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# RECOVERING HYPERBOLE: RE-IMAGINING THE LIMITS OF RHETORIC FOR AN AGE OF EXCESS

by

JOSHUA R. RITTER

Under the Direction of James Darsey

## ABSTRACT

Hyperbole has a varied and contentious history, and its forms and functions are largely ignored and dismissed today. Often misunderstood, hyperbole nevertheless offers critical insights into our understandings of epistemology and ontology that cannot go unexplored. In order to recover and reinvigorate a theory of hyperbole within the field of rhetorical theory and criticism, I explore the history of this critical trope from ancient to modern times. I then offer two functions and one meta-function of hyperbole based on this historical survey: moving through impossibility towards possibility, asserting a lie on the side of truth(s), and re-orienting one's perspective through disorientation. Derived from a historical survey of hyperbole, these two functions and one meta-function are vital for understanding and constructing a theory of hyperbole that is productive and useful for current theoretical discussion. Using these functions, I offer a variety of examples under the purview of the epideictic and grotesque genres and show how hyperbole might be employed within rhetorical theory and criticism. Overall, this project seeks to respond to the gap that exists within current rhetorical theory regarding hyperbole, to explore why hyperbole is often dismissed as a tropological expression of excess and exaggeration, and to revitalize interest in hyperbole for critical use in areas such as rhetoric, theology, and philosophy.

INDEX WORDS: Hyperbole, Epideictic, Grotesque, Quintilian, Exaggeration, Excess

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AN AGE OF EXCESS

by

JOSHUA R. RITTER

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2010

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2010

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

And, now, I will show you a more hyperbolic [υπερβολήν] way.  
1 Corinthians 12:31<sup>1</sup>

In Linnaean terms, *excess* is the order, *bombast* and *hyperbole* the genera, and within the genus *hyperbole*, one finds various species: metaphoric hyperbole, discursive hyperbole, hyperbole ruled by allegory, hyperbole as litote, and hyperbole that verges on irony, catachresis, or paradox.  
Christopher D. Johnson

## INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

### A HYPERBOLIC PROBLEM

Hyperbole (Lat: *superlatio*, Gk: υπερβολή) is an exaggeration, an excess, literally meaning to “throw beyond.”<sup>2</sup> It is a familiar and often used trope, e.g., “America is a giant among nations” or “Capitalism is a colossus,” but its specific functions are largely unexplored or even forgotten by current rhetorical theorists, which is surprising considering the fact that hyperbole has a rich, though contentious, rhetorical history. Moving through impossibility towards possibility and offering a deceit in order to push beyond given interpretations of reality and meaning, the functions of hyperbole are contradictory, complex, and often disorienting, but these functions have particular importance for the current age of excess because of the epistemological and ontological insights they can provide, e.g., disrupting notions of absolute truth in order to radically

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:31, my translation. This passage could also be rendered, “And yet, a way is revealed to you according to hyperbole (or extravagance).”

<sup>2</sup> **Hyperbole** (*noun*): 1) obvious and intentional exaggeration, excess, throwing over or beyond; 2) an extravagant statement or figure of speech not intended to be taken literally; 3) a figure of speech in which exaggeration is used for emphasis or effect

From the Latin: *superlatio*

From the Greek: υπερ-βολή

υπερ – meaning over and above, beyond, more than

βολή – from βαλλω, meaning to throw

alter perspectives about that “truth.” As the most effective trope for expressing the inexpressible and describing what is beyond description, hyperbole risks being misapprehended, and it stretches and strains facts and language so it might transcend the “ordinary” and communicate as yet unimagined possibilities.

Unlike other tropes, hyperbole is exceedingly and intentionally epistemologically and ontologically disruptive. It is paradoxical in the extreme. It repetitively shocks and de-stabilizes with audacious claims that are meant to force one beyond the literal and into the figural realm. It does not insinuate or offer subtle insights, though its path to these insights might be sly and deceitful, and it offers no synthesis of thought. It offers dissonance rather than resonance, and the resonance it does offer might be dissonance itself. It brings blunt force trauma, it is brazenly deceptive, and its intent is brutality.

It is true that all tropes are types of conceits intended to bring one to a new and perhaps surprising insight. The difference of hyperbole from other tropes is that it amplifies this fact so it is more than apparent that what is being said is a falsehood. It heightens the suspicion that more is being communicated than what is stated. Unlike other tropes, hyperbole must be recognized as a hyperbole for it to be effective, and it does not even attempt to go unnoticed. It privileges emotion over reason, and it often verges on the edge of madness. Hyperbole blatantly, disorientingly, and traumatically batters its audience and pushes it towards alternative ways of perceiving meaning and being through extreme contradiction. It undermines at every tropological turn, and it exorbitantly creates intense *pathos* that is often unsettling and disturbing. Confounding in the extreme, hyperbole is used and mis-used, recognized and mis-recognized, and its pervasiveness within discourse can make its importance hidden in plain sight.

Exaggeration and excess are common and familiar enough on the one hand. As Quintilian writes, “[Hyperbole] is in common use, as much among the unlearned as among the learned, because there is in all men a natural propensity to magnify or extenuate what comes before them, and no one is contented with the exact truth.”<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, hyperbole becomes complicated when we are called to explain what the use of exaggeration or excess or the definite forms and functions of hyperbole within language mean or signify. What are the benefits of using an exaggerated or excessive form of communication? Why suggest it is “a million degrees outside” when one could simply note the numerical degree? What else is being indicated by this exaggerated and excessive form of communication? I suggest that the excessiveness of hyperbole elicits a constructive, transformative ambiguity for alternative possibilities of meaning and being. However, as the contentious history of hyperbole indicates, fear and suspicion of excess and exaggeration hinders its exploration leaving a significant gap in current rhetorical theory regarding hyperbole.

As I will show, an unsure relation to excess exists from Plato to Augustine to the current rhetorical context. Both necessary and denigrated, the excess and exaggeration that are represented and displayed by hyperbole are negotiated along the margins of moderation throughout hyperbole’s controversial history. The rhetorical and psychological disruptiveness of hyperbole is indeed a significant concern of rhetorical theorists, and it is paradoxically praised but also resisted. An uncertain understanding of excess and exaggeration is a thread running through hyperbole’s history, but, as discussed below, the epistemological and ontological benefits of hyperbole are considerable.

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<sup>3</sup> Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.75, trans. Lee Honeycutt, <<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~honeyl/quintilian/8/chapter6.html#68>> (8 November 2009)

Familiar genres such as parody, caricature, satire, the burlesque, and the grotesque make use of hyperbole, and the four master tropes – metaphor, metonymy, irony, and synecdoche – seek to extend and expand meaning, which is the main function of hyperbole. Yet, hyperbole’s role is significantly unexplored in these varied genres and tropological expressions, and its forms and functions remain largely obscure in the current theoretical and critical context. Beyond academic theoretical discussions, common parlance further masks the (mis)use of hyperbole. For example, referring to President Obama as Hitler or to his health care plan as including “death panels” are exaggerations.<sup>4</sup> This assertion pushes the boundaries of reason towards impossibility and expresses more than the “truth” warrants in order to constitute and to communicate alternate realities.

One may consider these expressions and comparisons absurd, ridiculous, irrational, or fanatical, but these references are not simple statements of description. They are hyperbolic assertions of impossible possibilities and falsehoods on the side of pushing truth(s) beyond conventional boundaries, i.e., an “elegant surpassing of the truth.”<sup>5</sup> More than descriptors of one’s given reality, these expressions tropologically signify complex worldviews, perspectives, ideologies, and institutional frameworks. Through the force of their exaggeration, these assertions attempt to indicate what is

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<sup>4</sup> For examples, see <<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2009/may/08/chain-email/money-humanitarian-aid-not-immigration-assistance>> and <<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2009/aug/10/sarah-palin/sarah-palin-barack-obama-death-panel>>.

<sup>5</sup> Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.67, trans. Lee Honeycutt, <<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~honeyl/quintilian/8/chapter6.html#68>> (8 November 2009).

beyond reality rather than what is beyond belief.<sup>6</sup> One is indicating more than a literal statement when describing Obama as Hitler.

Suggesting that Obama is Hitler is blatantly false, and this assertion immediately shows the obviousness that Obama is not Hitler. When faced with this radical contradiction that Obama is not literally Hitler while unabashedly referring to him as such, one's attention is arrested, and one is forced to consider alternate ways of interpreting this statement. As the author of *Rhetorica ad Herennium* asserts, emphasis is used to reveal and foster the suspicion that something more is being communicated than what is stated, and the emphasis of hyperbole offers more than the given truth of a situation warrants in order to increase this suspicion.<sup>7</sup> While other tropes attempt to avoid suspicion of being a trope, hyperbole flagrantly displays itself as such to intentionally create suspicion and render itself suspect in order to force one to see beyond a statement of "truth" or fact and discover alternative, re-interpreted truth(s) within the statement itself.

An obvious and deceitful exaggeration, the lie of a statement such as Obama is Hitler is not intended to deceive but to create a momentary suspension of reality and reason, to disrupt typical synthesizing thought processes, in order to force one to (re)consider other truth(s) a hyperbolic statement might indicate. Offering a range of interpretations, the perspectival truth(s) revealed by a hyperbolic lie can vary widely based on the hearer's context because the intent of hyperbole is not to present one with definitive "truth." Through the disrupting, disorienting lie, a re-orientation of one's

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 8.6.73, 8.6.76.

<sup>7</sup> [Cicero], *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan (London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 4.53.67.

views and assumptions can occur. When employed effectively by the hyperbolist, hyperbole as a transitional principle of contradiction imbues a disorienting perspectival ambiguity and a paradoxicality upon its subject(s), but the intent is always transition or re-orientation of one's perspective.

It is the reception of the exaggeration upon which hyperbole succeeds or fails. The positive or negative reception of hyperbole depends upon one's predisposition towards hyperbole. That is, based on how it is implemented, how it is received, and what context it is used within, a failed hyperbole for one may be an effective hyperbole for another. When the figural expression is viewed only as literal or too outrageous, then the hyperbolist and the (re)interpretive work hyperbole can provide fail. Without viewing the assertion as a tropological representation of excess that arrives at possibility through impossibility and other truth(s) through falsehoods, the (il)logic of hyperbole's assertion is overshadowed, and even defeated, by the literal.

