SEEING THROUGH WORDS: HYPOTYPOSIS AND ITS FUNCTIONS

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Abstract:

This essay aims to analyse the rhetorical device of hypotyposis, which is held in great consideration both by ancient rhetoricians (Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian) and by modern critics (Dumarsais, Barthes and Eco) for its capacity to portray visual experiences through the use of words, so as to make them as perceptible as if they were present before the reader's eyes.

The essay compares hypotyposis with other similar rhetorical strategies, such as description (an important moment in which the narratio is suspended and the author describes a place or character), evidentia, and especially ekphrasis - which comes from ekphràzo, meaning "describe, represent", it is used with reference to the description of artworks - which all exercise a significant persuasive function, for they make arguments more tangible and convincing.

Keywords:

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1. Introduction

The many definitions with have been provided of hypotyposis since the days of Classical rhetoric all emphasising its capacity to represent visual experiences through verbal procedures, in such a way that the images evoked in the speech acquire the concreteness and emotional intensity of perceptual data, and almost seem to flow "before the eyes" (*ante oculos*) of the recipient. In particular, hypotyposis stimulates *phantasia*, the faculty which enables the mental representation of images with a highly illusionist power and is therefore capable of stirring emotions. Significantly, this figure of speech also takes the name of *evidentia*. This particular vividness and power to represent things stems from the wealth of details and the compelling quality of the images. This approach is shared by all the leading representatives of Classical rhetoric, such as Aristotle, Quintilian, and Cicero: for example, with reference to Cicero (*De orat*. 3, 53, 202), in his *Institutio Oratoria* Quintilian defines hypotyposis as:

> "vivid representation before the eyes" [which] comes into play when we do not restrict ourselves to mentioning that something was done, but proceed to show how it was done, and do so not merely on broad general lines, but in full detail. […] Others give the name of hypotyposis and define it as "a mode of representation of facts in such a way that they appeal to the eye rather than the ear" [*ibid.*] […] Nor is it only past or present actions which we may imagine: we may equally well present a picture of what is likely to happen or might have happened. […] This transference of time, which is properly called *metástasis*, is the same figure of speech as hypotyposis (*Inst. Or.* IX, 2, 40-41).

In *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (IV, 55, 68) this figure of speech *de facto* coincides with *demonstratio* or evidence, which does not mean demonstration in the usual or scientific sense of the term (as in the demonstration of a theorem, for instance), but rather means "to show", "to make others see"; it is something that is portrayed in such vivid words that the event described seems to be unfolding before one's eyes. Vivid descriptions help amplify the representation, eliciting an emotional reaction from the reader. This will ennoble the author's elocution, lending it gravity, dignity, and gentleness. Eco (2006: 191-92) has rightly noted that this and all other definitions transmitted by the rhetorical tradition have the same flaw, namely: they are circular, for they merely explain the meaning of the term "hypotyposis" without discussing its features and forms. Therefore, Eco believes that the examples usually accompanying the definition are more useful. Quintilian provides two: the first, more straightforward one, draws upon a verse from the *Aeneid* (V, 426) and describes the stance of two boxers, about whom it is said that each forthwith stood erect on tiptoe; the other example is borrowed from Cicero, who in his oration for Gallius paints a scene in particularly strong and complex colours, and involving several characters: "I seemed to see some entering, some leaving the room, some reeling under the influence of the wine, others yawning with yesterday's potations. The floor was foul with wine-smears, covered with wreaths half-withered and littered with fishbones" (*Inst. Or.*, VIII, 3, 66).

Quintilian considers this description so effective that he believes that a person could hardly have seen any more if he or she had been present in the room. Hypotyposis significantly increases commiseration for cities conquered by the enemy. For while it is true that the public associates a negative idea and a negative meaning with the expression "the city was stormed by the enemy", it is equally true that this short sentence does not engender deep commiseration. By contrast, if the concepts expressed in a single expression are expanded,

the emotional reaction will be far greater and deeper. Let's read the example which Quintilian offers in this regard, and which consists in a broad and complex description, a dramatic unfolding of actions that are presented to the reader almost as a film sequence, which includes

> the flames pouring from house and temple, and […] the crash of falling roofs and one confused clamour blent of many cries, […] some in doubt whither to fly, others clinging to their nearest and dearest in one last embrace, […] the wailing of women and children and the laments of old men that the cruelty of fate should have spared them to see that day, […] the pillage of treasure sacred and profane, the hurrying to and fro of the plunderers as they carry off their booty or return to seek for more, the prisoners driven each before his own inhuman captor, the mother struggling to keep her child, and the victors fighting over the richest of the spoil (*Inst. Or.*, VIII, 3, 68-69).

