him, critics are scandalized (and maybe teachers, too), but here we are encountering just these exact types of accidental tropes in composition and trying to find a way to reassemble what's "wrong." And by "wrong" I mean "not expected" or "working against expectation" or "resistant to eye-reading." We know the student writer wanted to "make[ ] sure that the reader doesn't sleep through [my] writing" and so she stretches for combinations of

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<sup>57</sup> I originally typed "destory" here by mistake, which has a whole other context and implication for the writing under examination and which is a great example of playing off a mistake or accident.

distinctive (possibly disjunctive) words. In a commentary on Percy's "Metaphor as Mistake," Eugene Green finds that Percy believes "boredom, as much as necessity, is the mother of metaphor" (n.p.). He elaborates on the problem of boredom and writing.

Curiosity and boredom, we must remind our students, are crucial to the process of revising their writing. Our students will be aided by being told that the way in which they are talking in an essay reflects inadequate curiosity about their subject or that it reflects boredom or that what they've said does not stir our curiosity or leaves us bored. There is no issue of any abiding human significance which is not better served by a recursive pattern of curiosity, boredom, and curiosity renewed. (n.p.)

This is exactly what I think is happening with "torching paragraph." The writer of "First Is the Worst..." exalts and creates some (graphic) metaphors—drafts are "highway roadkill" or a pair of "reviving hands"—but she "stumbles into beauty without deserving it or working for it" (Percy 67) with the catachresis. The McLuhanesque Moment (or is it now the Percean Moment?) is incredibly rhetorical because it is incredibly kairotic. That is, what makes the pointing out of these stumbles into beauty, like this one, important is the reflective capacity the catachresis has generated both for the teacher and the student.

In spite of that interpretation, I think she's in the vein of the two previous papers in this chapter: she's created something, named it.<sup>58</sup> A "torching paragraph" is a name for a particular kind of paragraph that unravels itself as it's weaving itself in the same motion. It is a paragraph

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<sup>58</sup> This is a place for Ann Berthoff's forming and naming (*Forming* 111–112). See also where she writes: "Language seen as a means of making meaning has two aspects, the hypostatic and the discursive. By naming the world, we hold images in mind; we remember; we can return to our experience and reflect on it. In reflecting, we can change, we can transform, we can envisage. Language thus becomes the very type of social activity by which we might move towards changing our lives. The hypostatic power of language to fix and stabilize frees us from the prison of the moment. Language recreates us as historical beings" ("Is Teaching" 751).

undergoing revision until boredom is banished from its domain. It is the paragraph as Penelopean maneuver.

### 3.4. ENVOI

Every sentence is a kind of experiment. We begin a sentence not knowing where  
or how it will end. We release it to the world unable to predict the response it  
will, fairly or unfairly, elicit.

James Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry*

Walker Percy writes (foreshadowing Patricia Parker) that there are “[t]wo conditions” for a “mistaken metaphor” (a catachresis) to meet “if the naming is to succeed,” and the first is that “[t]here must be an authority behind it,” and the second is that “there must also be—and here is the scandal—an element of obscurity about the name” (71). I think all of the student examples meet these conditions. That’s what working through each of them in this chapter aimed to show. Their obscurity is their identifying tag. Percy continues: “the mysterious name...is both the ‘right’ name—for it has been given in good faith by a Namer who should know and carries an *ipso facto* authority—and a ‘wrong’ name—for it is not applicable as a logical modifier” (71). The students ride the edge of “rightness” and “wrongness” by their catachrestic phrases, and what they do with them is create moments in their prose that elevate opportunities for elaboration (which by my lights is no small work). Not just elaboration happens, though. Students also work inside Patricia Parker’s “psychic hierarchy” and find out how language controls them or they control language. They also create moments that bucked logical order and semantic order to say something about the issue at hand (Platonic philosophy, political ignorance, complications in written revision). In a way, these troped phrases, in context, seemed to stretch beyond the page

and the limits of Classroom Language Games, or whatever kind of language game is popularly conceived of in a classroom. When I read these examples, I see how they're all trying to do more than what the words they're using allow them to. And for all the theory I've laid out, according to Percy, there are at least two ways to look at these moments: i.e. "is it the function of metaphor merely to diminish tension, or is it a discoverer of being?" (70). Put another way: Are students solving or finding problems with their catachreses? Percy answers this way:

I cannot know anything at all unless I symbolize it. We can only conceive being, sidle up to it by laying something else alongside. We approach the thing not directly but by pairing, by apposing symbol and thing. (72)

For all my build up of tropes as ways to solve problems, I think this chapter starts to show how students have created problems or issues for themselves through troping that then subsequently need a thinking through. The "solutions" are in themselves an instigator of more work, more problems to think through. They (the students) had to symbolize the nothing they didn't know. They had to work by "pairing." This, then, is a form of invention. The nonlogicality and obscurity of the catachreses again goes back to disjunctions and the fracturing of expectation and meaning. The moments in these papers I've pointed up are disjunctively dramatic in that they took language and turned it away from the commonplace (if only for a flickering moment!) and made a leap with it. If anything, that should be commended and explored further. They take part in what Longenbach calls "dry disjunctions"—shifts in mood that are hard turns into another voice. He finds these disjunctions in the rhetorical movements of Ezra Pound or John Ashbery, poets who traffic in narrative, drama, and nonsense.

And this kind of disjunctive, mistaken, and seemingly nonsensical language of our students in those particular moments, whether metaleptic, catachrestic, or (as we'll see in the

next chapter) estranged, is not only poetic but rhetorical. And it's also a basis for argument and story and invention. As compositionist Nancy Welch writes:

I approach composition with the belief that rhetoric and poetics are intertwined, that arguments are underwritten by stories, and that these stories work powerfully as forms of persuasion. Since I also come to composition as a writer of fiction, I don't think it's a *problem* that rhetoric and poetics can't be neatly separated, or at least not a problem to get past. I learn from stories. I learn from how stories are told. Sometimes the stories told in composition bring a stab of recognition. They make familiar classrooms suddenly new, disturbing, and strange; they convince me that here is plot with which I must contend.

(939)

What Welch is laying out in this passage is a way toward seeing the poetic in the rhetorical (and by extension, I'd say, tropes), especially in student writing. She writes of stories, but I see the composed essays in the examples above represented as works with similar structures. Imagery, characters, patterning, soundplay, messing with syntax. So it makes sense, then, to want to see, to want to "learn from how stories are told."

It was the aim of this chapter to have tried to open up catachresis a bit wider than it had been before so as to help, in Welch's words, "bring a stab of recognition" to the reader and convince her that there is a plot with which she must contend. It is the aim of the following chapter to bring, not only a stab of recognition, but also a stab of estrangement to the reader.

#### 4.0 “TENTACLES WILL SOON BE REACHING INTO AFFAIRS”; OR, TROPING AS ENSTRANGEMENT

“No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into...”

Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION: WHAT ENSTRANGEMENT IS & EXAMPLES

In this chapter, I'll explore troping and form and narrative and disjunction in student writing (as Nancy Welch showed at the end of the previous chapter) and, finally, try to see the poetic in the rhetorical, as through Viktor Shklovsky's idea of “enstrangement”<sup>59</sup> (*ostranenie* in Russian), and examine how cliché works with/against enstrangement. I'll also read two student papers that I find estrange the topic at hand, one through an imposed constraint, and the other through the student's own turning of language. And at the end of the chapter, I turn to science fiction studies to discuss how the notions of “cognitive estrangement” and “subjunctivity” do, can, and should play a bigger role in the reading of student work in Composition. But I first start with how enstrangement came about and who established it.

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<sup>59</sup> Often also translated as “estrangement” or “defamiliarization.” Benjamin Sher writes in his Translator's Introduction to *Theory of Prose* (the version I'm using in this chapter), “The translation of ‘estrangement’ is good but negative and limited. ‘Making it strange’ is also good but too positive. Furthermore, both ‘estrangement’ and ‘making it strange’ are not new, that is, they require no special effort of the imagination. In fact, they exemplify the very defect they were supposed to discourage. Finally, there is ‘defamiliarization’... This semi-neologism is very seductive until you realize that it is quite wrongheaded. Shklovsky's process is in fact the reverse of that implied by this term” (xix). Thus, the term should be something like “refamiliarization,” but that's, date I say it, too academical?

Viktor Shklovsky was the founder of a movement known as Formalism, also known as Russian Formalism, and is perhaps best known for his 1917 essay “Art as Device.”<sup>60</sup> Formalism, broadly, was focused on bringing out craft and technique in artistic writing (indeed, one translation of “Art as Device” is “Art as Technique”).<sup>61</sup> According to Fredric Jameson, in his study of structuralism and Russian Formalism, *The Prison-House of Language*, “The originality of the Formalists’ idea of technique is to be found in its inversion”:

For Aristotle and the neo-Aristotelians, everything in the work of art exists for some ultimate purpose, which is the characteristic emotion or peculiar pleasure of the work itself as an object consumed. *For the Formalists everything in the work exists in order to permit the work to come into being in the first place.* The advantage of this approach is that whereas ultimately the Aristotelian analyses end up outside the work (in psychology and the extra-literary problems of the conventionality of emotion), for Shklovsky such emotions as pity and fear are themselves to be considered constituent parts, or elements of the work in the first place. (82, emphasis added)

The Formalists main claim, then—that everything in a work brings about its existence—is also essentially what Shklovsky continually aims for in his writings on writing and analyses of classic and traditional Russian literature (and some of the first writing and theory on filmmaking). Such a specific claim also narrows the focus of the Formalist critic or reader to a manageable and

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<sup>60</sup> Alexandra Berlina, in her 2015 translation of the article for *Poetics Today*, titles it “Art, as Device” with a comma, as it appeared in the Russian. This changes the emphasis, breaking the comparison up a bit than with the comma. Berlina continues in a footnote that “Estrangement is gaining currency. A double issue of *Poetics Today* (26 [4] 2005 – 27 [1] 2006) dedicated to Shklovsky’s heritage is titled ‘Estrangement Revisited’” (152). I should add that I first heard of Shklovsky and the idea of defamiliarization/enstrangement from a craft essay (not a surprise) by the novelist and short story writer, Charles Baxter, called “On Defamiliarization” in his collection *Burning Down the House*. I discuss this essay more below.

<sup>61</sup> 1965 “Art as Technique,” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, translated by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, 3 – 24 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press).

tactile subject—that of craft or technique *as it shows itself*. For Shklovsky, writing isn't built with images or symbols or plot or anything else but *devices*. These devices are often those like parallelism, repetition, symmetry, and the like. As he states in "Art as Device": "In a narrow sense we shall call a work artistic if it has been created by special devices whose purpose is to see to it that these artifacts are interpreted artistically<sup>62</sup> as much as possible" (Shklovsky 2). We are asked to reject understanding art as we normally experience it, holistically, or synecdochically, as an allegory or a platform for symbols strung together. The devices don't work in service for the whole. Quite the opposite. For example, a television show like *Seinfeld* doesn't exist as 21 minutes of four or five scenes with an intricate comedic plot about zany Manhattanites where artistic devices are subservient. Rather, *Seinfeld* the show exists only for the sake of the artistic devices that make it up; these devices could be ironic reversal, chiasmus, deceleration, and enstrangement. Again, devices make more visible the show's creation—its art—as Shklovsky argues: "The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. *Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant* (6, emphasis in original).<sup>63</sup>

While I'm not arguing for composition teachers to neglect the final product of writing (research papers, podcasts, literacy narratives, etc.), I *am* arguing for the borrowing and exploration of enstrangement as a renewal of the perceptual process in student writing; also, just as a different compositional tool. Let me stress that "a renewal of the perceptual process" is

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<sup>62</sup> I would read this, alternatively, as "craft-oriented." That is, one interprets the artifacts with as much appreciation of the craft and technique of the thing, as possible.

<sup>63</sup> Edward P.J. Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* would be an example of certain devices (or rhetorical figures) displayed and shown in actual use for writing teacher and student alike. Although, the difference is Shklovsky breaks away from Greek canon in this instance. "[Shklovsky] clearly multiplied the entities designated as devices, cataloguing as many different varieties as possible" (Steiner 214).

nothing so dramatic as it may sound. It's not a Pauline moment on the road to Damascus. For me, a shift in perception can, and should be, seen within the frame of the "very local rewards and consequences" (34) that Bartholomae gets through the work of Poirier.

Even so, much of the construction of an essay in composition eschews the kinds of tropes and troping I've been suggesting thus far in the foregoing chapters. Essays of this type are what I've come to call dutiful. They accept, very willingly (too willingly, I think), received definitions of common or difficult terms. Many essays I've received and read exist to tick off boxes on a checklist. In a way, student writers can be dutiful to the point of automatism. Some scholars in composition, like Geoffrey Sirc or William Coles (labeled either romantics or expressivists), have made anathema certain versions of this unreflective duty to fulfill some Unspoken Demands of an Archetypal Teacher. I support this destruction of dutifulness. But I wouldn't go so far, as I've stated elsewhere, that one needs a verification of faith. As Thomas Newkirk has pointed out in his striking essay "The Dogma of Transformation," writing students haven't always been driven toward plangent sermonizing about their inner lives. In a collection of student essays from the University of New Hampshire around 1930, Newkirk finds that many of the pieces "were outward looking, intensely descriptive, and rarely revealing of any personal crisis or transformation—more sight than insight" (256).

Wherever the habit, need, or impulse to turn confessional or transformative came from, it's still a habit of writing.<sup>64</sup> And this was precisely why Shklovsky made habit the target of estrangement.

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<sup>64</sup> As I've shown in chapter 2, it would be disingenuous to think that ancient dramatic precursors had no impact on the way we tell any kind of narrative in contemporary society. Anagnorisis then becomes a genetic effect of being a descendent of ancient Greek storytelling.

