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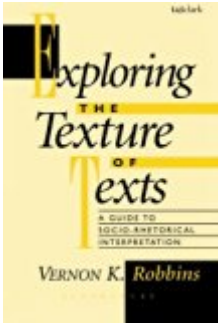
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Vernon K. Robbins. *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation.* Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1996. x + 148 pp. $15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56338-183-6.



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Published on H-Rhetor (June, 1997)

The Textures of Interpretation

One area of rhetorical study that has burgeoned in the last decades is in biblical studies, in particular New Testament studies. The result has been provocative and revealing analyses of the rhetorical function and structure of scriptural texts. Since Amos N. Wilder's Haskell Lectures delivered in 1962 at Oberlin College and culminating in his *Early Christian Rhetoric* (1964), biblical scholars have steadily investigated scriptural texts using rhetorical critical methods. For more than a decade, Vernon K. Robbins has been a major contributor to the rhetorical turn in New Testament studies, and his book *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* is another milestone in the field. Although the intended audience for the book is students and scholars of the New Testament, the relevance of this book need not be limited to New Testament criticism. Scholars and students of rhetorical criticism, socio-linguistics, and cultural history will find much to reward their time and efforts in this book.

The scope of the book is suggested in its title: to explore the textures of texts. Robbins uses the metaphor of textures within a larger metaphor of tapestry. The richness of a tapestry is best appreciated when beheld from several perspectives, each different from the others and each revealing something unique about the composition of the whole (pp. 2-3). In many ways, *Exploring the Texture of Texts* is the instructional counterpart of his analysis of the discourses of early Christianity, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (Routledge, 1996). The metaphor of tapestry is apt because Robbins presupposes that meaning is multivalent in "that words themselves work in complicated ways to communicate meanings that we only partially understand" and in "that meanings themselves have their meanings by their relation to other meanings" (p. 132). Given these presuppositions, any serious reader will benefit by exploring the multiple layers or the many textures of texts.

Robbins' socio-rhetorical interpretation draws upon work from several disciplines. "Socio" refers to interpretative strategies developed in sociology, anthropology, and socio-linguisitcs. Occasionally, Robbins uses the adjectives "deep" and "thick" to describe the results of socio-rhetorical analyses (pp. 2, 5, 130), and in these adjectives one can hear echoes of Clifford Geertz's classic essays "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" and "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" (*The Interpretation of Cultures* 1973). Robbins complements the insights from social science with rhetorical criticism of the Bible and with rhetorical sources such as Aristotle, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Quintillian, Hermogenes' and Theon's progymnasmata, and Burke. The result of this interdisciplinary approach is an impressive array of interpretive tools for the scholar and student.

Robbins' purpose in *Exploring the Texture of Texts* is "to build an environment for interpretation that provides interpreters with a basic, overall view of life and language as we use it" (p. 2). This goal presupposes the complex-

ity of the interpretive task as well as the abilities that we as interpreters of life and language already possess. His focus, therefore, "is to bring practices of interpretation together that are often separated from one another" and "to integrate skills people use in ordinary life with exploration of the intricacies of language in a text" (p. 2). This goal involves all the language strategies people use to negotiate meanings, but it also includes an awareness of how social and historical locations as well as personal interests affect the interpretive process. Robbins confesses that final interpretations of texts are impossible, and his approach does not claim to yield finality or completeness (p. 2). As a result Robbins has made accessible to anyone who wants to read carefully a rich array of interpretive tools with unlimited potential.

Robbins identifies five textures of texts. They are: 1) inner texture, 2) intertexture, 3) social and cultural texture, 4) ideological texture, and 5) sacred texture. With the exception of the last, all textures could easily be applied, with minor adjustments, to any text. Each chapter analyzes texture focusing primarily on the same passage in the Gospel of Mark 15:1-16:8. Chapter One is devoted to inner texture, or the "features in the language of the text itself" (p. 7). Chapter Two explains intertexture, or the relation of the text to other texts, oral, written, cultural, social, and historical. Chapter Three develops social and cultural texture, or the ways texts encourage readers "to adopt certain social and cultural locations and orientations rather than others" (p. 72). Chapter Four explores ideological texture, which "concerns the biases, opinions, preferences, and stereotypes of a particular writer and a particular reader" (p. 95). This chapter recounts a fascinating situation in which three different interpretations of the same passage of scripture are given by three different interpreters with different ideological commitments, showing how each ideology applied to the same textual data yields a different interpretation. Chapter Five explains sacred texture as the way in which readers use texts to relate human life to the divine (p. 120).

