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# **“THE RHETORIC OF TEXT” RECONSIDERED IN FICTION AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

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**Résumé** : L'article présente plusieurs principes rhétoriques que Leech et Short ont introduit dans "The Rhetoric of Text," chapitre sept de *Style in Fiction*, afin d'analyser des textes de Hemingway (fiction) et de Sting (non-fiction).

**Mots-clés**: rhétorique, stylistique, imitation, iconicité, point de vue

## **On Rhetoric and Stylistics**

For such an old term, "rhetoric" remains surprisingly polysemous. This is because it can designate at least two concepts simultaneously. First, "rhetoric" is often used to refer to written or spoken discourse that aims to be persuasive, especially in the context of politics. Ironically, detractors may call discourse "rhetoric" when they feel it is *not* persuasive. In this sense, "rhetoric" may refer to discourse one disagrees with (rather than discourse one agrees with), just as the term "ideology" is often used for policy one disagrees with. In other words, if "ideology" may refer to policy one disagrees with, "rhetoric" may refer to discourse one disagrees with. Such is the fate of "rhetoric", as empirical evidence from corpora might reveal, its semantic prosody is more negative than positive in current usage. That said, the second main sense of "rhetoric" refers not to the product *per se* but to the process. By that I mean that "rhetoric" can be used to refer to the theory of persuasion. American university courses on rhetoric reflect this ambiguity, which is to say they

usually involve theory and/or practice. Some rhetoric courses teach students how to write persuasively, while others may teach them only about rhetorical theory. Still other courses, however, try to do both at once by mixing theory with practice under the heading of “rhetoric.”

Within the context of Leech and Short’s landmark book, *Style in Fiction*, the fact that there is a chapter dedicated explicitly to textual rhetoric should hardly be surprising. I am referring here to their seventh chapter, called “The Rhetoric of Text.” As I have explained elsewhere (Hamilton 2008), the historical roots of stylistics are to be found in rhetoric. In the pedagogical institution of rhetoric, *elocutio* (i.e. style) was one of the five major canons of ancient rhetoric, so the debt stylistics owes to rhetoric should seem obvious. However, many researchers in stylistics today might argue that their work has more in common with modern linguistics than it does with classical rhetoric (although I doubt that Leech and Short would make that argument). Disciplinary boundaries, of course, may be but lines in the sand. As Paul Hopper recently admitted: “In fact, if pressed, I would regard linguistics as a branch of rhetoric in much the same way that, for Saussure, it was a branch of semiotics. Linguistics, for me, is micro-rhetoric—rhetoric writ small, so to speak” (2007, 249). In light of Hopper’s remarks, I would add that if stylistics today is part of linguistics, and if linguistics is itself part of rhetoric, then it follows that stylistics is logically part of rhetoric as well.

In “The Rhetoric of Text,” Leech and Short introduce a series of stylistic principles in order to uncover effective means of communication in texts (2007, 169). In broad terms, rhetorical analysis in literary studies may refer to “analyzing the surface structure of narrative texts to show how the linguistic mediation of a story determines its meaning and effect” (Lodge 1980, 8). More specifically, and this is what Leech and Short demonstrate in their chapter, studying style closely allows us to see how effective communication occurs in narrative texts. In what follows, I therefore discuss several principles from “The Rhetoric of Text” in order to show how they can clarify questions of style in both fiction and non-fiction. After introducing some of the principles, I turn my attention to Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (1925) before discussing Sting’s autobiography, *Broken Music* (2003).

### **Some Principles in “The Rhetoric of Text”**

According to Leech and Short (2007, 169), rhetoric relies on “principles or guidelines for getting things done by means of language,” and they openly admit their preference for “principles” rather than “rules” in their chapter.