If we examine the general laws of perception, we see that as it becomes habitual, it also becomes automatic. So eventually all of our skills and experiences function unconsciously—automatically. If someone were to compare the sensation of holding a pen in his hand or speaking a foreign tongue for the very first time with the sensation of performing this same operation for the ten thousandth time, then he would no doubt agree with us. It is this process of automatization that explains the laws of our prose speech with its fragmentary phrases and half-articulated words. (5)

The “fragmentary phrases and half-articulated words” can be pinpointed as the everyday, phatic speech of life. From here, the path toward estrangement starts with the unconscious build up of language-use, becoming familiar, all-too-familiar. By a certain point in their education, at least in America, students come into college aware of certain protocols of language. Especially the traditional five-paragraph essay and its various species of compare-contrast, process paper, and so on. What’s habitual and automatic is the students’ comfort with the form. (Not to mention my own.) Such forms are easy enough to slip into or consume. And the question is: If student choice with language bends automatic, where do they, the writer, exist in the invention process? How can they turn language away from those inevitable uses it can’t avoid, as Poirier put it? Again, Shklovsky:

And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By “enstranging” objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and “laborious.” (6)

One wants to change “to make a stone feel stony” into “to make a word feel wordy” or “an essay feel essay-ey.” The gist of Shklovsky’s point is that we’ve worn down the original sensorium with regards to language, and art generally. By “laborious,” I don’t think Shklovsky means irritating or hard. Instead, laborious is closer to meaning something like “this needs work to unpack” or “engage your attentive consciousness.” Though what does this look like? Shklovsky tied enstrangement to riddles, and for good reason. Riddles encapsulate the act of language shading the answer from you just enough to force one beyond what’s obvious or clear. For example, the famous Riddle of the Sphinx: “What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?” Answer: “A man.” Through a poetically compressed enstrangement, the riddle gives a description of *Homo sapiens* over a whole lifespan. Riddles inherently do the work of enstrangement and it is this work Shklovsky finds in prose. Shklovsky gives examples from Tolstoy’s writings wherein he describes a flogging from an estranged point of view, so as to show its absurdity. Or his story “Kholstomer”, also known as “Strider: The Story of a Horse”, where the reader is given a piebald horse’s first-person point of view, so as to play up the absurdities of mankind. In the following example, the piebald Strider is musing to other horses on the human words “my” and “mine” and how they are hard to understand and what they may mean.

For instance many of those who called me their horse did not ride me, quite other people rode me; nor did they feed me, quite other people did that. Again it was not those who called me *their* horse who treated me kindly, but coachmen, veterinaries, and in general quite other people. Later on, having widened my field of observation, I became convinced that not only as applied to us horses, but in regard to other things, the idea of *mine* has no other feeling or right of property. A man says “my house” and never lives in

it, but only concerns himself with its building and maintenance. A merchant talk of “my cloth store”, but has none of his clothes made of the best cloth that is in his store. There are people who call land theirs, though they have never seen that land and never walked on it. There are men who call women their women or their wives; yet these women live with other men. And men strive in life not to do what they think right, but to call as many things as possible *their own*...The activity of men, at any rate of those I have had to do with, is guided by words, while ours is guided by deeds. (142)

What happens in this passage is an estrangement of private property and the conventional meaning of “ownership” and individuality. How does this happen? Shklovsky suggests that “[Tolstoy] does not call a thing by its name, that is, he describes it as if it were perceived for the first time...In addition, he foregoes the conventional names of the various parts of a thing, replacing them instead with the names of corresponding parts in other things” (6). The reader is forced into a perspectival shift. And through this shift (one may even say “turn”), both writer and reader have to reach further, strain, and get inventive with the description in order to make it unusual enough to be unrecognizable at first yet not so unrecognizable as to be an impossible riddle. Here are a few more examples of estrangement in prose. The first is from Kurt Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions*. Vonnegut often used estrangement in his fiction, the better to show, I suspect, “man’s inhumanity to man.” He start the novel by describing that he think people are robots. In describing a disease infecting lots of people in his youth, *locomotor ataxia*, he writes:

Those people were infested with carnivorous little corkscrews which could be seen only with a microscope. The victims’ vertebrae were welded together after the corkscrews got through with the meat between. (3)

I tend to think of human beings as huge, rubbery test tubes, too, with chemical reactions seething inside. (4)

Or, in describing elementary school history classes:

The teachers told the children that [the year 1492] was when their continent was discovered by human beings. Actually, millions of human beings were already living full and imaginative lives on the continent in 1492. That was simply the year in which sea pirates began to cheat and rob and kill them.

Here was another piece of evil nonsense which children were taught: that the sea pirates eventually created a government which became a beacon of freedom to human beings everywhere else. There were pictures and statues of this supposed imaginary beacon for children to see. It was sort of an ice-cream cone on fire. (11)

Vonnegut's turning a torch or beacon into "an ice-cream cone on fire" is pure estrangement. And his goal is displaying how absurd or idiotic the original sentiment or idea was—at least, in the author's estimation. The same goes with calling explorers or conquistadors "sea pirates." Vonnegut later describes cannons as "[blowing] projectiles out of metal tubes at terrific velocities" (12). He is describing something by not using the proper names for it.

These re-namings and re-descriptions and shifts and turns have been happening, as we'll see, a long time.

## 4.2 RHETORICAL RATIONALE FOR ENSTRANGEMENT

This action of not calling “a thing by its name” didn’t suddenly pop up with Shklovsky, and it didn’t start with Tolstoy. A large portion of my argument in this dissertation is situated in the use of rhetorical tropes. And I hope I’ve made it obvious that the first two, metalepsis and catachresis, are safely in the realm of Greek and Roman rhetorics. But enstrangement doesn’t, on the surface, belong to either of these. Nevertheless, through some literary genetic history, one can find that enstrangement has been practiced as far back as Marcus Aurelius in his *Meditations* (especially in 6.13). The historian Carlo Ginzburg has found that Marcus Aurelius described objects, not with their names, e.g. eating, clothing, sex, but instead this way, “Falernian wine is grape juice and that robe of purple a lamb’s fleece dipped in a shellfish’s blood” (11 qtd. in Ginzburg). Ginzburg finds that, following Marcus Aurelius, one enacts such a perspectival shift in order to “rightly see” or “see better” how transient one’s life is and will continue to be (11). Enstrangement was simultaneously an existential, rhetorical, and compositional method toward living a Stoical life. That is, if one could redefine an experience or an event or an object in a way that distanced it, the emotional attachments normally connected to those descriptions would drop out. Ginzburg also claims that Tolstoy—who so influenced Shklovsky—was himself heavily influenced by Marcus Aurelius and that “Things unveiled themselves to [Tolstoy’s] passionate and detached gaze ‘as they really are,’ to use Marcus Aurelius’s phrase” and it was through shifting perspectives in his writings (in this case, through the point of view of a horse) that Tolstoy peeled away phenomena’s “conventional meanings” (11).<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> In a strange turn of events, Ginzburg shows how Aurelius’s style was amplified and perhaps made more visible by a forgery of his writing from the 16th century: “Marcus Aurelius’s life and letters had become widely known to the European cultivated public some decades before the first publication of his reflections in a disguised, fictitious form. The author of this forgery

Yet, in spite of (or in light of) such a history, there is one element of Shklovsky’s idea still not addressed: his insistence on writing as *art*, not, as writing teachers often read it, as *academic prose* or as some other kind of writing. My aim is to show how Shklovsky’s ideas about language and estrangement port beyond just artistic motives, which will lead me back to the classroom. Because it is there that the teacher deals with preconceived notions of what will be read and written—what I’ve been referring to as the commonplace or cliché. By cliché, I do mean the negative definition. (Sadly, the meaning of the term comes from the French verb *clicher*, which comes from an imitative sound that molten metal would make hitting a form for typing. If only it still carried that visual weight!) Although, there have been those who want cliché revived, or at least its history more thoroughly reconsidered, for example, Ruth Amossy, a scholar on stereotype and cliché. A better understanding of cliché can help flesh out estrangement’s contributions to the classroom.

### 4.3 BETWEEN ENSTRANGEMENT AND CLICHÉ

Amossy writes that there is a number of passive functions that the cliché can hold and act out for a reader. Of these, those most appropriate to our discussion of student writing in college,<sup>66</sup> are how cliché “Orients and Models Reading,” “Favors Identification,” and “Can Be an Argumentative Device” (37). When a cliché “orients a reading,” it acts as a “generic signal” to the reader, making her aware of an expected conceptual outlook (37). Within a grammar of

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was the Franciscan friar Antonio de Guevara, bishop of Mondofiedo, preacher at the court of the emperor Charles V” (12). Guevara wrote in such a way [examples] that is ended up influencing a slew of writers afterward, including French Enlightenment authors like Montaigne, La Bruyere, and Voltaire, all of whom practiced estrangement as Shklovsky later came to describe it.

<sup>66</sup> Amossy is writing about clichés in the literary tradition, e.g. Balzac, Flaubert, etc. But her observations on cliché equally hold for writing other than literature.

student writing, we can see sentences and phrases like this that start off with “In today’s society...”, “More and more we see...”, “The dictionary defines the word...”, etc. These are sentences that let the reader know there’s Big Thinking going on. Or, at least, a kind of thinking that is Doing Serious Work, whether or not it actually is. Then there is the cliché “favoring identification,” which “insures a circular relationship between ‘I’ and ‘you.’ It is a common place in which emotional identification can occur” (37). As one student essay read more fully later in this chapter begins, “Curiosity is an inescapable part of being human. Man has been asking questions since its inception and will continue to do so until its demise.” The reader, no matter who they are, is co-opted into this circle of discourse, one hard to break out of. (Moreover, who could disagree with the author’s statements? What would have to happen in order to do so?) Following closely behind these two is the cliché acting as an argumentative device, which serves to satisfy the reader that they are reading truthful words and buying into a “solidarity of minds” (37). The just-mentioned student example would also fit this third passive function. Amossy concludes by declaring, in a tone reminiscent of Shklovsky, that

The functions of passively registered clichés are, in essence, tied to the phenomenon of maximal *automatization*; those of critically perceived clichés are based on the fact that they are *quotations*. In both cases, however, the cliché posits a relation with a pre-existing discourse—anonymous and blurred talk, the insistent buzz of social discourse...and that relation mediates both text production and deciphering. (38)

It is Amossy’s yoking of “automatization” to a “pre-existing discourse” that we are most interested in here. The collocation of terms in English composition and rhetoric courses—e.g. “in today’s world”—doesn’t simply manifest as an unthinking habit; such verbal decisions carry down the line to the reader of the work, both teachers and peers. And the collocations represent,

whether the writer knows it or not, a distinct web of relationships and associations that affect the writing and interpretation of the paper.<sup>67</sup>

Following Amossy, we can surmise that students are, if only at first, looking backward into their linguistic history for models. They have borne their previous teachers on their backs. These teachers overpopulate every classroom and stifle students. (I, too, will become a stumbling block for them, much to my dismay.) To combat this, I return to a quotation from the head of my Introduction. It's from Emerson's "Self-Reliance":

But why should you keep your head over your shoulder? Why drag about this corpse of your memory, lest you contradict somewhat you have stated in this or that public place? Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then? It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past for judgment into the thousand-eyed present, and live ever in a new day. (138)

I'm not sure I know if those thousand eyes belong to one being or a thousand separate ones or five hundred. But I think Emerson meant to say that each present has a thousand ways to see a thing. Or, that each present has the *opportunity* to see a thing a thousand ways. And that compared to the "corpse" of the memorious past, with it's entrenched methods, and automatistic ways, we are to bring what's been done previously and judge them today. If at the end of that

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<sup>67</sup> There are those, like Cathryn Molloy, who embrace the cliché in some of its forms. Viz. for Molloy, she focuses on the "malcliche," which is a cliché that is misquoted, thus simultaneously being a cliché or a violation of style and an interesting invention/new use of language. Molloy's malcliche is as close as anyone has come, that I've yet seen, to describing what I'm trying to do with my broader term of "troping." "The new expressions that result may have the power to subvert or at least rearrange clichéd expressions. They might, at the most, be new, tactical expressions with unique communicative force, and they might convey intriguing knowledge departures from their originals. Ironically, authors of these misspoken clichéd expressions are unaware of their inventive acts, and even if they discovered them, it is unlikely that they would consider them profound acts. In fact, they might simply note the correction, and then banish the misspoken abomination to the dark corners of their minds to other seldom-visited places there" (149).

judgment is a new—enstranged—thing, or in this case, an artistic device, then so much the better. When a source of invention collapses into a sinkhole, that is when the search for new inventional methods happens. Or should happen. That is the rub, though. How does one recognize when it's time to drop the old or turn it over? Ostensibly, one does this when perception turns habituated into morphs into unthinking.

#### 4.4 BETWEEN ENSTRANGEMENT, HABIT, & PERCEPTION

A student writer's attention isn't passive; it's always bound in activity. Perception possesses certain prior knowledge and perceptive habits and patterns and causes of those patterns, whether from high school or other concurrent college courses. I follow John Dewey's definition of perception from *Art as Experience* as "the going-out of energy in order to receive" (53). The fuller quotation helps contextualize his meaning.

In much of our intercourse with our surroundings we withdraw; sometimes from fear, if only of expending unduly our store of energy; sometimes from preoccupation with other matters, as in the case of recognition. Perception is an act of the going-out of energy in order to receive, not a withholding of energy. To steep ourselves in a subject-matter we have first to plunge into it. When we are only passive to a scene, it overwhelms us and, for lack of answering activity, we do not perceive that which bears us down. We must summon energy and pitch it at a responsive key in order to *take* in. (53, emphasis in original)

For Dewey, there is a dialogue between the individual, the object, and the world. A constant triangulation. To perceive is to expend energy to receive. As Nathan Crick writes, for Dewey

“The very act of communication requires an individual to give form to what had previously been formless, and in doing so changes the attitude of that person toward his or her own experiences. So in drawing from the social resources of a shared language, the resulting expression serves, however slightly, to challenge, supplement, or rearrange both the experiences of the speaker and of the community being addressed” (270). Thus, for students engaging in troping-as-enstrangement, the aim is to take the writing beyond an expected perception, to reshape the thing seen in such a way as to go even further than “rearranging both the experiences of the speaker and of the community.” The idea is to radically reshape what had *already been formed* into something that demands fresh perception, perhaps instigating a full Deweyan “plunge” in each enstrangement depending on the demands made on the reader. Which is to say that enstrangement is an overtaxation of the normal level of perception—or a perceptive surprise.<sup>68</sup> In his book on imagination and narrative, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Jerome Bruner writes that surprise offers the possibility of “what people take for granted” because it is “a response to violated presupposition” (46). Perception is heavily affected by surprise, to the point that our perceptive systems work hard to tamp down the unexpected. Bruner argues that we are deeply bound to this habit of expecting what’s normal, what’s familiar. Thus: “The more expected an event, the more easily it is seen or heard” (46). For a writer, the more familiar (or seemingly familiar) the topic, the easier it may be to note its qualities or definition. Even with an unfamiliar topic, the writer would then, by Bruner’s lights, want to make the subject familiar not just for themselves, but for the reader, too. Yet, as Bruner explains, “perception is to some unspecifiable degree an instrument of the world as we have structured it by our expectancies. Moreover, it is characteristic of complex perceptual processes that they tend where possible to assimilate

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<sup>68</sup> Compare with Kenneth Burke’s “perception by incongruity” in *Permanance and Change* (90).

whatever is seen or heard to what is expected” (47). We wouldn’t want to teach (or take) a writing course where the writers only aimed to shake up their readers with estranged descriptions at every turn, but it does appear that the default setting is the need to assimilate. As I’ve been trying to show, Shklovsky’s idea can offer a way to shake off that habit as needed.