Each chapter concludes with a study guide that takes readers carefully through the textures of other biblical passages. These guides are thorough and helpful in leading students through the socio-rhetorical approach. Robbins insists that the five textures need not all be applied to any given text, that there is no order to the levels of texture, and that not all the resources of socio-rhetorical analysis need to be applied (p. 5). The reader is free to pick and choose from the textures and the kinds of analysis the interpretive tools that best suit the text, the interpretive purpose, and the rhetorical situation.

Within each of the five textures, Robbins lays out several textural constituents. For example, the inner texture consists in the familiar elements of literary and rhetorical close reading. Specifically, Robbins encourages readers to become acutely aware of "words, word patterns, voices, structures, devices, and modes in the text, which are the context for meanings and meaning-effects that an interpreter analyzes with the other readings of the text" (p. 7). Robbins identifies inner texture as consisting of repetitive, progressive, narrational, opening-middle-closing, argumentative, and sensory-aesthetic textures and patterns.

Robbins demonstrates the virtue of the socio-rhetorical method by putting one layer of texture against another to provide new insight into how the text works. For instance, many detailed analyses at the level of inner texture never answer the question "So what? ." It sometimes appears as though detailed analysis is an exercise in its own right. Not so in Robbins' analysis. In an analysis of the inner texture, Robbins suggests making tables of repeated words and concepts. Along the horizontal axis, the critic lists the topics of repeated words and concepts. Along the vertical axis, the critic charts the sequence of the text. The result is not just a list of repetitions, but a table of significant topics and their progression. That is, the table of repeated words and concepts becomes a tool for determining how the repetitive texture and pattern of a text complements and enables the progressive texture and pattern. This kind of inter-relational analysis is typical of Robbins' socio-rhetorical method and substantiates his supposition that interpretation is a matter of relating levels of meaning.

With respect to inner texture, Robbins' analyses are not unfamiliar to most readers aware of literary formalism and rhetorical criticism and resemble the kind of analysis of sacred texts one could find in the rhetorical tradition in such texts as Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book Three, or in Joachim Camerarius' *Notatio figurarum sermonis in libris quatuor euangeliorum* (1572) or in Salomon Glass's *Philologia sacra* (1653). In other textures, however, Robbins uses familiar rhetorical terms such as "topics" and gives them new meaning and life by incorporating research from sociology. The common social and cultural topics, for instance, are not patterns of inference as in Aristotle, but are instead values, patterns, or codes that help interpreters avoid ethnocentrism and anachronism in their interpretations. For example, interpreters of the New Testament need to be aware of the cultural topics characteristic of their own time and place as opposed to those operative in the Mediterranean re-

gion during the first century CE. This would require an understanding of the difference between "individualist, guilt-oriented values" and "group-oriented, honor-shame values" (pp. 75-76).

In all, Robbins' socio-rhetorical approach is interdisciplinary but not haphazardly so. The range and depth of what he offers does, in fact, provide the tools for thick and deep, and I must add, insightful interpretations of texts. The book is straightforward and could easily be used as a textbook for literary or rhetorical criticism or for any course in which interpretation is requisite. Its appeal may be limited because all examples are taken from the Bible and presumes some familiarity with Christianity. Nevertheless, Robbins has succeeded in bringing together an abundant repertoire of interpretive strategies and has presented them in a way illuminating for scholars and students alike.

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Citation: Grant Boswell. Review of Robbins, Vernon K., *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation.* H-Rhetor, H-Net Reviews. June, 1997.

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