The promise of hyperbole is transition from one perspective to another, and its risk is misapprehension as it communicates through contradiction and signifies ambiguous and paradoxical assertions beyond the purview of logical argumentation. In making a hyperbolic assertion, one does not rely on logical argumentation. Depending upon *affectus* more than *ratio* and justified by the magnitude of its exigence, hyperbole pushes the bounds of logic whereby logical thought forms are opened up to radical perspectival expressions that evoke emotions, enthusiasm, and experiences. However, this complexity of meaning and ambiguity is often overlooked, neglected, or misunderstood in current theoretical discourse.

The contentious history of hyperbole, which I will explore in chapter two, is complex and variable because the attitudes about hyperbole and excess differ significantly throughout its history. Sometimes, in Renaissance rhetorical theory, for example, it is celebrated, though often tentatively. At other times, hyperbolic excess is regarded with outright fear, suspicion, e.g., by Plato and Aristotle. Hyperbole is discussed primarily within Romanticism as the vehicle for the “sublime.” Hyperbole is also theoretically silenced and glossed by the privileging of irony in postmodern discourse, often dismissed as a signal of religious fanaticism, and consistently ignored as one of the master tropes.

I offer a history of hyperbole for two reasons. First, current rhetorical theory and criticism is disconnected from hyperbole’s history because hyperbole is largely neglected today. An exploration of how hyperbole is defined and viewed throughout its history will thereby provide a foundation upon which to build a theory of hyperbole for current discussion. Hyperbole does not need rescuing, but it does need to be re-presented and recast for the current context as the forms and functions of hyperbole are all but forgotten. Second, and closely related to the first, a historical survey will provide a basic context from which to view and explicate hyperbole today. Without understanding the ways this trope is historically defined and interpreted would make it difficult to offer a fully developed theory of hyperbole.

What I offer, then, is a history intended to increase an understanding of how hyperbole has been defined and perceived. Re-exploring hyperbole’s rich history reveals the complexities and subtleties about this trope that may have escaped us today. Given significant technical tropological attention at various times in its history, these



discussions offer fertile ground for re-constructing a detailed theory of hyperbole for the current context. Hyperbole's history also clarifies the observation that an uncertain relation to excess and exaggeration does exist and does affect our views regarding hyperbole. Revealing this uncertainty is important because it offers insight not just into the functions of hyperbole and how it operates effectively or ineffectively but also into our indecisive fear and suspicion of excess itself.

Considering hyperbole is often used to describe events, thoughts, perspectives, or experiences, it is striking that there is a significant lack of scholarship regarding hyperbole in contemporary rhetorical theory as well as contemporary theory in general. Indeed, the pithy and dismissive discussion of hyperbole in contemporary rhetorical theory is an interesting occurrence since hyperbolic excess and the perspectival ambiguity and paradoxicality it exerts upon the subject is such a complex and prevalent force within discourse. For example, in contemporary rhetorical theory hyperbole is often subordinated to an extension of metaphor and/or irony.

In the Encyclopedia of Rhetoric, Hienrich F. Plett defines hyperbole: "It is mostly a kind of metaphor or allegory that raises the referential object beyond probability."<sup>8</sup> In Plett's essay, rather than describing the complex tropological relation among hyperbole, metaphor, and allegory, hyperbole does not receive any extended consideration. In like manner, although the authors of The New Rhetoric do not describe hyperbole as subordinate to metaphor, they do not offer an extended reflection on

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<sup>8</sup> Hienrich F. Plett, "Hyperbole," in Encyclopedia of Rhetoric, ed. Thomas O. Sloane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 364.

hyperbole.<sup>9</sup> Their brief explication of hyperbole does link hyperbole to an argument of unlimited development that is always an argument of direction thereby assigning hyperbole an argumentative form rather than simply dismissing it as an irrational assertion. Yet, their analysis of this observation is insufficient for developing a conceptualization of hyperbole that fully elaborates the implications of its role within contemporary discourse. In addition, Katrin Ettenhuber<sup>10</sup> and Goran V. Stanivukovic<sup>11</sup> do offer several keen insights into the nature of hyperbole, but their scope is rather limited since they are studying hyperbole only within the purview of Renaissance rhetorical theory.

Outside of the realm of rhetorical theory, Mikhail Bakhtin notes the positive role of hyperbole within grotesque realism and laughter during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but he never offers any analysis regarding the specific functions of hyperbole.<sup>12</sup> Georges Bataille celebrates excess in his scatological philosophy of heterogeneous expenditure without reserve, but the role of hyperbole is never mentioned.<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche also often emphasizes excess and exaggeration in his

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<sup>9</sup> Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), esp. 287-292.

<sup>10</sup> Katrin Ettenhuber, "Hyperbole: Exceeding Similitude," in Renaissance Figures of Speech, eds. Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander, and Katrin Ettenhuber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Goran V. Stanivukovic, "'Mounting above the Truth': On Hyperbole in English Renaissance Literature," Forum for Modern Language Studies, 43, no. 1 (2007): 9-33.

<sup>12</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> For example, see Georges Bataille, Inner Experience, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988); Georges Bataille, Guilty, trans. Bruce Boone (Venice: Lapis Press, 1988); and Georges Bataille, Theory of Religion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989).

philosophy, though the role of excess in Nietzsche's thought is uncertain since he sometimes praises moderation as well,<sup>14</sup> and Jean-Luc Marion relies heavily on excess for his post-metaphysical phenomenological project.<sup>15</sup> Yet, neither of these thinkers addresses the role of hyperbole within their systems of thought. Jean-Pierre Mileur,<sup>16</sup> Suzanne Guerlac,<sup>17</sup> and Jacques Derrida<sup>18</sup> all address the notion of hyperbole but do not explore the functions historically ascribed to it, which often leads to assertions about hyperbole that are inaccurate. Slavoj Žižek is another contemporary theorist who frequently uses excess and exaggeration, not just in the content of his writing, but as a form or style of thought. That is, his argumentative form regularly operates through hyperbolic assertions rather than logical suppositions, but again, a thoroughgoing discussion or examination of hyperbole is absent from his writing.<sup>19</sup>

The neglect of hyperbole by these theorists notwithstanding, hyperbole offers a particular force of language that is not as obvious within other tropological formations. For example, when Washington Irving describes Ichabod Crane as "tall, but exceedingly

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<sup>14</sup> For example, see Friedrich Nietzsche, Human, All Too Human, trans. Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); Friedrich Nietzsche, Daybreak, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1982); and Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1966).

<sup>15</sup> See Jean-Luc Marion, In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Pierre Mileur, The Critical Romance: The Critic as Reader, Writer, Hero (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Suzanne Guerlac, The Impersonal Sublime: Hugo, Baudelaire, Lautreamont (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>19</sup> For example, see Slavoj Žižek, On Belief (London: Routledge, 2001); Slavoj Žižek, The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For? (London: Verso, 2000); and Slavoj Žižek, The Plague of Fantasies (London: Verso, 1997).

lank, with narrow shoulders, long arms and legs, hands that dangled a mile out of his sleeves,”<sup>20</sup> Irving is describing Crane through the force of hyperbole. In a similar example, when Garrison Keillor says in the voice of Guy Noir, *Private Eye*, “She [Miss Moffett] was rather beautiful, tall, with raven hair and a red wrap dress that hugged her hips so tight I could read the lettering on her underwear,”<sup>21</sup> Keillor is also using hyperbole. It is not that Miss Moffett’s dress was literally that tight, and Crane’s hands did not literally dangle a mile out of his sleeves. These are falsehoods and impossibilities on the side of truth(s) and possibilities. It is the exaggeration and excessiveness, which moves the literal into figural descriptions of Moffett and Crane, that offers one a way of viewing them that would be less forceful or imaginative if hyperbole were not employed.

In addition to these examples of hyperbole, religious rhetoric and theological discourse tend to use hyperbole quite often. Various models of “God,” especially classical Christian theistic models of “God,” are often premised upon Platonic ideals such as the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, which are buttressed by hyperbole in their attempt to express the impossible while still remaining bound to specific contexts of possibilities. Neo-Platonic Christian writers, such as Plotinus, also ground their arguments upon certain ideals assuming that the force of their hyperbolic assertions will carry their argument along a clear and logical line of thinking, but it is the paradox of hyperbole that offers a meandering path towards insight. Contemporary theological scholars like Karl Barth (a neo-orthodox theologian) and Hans Urs von Balthasar (a sacramental, aesthetic theologian) also rely upon these same idealist assertions and use

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<sup>20</sup> Washington Irving, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (Filiquarian Publishing, 2006), 10.

<sup>21</sup> Garrison Keillor, “Guy Noir,” *A Prairie Home Companion*, <<http://prairiehome.publicradio.org/programs/2007/06/23/scripts/noir.shtml>> (10 September 2009).

hyperbole to structure their arguments, and Mark C. Taylor's postmodern a/theology of "nots" is premised entirely upon the forms and functions of hyperbole.

Although hyperbole is a pervasive and significant force within thought and language, the evidence suggests it is often overlooked, distrusted, and neglected, especially in the current context. As one theologian theorizing about hyperbole argues, "At best, when we hear hyperbole at all today it sounds ridiculous, foolish, absurd, even fanatical. We are in danger of losing a dimension to language which stretches the imagination, challenges ready-made assumptions, and forces unusual perspectives,"<sup>22</sup> and he further suggests, "Hyperbole is more than an occasional eruption or a useful tool. It is a basic fact of language and action that commands attention and warrants understanding on its own terms."<sup>23</sup> These statements each support my argument, and what they highlight is twofold.