#### **4.5 BETWEEN ENSTRANGEMENT, CONSTRAINTS, & STUDENT WRITING**

Much of freshmen writing is about learning the academic moves, generic elements, the feeling-outward of trying on new voices, and “the going-out of energy,” a building up of abilities in academic devices like anticipatory signposting, transitioning, and comparison. Composition teachers focus on all of these parts because students need an ability to organize and arrange argumentative statements and research.

That said, I want to know what something like Pynchon’s epigraph to this chapter, the “progressive-knotting-into,” could look like in a composition classroom without letting go of coherency.<sup>69</sup> What I’m after with borrowing Pynchon’s phrase is something like bending the student’s compositional awareness/choices back into the writing to change subsequent outcomes without teacher input. Part of this means seeking out troping-as-estrangement, or setting up the constraints for estrangement, then finding out how the students’ forms of writing changed or, as mentioned in the last chapter, turned disjunctive.<sup>70</sup> Constraint as a method, an exigency, and a

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<sup>69</sup> This is not an insult. E.g. I found the idea of “estrangement” in Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry* before I knew the connection existed by reading the secondary literature. “But Poetry acts in another and diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar” (681). Coleridge, too, made use of the idea. (For more, see Bogdanov 48-49.)

subject is an inventive mode in writing because it raises *choice* into relief. With constraints, student writers must consider *the choices made* in any sentence. Shklovsky, in another work, *Third Factory*, writes on “the freedom of art” through a story about flax, all of which is a good example of enstrangement.

FLAX. This is no advertisement. I’m not employed at the Flax Center these days. At the moment, I’m more interested in pitch. In tapping trees to death. That is how turpentine is obtained.

From the tree’s point of view, it is ritual murder.

The same with flax.

Flax, if it had a voice, would shriek as it’s being processed. It is taken by the head and jerked from the ground. By the root. It is sown thickly—oppressed, so that it will not be vigorous but puny.

Flax requires oppression. It is jerked out of the ground, spread out on the fields (in some places) or retted in pits and streams.

The streams where the flax is washed are doomed—the fish disappear. Then the flax is braked and scutched.

I want freedom.

But if I get it, I’ll go look for unfreedom at the hands of a woman and a publisher.

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<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, the etymology of the Russian term for enstrangement, *ostranenie*, has spatial and topical resonances: “Tracing the genealogy of estrangement, Shklovsky also questions the autonomy and unity of the ‘national language.’ *Ostranenie* means more than distancing and making strange; it is also dislocation, *depaysement*. *Stran* is the root of the Russian word for country-*strana*” (Boym 515). And despite the risk of seeking middling connections everywhere, Pynchon’s epigraph is from the beginning of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where certain denizens of London during the Blitz, riding a train, journey out of the city to new and unfamiliar places to live. They are, coincidentally, quite literally dis-located.

But just as a boxer requires elbow room for his punch, so a writer requires the illusion of choice. (49)

Again, the rhetorical stakes in the writing classroom may not be as high as they were for an worker/artist in Soviet Russia, but Shklovsky's point is that, like flax, the art or artist needs constraint to function; it requires "oppression," so to speak. (I do not think Shklovsky is in favor of political oppression. Quite the opposite.) But if here flax equal words in a language and the "thick sowing" equals writing constraints, we read him as ever striving for unfreedom as against freedom.

A simple example from a recent class (Spring 2016) may be best. My students persisted in starting sentences with vernacular gerunds, pulling the progressive form of "to be" from their verbs. E.g. "Being troubled by the work..." instead of "Troubled by the work..." When I asked why they did this, no one knew. Other popular patterns showed up. General pronouns: many, most, some, all, people, etc. That is, they wrote sentences that contained no content applicable to the sentence prior or after but only existed to stave off the inevitable end—here, the completion of the essay. (That is, they fulfilled Shklovsky's theory without enstranging anything, because the essays were full of devices, just none that performed beyond the dutiful.)

On the next essay, I set three constraints: (1) No forms of "to be"<sup>71</sup> at all, (2) Start all sentences with a strong noun<sup>72</sup>, and (3) Use at least two parentheticals. The resulting essays

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<sup>71</sup> This strategy is called E-Prime. E-Prime is a form of English that uses no forms of "to be." Daniel Zimmerman, in an article titled "E-Prime as a Revision Strategy," writes that "Use of E-Prime can help students with the revision of their own writing and to become aware of underlying structural errors and cognitive opacities" (343). Moreover, "E-Prime filters noise; it helps to bridge the gap between private notation and public communication. It can catalyze a permanent boost in its practitioners' attention to language, allowing writers to construct their own filters and discover their own strategies, rather than to ape and clone 'inherited' and, frequently, maladaptive predilections" (346). I have, anecdotally, found this to bear truth (see

showed a greater attention to sentence forms, word choice, and especially *verbs*. The lightest constraint yielded denser prose. (This doesn't—or can't—catalog the self-imposed constraints students bring to the page from past writing instructors. We all recognize the stereotypical basics: Don't use first person pronouns, Paragraphs should weigh in around five sentences, All essays should start wide and welcoming so any discerning general reader off the street can pick up this general interest prose and read enthusiastically. I'd go so far as to say these kinds of shibboleths are neuroses of writing. Neuroses, then, are constraints that don't yield results. Instead, they limit. Or, these neuroses wildly proliferate choice instead of focusing on it.)

Sometimes, though, the constraints create themselves without my imposition, and it's only afterward that I notice how they link up with what I may understand or have previously known about literary devices. That is, I'm also aware of how my constraints fail. But as I mentioned earlier, often the automatization of the previous school-based forms of writing block any answer to *Why did you make this choice?* Constraint, leading to enstrangement-as-troping, can then open up a space for a metacognitive recognition of the compositional methods, if only because it can short-circuit the perceptive process of student writers.

As a clear example of the automatic moves I'm thinking of, and reading in class, take cleft sentences, those that start "Being that..." or sentences that start with the pleonastic "I think." These are the tiny habits of readymade writing. Pointing out the habits and moves and putting a barricade in the way of them is the first part of introducing enstrangement.

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more above). I.A. Richards had similar things to say about limiting one's vocabulary in *How to Read a Page*.

<sup>72</sup> By "strong" I mean anything that's specific or a proper noun. E.g. instead of starting with "This" or "If one" or a pronoun. A strong noun substitution wouldn't look like "His sentences are complex," but "Word-skeins thicken the page in intricate patterns," and so on. Or: "The sentences exploit quirky syntax." Oddly enough, John Dewey's writing style, to me, most exemplifies this.

I should mention that automatization isn't only on the writer's side—but also on the reader's side, my side. Faced with a flood of student writing carrying out similar, if not exactly, the same moves, any attentive reading for a teacher surely grows daunting. How to creatively read what appear as slight variations of the same, repeated essay? The problem infects both ways. If the form controls the student, and the student doesn't control the form, it is a place for slow reading to step in? For Shklovsky

...objects are grasped spatially, in the blink of an eye. We do not see them, we merely recognize them by their primary characteristics. The object passes before us, as if it were prepackaged. We know that it exists because of its position in space but we see only its surface. Gradually, under the influence of this generalizing perception, the object fades away. This is as true of our perception of the object in action as of mere perception itself. It is precisely this perceptual character of the prose word that explains why it often reaches our ears in fragmentary form...In the process of algebrizing, of automatizing the object, the greatest economy of perceptual effort takes place. Objects are represented either by one single characteristic (for example, by number), or else by a formula that never even rises to the level of consciousness. (5)

No matter what compositional method a student wields coming into a writing class as a freshmen, we shall want them to ask: *is it a formula that never even rises to the level of consciousness?* This isn't to say every single student can't find a way through the building up of habitual moves. But between the student and the teacher in the classroom, the teacher should take responsibility to delineate a boundary.

The following are the first few lines of two short essays for the same assignment I gave my Autumn 2015 class. (The same assignment used in the chapter on metalepsis.)

#2

- a. Write one page explaining a time you tried to improve your writing.
- b. What needed the improvement? That is, how was it “wrong”?
- c. How did you know how to make the writing “correct”?
- d. Define the way you use the word “improve.”

Here’s one student’s beginning:

Improvement can be described in many ways, but I define improvement as making something better. Better in the sense that by the end, you’ve learned something new that you had no knowledge of before and you are able to apply it to what you already know.

And another:

There are so many things humans need to survive, many of them are physical such as food, water, sleep, but people also need other people to survive. It is proven that in isolation humans go insane. Most importantly people need happiness, without that nothing else matters. Improvement is anything that makes it easier for people to survive.

I’m not blaming these authors for any stylistic shortcomings or inconsistencies. But as a reader of student writing, lines like these lack performance. They don’t add up. They are, in a way, stock responses. Asking a student to explain or defend the above turns into a more productive conversation than trying to suss out what they meant on the page, because I believe students find oral explication and conversation more conducive, more forgiving of contradiction. Some even

prove confused by what they wrote when they're given back what they wrote. As I go over these, I observe that each of the above excerpts both start with the typical world-wide view, glacially narrowing in on the topic at hand—the second one even more so; the second one is trying to “hook” the reader with some breed of “shocking platitude”; notice the “to be” verbs and the broadly defined “things” and their cohorts “something,” “anything,” “people,” and “humans.” The word patternings in the second example almost verge on non-content because they are so vague. The implications for this kind of “vaguery” point to a lack of focus on the writer’s end. Such a fantastically, cosmic scope is easy to propose because, who will disagree? To bring their focus back home is harder. To trope home is the hardest part.

#### 4.6 TAKING FAMILIAR STUDENT WRITING BEYOND THE PALE

As mentioned in the previous chapter, my Spring 2016 course was titled “Utopia, Atopia, Dystopia.”<sup>73</sup> And it seemed totally appropriate that the class’s topic, born of science fiction, should solidly imbricate with my notions of enstrangement in the classroom.)

Following what I’d tried in my Autumn 2015 class, I put forth a constrained approach after the first drafted essays came in. I’ll start with one of two essays by Jerrica. It was written with no constraints. Here’s the assignment I gave the class.

#1

a. What is the difference between telling a narrative and doing research?

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<sup>73</sup> The class used these three concepts as ways to read and ways to write. That is, I asked them to consider what a “utopic” sentence looked like, etc. It also worked with *topos* as a rhetorical idea. We read Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, Dave Eggers’s *The Circle*, and Kathryn Davis’s *Duplex*. The class also asked questions about the overlap between narratives, research, and games, since they were all important aspects of the novels and heavily explored genres in college writing.

- b. How can you tell a difference, if you see one? What signals the difference?
- c. Define “narrative” and “research” in this context.

(Do not use a dictionary, please.)

Here is Jerrica’s essay. It had no title.

Curiosity is an inescapable part of being human. Man has been asking questions since its inception and will continue to do so until its demise. When seeking for answers to a question, there are two places one can look: externally or internally. Doing research is how those who look externally find answers, while telling narratives allows those who turn their search inward to identify the answers they seek. Most works fall on a spectrum between the two, however, which can make a work’s categorization difficult.

The easiest way to differentiate a narrative from research is the subject matter. Research is done and published by people who look for answers outside of themselves, so research focuses on a topic aside from the author, be it science, history, or art. Narrative, however, is an author-centric medium, so the material will be either about the author or something the author created. The possible variation in a narrative’s topic leads to more specific subcategories such as fiction or autobiography, but no matter the subcategory, the narrative always focuses on the author. The narrative’s focus on the author also leads to the pliable nature of the narrative. While an author writing a narrative can create their own version of reality, research is grounded firmly in the world we know to exist. Even with regards to nonfiction narratives, the author’s view of the subject matter, often themselves, can warp the story away from actuality, even with such slight

indiscretions as hyperbole and bias. Research does not have this liberty, as it is rooted in fact, and any deviation can have severe consequences. However, works rarely fall easily into one of the two categories, and teasing apart works in the middle of the spectrum can be difficult at best.

Narratives and research are two extremes, and many pieces are a mix of the two. An author may use research to make a narrative more realistic, like many science-fiction writers do, or use narrative to make research more interesting, as some biographers choose to do. One could even choose to do research to make a realistic narrative about a character doing research like Ursula LeGuin most likely did while writing *The Dispossessed*. Despite the vast and convoluted ways the two forms can overlap, there is a simple way to tell whether a work leans more toward narrative or research. A narrative will tell the reader about the author, because the introspective nature of the writing process allows the authors views and opinions to seep into the piece via themes and motifs. Conversely, research will inform the reader about a topic besides the author, as the external emphasis forces the author to focus not on their own beliefs and ideas but fact and observation from the world around them.

Breaking down every piece of writing ever created by man into two categories is not only a daunting task, but a meaningless one. The writing forms of narrative and research are so often intermixed in a variety of complex ways to give the piece a balance, that simply breaking the spectrum into two disregards all of the unique mixes in between. While dividing all works into either research or narrative can lump together extremely different works or voices, a line can be

drawn when one considers whether the work informs the reader about the author or another subject.

As expected, there's the wide-scope introduction. Though she could've started at sentence four: "Doing research..." Overall, I find her thinking nuanced enough for a short response: "An author may use research to make a narrative more realistic, like many science-fiction writers do, or use narrative to make research more interesting, as some biographers choose to do." But by the end, I'm not sure where she stands when she writes "simply breaking the spectrum into two." In the last paragraph, she both dismisses the idea of "breaking down" genres and confirms the possibility of delineating "whether the work informs the reader about the author or another subject." Jerrica spent a few paragraphs trying to pry, embellish, or fuss with narrative and research, to say something beyond the obvious. In the end, she reverts to shrugging. She ends with a diversion. She waves one hand to distract you from the other. The terms of the essay shift from narrative and research to "informing the reader about the author or another subject."

This essay averages 24 words per sentence. There is no troping. There are no overt metaphors, similes, litotes, or the like. There's no striking alliteration, assonance, or consonance. No deviant syntax. The punctuation behaves itself. The response is cogent, clear, and makes a good faith effort at my assignment. But that is not all that the assignment should require or need.

Jerrica could revise. She could brush up the sentences or ideas that have threads hanging off. She could tighten syntax and the pleonastic "thats" and even break up paragraphs for visual pizzazz. But what does she come away with? What does the assignment afford her besides this? She's dutiful. Too dutiful, I think. What *choices* has she made? She's ostensibly worked through some concepts—i.e. narrative and research. Although, has she worked through the language, the sounds of the words playing off each other or the concepts bounding and bouncing off one

another? What does she take away from the sentences? What does she take away from their arrangement?