Throughout their chapter, Leech and Short identify at least fifteen "principles" of the rhetoric of text, including the principles of,

1. End focus, or "last is most important" (2007, 171)
2. Segmentation (2007, 173)
3. Subordination (2007, 178)
4. Climax (again, "last is most important"; 2007, 179)
5. Memory (2007, 184)
6. "First is most important" (e.g. in speech) (2007, 186)
7. Imitation (2007, 188)
8. Chronological sequencing (2007, 188)
9. Presentational sequencing (2007, 190)
10. Psychological sequencing (2007, 190)
11. Juxtaposition (2007, 193)
12. Reduction (2007, 198)
13. Concision (2007, 199)
14. Variety or elegant variation (2007, 199)
15. Expressive repetition (2007, 199)

Although the relationship between these fifteen principles is not always clear in "The Rhetoric of Text," some of them do merit more of our attention here. For instance, the first main principle Leech and Short discuss is that of end focus. Although they claim that end focus is "phonological" but that climax involves "tone units" (2007, 179), end focus and climax are two sides of the same coin for they are both found in writing too. That is why I will use the term "end focus" here for "the last is most important" principle in written examples. As Leech and Short explain (2007, 181), "In a classically well-behaved sentence, we expect the parts of the sentence to be presented in the general order of increasing semantic weight." Those familiar with research on information structure (Lambrecht 1994), especially topic-comment or theme-rheme ordering, will see some similarity here with the principle of end focus. And when Leech and Short say the principle of climax refers to "last is most important" too (2007, 179), then the similarity to the principles of end focus and climax ought to be clear.

One of the examples Leech and Short use to demonstrate the principle of end focus is the following sentence by the historian Edward Gibbon, "Eleven hundred and sixty-three years after the foundation of Rome, the imperial city, which had subdued and civilized so considerable a part of mankind, was delivered to the licentious fury of the tribes of Germany and Scythia" (qtd. in Leech & Short 2007, 180). After opening with information about Rome as an imperial city, Gibbon ends his sentence by focusing on "the tribes of Germany and Scythia," thereby introducing a new topic. Once that new topic is introduced, however, it is then familiar to the reader. And because it is familiar to the reader, we would logically expect the next sentence to start with the same

topic, those invading tribes. Writers who write according to the principle of end focus can thus fulfill reader's expectations about vital new information by putting it not in the middle of a sentence but rather at its end. The fact that Leech and Short's principle is corroborated by Joseph Williams' guidance on sentence "shape" (2009, 91) suggests this principle remains a useful one today. Although Leech and Short (2007, 186) later admit that in speech there may be a preference for speakers "to mention what is most important first," the principle of end focus nevertheless remains valid, especially in writing.

Another principle is suggested but not named in Leech and Short's discussion of sentence structure (2007, 176-185). To my mind, the principle involved here is the so-called form is content principle, which can be paraphrased simply as meaning that the *form* selected can be as meaningful as the *content* of what is communicated, especially if form and content are assumed to be equal in value. One of the consequences of this principle in literature is that there are writers who may use complex sentence structures to convey complex content (Leech & Short 2007, 176). For example, frequent uses of coordination or subordination in complex sentences can appear to convey complex thoughts. However, there are also writers who use complex syntax to convey confusion (e.g. Beckett in his plays), just as there are those who use simple syntax to convey profound emotions (e.g. Hemingway in his short stories). Simple syntax can include frequent uses of the conjunction "and," as well as successive uses of short declarative statements. Too much coordination, of course, can give us the impression of confusion. Writers who avoid subordinate clauses, for example by using repetitive coordination instead, might not help readers understand what is important and what is not even though nobody can pay equal attention to everything all of the time. That said, while intentional ambiguity may seem poetic, the same cannot be said of unintentional ambiguity.

As Leech and Short make clear, the importance of sentence structure cannot be underestimated. In their discussion of periodic sentence structure (2007, 181-182), for instance, they note that writers can create drama or suspense by using long "anticipatory constituents" in their sentences. Leech & Short cite the following example from Henry James' *The Ambassadors* to make their point, "At the end of the ten minutes he was to spend with her his impression — with all it had thrown off and all it had taken in — was complete" (qtd. in Leech & Short 2007, 183). James separates the predicate ("was complete") from the subject ("his impression") by using a subordinate clause containing twelve words. In doing so, James seems to create the effect of suspense. However, examples like this lead Leech and Short to formulate the

