CHAPTER 15

Rhetorical Definition as a Generic Term
Talking and Walking the Talk

One can see that from an overall standpoint, from a big rhetoric point of view, that rhetorical definition as a rhetorical mode permeates the whole process of composing and also that definition and interpretation are the ways that we create meaning both in speech and especially in the way that we create and invent what we say in writing.

Definition initiates our first words in making manifest our incipient aims. And by various modes of defining, encapsulated under defining as an umbrella term, we progress from those aims. And there in the composition of what we would like to say we find that there are many senses of what it is to interpret and to define as we expand on that aim. It is this continuing expansion and elaboration of our aims by rhetorical definitions and by using definitional proposals that we are able to introduce new meanings that enact and aid us in the generation of the innovative things we would like to say that are both informative and persuasive.

And this enactment by interpretation and definition is a continuous development in the composing process. Composing in its creativity is a defining and an interpreting process that transforms aims progressively into the things that we want to say. It helps us present words about things that we can personally approve of. In composing, we create the patterns of words that we want to stand on. It is by interpretation and definition that we enact words that lead us into the successful rhetorical actions that we engage in while we are composing.

Often we can define our aims by sketching them first in an outline of what we want to do and say. The uses of outlines in rhetoric, it is worth noting, are twofold. We use them for invention. And many times we use them as summaries. Summaries are mnemonic devices to recall the gist of what we have said in a written text. Summary outlines function very much like abstracts. They are condensations of what someone has written or said.

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But when outlines are used in prewriting, they become definitions and interpretations of intentions instead of summations. They become our guides to composing by helping us define what we want to say. A prewriting outline is a definition of intention that initiates the writing process. It is simply a tool for invention and a tool for composing. It is a guide to definitional expansion. In one sense it is a definition of a synopsis of a rhetorical action. As a synopsis it has the frame of a narrative. And as a frame of a narrative it is also an algorithm, which is no more than a definition of a procedure. And we narrate procedures.

Any schema or outline can be used as an initial representation that guides further the definitions and interpretations we make of our intentions. Such schemata of topics and themes are designs of patterns of the way we want to say things. As such they are talk about expressed intentions. And as such they are just one sort of definition. Terms like definition and interpretation are umbrella terms for many types and different senses of what it is to be a definition that have been historically developed to help us clarify what we are all about. And composing uses all these varieties of definition in many different ways as we develop what we want to say.

But we can also say that the definitions and interpretations involved in composition can be roughly divided into two types: rhetorical and logical. They are diachronic and synchronic respectively. One type summarizes historical usage, and the other type locates our meaning in a system of contrasting signs and their significations. And definitions and interpretations that are diachronic are based upon historical terms that are used for different types of clarification.

But as synchronic, interpretation and definition are terms for modes of discourse that examine terms in a system of language usage defined by their semantic contrasts with other words in our language. As synchronic, definition and interpretation can be thought of as correlative terms. And when we treat definition and interpretation as correlative terms they are defined in terms of their interactive sets of synonyms and antonyms and their respective contrasts that take on different senses in our personal contexts of use.

For example, when we contrast synonyms with antonyms we are treating them as correlative. Each involves the definition of the other. But note that synonyms as treated in dictionaries of synonyms are not strictly synonymous. Importantly, too, they are defined by their contrasts. They are terms with analogous uses and replaceable uses. They can be used for each other and interpreted to be synonymous in meaning in certain contexts, but they do not logically have the same meaning in all contexts (Urdang 1975). When we define usage, then, one correlative term contrasts with related synonymous terms, and all then in turn contrast with their antonyms in their usage. As such, interpretation of