Writing through constraints forces the writer to flex different “muscles.” Prose produced by constraint must complete a cognitive leap.<sup>74</sup> The leap goes from a seat of relative comfort with meaning and use to an unaccountable and awkward employment of meaning and use. (We again think back to Shkovsky’s example of sowing flax closely together.)

What follows is the assignment I gave the students in Jerrica’s class after a few unperformative essays. First, we read a piece from *Raritan Quarterly* by literary critic Karl Miller.<sup>75</sup> It was called “Harry and the Pot of Gold” and offered an adult’s distanced perspective on the *Harry Potter* book series. For example, students borrowed Miller’s prose, some of which went like this: “Beowulf and Harry have this much in common: each is a hero, a savior, a dragon slayer, a shield against dark forces”; “Witches, wizards, vampires, dragons, elves, hexes, jinxes, unicorns, phoenixes, hippogriffs, manticores, farting screwwts associate with prefects, homework, sports stars, bullies, teacher’s pets, teachers who don’t get on, with ‘getting people back’ and putting them down, in the style of classrooms and playgrounds” (132, 135).

The majority of my 19 students grew up reading the Rowling series. Today, *they* are the adults. I figured it would catch their natural interests. I was right. We discussed the essay. Next class, they received the assignment.

For this essay, I want you to answer the question, “Does a utopia need persuasion?” The constraint you must abide is this: you can only use the words in Miller’s essay to answer the question. Treat it as a giant word bank. Feel free to

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<sup>74</sup> See Colin Symes’s “Writing by Numbers: OuLiPo and the Creativity of Constraints” in *Mosaic* 32.3 (Sept. 1999) 87-107.

<sup>75</sup> Miller, Karl. “Harry and the Pot of Gold: Document View.” *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* vol. 20, no. 3, 2001, p. 132.

repurpose his words and short phrases into your own. Refrain from copying wholesale sentences. Please give the essay a title.

The assignment was tough, deliberately so. The words “utopia” and “persuasion” don’t appear in Miller’s essay. So students were forced to employ enstrangement as a device and trope Miller’s terms, images, and concepts. Some students struggled. Some found footing. Many wrote as literally as possible. Which isn’t to say they weren’t good. Actually, the results of this assignment were the best set of responses I’d received from the class all semester. The class was exposed to—and encouraged to use—a collection of words and phrases and concepts they wouldn’t normally have had at hand. The words, phrases, and concepts weren’t unavailable to them *as such* prior to this moment, but the mere direct exposure of them as possible material set them into a different verbal arena from the start. They had to follow verbal detours, which lead to troping-as-enstrangement. The following was the longest and enstranged investigation of the question.

### **Elsewhere**

The (overdone) oppression of contemporary class division and social desolation and “getting people back” and putting them down are often deserted for a world elsewhere: here. There is too much magic in the air. Praised for offering lavish tutorial care with bourgeois-bohemian tendencies. A brilliantly funny fantasy of multicultural mingling. A place for people to be, and to play, and to be reassured. A hero, a dragon slayer, a shield against dark forces. An institution designed to train the elite in a system that other mortals cannot follow. Children have long been invited to dream, but there are occasions when the invitation enrages. Magic succeeds, but also fails.

Children: fully capable of errors, resentment, and vexation. Who might well grow up to sink. A parent has an important job: award concocted intoxicants to be smoked or swallowed. This rescue scene is of a young wizard, claiming restoration to his kind. To some extent redeemed by belonging. But magic is subject to limit.

Adolescents, immune to any such encouragements (with families to desert, mothers and fathers to resent): the explosive handguns they were unable to anticipate. Tentacles will soon be reaching into affairs. Dark forces. Primal disaster. Prophets of doom. A poem of a thousand years ago pledged to blood. Out of the wilderness crawled a vile man who folded what he had (other prospects, alternative views) into a small, twisted package. A recruitment crisis of unprecedented dimensions, which belies the collapse. Children who once operated in comfortable relation to an adjudicated cannon, now critics suspect of birth and upbringing. There was some deep and stubborn difference that made even the progressive vicious. A scene depicting the captivity and constraint of a party. Finally, what the demonized pupils can hardly have hoped for: escape. Another brick in the history.

Through all the gathering gloom, a nation mourned for lost innocence. It is difficult to gauge what residues are present. Mothers freeing more time to devote to the children who they are grooming. Adults more at home with the authorial establishment of tradition. A connection among subjects that could sometimes appear to incorporate all that is arbitrary and conventional.

Legend has it (and it may also be true) but some fantasies are more truthful than others. They were not magical. They did not transmute metal into pure gold or light. No wizards, witches, vampires, dragons, elves, hexes, jinxes, unicorns, phoenixes, hippogriffs, or manticores associated with them: the philosophers deemed to be sorcerers.

Let me start a reading of this essay with a line from (formalist) film critic Roger Ebert: “A film is not about what it is about, but how it is about it” (“Flirt”). I want to modify this to: *An essay is not about what it is about, but how it is about it.* This is the context in which I read Jerrica’s essay, which one can read and scoff or get angry at the seeming opacity of it. But I applaud Jerrica for tenaciously hazarding this writing. As a writer, she had to carefully weigh *how* she composed her sentences through syntax, grammar, and tone. She scrapped duty for a focus on language. She made choices and had to reflect on those choices in a careful manner because of the tenuous circumstances surrounding her compositional method.

I will isolate and explain the devices used. Then I will explain why a student should be aware of the devices and focus on sharpening and developing them.

The idea here was to have students operate within a circumscribed vocabulary. That is, vocabulary as raw materials. The constraints put a pressure on Jerrica (and the rest of the class) to *choose*. That is: to make more of fewer resources than less of unbounded resources. Jerrica subjects Karl Miller’s words to intervention—an intervention representing layers of meaning and purpose. She separates and re-sorts the layers.

Notice her 11 words per sentence opposed to the prior essay’s 24. Jerrica couldn’t barrel into the question and copy the key terms. She couldn’t make the typical assumptions that themes or commonplaces promote. As I read this essay, I ask—how will Jerrica maneuver around the

missing terms (“utopia” and “persuasion”) and answer the question? In “Elsewhere” we aren’t allowed to view utopias as the classical paradise, nor can persuasion identify with anything in the traditional Greek or Roman background. All Jerrica had to work with were images and terms describing J.K. Rowling’s young adult series about a boy wizard. Above, I said the “leap [within] constraints goes from a seat of relative comfort with meaning and use to an unaccountable and awkward employment of meaning and use.” This also means troping the terms—in this case, a shrewd move compared with Jerrica’s previous essay. “Utopia” in the original question moves from a theoretical form of social structure to the duration of adulthood, the “place” where everything is settled and controlled from a child’s viewpoint. Persuasion transforms to “magic.”<sup>76</sup> In order to answer the question, Jerrica possesses (i.e. “owns”) the terms for herself and answers accordingly. The effect of her tone and syntax forces the reader to adopt a fresh perspective. The composition’s unity (or disjunctive pleasure) depends on the piling up of a continuous metaphor (itself a familiar device) through enstrangement and the smaller devices that make up enstrangement: e.g. repetition and variation, word patterning, and repeating phrases and sentence rhythms, lists, and deceleration.

Owing to the constraint of the assignment, Jerrica needed a way in. For her it was redescription. As mentioned, she describes a “utopia” as “a world elsewhere”—a Shakespearean phrase from *Coriolanus*. (None of the students knew the source of this before they used it. And Miller didn’t reference the play in his original essay. [It appears in Act 3, Scene 3.]) Coriolanus states it as a way of establishing his agency outside of the citizens of Rome who’ve banished him: “There is a world elsewhere.” And there is. Here Jerrica borrows the phrase to establish a (virtual) utopia amidst the “contemporary class division and social desolation.”

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<sup>76</sup> Incidentally: not a totally unreasonable assumption. Consider the close connection between magic and rhetoric in Ancient Greece. For more in this vein, see Jacqueline De Romilly.

The four sequential fragments—“A brilliantly funny fantasy of multicultural mingling. A place for people to be, and to play, and to be reassured. A hero, a dragon slayer, a shield against dark forces. An institution designed to train the elite in a system that other mortals cannot follow”—continue enstrangement by rephrasing the first sentence, the thematic claim. As Shklovsky said: this is done by “not call[ing] a thing by its name” (“Art as Device” 6). The fragments read like blurbs found on the back of bestselling books—meant to entice and titillate. This is in direct opposition to the sentences/clauses that are strongly S-V-O: “Children have long been invited to dream...,” “A parent has an important job...,”<sup>77</sup> and “Tentacles will soon be reaching into affairs.”<sup>78</sup>

Enstrangement, though, is also developed by other devices (Shklovsky 22-23). Since many overlap, e.g. lists and deceleration, I include them together for brevity.

**(2) Repetition & variation.** A straight forward device. The repetition of a phrase, clause, or sentence with some variation, no matter how slight. Can also be considered a “refrain.”)

**“magic”**

“There is too much magic in the air.”  
“Magic succeeds, but also fails.”  
“But magic is subject to limit.”  
“They were not magical.”

**“children”**

“Children: fully capable of errors, resentment, and vexation.”

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<sup>77</sup> This clause in particular starts to read as a cliché, but the conclusion of the sentence is “...award concocted intoxicants to be smoked or swallowed”—not quite what one often believes a parent should do. Thus, the sentence works because of its reversal, its undercutting of expectations. In this way, Jerrica turned the cliché for her use. See also: “Another brick in the history” asymptotically swerving toward Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall.”

<sup>78</sup> While these all use to be verbs, they are written with compelling visuals. The rest of the sentences’ parts support the verbs.

“Children who once operated in comfortable relation to an adjudicated cannon, now critics suspect of birth and upbringing.”

**(3) Word patterning.** This is the use of a series or collection of associated terms. These create and reinforce patterns between themes and other devices. What’s often a lost opportunity in student essays is a conscious effort to exploit the environs of a term.

**negative words**

oppression, class division, desolation, putting them down, deserted, to desert, enrages, errors, resentment, vexation, to sink, concocted intoxicants, to resent, explosive handguns, tentacles, dark forces, disaster, prophets of doom, pledged to blood, wilderness, vile, twisted, crisis, collapse, stubborn, vicious, captivity, constraint, demonized, gloom, mourned

**family-related terms**

“*Children* have long...”  
“*Children*: fully capable...”  
“A *parent* has...”  
“*Adolescents*...”  
“(with *families* to desert, *mothers* and *fathers* to resent)”  
“*Children* who once operated...”  
“*Mothers* freeing...”  
“...*children* whom they are grooming.”  
“*Adults* more at home...”

**(4) Lists & Deceleration.** From “Children have long been invited to dream” to the end of the third paragraph is a series of lists about children and adolescents. It’s also a description of these groups of people from slightly different perspectives in each instance. What does it add up to? Shklovsky writes, “The synonymous (tautological) parallelism with a transition and repetition from stanza to stanza turns into what is called in the poetics of the Russian song ‘a deceleration’” (“Plot” 25-26). This isn’t a song, of course, but it does use deceleration, the slowing down of prose by redescribing over and over the subject under discussion—here, young people.

Smaller, less dramatic devices left out of this description like alliteration, assonance, consonance are also doing their part. But I wanted to highlight Shklovsky's listed devices, especially how estrangement allows Jerrica to trope with Miller's language. Even with all of the devices in play there are moments where Jerrica's effort strains. No doubt, there is an element of poetic nonsense. Jerrica becomes fascinated with estrangement. She elaborates the controlling fantasy metaphor out of all proportion to its expressive value. For example, what does "Children once operated in comfortable relation to an adjudicated cannon, now critics suspect of birth and upbringing" mean? Are the "critics" the children? The placement in the clause makes it seem like they're part of "an adjudicated cannon." But if "now critics suspect of birth and upbringing" is a dangling modifier, we're reading differently. There's a grammar, but the sense is lost. So what comes next? How does she go on? What would come next could include having Jerrica parse the essay for those moments ripe for elaboration.<sup>79</sup> Constraint and estrangement bought her this initial draft. Now approaching the essay with previously disallowed terms, I'd ask her to see what she could she make of it. I'd ask her to keep the unique construction and tone and imagery intact. I'd ask her to monitor the introduction of the words "utopia" and "persuasion." I'd warn her about depleting the tenacity and density of the prose with their entrance. One would hope the poetic nonsense of the draft drains off and leaves the more striking elements behind.

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<sup>79</sup> I should mention that what I did in class was disperse the essays to other writers and had them revise the essays for sense, as much as possible, without contaminating the original intention.

#### 4.7 HOW ENSTRANGEMENT BRINGS INTO QUESTION THE SECURITY OF STUDENT WRITING

Perhaps it's better to call a familiarity a convention, since I'm leaning on the term enstrangement, which garages familiarity's antonym inside of it. Charles Baxter, the novelist, in a well-known fiction craft essay, "On Defamiliarization," takes on familiarity in writing, especially student-composed stories.

Familiarity, after all, is a kind of power, the power to predict and the power to abstract. It replaces the pleasure of the unknown with the pleasures of security. It signals that our defenses are in place and are working. The kingdom is running smoothly. It's running smoothly because no one is learning anything. (28)

I find this equally applicable to composition courses. What Baxter sees as the deceiving and deflating elements of familiarity, the references to "security" and "defenses," are precisely what's damaging to language, what stops the turning of terms and the building of concepts—and, in the end, any kind of learning. When we think of "the power to predict" we associate a smoothness that leads to solutions and strong ideas. But for Baxter—and I'd say for Poirier, too—"the power of prediction" merely runs "smoothly." And smoothness in writing means all texture, all depth, any and all topography has been ironed away. And with respect to security, one can see what's coming at them from a long way away. Thus, one could say (in response to Amossy) that relying on clichés and familiarity means writers satisfy themselves with the prefabricated phrases/collocations that cost nothing to construct. It is merely a return to Bruner's "expectancies."

So, then, students take on troping because it helps them disinherit strong, overpowering terms, or it helps them break conventions through the enstrangement of those terms (in a way

reminiscent of metalepsis). When Richard Poirier writes that Emerson’s “only remedy was to be found *in* language itself, by continuous acts of troping, syntactical shiftings, rhetorical fracturings of the direction set down by the grammar of a sentence” (33), we, as teachers, are orienting attentions to just these moments in student writing. From these moments we can alert the writer to their existence. But this cannot be all. A student writes an essay, I read and comment upon it, pointing to places where the student “shifts syntax” or tropes on ambiguous or troubling terms, then the student reads my comments and asks, “Now what?”

One way forward asks the student to consider the implications of her writing, especially the implications of it resembling someone outside of her ability, a writer who may turn out to put pressure upon her ability. What can a student make of that conjunction? This would continue with them trying on a redoubled effort to digest and rewrite the essay with those writers in mind, and then I’d reread with more comments. This method could keep going on. As I read student work, I’m open to the troped moments where the language isn’t giving them what they want but they’re trying it on anyway.