memory principle, which means, “Reduce the burden on the reader’s immediate syntactic memory by avoiding major anticipatory constituents” (2007, 184). In simple terms, sentences with shorter anticipatory constituents are easier to read than those with longer ones. When thinking about the burden of comprehension writers may place on readers, Leech and Short are right to insist that the rhetoric of text must be “addressee-based” (2007, 185). They say that for they feel that writers have to take “the reader’s needs and expectations” into consideration if they want to communicate effectively (2007, 185). Of course, writers are free to ignore the needs and expectations of readers, but if they do, then they will probably produce writing that is not worth reading once let alone twice.

The final principle of concern here is that of imitation, which Leech and Short (2007, 185) feel involves the presentational and representational functions of literary modes. The representational function specifically is carried out by writing that is “miming the meaning that it expresses” (2007, 185). This function logically relates to iconicity. Chronological sequencing is one form of iconicity whereby a cause “precede[s] effect” (2007, 186). For example, “The criminal was shot and killed” presents the cause first, the effect second. “The criminal was killed and shot,” however, presents the effect or result first, the cause second. Indeed, so strong is our preference for cause to precede effect that we might even interpret that last example to mean that the gunshot did not cause the criminal to die. Juxtaposition, another form of iconicity, means that “words which are close in the text may evoke an impression of closeness or connectedness in the fiction” (2007, 193). While the Gestalt principle of proximity (Ungerer & Schmid 2006) most likely provides a cognitive basis for this form of iconicity, its effects can be seen easily. For example, to say that “A schooner sailed into Portsmouth Harbour manned by forty men” (2007, 193) is to reveal juxtaposition in action. We expect the participle clause at the end of the sentence to modify the noun closest to it — Portsmouth Harbour — although it modifies schooner, the sentence’s subject! Juxtaposition in this case creates ambiguity or confusion since writers confuse readers by using such sentences.

## Rhetoric in Fiction

To discuss rhetoric in fiction along the lines proposed by Leech and Short in “The Rhetoric of Text,” consider the following vignette, which is “Chapter VII” from Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (sentences numbered for the purpose of analysis) :

[1] While the bombardment was knocking the trench to pieces at Fossalta, he lay very flat and sweated and prayed oh jesus christ get me out of here. [2] Dear jesus please get me out. [3] Christ please please please christ. [4] If you’ll only keep me from getting

killed I'll do anything you say. [5] I believe in you and I'll tell everyone in the world that you are the only one that matters. [6] Please please dear Jesus. [7] The shelling moved further up the line. [8] We went to work on the trench and in the morning the sun came up and the day was hot and muggy and cheerful and quiet. [9] The next night back at Mestre he did not tell the girl he went upstairs with at the Villa Rossa about Jesus. [10] And he never told anybody (Hemingway 1996 [1925], 67).

It goes without saying that Hemingway's style has been studied in great depth before. My remarks below are therefore but a tiny contribution to a much greater field of research. For example, in an article on "A Cat in the Rain" (another Hemingway story), David Lodge argues that Hemingway, "By omitting the kind of [character] motivation that classical realistic fiction provided, ... generated a symbolist polysemy in his deceptively simple stories, making his readers 'feel more than they understood'" (1980, 17). Another critic, Charles Anderson, contrasts Hemingway's "lyrical mode," as seen in passages of *A Farewell to Arms*, with "the hard polished surface of his typical prose" (1961, 442). The Hemingway style has been so influential for generations of American writers that, as Jerry Underwood suggests, it is nearly impossible for writers to escape Hemingway's influence (1976, 684-685).

That such a unique style could create memorable stories should seem obvious. "Chapter VII" from *In Our Time* is a story of hypocrisy, of so-called foxhole Christianity. In sentence [1], the long anticipatory constituent creates dramatic suspense, which is reinforced by the use of the past progressive verb phrase ("was knocking the trench to pieces"). Furthermore, despite the inclusion of a reporting phrase, ("[he] prayed"), the prayer is Free Direct Thought (2007, 270) rather than Free Direct Speech (2007, 258) because the prayer seems to be a silent one. Presumably, there are other soldiers with the protagonist in the trench (e.g. "We" in sentence [8]), but they do not appear to hear his prayer since it is not in Direct Speech form. Moreover, the protagonist prays only for himself, not the others.