First, they assert that hyperbole's forms and functions are misunderstood and underappreciated. Second, these comments contend that hyperbole is a significant force within thought and language. Implicitly, Erasmus offers a similar assertion, "By this lie [of hyperbole], as Seneca says, we come to truth; for hyperbole says more than reality warrants, yet what is true is understood from the false,"<sup>24</sup> and Quintilian's Institutes of Oratory extensively, though indecisively, argues for the importance of hyperbole. Examining hyperbole can shed new light on the ways scholars approach the study of discourse in general because hyperbole pushes interpretation and thought beyond its

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen H. Webb, Blessed Excess: Religion and the Hyperbolic Imagination (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), xii.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>24</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, On Copia of Words and Ideas, trans. Donald B. King and H. David Rix (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2007), 35.

normative limits through its uses of exaggeration and excessiveness. Yet, if we do not seek to understand hyperbole, then its insights will go unnoticed.

Because the material of theology takes us beyond pedestrian experience, it should not be surprising that hyperbole, an obvious vehicle for expressing the sacred, has been given its most sustained attention in contemporary time by a theologian, Stephen H. Webb. Thinking about the uses and meaning of hyperbole, Webb defines hyperbole as “a trope that beckons but also warns; it accomplishes an intensification that does not result in a metaphorical synthesis but brazenly both invites and distances the audience from the height of an apparently unreasonable position.”<sup>25</sup> Webb’s definition is certainly ambitious in his positioning of hyperbole into such a vital rhetorical position; yet, he often falls short in connecting his conclusions to the broader rhetorical implications of hyperbole in relation to thought and language, meaning and being.

Webb’s aim is to connect hyperbole to theological discourse, e.g., terms such as “grace” and “love,” but even here, his illuminating insights into hyperbole and theology have broader rhetorical implications than his findings admit.<sup>26</sup> For example, Webb does note the rhetorical aspect of his analysis, but he does not significantly explore current discussions regarding rhetorical theory or criticism. He offers no suggestion as to how a hyperbolic perspective might aid in rhetorical criticism, or, how a hyperbolic style may

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<sup>25</sup> Stephen H. Webb, “The Rhetoric of Ethics as Excess: A Christian Theological Response to Emmanuel Levinas,” *Modern Theology* 15, no. 1 (1999): 3.

<sup>26</sup> See Stephen H. Webb, *Blessed Excess: Religion and the Hyperbolic Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Stephen H. Webb, *Re-Figuring Theology: The Rhetoric of Karl Barth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Stephen H. Webb, *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Stephen H. Webb, “The Rhetoric of Ethics as Excess: A Christian Theological Response to Emmanuel Levinas,” *Modern Theology* 15, no. 1 (1999): 1-16; Stephen H. Webb, “The Rhetoric of and about Excess in William James’ The Variety of Religious Experience,” *Religion and Literature* 27 (1995): 27-45; and Stephen H. Webb, “A Hyperbolic Imagination: Theology and the Rhetoric of Excess,” *Theology Today* 50 (1993): 56-67.

be constructed by rhetorical theorists as a useful theoretical framework. Yet, changing the way rhetorical scholars view hyperbole can alter the way they understand concepts such as style, decorum, discourse, and subjectivity.

Webb also does not delve enough into the specific functions of hyperbole based on an extended historical exploration of the term, and he often assigns functions to hyperbole that are simply not accurate. He gives us a theological perspective about a rhetorical term, but he does not necessarily give us a rhetorical perspective regarding theological/philosophical concepts and ideas. In sum, Webb falls short of his own desire to understand hyperbole completely on its own terms as a significant tropological expression. However, his observations offer many points on which to build, and his work clearly indicates the complexity one finds when exploring the forms and functions of hyperbole. This complexity highlights the fact that the de-stabilizing nature of hyperbole poses a significant problem, even a threat, to the way we relate to thought and language because its force is so disruptive in regard to meaning and being.

Christopher D. Johnson is one scholar of comparative literature who does offer extensive and clear insights into hyperbole's forms and functions, but he limits himself largely to Baroque literature.<sup>27</sup> He also does not offer implications regarding his analysis of the Baroque texts he examines. He simply moves from one author to the next without offering any summary insights. He does present a thoroughgoing analysis of Quintilian's theory of hyperbole, but his significant observations frequently go unused in his actual analyses of the authors he explores. His project reveals contemporary scholars'

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<sup>27</sup> Christopher D. Johnson, Hyperboles: The Rhetoric of Excess in Baroque Literature and Thought (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

ignorance towards hyperbole as well as the importance of hyperbole for critical use, but his conclusions leave much to be desired.

Despite these few authors' attempts at explicating hyperbole and showing the importance of hyperbole's role within thought and language, their analyses are insufficient in parsing out the intricacies of hyperbole. Although "excess" (the core of hyperbole's function) is explored in contemporary philosophical and psychoanalytic discourse, and the "sublime" (closely linked but distinct from hyperbole) is analyzed as an important rhetorical aspect/tactic, hyperbole is absent from these discussions. Thus, its role and function are in need of re-exploration because hyperbole is such a pervasive and uncertain force within thought and language itself, and hyperbole can shed new light on the ways scholars approach texts and discourse.<sup>28</sup> That is, our relation to hyperbole is obscured by its excessively ambiguous role within thought and language because of its ignored functions. Its meaning, its form and content, its role and function, all constitute a vagueness with our relation to hyperbole itself.

## THE SUBJECT OF HYPERBOLE

### EPISTEMOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY

Examination of as significant and overlooked a trope as hyperbole is a complicated endeavor because of the questions it raises as well as the various ways it expresses itself through discourse and subjectivity. Among the important questions that our troubled relationship with the use of hyperbole puts into play are those related to

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<sup>28</sup> For example, Harry Clor argues that moderation is what suffers in today's society because we live in a culture of excess. See Harry Clor, On Moderation: Defending an Ancient Virtue in a Modern World (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008). The pervasiveness of excess is thus acknowledged by many, but the rhetorical function of hyperbole is ignored. Hyperbole is not thoroughly examined in order to determine our relation to it.



epistemology and ontology. Our relation to excess and exaggeration – and to their epistemological and ontological implications – is indefinite and often frightening. Paradoxically, the disorienting heights that distort our relation to this trope is one of its main functions. The confusion that frustrates our relation to hyperbole can also offer one a re-orientation to thought and language, to meaning and being, because ambiguity can open up new ways of seeing and perceiving the world, but misapprehension is a significant risk of this movement through vagary.

The ambiguity of excess is always a threat to the order, decorum, convention, propriety, proportion, and hierarchy of being, which is why the excessiveness and exaggeration of hyperbole is often resisted for its seeming irrationality. One reason for restraining hyperbole in the ancient world (as well as later historical periods) is its ontological disruptiveness. A fear of embodied hyperbole was directly connected to a fear of rhetorical excess, and stylistic vices were synecdochally connected to excessive forms of living. Plato and Aristotle, for example, are particularly harsh in their condemnation of hyperbolic excess.

In Plato's Gorgias, Socrates launches an attack on all that is excessive about rhetoric, i.e., sophistic rhetoric. At a linguistic level, he equates these excesses to flattery and cookery, and he considers these not to be arts but excessive ploys intended to deceive.<sup>29</sup> Cookery only appears to be an art, but it is not. It is a device of appearance

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<sup>29</sup> For example, Socrates says, "It [cookery] seems to be an art, but...is not an art but experience and routine." See Plato, Gorgias, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr., (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 463b. Of flattery he writes, "It [flattery] pretends to be this that it has slipped in under, and gives no heed to the best but hunts after folly with what is ever most pleasant, and deceives, so as to seem to be worth very much" (464c-464d).

However, this does not stop Plato from using rhetorical devices such as hyperbole. Matthew Fox writes of Plato's observation of Daedalus, "Plato credits him with having constructed a mechanical statue of the gods that was so lifelike that the statues perspired under the hot Aegean sun and had to be restrained

that deceives the hearer and lacks substantive knowledge. For Plato, the excesses of cookery, flattery, and folly are “shameful,” and Plato is typically perceived as privileging dialectic over rhetoric.<sup>30</sup> Rhetorical excess only offers one the appearance of truth, but in fact, appearance is not truth but deceit.

At an ethical level, Socrates compares the “intemperate man,” the vice of embodied excess, to a leaky jar, and he argues that the orderly life, the virtue of moderation, is better than the intemperate life.<sup>31</sup> Linguistic and embodied excess are both denigrated, even feared, while the ideal of Greek moderation is lauded. Excess destabilizes the balance of moderation. More than a rhetorical flourish, Plato argues that excessiveness is a vice, an ontological dissonance, to be avoided so that one may live well. Excessiveness and moderation are thus linked to how one might live, how one might “be” in the world, and this ontological duality is clearly established – the moderate, moral life is good while the intemperate, immoral life is bad.

The same duality of moderation/excess can be seen in Plato’s philosophy of rhetoric outlined in Phaedrus. Socrates argues that there are two ruling natures within

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lest they run away.” See Matthew Fox, The Hidden Spirituality of Men: Ten Metaphors to Awaken the Sacred Masculine (Novato: New World Library, 2008), 33.

<sup>30</sup> For example, see G. L. Hendrickson, “The Origin and Meaning of the Ancient Characters of Style,” The American Journal of Philology 26, no. 3 (1905): 249-290; Richard A. Lanham, The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); and Stanley E. Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). For an opposite view of Plato’s dialectic/rhetoric dichotomy, see Richard M. Weaver, Language is Sermonic: Richard M. Weaver on the Nature of Rhetoric, eds. Richard L. Johannesen, Rennard Strickland, and Ralph T. Eubanks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970).

<sup>31</sup> Plato, Gorgias, 493d-494a. He further posits, “The moderate soul is therefore good” (507a). He then suggests, “If the moderate soul is good, the one that suffers the opposite to the moderate is bad; and this would be the foolish and intemperate soul,” and he argues, “He who wishes to be happy must, it would seem, pursue and practice moderation, and each of us must flee intemperance as fast as his feet will carry him” (507a, 507d).

humans: the desire of pleasures and that which aims at the best. He states, “Now then, when opinion leads with reason toward the best and wins mastery, the name of the mastery is *moderation*; but when desire without reason drags us toward pleasures and rules in us, the name *wanton outrage* is applied to the rule.”<sup>32</sup> The moderate, “good” and reasonable soul is privileged over the excessive desirous soul that lacks reason and pursues only pleasure.