2. The word and the image

The definition provided by Classical authors is echoed, almost with the same words, by modern theorists such as Lamy, Dumarsais, and Fontanier. For example, in the treatise *Des tropes* Dumarsais considers

> l'hypotypose un mot grec qui signifie *image*, *tableau*. C'est lorsque, dans les descriptions, on peint les faits dont ont parle comme si ce qu'on dit êtait actuellement devant les yeux: on *montre*, pour ainsi dire, ce qu'on ne fait que raconter; on donne en quelque sorte l'original pour la copie, les objects por les tableaux (Dumarsais 1730: 133-34).

Likewise, in this regard Fontanier writes:

> l'hypotypose peint les choses d'une manière si vive et énergique qu'elle les met en quelque sorte sous les yeux, en fait d'un récit ou d'une description, une image, un tableau, ou même une scène vivante (Fontanier 1821: 390).

In order to better explain this elocutionary strategy, Dumarsais suggests a particularly revealing example drawn from Racine's *Phèdre*:

> Cependant sur le dos de la plaine liquide
>
> S'élêve à gros bouillons une montagne humide
>
> L'onde s'approche, se brise, et vomit à nos yeux
>
> Parmi les flots d'écume, un monstre furieux
>
> Son frot large est armé de cornes menaçantes
>
> Tout son corp est couvert d'écailles jaunissantes

> Indomptable taureau, dragon impétueux
>
> Sa croupe se recourbe en replis tortueux
>
> Ses longs mugissements font trembler le rivage
>
> Le Ciel avec horreur voit ce monster sauvage
>
> La terre s'en émeut, l'air e nest infecté
>
> Le flot qui l'apporta recule épouvanté
>
> (act V, sc. 6).

Racine's text is more complex because the description of the various stages of a natural event is accompanied by the zoomorphic transformation of waves into a raging monster whose forehead bears threatening horns and which is compared to an untamable bull and a fiery dragon. In this case, hypotyposis is combined with prosopopoeia, the rhetorical device which Aristotle describes as capable of "bringing inanimate things to life" (*Rhet*. 1411b) and which thus lends vigour and energy to a description. In this respect, it may be argued that the process at work is the replacement of the real with the imaginary. Poets have always made extensive use of this mode of expression. Particularly significant are Aristotle's examples, drawn from Homer's *Iliad*: "The spears stuck in the ground quivering with hunger for the flesh. / The spear-point shot quivering through his breast" (*Il*. XI, 574 and XV, 541).

The presence of prosopopoeia recalls human beings' natural tendency to lend consistency to shadows, to see threatening and cruel animate forms in the dark and disturbing aspects of nature. On account of its evident connection to forms of *pathos*, Parret (2001) rightly considers hypotyposis to be one of the peculiar figures of speech that contribute to the creation of the sublime. Indeed, as Longinus recalls, the images evoked in speeches are all the more compelling when they are pervaded by the emotional turmoil of enthusiasm and passion: "Images, moreover, contribute greatly, my young friend, to dignity, elevation and power as a pleader […] when, carried away by enthusiasm and passion, you think you see what you describe, and you place it before the eyes of your hearers" (*Subl.* XV, 1-2)

The device of hypotyposis has also been associated with *descriptio*, which Barthes (1972) regarded as an important moment in which the *narratio* is suspended and the author describes a place or character: in the former case we speak of topography, in the latter of prosopography. We then have ethopoeia when the moral qualities of a person are described, so the portrayal combines propopography and ethopoeia. A parallel instead consists of two descriptions, which may be either consecutive or combined, highlighting the similarities or differences between the various elements. The descriptive sequence is opened and closed by markers that interrupt and then resume the diegesis, as when an author says that the character looked out of the window, or left the window and returned to his desk. Description serves several functions: it introduces a degree of psychological relaxation after a moment of great suspense; or it provides an *ouverture* announcing the overall tone of the work, as in the case of the wonderful opening section of Leopardi's *The Evening of the Holiday*:

> The night is soft and bright and without wind
>
> And the moon hangs still above the roofs

And kitchen gardens, showing every mountain

Clear in distance. O my lady

Every lane is quiet now, and night lights

Glow in the windows only here and there.

(*Canti*, XIII, vv. 1-6).