The prayer comprises 41% of the story (i.e. 55 words out of the story's 134 words), and the prayer runs from the last half of sentence [1] to the end of sentence [6]. After the prayer, the turning point in the story comes in sentence [7], when the "shelling moved further up the line," away from the protagonist. This is where Leech and Short's principle of imitation becomes most relevant, especially where chronological sequencing is concerned. There is a chronological sequencing of events in sentence [1], where the bombardment comes first, followed by the protagonist's actions, "he lay very flat and sweated and prayed." By using simple past verb forms here — as well as repeating the coordinating conjunction "and" — Hemingway's use of sequencing represents the situation dramatically. This is why the prayer that follows seems sincere

and genuine. Likewise, Hemingway uses sequencing in sentences [7] to [10] to report events in their chronological order. However, the shift from [6] to [7] is highly salient for we assume causes to come first, effects second. That is why we can interpret sentence [7] to be an effect caused by the prayer. Since [7] follows [1] to [6] as we read, we are made to assume that the shelling moved away from the protagonist *because* he prayed to Jesus to spare his life.

However, Hemingway could have made his story even shorter by merely stating the so-called facts, "The Fossalta trench was bombarded last night. Then the shelling moved further up the line. At least one soldier survived the attack." Although that style would be fitting for a wire agency report, it is hardly an example of great literature. It is what it is, a poor paraphrase of Hemingway's original story. What is more, within the context of *In Our Time*, if the numbered chapters (i.e. the vignettes) that appear between the book's main stories were made even shorter (and they are never longer than a page), then their inclusion in the book might seem even more perplexing. But to return to "Chapter VII," we can also see Hemingway putting the principle of end focus into practice. Sentence [6] ends with "dear jesus," while sentence [9] ends with "Jesus" — spelled with a capital "J" this time to make the contrast striking. It should be noted, however, that the protagonist is not entirely disrespectful toward Jesus since he uses a polite construction at one point in his prayer, in [4], "If you'll only keep me from getting killed I'll do anything you say." The use of *will* in both the protasis and the apodosis of a conditional construction is rare, but when used it is often pragmatically motivated. It is polite to say to a customer, for example, "If you'll wait here, I'll get the manager to assist you." To return to end focus, sentence [8] ends with "cheerful and quiet" rather than "hot and muggy," the pair of terms with which the phrase contrasts. Finally, and this is perhaps the most powerful example of the principle of end focus in action, Hemingway sums up the story in sentence [10], "And he never told anybody." Presumably, he does this so that there can be no doubt about the protagonist's hypocritical Christianity. The promises the soldier made during his near-death experience are never kept, and as Thomas Strychacz (1989) suggests, masculinity and authority are frequent concerns in Hemingway's book. Finally, the "last is most important" principle not only seems true about the composition of sentences but also the composition of stories like Hemingway's "Chapter VII" from *In Our Time*.

## Rhetoric in Non-Fiction

Although Leech and Short called their book, *Style in Fiction*, many of their insights in "The Rhetoric of Text" are equally relevant to non-fiction. Let

us consider, then, the following excerpt, which is from *Broken Music, A Memoir* by Sting (sentences numbered for the purpose of analysis) :

[1] From about the age of seven, on school holidays and at weekends I will go out to work with my father on his round in the High Farm estate and the miners' cottages at the north of the town. [2] He works seven days a week, every day of the year but Christmas. [3] My dad is the boss, but he can't afford to take a holiday. [4] When I join him, he will shake me awake at 5 a.m., leaving my little brother in his slumbers, and I'll bundle myself into the warmest clothes possible. [5] Sometimes, in the winter, it is so cold that there is frost on the inside of the window and I have to fumble to get dressed underneath the bedclothes as my breath condenses in the chill air. [6] I stumble downstairs where my father is pouring the tea and I begin setting a fire before the rest of the family rise. [7] We load up the van, wearing old leather gloves with the fingers cut out and lifting the cold metal crates as gently as possible so as not to wake the neighbours. [8] Soon we are making our way through the dark empty streets. [9] I learn to love the unique quality of the early mornings. [10] When everyone else in the town is tucked up in bed, we move quietly like cat burglars and seem to own the streets, investing them with an exclusive and mysterious glamour that will vanish as the morning progresses (Sting 2003, 28).