And I think we’ve seen this far, students wrench the rhetorical and grammatical positioning and meaning of the language into a possibility for their own display and meanings. Even in a short essay, a writer can sufficiently create a sense of self that begins to push against itself.

#### **4.8 THE ENSTRANGEMENT OF “UNDERSTANDING”**

In order to see better how this works in the classroom, I’m including another entire four paragraph essay written by a student of mine—Anna Ridgway—from the Autumn 2015 semester

that I think warrants a reading that pays attention to troping-as-enstrangement. Again, the class was the “The Unexamined Life.” The premise of the course hinged on the word “exam”—that is, most people tend to shirk or evade exams, so why would we want to examine our lives? The course also spent time engaging in the kind of discussions that gave importance to peering into terms and holding them accountable. We had started asking questions and examining certain terms in the course and our readings, and I encouraged the class to dispute these terms when they felt it was necessary.

Anna wrote her essay in response to “On Not Getting It” by psychologist Adam Phillips. In his piece, Phillips persuades readers to find comfort in “not getting it.” What Phillips himself means with this phrase—by his own admission—isn’t entirely clear. Here’s the first full paragraph from Phillips’s essay to show his style and his terms.

No one wants to be the person who doesn’t get it. Doesn’t get the joke, doesn’t understand what’s being said, what’s going. The ‘it’, once again, being an object of desire. Because we want it, we want to get it; we want the pleasure of not being amused by it; but either way we have to get it. What you get when you get it, though, as jokes make patently clear, is not as obvious as it first seems; as Freud once remarked, no one ever quite knows what it is about a joke that amuses them. We can get pleasure from a joke only when we understand it, but we don’t always understand our understanding. Here, at least, getting it and not getting it go together. But mostly, not getting it, whatever it is, means being left out; left out of the group that does get it, and exempt from the pleasure that getting it gives. (34)

This was why I chose the essay: the switch-backing and repetitious style, the inability for the reader to escape the first personal plural Phillips uses. One necessarily jumps to a conclusion

about definitions and offers that “not getting it” is anytime we miss out on what goes on around us, thus falling into a state of inferiority. This was the general consensus in class discussion. But in the essays I received, students did subtle work meshing with Phillips’s terms. There were ambiguous terms doing double—or treble—duty. Again, my assignment to them for this essay was to read Phillips’s essay and discuss it while disputing his language. I purposely kept the assignment loose in order to let the students surprise me with their selections or directions. So the question is where was Anna troping? What should I do next?

### **Craving to “Get It”**

In the essay “On Not Getting it” Phillips asks “[w]hy is it so hard to enjoy not getting it?” (45) The “it” for example would be not understanding the punchline of a joke. He recommends not understanding ourselves and others because it takes away from our lives. Unfortunately, Phillips is wrong in this regard. “Getting it” is part of human nature, fuels passions and innovation. Humans strive to understand. To understand the world, the universe, and the people around us. Although we can never possibly understand everything, we can still strive to understand more. Who would ever say “well we cannot possibly know everything, so why try?” That would never happen. The need to understand fuels human innovation. Without it, there would be no modern science, technology, or progression. “Getting it” fuels my passion for knowledge. I always want to learn more, know more. I could never enjoy not getting it. I respect those who drive themselves to “get something”, to understand and ask questions more than I respect those who, as Phillips writes “enjoy not getting it”.

I refuse to believe that our lives are consumed with the need to understand. The want to understand does not make my life any less meaningful or extraordinary than someone who does not care if they “get it”. Is it really so wrong to want to understand a work of Shakespeare? Does it really make our lives so bland because we “dumb down” Hamlet by translating it into modern English? When I read Shakespeare on *Sparknotes*, it's not to make it easier on myself or to dumb down his works, but it is to get the full effect and meaning behind Shakespeare's words. While Phillips writes that it should be acceptable when someone does not understand, that we should “enjoy not getting it”, but is it really so wrong to want to understand. To slave over a piece of work, so that I understand the meaning and the reasons behind the language or rereading a novel over and over again to accumulate new information and dive deeper into the depths of the book and fully immerse myself so that I can fully understand and “get it”. How could anything be enjoyable if you do not understand it? How would any movie be enjoyable if the whole time is spent in confusion? To me, nothing would be enjoyable at that point.

The problem with “getting it” is that one person's understanding can differ from another's. Take Uganda for example, they have a law that puts gay people to death. Ugandan's think they are getting it and others believe they get it, when they oppose the idea of putting gay people to death. In a perfect world, I would say if we continued to try to understand one another equality would be achieved for everyone, but this is not a perfect world. In fact, our world is perfectly imperfect. Those with opposite opinions already believe they understand and there is no way

to change their minds (unless by force) and I really have no solution to this problem because strongly held beliefs are the most difficult thing to change or influence in a person. More often than not, those with strong beliefs will not even compromise, so there is no easy solution.

Yes, Phillips may be talking about “getting” a punchline of a joke or meaning or a poem, but the incessant need and want for knowledge and understanding is what drives humanity. “Getting it” allows humanity to understand the world and each other, to empathize, and try to improve for the better. It means progression. My own penchant for knowledge and willingness to work hard stems from my need to understand. While I disagree with Phillips wanting people to enjoy not getting it, I do agree that there should be no humiliation in not getting it because failure is a part of the process of understanding. This is not about societies expectations for everyone to get it, but about humanities necessity and personal desire for knowledge, understanding, and “getting it”.

To an extent, this essay is Themewriting in the Colesian mode. But themes still have odd internal workings. They still have moments of possibility, and we should read them as such, with both a careful and critical eye. I follow Peter Wayne Moe’s reading of Coles’s method of dismantling Themewriting in *The Plural I*, when Moe points out in an extended analysis that student writing is often inhabiting “epideictic rhetoric,” that of praise and blame (437). For Moe, “[Coles’s] classroom is one of resistance that shows forth the potential of the epideictic to reshape shared values. Coles addresses the problems of trite and banal epideictic rhetoric head on: his teaching confronts flashy but substantively weak writing, *his assignments push students past hasty*

*conclusions and toward sustained inquiry*, and his discussions show that much is at stake in this classroom, even as he and his students do little more than praise and blame student writing” (437-38, emphasis added). I think Anna’s paper falls squarely into the praise and blame category of epideictic. How else to read her paragraphs on reading Shakespeare and Ugandan politics? They can do nothing else but praise and blame with so little space to work deeper with the materials. Her major claims are too unwieldy for such a short piece, they take on hasty conclusions (“This is not about societies expectations for everyone to get it, but about humanities necessity and personal desire for knowledge, understanding, and ‘getting it’”) which stop just short of sustained inquiry. Of course, that could be a symptom of the assignment and its length.

But notice two things about Anna’s paper: (1) forms of “understand” appear twenty-four times; (2) forms of “getting it” appear seventeen times. For such a short essay, these terms shoulder a significant amount of work for Anna. This is what led me to suss out what she tried to make of these two terms: one given by Phillips; the other her own contribution.

Aside from her tilting toward the windmills in mentions of Shakespeare, Ugandan oppression against homosexuals, and science and technology on a broad scale, she makes plastic the verb “understand” in interesting ways—ways I don’t think she herself recognized in the composing. The verb is frequently accompanied by other verbs, verbs which parade their punch and power: “fuel,” “drive,” “craving,” “need,” “want,” and “strive.” I don’t doubt she is enacting her passion through the prose. But why divorce “getting it” from “understanding”? Even in the first two sentences, she sets up the reader to translate “it” into “not understanding the punch line of a joke.” And then she reverses course by focusing more on the positive “getting it” rather than Phillips’s original “not getting it.”

She favors understanding over getting it. She writes as if getting it is a preparatory stage for understanding, as if she's shading out rough areas of epistemology. E.g. in the second paragraph, Anna proclaims: "I refuse to believe that our lives are consumed with the *need* to understand. The *want* to understand does not make my life any less meaningful or extraordinary than someone who does not care if they 'get it'" (my italics). People, in her eyes, *want* and *need* understanding, but merely "get it." To demote Phillips's term, especially if she disagrees with him/it, makes sense. It's a shrewd move—the forking of the original term allows her a way to balance both her interlocutor's position with her own (if overconfident) position.

Although, in the first paragraph, she uses Phillips's term with aplomb even though her own term starts cropping up all over the paragraph. Graphically, if one circles the two terms in different colors (as I have done in red and green in my physical copy) it begins to look spatially tactical, like a football coach's playbook or a general's survey of a battle—her terms considerably outnumber Phillips's. This holds true for almost the entire paper. I find her troping on "understanding"—again, a word centrally located in epistemological studies and philosophy—interesting, difficult, and refreshing and, oddly, thick. As I read, I am brought into her turning, her layering. Poirier believes with problematic terms like "understanding"—or what I'm assigning to the word—"the dictionary will be of little help in determining how they function" because "they are constantly being troped within sentences that insist that readers, too, must involve themselves in the salutary activity of troping" (129). He goes on to say that the "salutary" effect "might...make us less easily intimidated by them." And I agree.

For the student, "understanding" has not only violent implications but latent ones. She distrusts the manifest (or what she's designated as the manifest). See the end of the second paragraph where she asks if

it [is] really so wrong to want to understand. *To slave* over a piece of work, so that I understand the meaning and the reasons *behind the language*...to accumulate new information and *dive deeper*...and *fully immerse* myself so that I can *fully understand* and ‘get it’. (my italics)

These are not patient, neutral terms. For her, she has “to slave” to reach understanding. Although two paragraphs later she’ll claim “there should be no humiliation in not getting it because failure is a part of the process of understanding,” I still read a spectrum of “understandings.” What, I wonder, is “fully understanding”? Is there “partial understanding,” then? Further below this, “understanding” plays off neighborly terms and gains mirth as a quality. “How could anything be enjoyable if you do not understand it?” she asks. “How would any movie be enjoyable if the whole time is spent in confusion? To me, nothing would be enjoyable at that point?”

Understanding underpins enjoyment. Or, if one has to slave to get there, it *pins* enjoyment down. But these are all smaller moves compared to the troping she does in the third paragraph. This is the political paragraph where the meaning shifts a lot—and the student (I think unbeknownst to herself) enstranges the term “understanding” when she claims:

I would say if we continued to try to understand one another equality would be achieved for everyone, but this is not a perfect world. In fact, our world is perfectly imperfect.

Those with opposite opinions already believe they understand and there is no way to change their minds (unless by force) and I really have no solution to this problem because strongly held beliefs are the most difficult thing to change or influence in a person.

It is the second use of “understand” that moves away from the familiar definition of “perceive significance” or “be sympathetically aware.” For her, the opposition “understands” in a way that

doesn't resemble the popular definition of understanding at all. (One almost wants to read it as italicized.)

Now I'll put my cards on the table and say that, prior to reading Poirier on troping, I'd have made some solemn injunction to Anna about cleaning up the "understanding" litter that's strewn about, the way the word spreads all over the place. Or I'd have asked her to be specific and concrete. There's nothing a priori wrong about those kinds of comments, but to me they halt the struggle of the self against itself that seems to entail a productive and intelligent working through of reading and writing.

Moreover, Anna's move is enstrangement, but here it is also what's rhetorically called *ploche*—the simple repetition of a word. More than that, it is *antanaclasis*—the repetition of a word where the meaning changes in each use.<sup>80</sup> But finally, I confer enstranged-status upon it because the meaning of "understand" ends up taking on a slew of different non-recognizable meanings in the context of use. And I want to end this section on student writing, and Anna's "understanding," with Hayden White's take on familiarity and unfamiliarity—and by a certain circuitous route, propriety and impropriety.

Understanding is a process of rendering the unfamiliar, or the "uncanny" in Freud's sense of that term, familiar; of removing it from the domain of things felt to be "exotic" and unclassified into one or another domain of experience encoded adequately enough to be felt to be humanly useful, nonthreatening, or simply known by association. This process of understanding can only be tropological in nature, for what is involved in the rendering of the unfamiliar into the familiar is a troping that is generally figurative. (*Tropics*, 5)

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<sup>80</sup> See Fahnestock on the figure of "ploche" in *Rhetorical Figures in Science*, 159-161.

White makes a strong point for troping and enstrangement, but with his use of “understand” as the word troped/enstranged, I find this deeply ironic and instructive. Through Anna’s draft, I read her as trying to understand “understand”—yet she’s going beyond the move of making the “uncanny” familiar. I agree with White that the “process of understanding can only be tropological in nature”—(“figures of thought,” indeed!)—but here the process of understanding both tropes itself and the term, turning doubly tropological. White’s point is that understanding happens tropologically, through tropes, through the turning of terms. Shklovsky’s goal with enstrangement was to make the familiar come back home to us through making the familiar strange. It is a reintroduction of what’s so close to us because it had faded away from use. That’s what I see Anna starting to do in her paper, trying to push back on “understanding” and making it do heavy lifting again. She’s not allowing it to sit and become too familiar a term that the reader, or herself, loses sight of what it means—or could mean—to *understand* something. Something large (Ugandan politics regarding gay people) and something relatively small (comprehending Shakespeare). Of course, I came to this reading by attending to the organization, the grammar, of one word following another, asking how those facts or phrases are linked. And most times the student sentences are indicative, factual. Other times, the sentences bend toward the mood of subjunctivity. I will end this chapter with a short discussion of what (and how) mood, specifically subjunctivity, means for enstrangement inside of student writing.

#### **4.9 ENSTRANGEMENT & SUBJUNCTIVITY: PUSHING TOWARD THE OPENING OF A CONCEPTUAL SPACE**

In this final section of this chapter, I will extend and explore the implications for why enstrangement is valuable to composition and rhetoric and to help further elaborate the student

examples above. To do this, I will turn to critical literature in science fiction studies, specifically ideas brought out by critic Darko Suvin and the novelist Samuel R. Delany. This may seem like a knight's move from the topic of writing into a topic more situated in literature, but it's less obtuse than it at first appears.

In a 1972 *College English* article, Darko Suvin argued that science fiction (SF) was a “literature of cognitive estrangement” (372).<sup>81</sup> It follows from his argument that SF carries within itself its own “coherent poetics” of which estrangement is a part, as well as “exclusive interest in a strange newness, a *novum*” (373). A *novum* can be considered the thing which a SF story puts forth as the speculative core. E.g. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* proposed a device for faster-than-light communication across light years called an “ansible.” Of course, an ansible is impossible in modern science. But in the novel, Le Guin explains how (by extrapolating from current scientific principles) an ansible would work. Thus, Le Guin had to anchor her idea in a fact (information can't travel faster than light; gravity is a force acting all throughout the universe; the Einsteinian principle of simultaneity, etc.), and then push past that into an area of conception that broached what was known. Both cognitive estrangement and the *novum* play a part in how I've been describing Shklovsky's contribution of enstrangement in student writing. Suvin notes, parenthetically, Shklovsky's *ostranenie* and cites him as a source of the idea, yet, for him, still a ways below the greater influence of Bertolt Brecht.<sup>82</sup> What's most salient in Suvin's article, though, is the following thesis.