This mode of expression thus also serves a pictorial function, insofar as it makes a character see objects, and conveys information from one character to another. In realistic narratives, the description chiefly depends on the gaze, but may also depend on words, in the case of an informed character describing something to an uninformed character, or on action, in the case of the enumeration of a character's actions before another character.

The theme of the imagination emerges again in the argument developed by Perelman and Tyteca (1958), who consider *evidentia* the rhetorical device which exemplifies presence, as it makes it possible to bring objects back to life by representing them in an ideal contemporaneity, in such a way that elements which are spatially and temporally distant may seem present. Significantly, hypotyposis is often associated with the use of the historical present.

3. The word as a representation

A variety of techniques for the verbal representation of space can be employed by an author, according to three different modes (Eco 2006). The first and most simple mode of representation is denotation, which simply furnishes an objective representational element – as when it is said that two places are twenty kilometres apart. This is the least interesting form of spatial representation, since the reader, if he or she wishes, can associate the conceptual content with an image possibly drawn from some personal experience, but the text does not contain any expression leading the reader to imagine the space in question (Bertrand 2000).

The second mode of representation is detailed description, whereby the author describes the pertinent features of a space, which is to say those features that characterise it in such a way that the reader can create an image of the space in his or her mind. The details provided help develop the specific space in question in a more or less precise, and more or less nuanced, way. The amount of detail provided can make a difference: if the details are too few, the image elicited will be too vague and hence not compelling enough, whereas too broad a description may prevent the reader from creating an image, as it requires a considerable effort in terms of concentration and memorisation.

In other words, hypotyposis should not so much lead the reader to see something, as make him or her eager to see (Eco 2006: 202). In the famous description from the *Apocalypse*, which has inspired countless attempts at visual translation, the author does not describe everything, but only truly significant elements, leaving many gaps (for example, regarding the shape of the seats, or the hair and faces of the ancients) which it is up to the reader to fill in:

and behold there was a throne set in heaven, and upon the throne one sitting. And he that sat, was to the sight like the jasper and the sardine stone; and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald. And round about the throne were four and

twenty seats; and upon the seats, four and twenty ancients sitting, clothed in white garments, and on their heads were crowns of gold. And from the throne proceeded lightnings, and voices, and thunders; and there were seven lamps burning before the throne, which are the seven spirits of God. And in the sight of the throne was, as it were, a sea of glass like to crystal (*Apocalypse*, 4).

The description, in other words, must not be didactic: it is necessary to craft an image capable of striking the reader's imagination by leaving out the kind of excess detail which does not convey the sudden glimpse by which reality is perceived. The vagueness of the image is an essential element of the description: it is what enables ancient poets – for instance, Homer – to exercise a powerfully evocative effect on readers even today, filling them with wonder. Minute descriptions have different effects on the reader, depending on the perspective adopted by the writer, and which may be either external or internal with respect to the scene described. The former kind of perspective entails a complete description of the scene, of the sort provided by a director who is filming from above and can cover the whole space with his camera, offering an all-round view. This is the case with the famous opening lines of Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, which is still one of the best and most accomplished examples of hypotyposis. The author here proceeds from the top down, providing a geographical overview:

That branch of the Lake of Como, which turns toward the south between two unbroken chains of mountains, presenting to the eye a succession of bays and gulfs, formed by their jutting and retiring ridges, suddenly contracts itself between a headland to the right and an extended sloping bank on the left, and assumes the flow and appearance of a river. The bridge by which the two shores are here united, appears to render the transformation more apparent, and marks the point at which the lake ceases, and the Adda recommences, to resume, however, the name of Lake where the again receding banks allow the water to expand itself anew into bays and gulfs (Manzoni 1842: 1).

In the latter case, instead, the perspective is an internal one, so in the description of the scene the reader follows the protagonist's gaze, which – along with all other elements – is immersed in the scene itself and describes what he or she sees: the gaze is not a total gaze but only a partial one, and the 'filming' is made not from above but from below. The identification game which the text creates with the reader is more direct and, as a consequence, should engender greater emotional impressions. This kind of representation is often used by the great Italian writer Beppe Fenoglio in his notable short story *A Private Affair*, centred on the figure of the partisan Milton: the reader sees the evocative landscape of the Langhe, in Piedmont, through his eyes and sensibility.