This passage is from chapter 1, when Sting describes his childhood in Wallsend near Newcastle in the late 1950s. A few pages earlier, we learn that Sting turned five in 1956, which was when his father quit his job as an engineer to become manager of a dairy instead. The passage above is from a section where Sting describes the dairy, which the family lived above. Most readers might agree that Sting's depiction of the scene is a very vivid one, even for readers like myself who are not from the north of England. There are many common nouns here with definite articles, as well as examples of what Leech and Short would call devices of "cohesion" (2007, 196). Yet some of their principles might help us see a little more clearly how Sting's depictions seem so vivid.

First, the sentences are generally well-crafted, with the principle of end focus put to good use. For example, sentence [2] ends with "every day of the year but Christmas," while sentence [3] ends with "can't afford to take a holiday." Sting implies here that even if his father could have made time for a holiday somehow, since he was his own boss, there was never any money for a holiday. The juxtaposition is clear, as a schoolboy, Sting has "school holidays" (sentence [1]), while his father only has one day off the entire year, Christmas, which is in winter to top it off. Sentence [4] ends with "the warmest clothes possible," while sentence [5] ends with "chill air," reminding readers we are in the heart of winter here. Then sentence [6] ends with "setting a fire before the rest of the family rise," while sentence [7] ends with "so as not to wake the neighbours." This explains why Sting and his father work so quietly. Indeed, in sentence [4] we see that Sting's father shakes him awake so as not to wake the younger brother who is sleeping. Then we see his father making tea for the two

of them, while Sting wants to warm the house for the comfort of others. To summarize, these are kind acts of consideration, depicted in detail, unlike the selfish soldier praying only for himself in Hemingway’s story.

The principle of imitation is also at work in Sting’s excerpt. For instance, in sentences [4] and [5], in the middle of the passage, we read, “[4] When I join him, he will shake me awake at 5 a.m., leaving my little brother in his slumbers, and I’ll bundle myself into the warmest clothes possible. [5] Sometimes, in the winter, it is so cold that there is frost on the inside of the window and I have to fumble to get dressed underneath the bedclothes as my breath condenses in the chill air.” After using the verb “bundle” to describe hastily getting dressed in sentence [4], Sting then represents that action in the next sentence. Sentence [5] is rather long since the average English sentence is just 17.8 words long in general (Leech & Short 2007, 90). Sting’s fifth sentence, however, is roughly twice as long as the average one (37 words), and noticeably longer than either the fourth sentence (28 words) or the sixth sentence (23 words) which frame sentence [5]. The principle of imitation offers an answer to the question of why a noticeably longer sentence would have been used in [5]. What Leech & Short call ““form enacting meaning”” (2007, 195) in their discussion of iconicity suggests that a longer-than-average sentence can help represent or mimic the action of having “to fumble to get dressed,” especially when it is cold. What is more, if verbs like “bundle” and “fumble” have attenuated aspects, then using longer sentences to reinforce those aspects could directly contribute to the vivid imagery here.

A final thing readers may notice in Sting’s excerpt is the use of “will,” which occurs 4 times in the 244 words of the passage. For the first 26 pages of chapter 1 in *Broken Music*, Sting mainly uses past tense forms in the usual manner. But this changes near the end of page 26. Although Sting the man was at least 50 when he wrote *Broken Music*, he only covers the first 25 years of his life or so in his autobiography. What is more, his use of “will” both here and throughout the memoir is meant to represent the viewpoint of a first-person omniscient narrator, which seems like a paradox. When Sting notices that most of the men in Wallsend seem to work in the shipyard building ships, he writes, “As I watched them, I wondered about my own future, and what kind of job I would be able to do. Would I too join this vast army of men and live out my days in the bellies of these giant ships?” (2003, 26-27). Two paragraphs later, he writes, “Three years after me, my brother, Phil, is brought into the family and my father will make another decision that he will regret for the rest of his left” (2003, 27).