Linking excess to wanton outrage also suggests that excess is equated with a lack of emotional control and a disruption of order, which are two things hyperbole is almost always associated with or accused of doing. Hyperbole is also typically described as lacking reason, as irrational, and as excessive desire leading to pleasures. Thus, Plato implicitly argues against hyperbole and its embodiment as irrational desire. He establishes an ontological duality between moderation and excess, and moderation implies a virtuous mastery over one’s life while excess implies a significant ethical lack in one’s life. For Plato, the very nature and being of what it means to be human is at stake in the moderation/excess dualism, and excess, as embodied hyperbole, is rejected as something that must be avoided. This same concern carries over to Plato’s student, Aristotle.

Ancient rhetorical theorists were not simply concerned with hyperbole’s ontological disruptiveness, however. For example, there is an interesting epistemological connection to hyperbole in *Rhetorica ad Herennium*: “Emphasis [*significatio*] is the figure which leaves more to be suspected than has been actually asserted...The emphasis is produced through Hyperbole [*per exsuperationem*] when more is said than the truth

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<sup>32</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 237d-238a.

warrants [*patitur veritas*], so as to give greater force to the suspicion.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the author of *On the Sublime* states, “Hyperbole may tend to belittle as well as to magnify; the common element in both is a strain on the facts.”<sup>34</sup> Or, Quintilian says, “[Hyperbole] is an elegant surpassing of the truth.”<sup>35</sup> These are stimulating and complex passages not simply because of the re-iteration of hyperbole’s link to a “surpassing of the truth” or “a strain on the facts,” but because these passages suggest an interesting epistemological relationship between hyperbole and “truth.”

Hyperbole is not a simple form of distortion because hyperbole works by being recognized as a figural exaggeration. Hyperbole pushes one to think beyond given “truths” and assumed versions of reality. The hyperbolist offers hyperbole to be recognized as an exaggeration (either immediately or eventually), and this can become a constructive, transformative ambiguity for alternative possibilities of meaning and being. Or, it can fail in/as literality when it is mis-apprehended. Hyperbole can serve to heighten a suspicion of “truth” in order to reveal a concealment and point to something more, more than the truth warrants, and constitute alternative ways of perceiving a given “reality.” In short, hyperbole is an important trope not simply for its exaggeration but for its epistemological participation in the (re)constitution of meaning and its questioning of given “truths” or “realities.”

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<sup>33</sup> [Cicero], *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan (London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 4.53.67.

<sup>34</sup> [Longinus], *On the Sublime*, Loeb Classical Library, trans. W. H. Fyfe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 285.

<sup>35</sup> Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.67, trans. Lee Honeycutt, <<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~honeyl/quintilian/8/chapter6.html#68>> (8 November 2009).

A more contemporary perspective of hyperbole's epistemological contingency reveals that the realm of postmodern and poststructuralist discourse, where moderation itself is condemned and excessive transgression and disruption of epistemological and ontological limits is celebrated,<sup>36</sup> may have prepared the way for a shift to a more positive conception of hyperbole. Hyperbole is seemingly the trope *par excellence* for current discussion since hyperbole is such a de-stabilizing epistemological and ontological force. For example, in his Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida,<sup>37</sup> Allan Megill unintentionally argues that each of these figures is engaged in the (epideictic) rhetorical strategy of hyperbole to "fiction" (*pseudologia*) the past in order to "throw beyond" the present and the future (*logos politikos*).

Although Megill offers no discussion of hyperbole, his argument leads one to conclude that attempting to say too much in order to say what can never be fully articulated, which is one function of hyperbole, is precisely what Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida were pushing the exploration of "truth" towards. Each figure

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<sup>36</sup> For example, Derrida writes, "That which gives us to think beyond the closure cannot be simply absent. Absent, either it would give us nothing to think or it still would be a negative mode of presence. Therefore the sign of this excess must be absolutely excessive as concerns all possible presence – absence, all possible production or disappearance of beings in general, and yet, *in some manner*, it must still signify, in a way unthinkable by metaphysics as such. In order to exceed metaphysics it is necessary that a trace be inscribed within the text of metaphysics, a trace that continues to signal not in the direction of another presence, or another form of presence, but in the direction of an entirely other text....The mode of inscription of such a trace in the text of metaphysics is so unthinkable that it must be described as an erasure of the trace itself. The trace is produced as its own erasure." See Jacques Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, trans. Allan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 75-76; quoted in Mark C. Taylor, Altarity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 268. This trace that is its own erasure within the text of metaphysics itself that signals, or transgresses, in the direction of an entirely other text might thus be thought of as hyperbole or a hyperbolic style. See also Derrida's discussion of the "prodigious" in Jacques Derrida, The Truth in Painting, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) and his discussion of "chora" in Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: *The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone*," in Acts of Religion, trans. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002) and Jacques Derrida, "Khora," in On the Name, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>37</sup> Allan Megill, Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

employs the strategy of extremity in order to portray a certain position, and the excessiveness of their claims is necessary to exert the full force of their argument that is epistemologically and ontologically disruptive and de-stabilizing.

Hyperbole is ostensibly infinite in its intensification, and it is dangerously without limit. As Derrida notes, hyperbole “cannot be enclosed in a factual and determined historical structure, for it is the project of exceeding every finite and determined totality.”<sup>38</sup> Hyperbole’s excessive disruptiveness de-stabilizes epistemological and ontological presuppositions. By throwing beyond every finite and determined totality, hyperbole offers one a perspectival shift/mobility, which heightens one’s awareness of how limits, norms, decorum, order, hierarchies, and conventions are constituted through thought and language. Yet, as I will show, hyperbole is not without limit. It does throw beyond given perceptions of reality, but it is not excess beyond all measure. Rather, it is a purposeful measure of excess used for transition through contradiction.

Through ambiguity, hyperbole allows for a perspectival shift/mobility, and it positions one’s interpretive lens in such a way, almost as looking awry, as to reveal what one might miss without the perspective of hyperbole. As Katrin Ettenhuber, drawing from her work on Renaissance writers, suggests, “By highlighting the limits of figuration and productively destabilising the reader’s views of linguistic norms and conventions, it [hyperbole] encourages active reflection on the different ways in which meaning is constructed and communicated.”<sup>39</sup> The problematic role of hyperbole, then, is also one of its most important aspects for determining our relation to hyperbole. The nebulous

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<sup>38</sup> Derrida, Writing and Difference, 60.

<sup>39</sup> Ettenhuber, “Hyperbole,” 210.

role of hyperbole lends itself to constituting an excessive ambiguity, and it is this ambiguity that allows hyperbole to work in relation to meaning, i.e., the disruption of meaning as “givenness.”

One’s relation to that excessive ambiguity is problematic because ambiguity is mysterious, uncertain, seemingly irrational, and frightening through its de-stabilizing effects on our modes of existence and our systems of thought. A hyperbolic perspective pushes the boundaries of decorum towards a style that is disruptive and often grotesque, which is precisely the reason hyperbole is frequently mistrusted. Yet, it is this de-stabilizing and contradictory nature of hyperbole that makes it such an intriguing tropological expression in need of re-exploration and re-consideration.

### THREE FUNCTIONS OF HYPERBOLE

In order to make my argument that hyperbole is a contentious trope in need of re-exploration because of the gap within current tropological theory and that hyperbole can offer critical contributions to contemporary rhetorical theory and criticism, I offer two consistent historical functions of hyperbole and one meta-function. After offering a history of hyperbole, these functions will guide and structure my argument: impossibility leading towards possibility, a lie on the side of truth(s), and a re-orientation out of disorientation. The two functions and one meta-function also highlight the movement of hyperbole to transition out of contradiction, to shift perspectives through the contrariety of hyperbole’s paradoxical transformation(s).

The first two functions are historically ascribed to hyperbole, and the last one is a meta-function of hyperbole that I derive from two one-sentence glosses made by Paul Ricoeur upon which I will significantly expand. I discuss the meta-function last because

explicating the first two functions will make it more apparent that re-orienting through disorientation is hyperbole's comprehensive, global purpose. That is, after exploring the first two functions of hyperbole, I will then offer the final meta-function of disorientation/re-orientation as an overall culminating function because the purpose of each function of hyperbole is to disorient and disrupt in order to re-orient one towards another perspective. Thus, after a discussion of hyperbole's controversial history in chapter two, I will offer an explication of these functions in chapters three and four.

### IMPOSSIBILITY/POSSIBILITY AND TRUTH/LIE

In chapter three, I will explore the impossibility/possibility and truth/lie functions of hyperbole, which also lead to questions of hyperbole's justification, use of decorum, and reliance upon *kairos*. It is Quintilian who offers a thoroughgoing examination of these two functions of hyperbole, though Longinus, Demetrius, and the author of *Ad Herennium* address these functions to a lesser degree. Seneca's insights do highlight well the impossibility/possibility function, but Quintilian's theory of hyperbole is so profound that it will influence the attitudes and uses of hyperbole throughout the history of rhetorical theory. In the Renaissance, for example, when those like Erasmus view hyperbole particularly positively, it is Quintilian's theory of hyperbole they rely upon. Even in current theorists' hesitant and pithy statements about hyperbole, e.g., Derrida, I will show that Quintilian's theory of hyperbole continues to be operative.

As noted above, Quintilian writes, for example, that hyperbole is an "elegant [i.e., decorous] surpassing of the truth,"<sup>40</sup> and he suggests, "It is sufficient to remark that the

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<sup>40</sup> Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.67, trans. Lee Honeycutt, <<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~honeyl/quintilian/8/chapter6.html#68>> (2 November 2009).



hyperbole lies, but not so as to intend to deceive by lying.”<sup>41</sup> In complete contradiction to normative ways of defining a lie, Quintilian’s epistemological assertion about hyperbole is a confounding one. Ascribing this function to hyperbole, Quintilian alters typical perceptions of epistemological inquiry and suggests that hyperbole operates within its own type of (il)logic where given notions of truth can be expanded or exploded. He also posits that lying hyperbolically on the side of truth(s) can be an “elegant,” even decorous, tropological expression.