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<sup>81</sup> Note that Suvin spells the word without the “n” that I've added. The concepts are exactly the same, though.

<sup>82</sup> Brecht came after Shklovsky but still had an influence on enstrangement. For more, see Brecht's “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting” and Fredric Jameson's *Brecht and Method*, pp. 39-40.

SF is, then a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment. (375)

For Suvin, the term *cognition* "implies a creative approach tending toward a dynamic transformation rather than toward a static" (377).<sup>83</sup> Since SF, as a genre, is *cognitive estrangement*, we have a kind of writing that (in my own redefinition) creatively makes-unfamiliar what's often taken-as-familiar so as to play up the dynamicism of the environment.

The student writing that I've used as examples of enstrangement have, to some degrees small and large, worked to make dynamic what was static, to make unfamiliar what was familiar. The reason why the turn to SF studies makes sense at this point in the chapter (and dissertation) is the devotion and theorizing on the strange and the focus on making the reader of the writing work to establish what Suvin refers to as the *novum*. I would also argue that Suvin's "cognitive estrangement" is part of what takes place inside the moments of enstrangement, here and elsewhere, in student writing. Yet his "cognitive estrangement" is still just an effect of the writing. What is it that is *in* the writing, i.e. what does the writing *do* that brings about Suvin's idea?

For this, I turn to SF novelist Samuel R. Delany and his idea of "subjunctivity." Traditionally, the subjunctive is a grammatical mood that denotes what's imagined, wished, or has potential or possibility. Opposed to that is the indicative, which denotes facts and factual events, what-is-real-already. Delany offers a slightly different take on the former grammatical mood. He writes: "A distinct level of subjunctivity informs all the words in an s-f story at a level that is different from that which informs naturalistic fiction, fantasy, or reportage" (31). While

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<sup>83</sup> This can, and should, remind the reader of Dewey's definition of perception noted above.

Delany narrows the effects of subjunctivity to SF, I want to point out that he has later mentioned that different levels of subjunctivity exist, which depend on genres, tropes, and structures.<sup>84</sup> And it shouldn't be a stretch to apply subjunctivity to writing that isn't SF, because in this instance student writing has all of the above: genres (inside of the genre of *student writing*), tropes, and structures. Thus:

Subjunctivity is the tension on the thread of meaning that runs between...sound-image and sound-image. Suppose a series of words is presented to us as a piece of reportage. A blanket indicative tension informs the whole series: *this happened*. That is the particular level of subjunctivity at which journalism takes place. Any word, even the metaphorical ones, must go straight back to a real object, or a real thought on the part of the reporter.

(31)

The last moment here is most important because of Delany's framing of subjunctivity. While for Delany subjunctivity is confined to SF, the grammatical mood makes a lot of sense in a composition and rhetoric pedagogy. How can this be? Part of the ambit of SF, according to Suvin, is the *novum*, often the engine of the SF story, the thing that requires research and speculation/extrapolation on the part of the author. What could this have to do with first-year writing or rhetoric classes? It shouldn't be too hard to see the term *novum* shifting, or applying, to the ways we ask student writers to build, create, or fashion ideas and concepts in their writing

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<sup>84</sup> Delany writes in "Three Letters to Science Fiction Studies" in *Starboard Wine*: "My own thinking on science fiction over the past ten years leads me to the observation that the differences between contemporary science fiction and other modes of writing are akin to the differences among, say, poetry, prose reportage, prose fiction, and drama; the differences, as I see it, are *formally categorical*. Note that all these categories may or may not manifest, faintly or strongly, elements of 'narrative structure.' What is important, however, is the *different* weights, the *different* demands, the *different* rhetorical tropes, figures, and structures with which narrative may be manifested in *each* category" (177). It is the last part—the "in *each* category"—that I'm leaning on most.

that go beyond the commonplace, the cliché, the “hasty conclusion” and/or those that hazard a breaking of clichés by enstranging them. We ask students in writing classes, whether we know it or not, to resist relying on or dwelling too long inside of the indicative. We are asking them to step into the subjunctivity that Delany describes.

This is not to say that we are asking students to write SF or speculative fiction or anything like that. Rather, the subjunctivity that works for SF can also work for writers in courses where the remit is Thinking, Examining, Analyzing, Concept Building, and so on. For example, Jerrica’s first essay seems easily, squarely in the indicative mood. Whereas her troped second paper is emphatically in a subjunctive mood enabled by enstrangement and constraint. To fixate on the indicative is to waver in language through facts-as-presently-known. The indicative mood, though, is only a part of the toolbox of grammar and rhetoric. The arrangement of facts is a partial method that needs the aid of *the-hasn’t-happened-yet*. What I mean by this is that students need facts, but they also need individual, idiosyncratic, and analytic sentences that broach what Delany calls the subjunctive.

To help contextualize this, I’d like to take as an example the first “Course Goal” in the University of Pittsburgh’s Seminar in Composition syllabus: “Engage in writing as a creative, disciplined form of critical inquiry.” I can’t state with certainty how grammatical moods play (or don’t play) a part in that goal, but I do know that, historically, one way we know how to creatively inquire is through the subjunctive in language. For example, asking, “What if...?” or “How should this be different...?” or “What would you think of...?” As Delany elaborates, “The particular subjunctive level of s-f expands the freedom of the choice of words that can follow another group of words meaningfully; but it limits the way we employ the corrective process as we move between them” (“About Five Thousand” 32). I take this to mean that one can write an

indicative sentence like “The bear raised up on its legs and roared,” and no one would blink. But a sentence that went, “The bear stood up on its legs and yelled” may be taken with more suspicion because of the human-sounding verbs attached to it. The “corrective process” Delany mentions would swiftly push those verbs aside because the *overall* meaning seems factual. We could translate it as: *A bear got up on its back legs and made a loud noise.* Now, in a subjunctive sentence, I could see it going, “The bear stood up on its legs and yelled *my name.*” By itself, “my name” is a normal phrase, as was the rest of the sentence prior to that. Put together, my subjunctive sentence, as Delany explains, “expand[s] the freedom of the choice of words that can follow another group of words meaningfully” (32). We would understand my sentence to *not* be reportage or academic research. Instead, it would be immediately recognizable as fiction or playful writing. And as we’ve seen, in the composition and rhetoric classroom, and in student writing, subjunctivity appears when students are conceptualizing or saying something beyond their own footing in the facts. They are reaching beyond themselves into a new conceptual space. They are theorizing or hypothesizing when they are in the subjunctive. They are testing out ideas throughout and within language. But all of these elements must come together for enstrangement, as I hope to have shown in the student examples above.

## 5.0 ANALYSIS OF COMPOSITION AWARD ESSAYS; OR, A COMPARISON OF TROPING

“We do not usually know what someone will say,  
but we are prepared to interpret any of a very large  
number of things that person might say.”

Donald Davidson, “The Second Person”

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION: WHY COMPARE ESSAYS? A RATIONALE

In the preceding three chapters, I’ve shown how what I’ve labeled the “misfit” rhetorical tropes of metalepsis, catachresis, and enstrangement appear as methods of argument (and sometimes disputation) in order to try and solve (or dissolve) certain problems or issues that occur in student writing. While this dissertation is not a quantitative analysis of writing, it *does* want to try and be as thorough and comprehensive as possible with regards to the methodologies of slow reading and ordinary language that was sketched out in the introduction and carried out in the subsequent chapters. And in order to examine whether misfit tropes show up in my courses only or if they also occur across a wider spectrum of student writing, I’ve chosen to examine essays from my English Department at the University of Pittsburgh that may best display these rhetorical elements—those submissions to the yearly undergraduate Composition Award.

### 5.1.1 How an Essay Gets Nominated or Submitted, etc.

The following is from the webpage detailing the Composition Program Award Guidelines:

The Composition Program honors excellent undergraduate writing created in its classes by awarding cash prizes to winners of the Ossip Award for Excellence in Seminar in Composition or the Award for Advanced Composition.

Each year's panel of judges looks for thoughtfully crafted essays that explore a subject's complexity.

To showcase both the range and the quality of work valued by the Composition Program, prize-winning essays from recent years are published here with permission of the student authors (who retain copyright to their work). Each essay is accompanied by commentary from the judges, highlighting what they considered award worthy. It should be noted that most contest winners were first-year students at the time of writing and that papers were not revised or edited for web publication. The essays are not being offered as models of perfected student writing nor as templates for a successful paper; they represent outstanding achievement by students who submitted their work to the writing contest for each academic year. ("Composition")

What's most interesting about this description is the lack of revision or editing and the claim that "essays are not being offered as models of perfected student writing nor as templates" for future students. The judges look for "thoughtfully crafted essays" that somehow work to dig through a "subject's complexity," but how or what such a process looks like isn't stated outright. The parameters are vague enough for the judges to choose what seems most appropriate in any given year, and this is important because there is no set rubric. Thus, students don't need to write

toward a certain audience or around a particular subject. Nor are students compelled to write after a proscribed style.

So how a teacher decides on what to nominate varies widely. If a student paper in a Seminar in Composition course seems suitable, then it can be submitted. If a student paper in Introduction to Critical Reading is a stand-out, then it, too, can be submitted. And so on. It's the writing teacher's discretion that seems to promote students' submissions. There are perhaps, in any given semester at Pitt, around 100 undergraduate writing courses being offered. It's safe to say that those classes are taught by a wide collection of teachers, many of which may not know each other, and aren't privy to how everyone else is teaching the same or different course. The point here is that there's enough difference between the courses and the teachers' pedagogical interests and approaches that one could expect a collection of papers that don't all hew to some rigid and identical standard. In fact, the way the courses at Pitt are spread out across the faculty—full-time and adjunct—it would seem to be impossible. Therefore, if I do come across evidence of troping with the misfit tropes as mentioned above, then some questions to be asked could be: How does troping make itself available to a student in these papers? Does it derive from the same rhetorical exigence as the ones my own students faced? And if the exigence is different, what could that say about the tropes?

## **5.2 STUDENT EXAMPLES**

Among the awards submissions for 2013-2014, of which there are 65, there's a paper titled "10 Responses to Porchia" which begins with an aphorism from Antonio Porchia (an Italian-Argentinian poet) that goes "Truth has very few friends and those few are suicides." The student

essay (anonymously submitted and with no identification of instructor or assignment prompt) then proceeds to give ten numbered responses to the aphorism, almost (one could say) riffing on the aphorism, trying to build off of it. Here's response number six:

Would the opposite of this aphorism hold true? Falseness has very many friends and those many live as long as they can. Falseness could manipulate people into becoming its friends. False people could lie to people and flatter them to make it seem more likable. In this way, the false could have many friends. Pertaining to the second clause, perhaps the friends of Falseness live as long as they can because they are afraid of death. They could be afraid of the truth of death. They could fear the nonexistence of an afterlife, or, if falseness is wickedness, they could be afraid of eternal judgment for their falseness.

Maybe the pearly gates don't open for the false, so they avoid it for as long as they can. I include this excerpt because it is a candidate for the misfit trope of estrangement. While the passage does not exactly describe a thing in words nor normally used to describe it, the student does take a parallax view on the topic, one that forces the reader to view the aphorism from an estranged point of view, renewing the familiar by making it unfamiliar. Although, while this reversed aphorism starts off going in one direction, I think it's interesting that the conclusion of the aphorism is close to the same thing either way. Truth in death. Life in falsity. But then, that's the point of the misfit trope.

The next essay's focus is on negotiating (and terminating) a close friendship in high school because of a moral deterioration through suspect actions. The following paragraphs are from the middle of the essay.

"Tell me," she said, and I blinked hard, knowing something difficult was to follow, "what happened between you and Megan?" With my eyes still closed, dreaming,

I said, “She died in a drunk-driving incident.” Alex quickly corrected me, “No, she’s alive and well. Stupid, but well.” He was telling the truth, and I wasn’t – to some degree. She was dead to me. I went through a mourning phase for her, or for whom I thought she was. I knew she wasn’t perfect, but I had this image of her as someone responsible and rational, cautious and careful, compassionate, and yet, still fun and enjoyable. She was someone more like me, maybe, or what I try to be. When the reality of her actions shattered this image, she, my perception of her, died. I haven’t been able to process it completely – this “it” being how we’ve both changed for better and for worse.

“No, really. Tell me.” I went through the whole story: how Megan had a Halloween party, how Alex and I went as Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, how I told her in advance that I didn’t feel comfortable drinking in a church youth house, how when I got there no one was sober enough to get our costumes. Megan offered to drive me home if I participated; I said that she couldn’t remember how to get to my house sober after all these years, let alone tipsy, and I left the party within an hour of arriving because I felt so alone in my group of friends. I wonder if I said it with as much venom then as I did when I recalled my words. “It was one thing when we’d sleepover, but another when everyone insisted on leaving after. She was trying to impress her college friends. I was the only one sober, and I’ve never been so sober in my whole life.”

Mrs. Sweet was silent. She tipped her chair back, and closed her eyes. I used to be made uncomfortable by these silences, until I had some of my own. I realized this was her processing. Sometimes she would come back from these silences with nothing to say, because the picture I had painted spoke for itself, saying all that was necessary. My

experience was so sobering – the truth became clear, that my friends and I were no longer interested in the same things, that we were no longer friends. (emphasis added)

Here, the final instance of “sobering” is my candidate for enstrangement in the way that Anna’s “understanding” was troped and estranged in the previous chapter. What this author means by “sobering” isn’t a reference to what we think of as physically drunk/sober, but she was intellectually drunk/hazy and then “brought to a reality” of some sort. That is, even while unaffected by alcohol in the recollection, she was still “under the influence” of a former friendship. It is a troping on the starting and ending points of what we ordinarily think of as being sober. But in this case, “being sober” means physically un-drunk. Growing sober or getting “sobered up” by her telling Mrs. Sweet the story clears a conceptual mist. The root of the word “sober” comes from the Latin “ebrius”, meaning intoxicated or drunk. Further back than Latin it possibly comes from Hittite for “you will drink.” A poetic definition of “ebrius” is “full.” So reading the line, “My experience was so sobering” can be read as “My experience was so *emptying*”—which is what comes later in the paragraph when the author describes losing her mutual interests and friendship. The enstrangement clicks when the reader gets that the author saw being sober *as* already-drunk-in-some-capacity-worse-than-alcohol. Her estranged “sobering” is meant—again, in this context—as clearing away (or emptying) the de-intoxicated state we often think of. The writer is reaching for an aggressively clear-headed state of awareness.