The third mode of representation is the list, a technique which always leads to the evoking of spatial images, but – by contrast to what occurs with the minute description – this can take place without the author noting anything of real relevance. One example is the famous description of the items in Leopold Bloom's kitchen in the second-to-last chapter of *Ulysses*: a long sequence of irrelevant objects, none of which acquires any privileged function, and which unfolds before our eyes page after page, putting our attention to the test. In this case the representation requires the reader's collaboration and is functional to the author's aim: to get the reader to grasp the unfathomable nature of the listed items.

The capacity to "make others see" through words is also shared by another expressive technique that is widely employed in rhetoric, namely *ekphrasis*, which comes from *ekphràzo*, meaning "describe, represent". It is especially used with reference to the description of artworks. In Late Antiquity and then in the 16th-17th centuries, ekphrastic literature became a popular genre with specific features and dynamics, which illustrates the relationship between literature and the figurative arts; it may be argued that all art history is a collection of *ekphraseis*. Among the most famous examples, we find Winckelmann's description of the Laocoön statue in *Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and the Art of Sculpture* (1755). The protagonist's mood is masterfully represented by the image of this man who, to resist his own destiny, strives to gather all the strength of his spirit; and as pain swells his muscle and stretches his sinews, he displays his courage on his wrinkled forehead. His breast is puffed out by his stifled breathing and his effort to suppress a scream of pain.

This passage is most interesting because it represents a clear example of cross-semiotic translation, which is the opposite of the kind of translation we usually find (Eco 2004): for instead of translating a novel – into a film or comic, for example – the reverse operation is undertaken, by passing from images to words. *Ekphrasis* is no longer practised as a rhetorical exercise, but is used to direct the reader's attention to the image one is seeking to evoke. An example of this is the famous description of Velázquez's *Meninas* which opens Foucault's *Le mots et les choses*. In other contexts, instead, the study of this rhetorical device occurs as part of a more general reflection on the power of images, their ontological condition, and how they intertwine with writing and society.

It is possible to distinguish between classical (and explicit) *ekphrasis* and concealed *ekphrasis*: the former coincides with the verbal translation of a well-known artwork, as in the examples from Winckelmann and Foucault just mentioned; the latter is instead designed to evoke a vision in the reader's mind by referring to a real work – hence, by providing a visual reference – which however is not made explicit. Eco, for instance, has made use of this kind of rhetorical strategy in *The Name of the Rose* – through the description of some pages of illuminated manuscripts – and in *The Island of the Day Before*. In order to describe a scene featuring a female character, in the latter novel Eco draws upon a famous painting by Vermeer, *The Lacemaker*, while giving the reader the impression that he is describing a real scene. In such cases the author establishes a sort of game or challenge with the reader: if the verbal description is sufficiently effective, the cultured and aware reader who is familiar with the visual work that has inspired the writer can easily recognise it; otherwise, if the reader does not recognise the work, because it is not part of his or her baggage of experiences and knowledge, he or she could in a way discover it through the imagination, as though seeing it for the first time; so in this case *ekphrasis* would still play a useful role.

Sometimes, as with Eco, the writer inserts a particular expression into his verbal description that serves as a 'clue' guiding the reader in the right direction. In describing the scene that points to Vermeer's painting, instead of simply stating that the woman is lit by the lamp, Eco uses the peculiar expression "in the light of an unseen lamp" (Eco 1996: 59), to give the idea that the light is not shining from outside, but directly from the woman's face, which is an active light source, not a passive receptacle. It is well-known that in Vermeer's paintings light seems to come from the elements depicted, such as faces, hands, fingers, and bodies, which in the viewer's eyes appear to shine of a light of their own.

4. Conclusions

Quintilian maintained that in order for a speech to prove reliable, it was not all that important for the arguments "to be presented according to this or that figure" (*Ist. Or*, IX, 1, 10); actually, at least with regard to this point he was wrong. Figures of speech have a significant impact on arguments, as they bestow a degree of argumentative effectiveness that Perelman and Tyreca (1958: 36-39) considered to be equal to that of quasi-logical arguments and of the *entimema*: by representing what is particular, individual, and concrete (as in the case of the presentation of elements useful for one's argument), rhetorical devices make the orator credible and his speech plausible. Locke in his famous *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690) Locke considered this transition from concrete to abstract to be very important for the very learning of the language and for knowledge in general (Prato 2016: 58).

For quite some time, the theory of figures of speech was regarded as a classification of useless expressive techniques that are used for their own sake, whereas – as Barthes (1972: 66) had already emphasised – it teaches us that form is substance and that rhetoric, as a discipline, does not carry the negative meaning which in common parlance is associated with the term 'rhetorical'.

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