Regarding the impossibility/possibility function while also implying the truth/lie function, Seneca writes, “Exaggeration never hopes all its daring flights to be believed, but affirms what is incredible, that thereby it may convey what is credible.”<sup>42</sup> Through exaggeration one asserts “what could not possibly be in order that they might be thought to be as much so as possible.”<sup>43</sup> Expressing the possible through the impossible is hyperbole’s forte in Seneca’s mind and is an important insight into hyperbole. Pushing the bounds of belief and straining epistemological and ontological boundaries to a breaking point for the purpose of transition holds a vast array of implications and uses for hyperbole. Indeed, at a time when the impossibility of possibility and the possibility of impossibility are common phrases within poststructuralist discourse, it seems that this function of hyperbole is particularly hospitable to the current theoretical context.

Noted above, hyperbole is purposefully epistemologically and ontologically disruptive and transformative, and these two functions particularly highlight this

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 8.6.74.

<sup>42</sup> Seneca, *On Benefits*, trans. Aubrey Stewart (London: George Bell and Sons, 1905), 7.23.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

characteristic of hyperbole. Out of the contradiction of moving through impossibility towards possibility and offering a linguistic lie on the side of hermeneutical truth(s), a transition occurs from one perspective to others. This transition, and whether one participates in it or not, is the crux upon which hyperbole will succeed or fail. If hyperbole is not received well and a transition does not occur through hyperbole's figural force, then it is because hyperbole has become impaled upon the spear of the literal. Despite hyperbole's forceful push into the figural, it may still be accused of absurdity and dismissed as a violator of decorum, insincerity, pretense, and faulty judgment, i.e., *kakozelia*.<sup>44</sup>

In order to parse out these two functions, I will examine the epideictic and grotesque genres. Though completely absent from current rhetorical theory,<sup>45</sup> epideictic is historically connected to hyperbole, and grotesque theorists connect hyperbole to their discussions but often unwittingly. These two genres exemplify the uses of hyperbole, and I will use them to explore these two functions of hyperbole. I will also use these genres to explicate the disorientation/re-orientation meta-function of hyperbole in chapter four. I will mainly use epideictic in chapter three, and I will mainly use the grotesque in chapter four, though there is definite overlap between the two in each chapter.

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<sup>44</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 34.

<sup>45</sup> For example, see Richard Chase, "The Classical Conception of Epideictic," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 47 (1961) : 293-300; Perelman, *The New Rhetoric*; Walter H. Beale, "Rhetorical Performative Discourse: A New Theory of Epideictic," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 11 (1978) : 221-246; Bernard K. Duffy, "The Platonic Functions of Epideictic Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 16 (1983) : 70-93; Celeste Michelle Condit, "The Functions of Epideictic: The Boston Massacre Orations as Exemplar," *Communication Quarterly* 33 (1985) : 284-299; Michael K. Carter, "The Ritual Functions of Epideictic Rhetoric: The Case of Socrates' Funeral Oration," *Rhetorica* 9 (1991) : 209-232; Dale L. Sullivan, "The Ethos of Epideictic Encounter," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 26 (1993) : 113-133; Bradford Vivian, "Neoliberal Epideictic: Rhetorical Form and Commemorative Politics on September 11, 2002," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92 (2006) : 1-26; and Theodore C. Burgess, *Epideictic Literature* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2007).

In epideictic, where exaggeration and amplification (υπερβολή and αυχέσις)<sup>46</sup> are used either to praise excessively or to blame excessively, hyperbole is a formative and crucial tool. *Auxesis* (αυχέ-σις: the process, state, or condition of increasing; amplification), for example, is “magnifying the importance or gravity of something by referring to it with a disproportionate name.” As we will see from Quintilian’s view, all the types of amplification are species of hyperbole: *incrementum*, *comparatio*, *rationcinatio*, and *congeries*. Viewed from a hyperbolic perspective, the epideictic genre engages hyperbole, especially through *incrementum*, to render an evaluation from one perspective (*pistis*), or “given,” towards another perspective or thought, a transformation of perspective.<sup>47</sup>

Affirming and critiquing a “given” perspective in order to transform thought occurs through the use of hyperbole as it points towards an “invented great.” “[Epideictic promotes] identification with a new or different vision of community through the veneration of an ‘invented great.’”<sup>48</sup> This invented great aids in emphasizing a critique of a current context and points the audience towards an alternate view of the present and future. It is an impossibility that points towards other possibilities of meaning and being; a deceit on the side of truth(s). That is, hyperbole is used in order to alter one’s “given” perception of reality and point towards another (contingent) ideal that is ambiguous

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<sup>46</sup> Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 403. Or, as Erasmus states, “Speech is varied by *auxesis*, i.e., by amplification, when in order to render something more effectively we put in place of an appropriate word a stronger one.” See Desiderius Erasmus, *On Copia of Words and Ideas*, trans. Donald B. King and H. David Rix (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2005), 35.

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of epideictic discourse in a more aesthetic view based on a constellation of purposes see Dale L. Sullivan, “The Ethos of Epideictic Encounter,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 26, no. 2 (1993): 113-133.

<sup>48</sup> Richards, “Inventing Sacagawea,” 3.

“truth” as the free play of interpretation and signification, which may be deceptive in its ateleology and transformative vision of what might yet come to pass. Thus, a rhetor’s use of hyperbole allows for a celebration as well as a disruption of “givenness,” a moving from one thing to something else through excessive contradiction. By exploring aspects of the epideictic genre in this manner, the forms and functions of hyperbole will be illuminated.

Out of this brief discussion of the epideictic genre an interesting relationship among hyperbole, decorum,<sup>49</sup> and *kairos*<sup>50</sup> is discovered. I will discuss the issue of a decorum of excess in chapter three, but I will significantly expand upon it in chapter four. For example, I suggest that decorum and *kairos* together constitute a more fluid decorum of excess where hyperbole functions both forcefully and appropriately. The contextual aspect of hyperbole is governed by *kairos*,<sup>51</sup> and the *kairotic* moment marks the excessive

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<sup>49</sup> For example, see Michael Leff, “The Habitation of Rhetoric,” in Argument & Critical Practices Proceeding from the Fifth SCA/AFA Conference on Argumentation, ed. Joseph Wenzel (Annandale: SCA, 1987); Robert Hariman, “Decorum, Power, and the Courtly Style,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 78, no. 2 (1992) : 149-172; Joy Connolly, The State of Speech: Rhetoric and Political Thought in Ancient Rome (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Stephen J. McKenna, Adam Smith: The Rhetoric of Propriety (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005); Craig R. Smith, “Roman Decorum as a New Praxis for Existential Communication,” Western Journal of Communication 56, no. 1 (1992) : 68-89; and Robert Hariman, “Decorum,” in Encyclopedia of Rhetoric, ed. Thomas O. Sloane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>50</sup> For example, see Dale L. Sullivan, “*Kairos* and the Rhetoric of Belief,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 78 (1992) : 317-332. For an interesting argument that is often contradictory to Sullivan’s presentation of *kairos* regarding Plato and Aristotle see James L. Kinneavy, “*Kairos* in Classical and Modern Rhetorical Theory,” in Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis, eds. Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002) and James L. Kinneavy and Catherine R. Eskin, “*Kairos* in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*,” Written Communication 2 (1994) : 131-142. Isocrates also emphasized *kairic* thought and action within his system of rhetorical *paideia*. See Phillip Sipiora, “Introduction: The Ancient Concept of *Kairos*,” in Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis, eds. Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); John Poulakos, “*Kairos* in Gorgias’ Rhetorical Compositions,” in Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis, eds. Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); and Scott Consigny, “Gorgias’s Use of the Epideictic,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 25, no. 3 (1992) : 281-297.

<sup>51</sup> See James L. Kinneavy, “*Kairos*: A Neglected Concept in Classical Rhetoric,” in

and disorienting path of hyperbole. Within these situations (*kairos*), the excessive response of hyperbole can be perceived as the right measure or appropriate proportionality (*to prepon*) – an adherence to decorum, i.e., a decorum of excess where all is exaggerated and disproportionality is the proportionate and appropriate response. The magnitude of a particular exigence or subject matter demands a timely response equal to the task. The trajectory of hyperbole both exceeds and is dependent upon *kairos* and decorum within a decorum of excess.

The epistemological and ontological disruptiveness of hyperbole functions as a response to an exigence at a *kairotic* moment by throwing beyond a “given” rational economy and highlighting the force of circumstantial contingency. For example, a statement by William Falk highlights hyperbole’s relation to *kairos* and contingency:

Perhaps Abraham Lincoln made a mistake. When some Americans believe the current president is a communist cult leader trying to brainwash the nation’s schoolchildren, and other Americans want the last president to be dragged off his ranch in handcuffs, it is time to reassess the state of our union. So may I make a modest proposal. There *is* a way to end the bitter bickering over health care, abortion, affirmative action, religion in the public square, taxation, torture, and the proper role of government. It is called secession. Yes, I know: Splitting the United States into two nations is a bit extreme. But extremism in the defense of America’s sanity is no vice. And since we’re already segregating ourselves by what we watch, listen to, and read, why not go all the way?<sup>52</sup>

As Falk’s statements and his reference to Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” suggest, he is being obviously hyperbolic, e.g., as hyperbolic satire, even going as far as actually identifying his ideas with extremity. He offers a lie on the side of truth(s). His response is both governed by the exigence of political and social unrest and exceeds the

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*Rhetoric and Praxis: The Contributions of Classical Rhetoric to Practical Reasoning*, ed. Jean Dietz Moss (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986).

<sup>52</sup> William Falk, “Untitled,” *The Week*, 18 September 2009, 7.

decorousness of logical argumentation. At the “right moment,” he goes beyond the accepted rationality of political rhetoric, highlights the contingency of the situation, pushes the boundaries of decorum, and makes a hyperbolic assertion of secession that is forceful and disruptive to one’s national identity. The political exigence is his justification for the use of hyperbole and guards against accusations of misuse and absurdity. In sum, the hyperbolic rhetoric Falk employs is ontologically disruptive, excessive, and still bound to its contextual exigence within a decorum of excess.