The exigency of this essay, so far as I can tell, is one of trying to establish authority over, or to justify, the decision of cutting the friend out. But is it dodging or working through a commonplace, avoiding it? Does the enstrangement trope away from the commonplace? Well, is it commonplace to write a reflection essay on a time when you had to make a difficult decision;

or had to make a major life choice; or construct writing that follows the traditional *bildungsroman*? It can all be commonplace, yes. But it then depends on how the authors handles it. And I'd argue that this author swerves past a potential cliché pitfall in that last sentence *purely* by the use of "sobering" in the way she does. (This is what I'd argue and be prepared to say to the student if they were my student.) To be fair, the last sentence does also take part in anagnorisis (as we saw in the second chapter), in the recognition of how all past actions (the author's misjudgment of her friend) had been flawed up to that point. Yet the use of "sobering" forgives that potential rhetorical habit.

I'd like to, here in this last chapter, make an uncommon plea for anagnorisis, despite my seeming put downs and reading too much of it into the student writing in this dissertation. Anagnorisis may seem like a moment that forces its Ancient Greek dramatic goo over all assignments, a bane to writing, but that's not so. Many of these essays are written in the first-person point of view, and as such, are to be taken seriously, especially when claims about change or difference or transformation appear. In an essay titled "First Person Authority," philosopher of language Donald Davidson tries to make clear how it is we think we're dead positive about our own self-ascribed "belief, desire, or intention to [our] present self" and how it doesn't hold that others can do the same when trying to assign similar beliefs, desires, or intentions to us (xiii). Davidson goes on: "Though there is first person authority with respect to beliefs and other propositional attitudes, error is possible; this follows from the fact that the attitudes are dispositions that manifest themselves in various ways, and over a span of time. Error is possible; so is doubt. So we do not always have indubitable or certain knowledge of our own attitudes [Cf. with Cavell in Introduction]. Nor are our claims about our own attitudes incorrigible. It is possible for the evidence available to others to overthrow self-judgments" (4). I expect, as a

reader of first-year writing, to see a lot of these self-assessment and self-aware moments where the writer breaks through to a (potentially, self-described) new level of realization about themselves, the world, or others. I'm not denigrating that rhetorical move. If anything, I encourage it. But I do think it would be a failure on my part, as a writing teacher, to let students persist in the commonplace moves that keep those anagnoristic moments stale and hackneyed as weekday sitcom plotlines. So I take Davidson's point above two ways: first, I find him saying that we can never be entirely certain, or held to, our beliefs, desires, or intentions, because we change over time and thus, our self-claims can be wrong in light of new ideas, materials, or "evidence" in the future. This evidence can be given to us by someone else, and though Davidson doesn't suggest it, I would say that the other person can often be the future self (see the example above). Second, such an explanation goes a long way to making sense of why so many students write about these transformative times in their lives. And why the kind of reading I've giving to these student essays is even possible—because, as Davidson writes, "claims about our own attitudes [aren't] incorrigible."

In an essay titled, "A Heartless Home and Many Homeless Hearts" (the title itself a chiasmus), the writer focuses on the reading of an Edward Said essay called, "States." This title of the essay is, in itself, a troping: *chiasmus*. There is an ability to see one subject/topic/object from another (opposite?) position. Thus the criss-crossing of action of chiasmus. But the subtle nod to an interest in troping, and perhaps a peek at the writer's argumentative method, the misfit trope I've located here is metalepsis. Specifically, the version M2—reversal of cause and effect. The metaleptic feeling starts early, with the writer setting it up. I excerpt the essay a few pages in, where the writer is discussing the complexity of Palestinian cultural heritage and expression.

Exile, I believe, has forced the Palestinian people to change. They were forced to exchange their homes for mere shelters, their entire homeland of Palestine for random areas of land to live, and a pure authentic lifestyle for one marbled by the cultures of the nations in which they sought refuge. The combination of authentic Palestinian objects, speech, and practices with those of other societies creates an interesting blend of culture for the new generation by which to define itself in exile.

We see the writer beginning to examine and parse the history of the Palestinian people, how they're "marbled"—an interesting term, considering the solidity, and inflexibility, of marble, to say nothing of its ability to be carved into beautiful objects. Though we should stop and look at this verb closely. Here we may have yet another metaleptic moment of M2. The way the writer describes the Palestinian lifestyle, they suggest that it has been "marbled" by those on the outside, by "the cultures of the nations in which they sought refuge." True enough. But who has the agency here? The Palestinians or the nations welcoming them? The way the line is written seems to suggest that the Palestinians are absorbing the cultures of the exile countries, and the marbling is being done *to them*. "Marbled" is intriguing here simply because it's a medium in which to make things, to carve things, to extract shape and form, much as an exiled culture can undergo shaping, forming. The writer chooses the object as a verb and makes it the way toward agency. As an analogous example, one might not say that

They were forced to exchange their homes for mere shelters, their entire homeland of Palestine for random areas of land to live, and a pure authentic lifestyle for one **clayed/wooded/pigmented** by the cultures of the nations in which they sought refuge. Oddly, "pigmented" works. These certain terms are doing double-duty. They take the effect—marble, pigment—and make them a cause, a source of activity. They trope directionality and

linearity by making the inert forms the source of action, the verbs. But then the writer turns to a picture from Said's essay of an exiled bride and groom, dressed in European garb, surrounded by their homeland's cultural objects.

If the bride and groom are unwelcome in Palestine, but ostracized everywhere they go, what are they to do? If a joyous occasion such as a wedding is dampened to such a great extent by the anxiety of deciding where to flee to next, what is the purpose of even "celebrating" it? **This, to me, is an example of death in life.** When you find little to enthusiastically celebrate and take comfort in, your existence—both physical and metaphysical—seems meaningless. The absence of a hospitable homeland then prompts the generation of the twenty-first century to ask itself both if establishing a new homeland is possible and if that new way of life should replace that of their parents'. (emphasis added)

The bolded sentence is the core of the metaleptic moment that the writer's built up to. "Death in life" is pure metalepsis, switching cause and effect, and in this instance, as they rightly note, creates a paradox. How can there be death in life? Exactly through the example—and some rhetorical work done earlier—of the exiled newlyweds. The writer continues to explain that the new, younger generation should work to be re-described (and potentially usurp) the traditional, older generation. To remake their present and recreate their past to fit their needs. This is the version of metalepsis known as M3, the transumption of new terms for old, making the past seem the inheritor of the present, and not the other way around.

Reflecting on this essay, it does seem that the topic/subject almost invites the use of metalepsis as a rhetorical tool to trope and move through the argument. Since what's at stake is the reversal and wrangling of past with present, and with the paradox of refugees in exile,

metalepsis seems necessary to try and *get at* and *make sense of* the issue. This doesn't mean it's the *only* way of getting and making sense of an issue (or any issue), but that metalepsis, in this moment, is doing very particular rhetorical work.

### 5.3 CONCLUSIONS

What should be immediately evident after just four examples is how troping *does* exist outside of my classroom. To be honest, it would've been more shocking to *not* find any kind of troping in the award essays. But I want to re-ask questions some questions I've asked throughout the dissertation in response to these outside student papers.

- 1. How does troping make itself available to a student in these papers?** It's not absolutely correct to phrase it as "make itself available" because troping, as we've seen, doesn't necessarily work like that. I should've phrased it, What conditions are sufficient but not necessary for troping? In some situations, like the first one, the student is purposely trying to see the aphorism from a different perspective. "Would the opposite of this aphorism hold true?" What seems to be sufficient conditions for troping is either a prompt from the teacher asking for a skewed perspective or a work that indicates "permission" like "dispute" or a phrase like "how can you make sense of..." But even here, I'm not content in saying that there are neutral and objective conditions that make troping a "thing" to be done in a particular situation. Linguistic troping doesn't seem to operate that way. It's not a one for one action. Instead, we should look at each case, as I've done here, and try to work backwards through the writing to see how the troping is situated in the paper and how it operates on the rest of the work, or doesn't. The key point

with every instance of troping, should a teacher pursue it—and I think they should—would be to make revision the endpoint. A program for more work, etc.

**2. Does it derive from the same rhetorical exigency as the ones my own students faced?**

Again, the question should be re-framed. It should be, What are the exigencies that these student papers display and work with, against? And as above, each case should be taken individually. It seems, from the ones I've seen here, that troping appears where tension arises. In the Said paper, the topic was contentious and political, and the student was trying to say something elegant or interesting about a marbled culture or about how people exiled are existing in a death in life. In that instance, the moments of troping were well-placed to move the reader, this reader, into a place where their overall argument can be accessed more strangely, and yet more true (to revisit Wallace Stevens).

At this point, I also want to re-visit a quote from Stanley Cavell in my Introduction to better grasp what I think is going on here.

[The word “ordinary”] reminds us that whatever words are said and meant are said and meant by particular men, and that to understand what they (the words) mean you must understand what they (whoever is using them) mean, and that sometimes men do not see what they mean, that usually they cannot say what they mean, that for various reasons they may not know what they mean, and that when they are forced to recognize this they feel they do not, and perhaps cannot, mean anything, and they are struck dumb.

(“Avoidance” 270)

I don't think, necessarily, either the students or myself are “struck dumb.” I do think we're struck into a different language game, or a different relationship to the writing being read. And this is why the teacher-student relationship with regard to writing is so important. When Shelley Reid

proposed that we see teachers as solvers of student writing problems, this chapter should remind us how that can happen in specific rhetorical ways. As a teacher of writing, I'm attuned to, and a firm believer in, the troping of language as a evergreen starting point for writing instruction in college. Moreover, troping is a way into the hard and difficult work of revision. What I've been most enamored by reading these student papers from outside of my classes is how spontaneous and emphatic the language use is. I'm interested in the subtle moves and textures of the language that students are knowingly and unknowingly playing around in and manipulating. And, finally, I'm drawn to how they're performing their writing, by side-stepping (in some small fashion) cliché and commonplace opinions.

## 6.0 WHY AND HOW DO YOU WRITE THE WAY THAT YOU WRITE?

“All material includes the interpretations that will be made of it.”  
Richard Poirier

In the book *Teaching Queer*, during a discussion about interfering with the act of student composition, Stacey Waite says that “if composition teachers want students to resist reliance on cliché, to push on the already available ways of thinking and writing about a given matter, it becomes our burden to write assignments that interfere with the processes of reading and writing” (108) and by this interference create a detour in the usual lines of expression and analysis that make up the commonly shared efforts of student writers. Waite goes on to write that teachers should create “assignments that interrupt even students’ vision of themselves” (108). This is not an easy task, nor is it one that many teachers or students may be comfortable with.

I don’t know if I’m up to the challenge of wholesale changing a student’s vision of their self. (That seems so drastic for a composition course.) If anything, I’m trying to encourage writers to change their *performance* on the page. Waite’s claim sticks with me, though, since what I’ve been investigating and calling for in this dissertation is a seeking out and acceptance of an “interference” in writing. If the misfit tropes are anything, they are interfering with the “typical” approaches or methods of writing. True, they are part of the larger stable of rhetorical tropes, schemes, and figures that have been catalogued for 2,000 years. Yet I’m not entirely sure that crafting interfering assignments will be the solution to more troping, or more instigations of troping. In reality, I never wrote an assignment that “aimed” to encourage troping. There may’ve

been attitudes or certain terms I used (e.g. “dispute”), but even in assignments that I wrote where I aimed for a version of utter clarity, students still found ways to trope.

What I’m saying is that troping seems, at many points in this dissertation, and in student writing in general, to be an unconscious artifact. And what I want to emphatically state here in the conclusion is this: *troping cannot be relied on*. That may appear radically deflationary to my argument, but it’s what is left standing. With honesty, I don’t think that’s bad. Because writing teachers already know that certain effects of writing can’t be counted on to perform on command. Even after pointing it out to a writer, there’s no way for a student to definitively lay claim to troping’s efficacy. When Richard Poirier writes in his books about Emerson’s troping on certain terms like “nature,” “work,” and “action,” in the end, we are really just convinced by Poirier’s arguments for Emerson’s language than we are about Emerson’s actual motivations. And that’s fine. That’s what strong and compelling reading is all about, anyway. Moreover, obviously, I can’t claim that troping happens in every instance of student writing when a writing problem arises. There is, I’m sure, an argument (or arguments) out there that even in my examples here, there was no problem to solve or work through. Troping just *happened*, some may say.

But, as Poirier writes, this is exactly the thing: “The only remedy...[is] to be found *in* language itself, by continuous acts of troping, syntactical shiftings, rhetorical fracturings of the direction set down by the grammar of a sentence. Even these, however, can turn into habits of conformity” (*Renewal* 33). We are left with a tool unable to fix itself. Troping then becomes in this instance a “program for more work” a phrase borrowed from William James in his essay “What Pragmatism Means”. Poirier digs into this essay, in conjunction with his own thoughts on the work of turning language, in his series of lectures, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, and says this:

“James is...attacking our tendency to sell ourselves short, to circumscribe ourselves by a dependence on abstractions. We seek dependence, [James] says, ‘in the shape of some illuminating or power-bringing word or name’” (92). James follows this up with, “You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience. It appears less as a solution, then, as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be *changed*” (qtd. in Poirier 92, emphasis in original). Tropic can never be a solution to anything, and so I cannot sell it as a panacea. Jeez, I can’t even sell it as a celebrity workout tape. It is only, perhaps much to the chagrin of my students, an impetus to even more (and likely harder) work. Work, work, work. Revising, re-seeing, re-thinking, re-cognizing. Re-tooling, re-setting, remembering, re-selling. Everything again, forever.

I repeat: I don’t want to change selves; I want to change language on the page. This is why, as I’ve said elsewhere, that when I start each new semester, I tell my students the following: “I can’t promise that you’ll change the way you write by the end of the semester. In fact, I don’t care if you change the way you write. All I want you to know is *why* and *how* you write the way that you write.” The aim is to make their performances on the page self-aware and self-reflexive. To make their performances on the page living selves. (That’s different than wanting to change metaphysical selves.) The whole aim of the course is to make myself dispensable; to make myself unneeded for their own self-analysis and improvement of their writing. The aim is to have my classes poking at the language of their work and asking more of it than they did before: where does this etymology go? how does this pun give me access to a network of meanings? can a comic stance on a dramatic topic allow for flexibility and pliancy?