While a young boy could not know his father's feelings about such a decision, this is knowledge Sting no doubt acquired later on in life. What makes the use of "will" unusual is that we have a middle-aged writer telling his life story from a boy's point of view at this part of the memoir. But what if Sting had used "would" rather than "will" (as often as possible) in the excerpt in question? The result would be as follows:

From about the age of seven, on school holidays and at weekends I would go out to work with my father on his round in the High Farm estate and the miners' cottages at the north of the town. He worked seven days a week, every day of the year but Christmas. My dad was the boss, but he couldn't afford to take a holiday. When I would join him, he would shake me awake at 5 a.m., leaving my little brother in his slumbers, and I would bundle myself into the warmest clothes possible. Sometimes, in the winter, it was so cold that there would be frost on the inside of the window and I would have to fumble to get dressed underneath the bedclothes as my breath condensed in the chill air. I would stumble downstairs where my father would be pouring the tea and I would begin to set a fire before the rest of the family would rise. We would load up the van, wearing old leather gloves with the fingers cut out, lifting the cold metal crates as gently as possible so as not to wake the neighbours. Soon we would be making our way through the dark empty streets. I would learn to love the unique quality of the early mornings. When everyone else in the town would be tucked up in bed, we would move quietly like cat burglars and seem to own the streets, investing them with an exclusive and mysterious glamour that would vanish as the morning progressed.

Although more frequent uses of "would" create consistency, they may strike readers as redundant or repetitive, compared to the original, even if there is nothing grammatically incorrect about them. Indeed, it is often possible to use "would" in place of "used to" to depict past actions that no longer occur. But because Sting mixes verb tenses in the original excerpt, that may explain in part how we get an unusually vivid impression of a routine scene from his childhood. In other words, this could be an example of Leech and Short's elegant variation principle, which simply advises writers to avoid "too much repetition" (2007, 199). That said, Sting's persistent use of "will" throughout his autobiography is one of its more noticeable stylistic features. In the first sentence of the Epilogue, for instance, he writes, "Three years after the deaths of my parents, Trudie and I will move into Lake House in the Wiltshire countryside" (2003, 330). As the great grammarian Michael Swan notes, "When we use *will*, we are not showing the listener something; we are asking him or her to believe something" (2005, 191). In Sting's case, his personal knowledge of his life allows him to use "will" in this way to report various events, even though the predictive sense "will" may give us the impression, at times, that the autobiographer does not always know what exactly happens in his own story. But that is a topic for another article.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have surveyed several of Leech and Short's principles from "The Rhetoric of Text." I have done so in order to show that they can clarify a number of aspects of fiction and non-fiction. Although I have discussed some principles, such as end focus and imitation, there are many principles I have not discussed. What is more, my brief analyses of the examples by Hemingway and Sting are by no means complete. Indeed, were there space enough and time, one could say a great deal more about style in both *Broken Music* and *In Our Time*. For example, the principle of expressive repetition (Leech & Short 2007, 199), or narratological concepts like that of the "reflector" (Leech & Short 2007, 273), could shed light on aspects of Hemingway's story that I have not discussed. Likewise, reviews of *Broken Music* could also be studied to see how critics have responded to Sting's story and style. After all, the book quickly rose to number 6 on *The New York Times* bestseller list on 18 January 2004, and in an interview Sting said he wrote the book to show, "How an ordinary person from the North of England becomes Sting, becomes a celebrity, becomes a successful artist" (Sainz 2004, 6). Having said that, I hope to have made it clear in this article that "The Rhetoric of Text" enables us to uncover textual details we might have taken for granted before. And if Leech and Short's chapter reminds us as well that stylistics comes from rhetoric, then that too is worth remembering.

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