The contextual aspect of hyperbole is indeed an important one: “Hyperbole is always located in a situation, a context, an economy [in order to disrupt that situation or economy]. It is always of something and toward something else.”<sup>53</sup> The excessive trajectory of hyperbole operates within a decorum of excess, which includes *kairos* as a guide because outside of the “opportune moment,” hyperbole is ridiculous. Hyperbole’s excess loses its power and meaning when it is disconnected from its context. It is unwarranted and unjustified. Not only does a weak connection to context hinder the hyperbolist’s justification of hyperbole’s use, but it renders hyperbole almost meaningless.

Relying on a decorum of excess in a particular context, hyperbole functions effectively in all of its excessive ambiguity and irrationality. The pre-Socratic ethic, especially in the Pythagorean school and Gorgias’s thought, of “Know the opportunity” (*kairon gnothi*) is vital for the functioning of hyperbole.<sup>54</sup> In response to a particular exigence, “Extraordinary circumstances and unprecedented conditions compel one to

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<sup>53</sup> Webb, *Blessed Excess*, 147.

<sup>54</sup> Kinneavy, “*Kairos* in Classical and Modern Rhetorical Theory,” 59.

resort to kairotic speech, that is, speech that risks violating established norms of propriety and decorum.”<sup>55</sup> Hyperbolic speech is a certain *kairotic* speech that seemingly violates norms and decorum in order to respond appropriately to a particular exigence, and its justification is the extraordinary, which is particularly evident in hyperbole’s disorientation/re-orientation function.

### DISORIENTATION/RE-ORIENTATION

The disorientation/re-orientation meta-function I will explore in chapter four is not one that is historically associated with hyperbole, and it is a new contribution to the theory of hyperbole. As I said above, the inspiration for this function comes from two one-sentence glosses made by Ricoeur, and I will significantly expand upon his assertions. The main statement from Ricoeur I will explicate is the assertion, “[Hyperbole] reorients by first disorienting [the law of paradox and hyperbole]...[and] makes the extraordinary break forth in the ordinary [the law of extravagance].”<sup>56</sup> Ascribing both paradox and the extraordinary to hyperbole, Ricoeur states what I suspected all along about hyperbole. Namely, that hyperbole is a trope specifically designed to disorient the audience long enough in order to produce a re-orienting shift to other as yet unrealized perspectives and realities. This is the meta-function, or “law,” of hyperbole because each function of hyperbole is subsumed under this impetus to re-orient through disorientation, and this is particularly evident in the grotesque genre.

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<sup>55</sup> John Poulakos, “*Kairos* in Gorgias’ Rhetorical Compositions,” in *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis*, eds. Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 92.

<sup>56</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 229.

Typified in both the epideictic and grotesque genres, I will mainly use the grotesque because it specifically highlights the disorientation/re-orientation of hyperbole. Also, some theorists of the grotesque already tangentially associate the grotesque with hyperbole. Suzanne Guerlac's notion of the "impersonal sublime," for example, relies on both hyperbole and the grotesque. She suggests that the logic of excess, a "hyperbologic,"<sup>57</sup> is what guides the grotesque and that the grotesque's rhetorical figure is "accumulation, exaggeration, or hyperbole."<sup>58</sup> Within the grotesque, "The same and the other are held together, 'complicated,' by hyperbole."<sup>59</sup> It is this complication that is the uneasy *pathos* created through hyperbole within the grotesque, and it is what must be traversed in order to arrive at new resonant, re-oriented possibilities.

In his illuminating work on the grotesque, Geoffrey Galt Harpham describes grotesqueries as standing "at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles."<sup>60</sup> Although Harpham does not explicitly discuss hyperbole in his work, the language here is similar to what I have identified as hyperbole's role in thought and language, i.e., standing disorientingly at the margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown and calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the

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<sup>57</sup> Guerlac, The Impersonal Sublime, 111.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>60</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature (Aurora: The Davies Group, Publishers, 2006), 3.



world. In Harpham's understanding, the grotesque serves a positive function that expands and re-orient's our imagination rather than hindering imagination.

Bakhtin explicitly notes the positive role of hyperbole regarding the grotesque image of the body in Rabelais's writing. He writes, "The grotesque body...is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body."<sup>61</sup> He then argues that the outgrowing of the self and the transgressing of one's own body each play a leading role in the grotesque image, which are both subject to "positive exaggeration, to hyperbolization."<sup>62</sup> In Harpham's and Bakhtin's depictions, the grotesque serves a positive function of transformation, which errantly transitions from one understanding of reality to another.

The grotesque offers fertile ground for explicating this meta-function of hyperbole despite the varying interpretations of the grotesque by numerous theorists. No matter the differing characteristics enumerated across the literature of the grotesque, the one unifying concept is that of disorienting contradiction, paradox, or incongruity,<sup>63</sup> e.g.,

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<sup>61</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 317.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> For example, see James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates, eds., The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997); Frances K. Barasch, "Definitions: Renaissance and Baroque, Grotesque Construction and Deconstruction," Modern Language Studies 13, no. 2 (1983) : 60-67; Frances K. Barasch, "The Grotesque as a Comic Genre," Modern Language Studies 15, no. 1 (1985) : 3-11; Frances K. Barasch, The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings (The Hague: Mouton, 1971); Kenneth Burke, Attitudes Toward History, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); David Christenson, "Grotesque Realism in Plautus' 'Amphitruo,'" The Classical Journal 96, no. 3 (2001) : 243-260; Frances S. Connelly, ed., Modern Art and the Grotesque (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); David K. Danow, The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995); Edward Diller, "Aesthetics and the Grotesque: Friedrich Durrenmatt," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature 7, no. 3 (1966) : 328-335; Brad Epps, "Grotesque Identities: Writing, Death, and the Space of the Subject (Between Michel de Montaigne and Reinaldo Arenas)," The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association 28, no. 1 (1995) : 38-55; Peter Fingesten, "Delimiting the Concept of the Grotesque," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 42, no. 4 (1984) : 419-426; James Goodwin, Modern American Grotesque: Literature and Photography (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2009); Joan Gordon,

Kenneth Burke offers the grotesque as a perspective by incongruity.<sup>64</sup> The main hyperbolic function represented by the grotesque, then, is its disorienting contradictory nature, which always (mis)leads towards some transition of thought, emotion, experience, insight, or psychological state.

Viewing hyperbole through the lens of the grotesque also reveals its paradoxical and transgressive characteristics that move one from dissonance to a newly created sense of resonance in the audience. It is this resonance, this re-orientation, which carries the audience through contradictions towards a transition. The dissonant force of hyperbole's aggressiveness is justified by its figural resonance. The attitudes about hyperbole and our difficult relation with excess and exaggeration often stifle this transformative movement, but hyperbole repeatedly offers a way to batter the literal into the figural and moves one through paradox into partial apprehension.

Examining the contentious history of hyperbole as well as its three functions that move within a decorum of excess, which are exemplified in the epideictic and grotesque genres, leads to the conclusion that hyperbole is an important, though often misunderstood, trope deserving of further attention and exploration. A gaping hole within current rhetorical theory, this tropological representation of excess is in need of critical re-exploration.

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"Hybridity, Heterotopia, and Mateship in China Mieville's 'Perdido Street Station,'" Science Fiction Studies 30, no. 3 (2003) : 456-476; Geoffrey Harpham, "The Grotesque: First Principles," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 34, no. 4 (1976) : 461-468; Lee Byron Jennings, The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963); Farrell Lee, "Grotesque and the Demonism of Silence: Beckett's 'Endgame,'" Notre Dame English Journal 14, no. 1 (1981) : 59-70; Michael Steig, "Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 29, no. 2 (1970) : 253-260.

<sup>64</sup> Kenneth Burke, Attitudes Toward History, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

## CHAPTER 2: THE CONTENTIOUS HISTORY OF HYPERBOLE

There are two things upon which every treatment of the Scriptures depends: the means of discovering what the thought may be, and the means of expressing what the thought is.  
St. Augustine

God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived.  
Anselm

The special goal of theologians is to expound Scripture wisely; to render its doctrine according to faith, not frivolous questions; to discourse about piety gravely and efficaciously; to wring out tears, to inflame spirits to heavenly things.  
Erasmus

## INTRODUCTION

Hyperbole has a rich and contentious rhetorical history. It is misunderstood, celebrated, denigrated, treated with suspicion, extolled, disparaged as a “*lowd lyer*,” an “overreacher,” and described as a vice that leads one away from the virtue of moderation. “Some writers...argue that hyperbole can become a stylistic vice, and advise the orator to dispense with its services altogether.”<sup>1</sup> The main reason for this contentiousness is because of the fear of rhetorical theorists, philosophers, and rhetorical theologians that hyperbole will go too far – disrupting decorum and/or leading one to a life of vice, e.g., “sin,” vehemence, intemperance, or licentiousness.

The central assumption buttressing this fear is that the excessive ornamentation of language, the overuse of rhetorical tropes and figures as a violation of decorum, will enliven passions and desires and lead one to excessive forms of living, mistakes, and error. Tropes are all forms of lies that attempt to magnify or expand meaning, but

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<sup>1</sup> Katrin Ettenhuber, “Hyperbole: Exceeding Similitude,” in *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, eds. Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander, and Katrin Ettenhuber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 198.

hyperbole is more blatant in this function. This is why some call hyperbole the “trope-producing trope,”<sup>2</sup> and it is why theorists link it to decorum. In fact, one’s view of hyperbole is often contingent upon one’s understanding of decorum. In addition, for most rhetoricians throughout history, stylistic and moral excess is considered to be a transgression of virtue, decorum, and moderation, but for those like the sophists or the Romantics, excess is preferred and celebrated within a certain decorum of excess. As the tropological representation of excess, the explicit or implicit discussion of hyperbolic excess and its protean forms is at the center of this controversy.