One of the questions I asked in the Introduction was, “What does the act of troping say about the kinds of commonplaces that exist in student writing?” One doesn’t cause the other or vice versa. What’s compelling about both commonplaces and troping in the same piece of writing is how close together they can be, how they can affect each other. Let me offer a penultimate example of student writing as a way to exemplify my point. The student paper was found in the University of Pittsburgh archives, from an English course back in 1948—70 years ago. The author is Leah T. Turets. Leah’s paper is a theme. (Because it’s a theme, I encourage the reader to consider how Leah approached her subject—i.e. through description, evaluation, and parenthesis.) There is no title, and there was no assignment included with it. I found it in a box belonging to the former English chair Professor Percival Hunt. There are a few words and sentences that either Leah or Prof. Hunt struck out, but I will keep them in with the strikeout lines.

My grandmother was a frail little woman. I ~~usually~~ think of her in her ~~favorite~~ chair, her big book sunk in her lap, its rubbed leather binding only a little browner than the brittle pages she murmured over. Her lips would quiver with the soft sound of her prayers and her fingers, thin, the skin taut and glossy over the knobby bones, would move a little as she followed the faded print. I never think of her as doing things—I seldom heard her express a preference or an opinion, and never a demand. But she often used one word which summed up what she most admired in people. It is a word which is not quickly translated. It means “gentle behaviour” or “seemly conduct”, it includes “kindness” and “courtesy” and takes into account the motive of a person and his rearing, too: it was “*menschlichkeit*”. ~~When she spoke it the word carried her warm approval and~~

~~gained the overtones which it has for me.~~ I often find myself (listening in memory for the sound of her voice) trying the word to see if what I have done can stretch to fit it.

As a pure description, I think this is quite good. Her observational eye is keen and sharp, and the choreography of her prose is deft. For example, the placement of “thin” and the extended description of the grandmother’s fingers in the sentence, “Her lips would quiver with the soft sound of her prayers and her fingers, thin, the skin taut and glossy over the knobby bones, would move a little as she followed the faded print.” The whole theme is typical in subject: The Grandmother. Or, Reflection on a Family Member. I’ve read plenty of pieces by students that are about family members, especially grandparents. It is a commonplace, a recognizable *topoi*. Leah writes that “*menschlikeit*” cannot be “quickly translated” when it seems she may be better off with “easily translated.” But the notion of speed is all throughout this theme (“I never think of her as doing things”). I have, more than any contemporary essay or theme, a solid idea, a very vivid image, of what Leah Turets’s grandmother looked, acted, and sounded like. But none of this is what I’m concerned with. It’s the last sentence.

I’m not sure what’s going on in that last sentence, but I know it is troping. In that sentence—“I often find myself (listening in memory for the sound of her voice) trying the word to see if what I have done can stretch to fit it”—I keep reading over and over, slowly (like Walker Gibson’s dumb reader) to figure out what “stretch” is doing. Listening to the voice of the line starting, then offering that almost clichéd parenthetical, and closing on her inabilities rather than her certainties. Often we say that a term/word stretches to fit a concept, but here Leah is stretching her actions to fit a term. It is an unusual use. If it’s troping, then what kind? I wonder, is it catachresis? Perhaps she’s pushed the fabric-based metaphor of “trying out a word” too far to the point of breaking down. But it doesn’t seem like a great example of catachresis. There is

no one place to frame the metaphor, unless we consider the whole sentence as one, and that seems unlikely. I turn to enstrangement and think maybe this is what's happening to "stretch"—but it's not the best example, either. If what she's making strange is "stretch" couldn't she also be enstranging "listening" since she's seeking her memory for sounds? The use could, in some sense, be considered metalepsis. She's reversing the order of stretching. How does one retroactively stretch an action in the past to fit a conceptual term in the present?

Again, her usage is unusual. Her language game is creating new rules. It doesn't necessarily fit my misfit tropes perfectly, but it is still troping and it is still misfit. She is being painted by a picture. I am searching this written memory for the sound of her voice.

Leah's theme leads me to revisit another question I asked in the Introduction: "What do the use of misfit tropes say about how troping is instigated?" I will have to reframe this question because at the end of this project I'm not sure that troping is "instigated." (As I stated in chapter 5.) Instead, I think troping is an element of language use that takes a certain method of reading to bring forth and elaborate upon. Stanley Cavell summarizes the poised and revolving nature of language in his book, *In Quest of the Ordinary*. His argument is both exhilarating and sobering.

...you always tell more and tell less than you know. Wittgenstein's *Investigations* draws this most human predicament into philosophy, forever returning to philosophy's ambivalence...as between wanting to tell more than words can say and wanting to evade telling altogether—an ambivalence epitomized in the idea of wishing to speak "outside of language games," a wish for (language to do, the mind to be) everything and nothing. Here I think again of Emerson's wonderful saying in which he detects the breath of virtue and vice that our character "emits" at every moment, words so to speak always before and beyond themselves, essentially and unpredictably recurrent, say rhythmic, fuller of

meaning than can be exhausted. So that it may almost be said of every word and phrase in the language what William Empson has said of metaphors, that they are pregnant...(83)

Yes, oh ganesha, yes, pregnant. “But pregnant with what?” is the question. Just meaning? All of the student essays, papers, and pieces in this dissertation are pregnant with meaning, more meaning than the students or the writings themselves know what to do with. The students are meaning all over the place. I prefer, then, to read the student writing and language use as pregnant with mutability, with potential. Cavell’s suggestion that words are “fuller of meaning than can be exhausted” should be a boon for writers in composition—especially for teachers of writing. Yet how to get at these pregnant moments, these tropings, these voicings, these performances on the page?

In the Preface to his first major collection of essays, *The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Contemporary Life*, Richard Poirier writes about the conflict of the writer in the writing itself.

When a writer is most strongly engaged by what he is doing, as if struggling for his identity within the materials at hand, he can show us, in the mere turning of a sentence this way or that, how to keep from being smothered by the inherited structuring of things, how to keep within and yet in command of the accumulations of culture that have become a part of what he is. Much of cultural inheritance is waste; it always has been. But only those who are both vulnerable and brave are in a position to know what is waste and what is not. (xxi)

I wrote earlier in this project that students may be troping in order to escape the voices of past schooling that heavily haunt their heads. Those voices are just as much a product of cultural inheritance as anything else, and surely are waste. My teachings and suggestions, too, as I’ve

said, could and will likely turn to waste for students. Another accumulation, another thin lamination on top of their written history. What I've been arguing for and trying to show throughout this dissertation is how and why we should be reading student writing a certain way, for certain tropings and energies and performances that help students slip the moorings of first-year writing's unfortunate but inevitable trappings—those of commonplace responses, cliché, Colesian Themewriting, teacher flattery, and the undercutting of their own points. In my eyes, the job of a writing teacher is to help solve writing problems and then make ourselves unnecessary henceforth. It is also to focus on the trope's performances, what they do with language and why. I want to end this conclusion by fencing with a few more quotes from Poirier, both from the Preface of *The Performing Self*.

Performance comes to fruition at precisely the point where the potentially destructive impulse to mastery brings forth from the material its most essential, irreducible, clarified, and therefore beautiful nature. (xxii)

Troping may not exactly be a “destructive impulse to mastery,” but I do think that when students are twisting a sentence this way and that, they are “bring[ing] forth from the material its most essential, irreducible, clarified, and...beautiful nature.” When Leah Turets wrote about her grandmother that “I often find myself (listening in memory for the sound of her voice) trying the word to see if what I have done can stretch to fit it” I read a sentence that pauses, proceeds, reconsiders, and ends by hanging fire. The same is equally true for “cupcake world,” “torching paragraphs,” and Jerrica's essay about persuasion and utopia, and all the other examples. My readings of these writings are idiosyncratic, and purposely so, and should be held up against the students' self-interpretations and self-directions. Theirs are the final word. Exactly so, there can be no law in place about how a troping takes place or how the misfit tropes should go. When I

judge that anagnorisis is the impetus for a misfit trope, it is the best reading on offer to me in that moment, for that paper. For perspective, Poirier declares, “Writing is a form of energy not accountable to the orderings anyone makes of it and specifically not accountable to the liberal humanitarian values most readers want to find there” (xxiii). In other words, I can only make sense of the performance of the writing and the tropes and work from that unique stage of composition. I cannot expect, like Waite, for the changing of a Self or a Disposition. Also, I cannot expect that change to make a dent in a revision. More importantly, student writing isn’t accountable to me. Not like that. It is only accountable to the student writer who is to take hold and charge it. I possess the function of a reverberator, to ask questions like, “Why and how do you write the way that you write?” and “Is this the way you want to sound?” My function is to elaborate on and spin out the implications of sounding a certain way or what a student could do or has done with the voicings and performative leaps of linguistic power. I didn’t want to taxonomize student writing in this dissertation, and I’m afraid (at certain points) that I have. I’ve singled out certain tropes to lay over and read student writing with, but I’d rather see their work as Poirier does below. I want to end with a warning and explanation from Poirier, one that I think holds hands with this conclusion’s epigraph.

Efforts to institutionalize the study of literature [*in this case, student writing, too*]...have all had the result of suppressing the kind of energy I try to locate in the word “performance.” It is an energy in motion, an energy which is its own shape, and it seldom fits the explanatory efforts either of most readers or even of most writers. If Faulkner, for example, really meant to summarize himself in the tedious, and loud, ironies of his Christian symbolisms in *The Sound and the Fury* or *Light in August*, he would be a writer not worth trouble. In the act of reading him, however, anyone responsive to the local

power of his writing soon recognizes that Faulkner needed his structurings the way a child might need a jungle gym: as a support for exuberant, beautiful, and testing flights.

(xxiii)

The assignments we give are the structurings for the students' "testing flights" for their rhetorical configurations and refigurations, as are their own structures that become the essays and papers they turn in. If I was truly to think that Jerrica in chapter 4 or the writer of the "Care" essayette in chapter 1 meant to "summarize" themselves in the ways that they did, then, yes, perhaps, they'd not be worth the trouble. True, they are not Faulkner. But still, in my acts of reading, I can see that the forms of the writing and the tropings within were the basis for their effects.

The title of this dissertation comes from a line in a Gertrude Stein book called *How to Write*. (Surely one of the best jokes ever.) In the midst of her typical associative language, my title appears, itself, alone, a solo paragraph. "Resemble assemble reply." The sentence can be taken two ways (well, more than two), two that keep popping up in my vision.

First, the sentence can be a standard method of writing.

Resemble what you want to sound like. Assemble accordingly. Then reply to whatever you see.

Or: the sentence can be a warning.

What do you want to resemble? How will you assemble it? How will you reply?

Resembling anything can be dangerous, and so I'm quick to point out to students and writers that the impulse to pick what's closest or what's convenient or familiar can lead to less than satisfying results, if what's wanted is writing that does something other than act dutifully and upright with no reason why.

The three misfit tropes discussed at length in this dissertation represent (synecdochally) just a fraction what's available within troping. But they are the ones that I saw and read repeating. It is my hope that those who read this, and who are in a position to teach reading or writing, when poised and attentive, can help writers go on to the next draft knowing their rhetorical moves. Again, if we're to be solvers of writing problems, then it only makes sense to show our students that they're writers performing exuberant acts of troping, and that it's incumbent upon them to have, so long as they can stand it, the last word.

I want to close with a student paper, give it the last word. It's an essay written by Sarah Frank, a former student of mine at the Community College of Allegheny County for an English Composition II course. She wrote about the similarities between Henry David Thoreau's experience of success and failure while farming beans in *Walden* and the act of writing. It is a performance, to be sure.

And I know what you're about to ask. I don't know if it tropes.

But it does sing.

#### You Can't Reinvent the ~~Wheel~~ Bean Plant

Henry David Thoreau did not grow beans to make money. Sure, he sold his beans for profit to purchase necessities. But his goal was not to make money to save money to spend money. His goal was survival without an abundance of "things" or human interaction. Not "survival" in the sense that he had to fight for his life, but for true living and experience despite the lack of material objects and societal interference. His daily activities were performed for self betterment. He acquired an intimate connection between the earth and the core of his being, in

an attempt to reach self-actualization. The record of his experience, *Walden*, muses about the value of others' opinions, and whether or not their priorities are legitimate. When tending to his bean field, passers-by comment on his abnormal cultivation techniques, insinuating that it "wasn't good enough" because it did not conform to traditional farming practices, therefore making it less valuable because it was less profitable because it was less efficient. Thoreau questions "... who estimates the value of the crop which nature yields in the still wilder fields unimproved by man?" (174). He ridicules their belief that his efforts were worth nothing. To him, his bean plants' connection with their "wild and primitive" (174) state was a thing of beauty. "Half-cultivated" was not a dirty word, but an admirable one. His precious beans were not "savage" or "barbarous," they were "cheerful" and "powerful." Though the virtues embedded in the seeds of his labor and the beans themselves "did not come up" (181), Thoreau did come to a realization. It was not he, but nature itself that caused his beans to grow. He *did* provide aid in the way of hoeing, but it was the clouds that provided the rain that watered the soil, and it was the sun that provided the light for photosynthesis, and it was the forces of nature that provided the exact circumstances for the miracle of life.

Thoreau learned all he could from his beans and resolved to "not plant beans... with so much industry" (181) again. Though he did not reach his goal, Thoreau tried. His whole point was that he tried. He believed that doing things (such as farming) the same way over and over again, without recourse or consideration, was wasted energy. Why do something that you already know the outcome of? Been there, done that. Thoreau believed that one's energy should concern the creation of a "new generation of men," a generation that would generate new ideas and crave

new adventures. The funny thing is, concerning reading and writing, Thoreau believed we had much to learn from the classics. But without the basics, there cannot be new growth. A bean plant cannot grow without water, sunshine, and soil just as a human cannot experience new things without an income from raising said beans. In the same sense, one cannot create a new story about a hero if “hero” itself is not defined; nearly all of today’s heroes are based on the great Beowulf. If you understand the origin, you can comprehend the possibilities. Thoreau’s attempt to understand the beans as much as they understood him resemble the process of trying to understand one’s own writing. There’s a difference between understanding what you just wrote and *understanding what you just wrote*. There’s a difference between writing an essay and *letting the essay write itself*. Letting your words reflect your primal instincts and beliefs allows you to connect with what you’re writing. Letting your beans rely on their environment allows them to connect with their humble, uncultivated beginnings. Let your beans be. Appreciate them for what they are. Let them do their thing while you go out and explore what you do not yet know. The beans don’t need you, the classics don’t need you, they already know what they’re doing — metaphorically, at least. Don’t waste time writing the same things over and over again or planting your beans

the same way over and over again. The point is to push your boundaries as a human being,  
whether it be secluding yourself in a forest or traveling the world or writing a novel.

Thoreau thinks that you should

know *why* you're doing something, otherwise,

what's

the

point?

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