It is not that the excessive function of hyperbole changes throughout history, though how it is (re)interpreted for epistemological purposes may change. Rather, it is the form and attitudes about hyperbole that change at various times in history as well as how excess can effect ontological conceptions. As the tropological representation of excess, hyperbole’s epistemological implications and its relation to ontology within this historical framework are explored but only insofar as they prove my thesis for this chapter, which is the contentious history of hyperbole. Hyperbole’s definition, form, and functions are all ambiguous and protean in divergent, conflicting ways, e.g., its paradoxical nature, its violation/adherence to decorum, its stylistic vices/virtues, and its contextual contingency. As such, hyperbole’s de-stabilizing rhetorical function as it is related to stylistic and moral decorum is significantly interrelated with epistemological and ontological concerns about excess.<sup>3</sup> The epistemological function of hyperbole is

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Pierre Mileur, The Critical Romance: The Critic as Reader, Writer, Hero (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Goran V. Stanivukovic, “‘Mounting Above the Truth’: On Hyperbole in English Renaissance Literature,” Forum for Modern Language Studies 43, no. 1 (2007) : 9-33.

related to its embodied ontological (ethical) form as a way living, and the characterization of hyperbole reveals important aspects of the ways one's relationship to hyperbole interacts with meaning and being; thereby, revealing its debated place in thought and language.

Many philosophers, rhetoricians, and theologians refer to the dangers and vices of excessive living as well as stylistic vices and superfluous eloquence without mentioning hyperbole. Although hyperbole is not always specifically referenced, the attitudes and expressions about excess, ornament, appearance, desire, and superfluity can be linked to "embodied hyperboles." That is, hyperbole is a trope as well as a figure of thought.<sup>4</sup> As the tropological representation of excess expressed as a figure of thought, hyperbole can be interpreted and portrayed in an embodied form as a type of hyperbolic praxis.<sup>5</sup> Quite simply, embodied hyperboles are those ways of living that re-present excessive behavior or transgress conventional limits, either in abundance or in paucity. Throughout history, embodied hyperboles are referred to in various ways, e.g., sin, intemperance, impiety, vice, adolescence.

It is true that hyperbole is technically a trope, but today, rhetorical theorists recognize tropes as being generators of meaning and being. In this sense, hyperbole represents: 1) the tendency of all tropes towards excess, i.e., "the trope-producing

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher D. Johnson, Hyperboles: The Rhetoric of Excess in Baroque Literature and Thought (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 44.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen H. Webb describes this as a distinction between hyperbole the trope and hyperbolic praxis. He writes, "Hyperbole the trope is a strange feat of language, residing uneasily on the border of the sublime and the ridiculous; by going too far it can lose all sense of seriousness and purpose. Hyperbolic praxis can be located at the edge of an enthusiasm undefended against the temptation of fanaticism. In either case, as trope or praxis, hyperbole is usually suspect because, by definition, not only does it go too far but it is difficult, in the midst of good hyperboles, to say when the 'too far' is 'too much.'" See Stephen H. Webb, Blessed Excess: Religion and the Hyperbolic Imagination (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 17.

trope,”<sup>6</sup> 2) the tropological and figural representation of rhetorical excess, and 3) the bodily expression of excess, i.e., embodied hyperbole. As generators of meaning and being, tropological language and being are intimately tied together. As such, hyperbolic excess is either denounced as a stylistic vice that always violates decorum and results in “sin” or a derivative thereof; or, hyperbolic excess is viewed as an epistemological virtue, a “beauty,” and “elegant” when it adheres to a decorum of excess. Excess is often viewed in terms of a moralistic good/bad (and even evil) binary, and this binary tension is continually (re)negotiated. These views of hyperbole lead to the conclusion that hyperbole has a controversial history, both in rhetorical theory as well as rhetorical theology and philosophy.

A history of rhetoric often overlaps with a history of theology since many theologians are also rhetoricians and vice versa, and I will make theological observations about hyperbolic excess along the way, though the main focus will remain on hyperbole and its history. Furthermore, theological discourse fairly consistently privileges metaphor and analogy explicitly, but implicitly, theology relies heavily upon hyperbole for its assertions about theological terms and doctrines, e.g., grace, love, Christology, eschatology, theories of atonement, and the incarnation, as well as within many of its argumentation strategies.

In the present project, I offer a survey of hyperbole’s significant and controversial history to provide a more thorough understanding of hyperbole for current discussion. Except for the four master tropes, particularly metaphor, current rhetorical theorists are not as inclined to think in serious theoretical terms about figures and tropes, as rhetorical

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-Pierre Mileur, *The Critical Romance: The Critic as Reader, Writer, Hero* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 12.

theorists were in other times. That is, we currently do not often consider the range of figures and tropes about which previous theorists explored, and we do not typically examine the precise, nuanced distinctions they maintained. Thus, this history will recover some of this discussion regarding hyperbole.

I limit this historical survey to show how hyperbole is defined and to show how the attitudes about hyperbole change. An analysis of why these attitudes shift based on political, religious, or socio-economic contexts is not explored in depth because my purpose is simply to offer a backdrop from which to better understand this trope and its functions for contemporary rhetorical theory rather than to present the contextual dynamics from which the attitudes toward hyperbole emerge, though this is another much needed work to foster a greater understanding of hyperbole.

I also limit this historical overview of hyperbole to the Western rhetorical tradition while incorporating Western theological and homiletic observations about hyperbole as examples when appropriate. I will not examine every text or thinker who mentions hyperbole, exaggeration, or amplification, but I will engage those rhetoricians and rhetorical theologians who have contributed to the development of hyperbole, positively or negatively. I will offer a more detailed analysis of hyperbole in Greco-Roman rhetorical theory, including the “Church Fathers,” than at other times because all other discussions and definitions of hyperbole are premised upon the writings of these theorists, especially Quintilian. Some contemporary philosophers also offer insights into hyperbole, but I will save a detailed analysis of those philosophers for later chapters since they have less to do with the history of hyperbole and more to do with parsing out hyperbole’s functions.

I will first examine the views of hyperbole by Greco-Roman rhetorical theorists, including the Latin “Church Fathers,” and I will then explore the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and contemporary rhetorical theory. I will proceed, then, along a rhetorical trajectory through a history of hyperbole that will at times be influenced by and influence theology. Thus, this history is a history of hyperbole’s prescriptions and proscriptions within rhetorical theory, rhetorical theology, and the preaching traditions within Western Christian discourse, and what I will find is that hyperbole’s excessively disruptive force is sometimes scorned, sometimes celebrated, often misunderstood, and always treated with suspicion.

## ANCIENT WESTERN RHETORICAL THEORY

### “PAGAN” RHETORIC

The contentious history of hyperbole can be perceived as a significant ontological threat, and this fear is expressed through the dualities of intemperance/temperance, excess/moderation, vice/virtue, deceit/truth, and irrationality/rationality. Hence, one reason for restraining hyperbole in the ancient world is its ontological disruptiveness. From Plato, to Aristotle, to Demetrius and Cicero, the forces of excess are resisted, even vilified, in favor of a more stable, moderate order founded upon unarguable “first principles” and *logos*.<sup>7</sup> David Bentley Hart, an Eastern Orthodox theologian, writes, “The cosmos and the city, the city and the soul: this is the golden thread of analogy running through ancient Greek metaphysics; the serene lineaments of rational form are

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<sup>7</sup> For example, in the *Republic*, Plato argues that ugliness, i.e., a monstrosity of the soul, is a lack of harmony. See Umberto Eco, ed., *On Ugliness*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), 30. Ugliness is a transgression of the virtue of beauty as moderation and the unity of wholeness. Excess is resisted precisely because it is a disruptive force of the beautiful soul founded on “first principles” of unity and harmony with the cosmos.



always engaged in a struggle with the tragic depths they comprise with the turmoil that surrounds them as fate and as the infinite.”<sup>8</sup> The Greek cosmos for many of its philosophers is viewed as fragile, and its analogous ontological assumptions require a constant synecdochal striving for equilibrium that only the virtue of moderation can guarantee.<sup>9</sup> Hyperbole, through its excessiveness, disrupts that equilibrium and moderation through paradox and contradiction and threatens the presumed balance of order, unity, and beauty. Expressions of hyperbolic excess like grotesqueries, monstrosities, chimaeras, amalgams, and duplicitous combinations are often resisted as imperfections of appearance and mysteries of ambiguity. A certain harmony is attempted through philosophical, theological, and mythological systems of thought, but hyperbolic assertions are not entirely concerned with harmony. Thus, it is not a simple distrust of hyperbole as flagrant, deceitful, or distasteful that one encounters but an aversion to its extreme disruptive metaphysical, specifically ontological (in its analogical differentiations), implications.

A common theme of Greek rhetors, as well as Roman orators, is to condemn the excessive eloquence, vices, intemperance, ornate speech, and mere appearance of the sophists because sophistic excess diverged from the ideal of moderation they sought to uphold. James J. Murphy asserts that the entire Greco-Roman world often attacked the sophists of the “Second Sophistic” for their rhetorical excess.<sup>10</sup> The contempt for the

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<sup>8</sup> David Bentley Hart, The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 125.

<sup>9</sup> For a thorough discussion of the importance of moderation in the ancient world and how it was viewed in opposition to excess, to tame excess, see Harry Clor, On Moderation: Defending an Ancient Virtue in a Modern World (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> James J. Murphy, Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from St. Augustine to the Renaissance (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 50-51.

sophists and their employment of hyperbole is reflected in Thomas E. Ameringer's statement that oxymoron and hyperbole "form one of the most objectionable and unartistic traits of sophistic rhetoric."<sup>11</sup> The connection of hyperbole to sophistic rhetoric is made more explicit when he writes, "The *hyperbole* is another trope much in vogue with the sophists...The sophist orators often employed it to give to topics which were trivial or commonplace an air of grandeur and importance."<sup>12</sup> Sophistic excess is explicitly linked to hyperbole. Even before the second sophistic, the sophists were chastised for their excess, and this condemnation of sophistic excess is twofold. It is a denunciation of rhetorical excess as a stylistic vice tropologically and figurally represented as hyperbole as well as embodied excess, i.e., embodied hyperbole, as a moral vice. Rhetorical excess is synecdochally connected to embodied excess. Hence, allegations against rhetorical excess in sophistic discourse are also ethical allegations against the sophists in terms of intemperate living. Hyperbole as the tropological representation of excess is thereby also condemned. The avoidance of stylistic vices, therefore, is a significant concern for ancient rhetoricians because it synecdochally represents the embodiment of excess.

Isocrates, for example, condemns the sophists in Against the Sophists and in his Encomium of Helen. In Against the Sophists, Isocrates argues that the sophists are deceivers who live a life of careless indolence instead of devoting themselves to serious study. He calls them liars, and he asserts, "Oratory is good only if it has the qualities of

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas E. Ameringer, A Study in Greek Rhetoric: The Stylistic Influence of the Second Sophistic on the Panegyric Sermons of St. John Chrysostom (Kessinger Publishing, 2006), 40-41.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 18.

fitness for the occasion, propriety of style, and originality of treatment.”<sup>13</sup> In contrast to a good orator, he views the sophists as speaking about absurdities and violating the rules of decorum through their excessive speech as well as their excessive living. His condemnation of the sophists occurs as a stylistic rebuke that is also a renunciation of their lives as expressions of figural excess. One’s oratory is considered a reflection of one’s life, and because hyperbole is the tropological representation of excess, hyperbolic speech is rejected for its destabilizing epistemological and ontological effects. Although Isocrates himself is often characterized as a sophist for his use of an ornate or grand style,<sup>14</sup> he attempts to distance himself from the excessive style of sophistic discourse and, *mutatis mutandi*, the lives they lead. What Isocrates rejects is hyperbole the trope and figure of thought that leads to embodied hyperbole. The rhetorical and ethical allegations Isocrates brings against the sophists for their excess are also particularly evident in Plato’s writing where he vehemently critiques the sophist’s excessive style as well as intemperate living. The same is true of Aristotle.

Although Plato clearly establishes a moderation/excess duality in Gorgias and Phaedrus, it is Aristotle who is often referenced by other rhetorical theorists when discussing hyperbole. I will, then, forego an explication of Plato, and move directly to Aristotle. In Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, he lays out his proposition for the virtues of moderation over and against the excesses of appetites, pleasures, intemperance

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<sup>13</sup> Isocrates, Against the Sophists, 1.14-1.15, Ohio State University at Mansfield, <<http://english.mansfield.ohio-state.edu/writing/276files/IsocratesAgainst.htm>> (5 November 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Morris Croll argues that the true and original grand style is developed by Isocrates. Although Thucydides and Demosthenes are typically equated with the grand style, Croll argues that they belong to the plain style, and that Isocrates and Cicero are the main proponents of the grand style. See Morris Croll, “Attic” and Baroque Prose Style: Essays by Morris Croll, eds. J. Max Patrick and R. O. Evans (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

(*akolasia*), and desires. He equates intemperance, either in excess or deficiency, with the irrationality of children's desires and things that are shameful,<sup>15</sup> which explicitly equates the vice of excess with irrationality, shame, and unreasonableness. Just as for Plato, excess is an ontological deficiency, a lack, that necessitates a corrective ethical and moral obligation to moderation. Indeed, Aristotle argues that the intemperate person, i.e., one who embodies excess, exhibits irresponsibility for others.<sup>16</sup>

Not only does Aristotle consider excess to be irrational and contrary to reason, he also suggests that it lacks any ethical dimension. He believes that the intemperate person is one who disobeys and lacks the "right nature."<sup>17</sup> Anything intemperate or immoderate is to be rejected and "expelled" because it is contrary to the "right nature," the "right" way of being in the world. Many theorists, as will be shown, also characterize hyperbole as irrational, shameful, unethical, and lacking the right nature for expressing ideas within language. In this sense, Aristotle is describing embodied hyperbole, and he is arguing against the ways moral and bodily excesses lead one away from the ethical position of moderation and virtue. Though only implied here, this connection to hyperbole is overt in On Rhetoric.

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<sup>15</sup> He states, "For the things that need to be tempered are those that desire shameful things and tend to grow large. Appetites and children are most like this; for children also live by appetite, and desire for the pleasant is found more in them than in anyone else," and he posits that "if the appetites are large and intense, they actually expel rational calculation. That is why appetites must be moderate and few, and never contrary to reason." See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999), 3.12.30.

<sup>16</sup> He writes, "One person pursues excesses of pleasant things because they are excesses and because he decides on it, for themselves and not for some further result. He is intemperate; for he is bound to have no regrets, and so is incurable...The one who is deficient is his opposite, while the intermediate one is temperate." Ibid., 7.7.20.

<sup>17</sup> He writes that "the decent person...will attend to reason because his life aims at the fine," and he considers the intemperate person to be a "base person." Ibid., 10.9.5b, 10.9.10b.

In On Rhetoric, Aristotle equates hyperbole with metaphor, and he explicitly dismisses hyperbole as “adolescent” and “vehement.”<sup>18</sup> He links hyperbole to adolescence because “All the mistakes they [adolescents] make are in the direction of excess and vehemence...for they do ‘everything too much.’”<sup>19</sup> For Aristotle, hyperbole is an (overly) exaggerated metaphor and is equated with the mistakes and passions of youth suggesting that the young are easily angered, disregard limits, and are given to excessive expression – a psychological intensity of feeling expressed through language – which is certainly not in accord with Greek notions of moderation. In his terms, “It is inappropriate for an older [wiser] man to speak [in hyperbole].”<sup>20</sup> What was only implied in Ethics is now made explicit. Hyperbole is the tropological and figural representation of excess, and using the irrational and shameful trope in language violates decorum and reflects one’s deficient character. The “adolescent” embodies hyperbole while the “older man” embodies a decorum of moderation, which is violated by excess. Hyperbole is simply too risky because it risks doing “everything too much.” It is intemperate and uncontrollable, which leads to rhetorical as well as ethical mistakes in the direction of excess-as-lack. What hyperbole lacks, however, moderation is able to manage and contain, and these mistakes and excessive vices in one’s life and within discourse are regulated.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Aristotle’s view of hyperbole becomes clearer. It is too excessive, too

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<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.11.15.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 2.12.14.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 3.11.15.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Harrawood writes, “The thing hyperbole exhibits or exposes, what Aristotle calls vehemence, is the speaker’s will to dominate the imaginative content of the verbal exchange by imposing upon the listeners a hyperextended figure as an element of argument enclosed by logos and thus both obvious and containable within shared discourse.” See Michael Harrawood, “Overreachers: Hyperbole,

irrational, and ethically inept, and using hyperbole reflects a lack of appropriate, moderate character because it is used primarily by those who cannot control their passions and desires, which paradoxically suggests that excess reveals a lack rather than abundance.

Pseudo-Longinus, henceforth referred to as Longinus, offers a more amenable description of hyperbole than Aristotle, and he discusses it primarily as a trope of language used in the elevated style thereby emphasizing its rhetorical function rather than its embodied form. Largely abandoning *logos* and *ethos*, Longinus's elevated style appeals exclusively to *pathos* to move his audience, to "transport them." To achieve this goal, Longinus employs the use of hyperbole, but Longinus's main concern is that hyperbole might blend with the "true Sublime."<sup>22</sup> He writes of hyperbole, "The hyperbole is sometimes ruined by overshooting the mark. Overdo the strain and the thing sags, and often produces the opposite effect to that intended."<sup>23</sup> Distinct from the sublime, Longinus contends that hyperbole may be ruined by its precise function to enlarge and exaggerate, which is the primary fear of all rhetorical theorists regarding hyperbole. For Longinus, as for others, this fear is a stylistic concern because the risk of hyperbole is that it might be amplified beyond the elevated, or sublime, style thereby disrupting the decorum of this style. Hyperbole is necessary and appropriate when

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the 'circle in the water,' and Force in *I Henry 6*," *English Literary Renaissance* 33, no. 3 (2003): 321; quoted in, Goran V. Stanivukovic, "'Mounting Above the Truth': On Hyperbole in English Renaissance Literature," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 43, no. 1 (2007): 11.

<sup>22</sup> [Longinus], *On the Sublime*, The Loeb Classical Library, trans. W. H. Fyfe, ed. G. P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 177.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

discussing sublime topics because it is a breaker of boundaries, but it must be inhibited so as not to violate the decorum of the elevated style or blend into the Sublime.

To further aid in regulating the excess of hyperbole, Longinus argues, “The best hyperbole is the one which conceals the very fact of its being a hyperbole. And this happens when it is uttered under stress of emotion to suit the circumstances of a great crisis.”<sup>24</sup> Hyperbolic excess must be concealed as well as limited to certain situations, e.g., those of psychological duress, in order for it to be effective and justified. Overall, then, hyperbole is appropriate when discussing sublime topics as well as during moments of extreme duress. Hyperbole must adhere to a certain decorum because the incident (or the content of one’s argument) does not exist for the sake of hyperbole, but “the hyperbole for the sake of the incident”<sup>25</sup> – “The intensity of *feeling* justifies the excess in language.”<sup>26</sup> The use of hyperbolic excess, the force of its phenomenological and psychological power, must be appropriate to the situation or the content being discussed. As almost all rhetorical theorists will reiterate, using hyperbole effectively is contingent upon its adherence to a certain decorum of excess. Longinus is clearly favorably inclined towards hyperbole as long as decorum is maintained so it will not be too disruptive or be confused with the sublime. Hyperbole must not “overdo” its intended purpose. Thus, Longinus utilizes hyperbole as a breaker of boundaries to “throw beyond” the limits of

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<sup>24</sup> [Longinus], On the Sublime, 283.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Brian Vickers, “The ‘Songs and Sonnets’ and the Rhetoric of Hyperbole,” in John Donne: Essays in Celebration, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1972), 140. Vickers makes this statement in reference to Longinus and Aristotle.

language and knowledge, but he also struggles with establishing a type of decorum in which hyperbole does not go too far.<sup>27</sup>

Demetrius offers a less favorable definition of hyperbole, which is also discussed primarily in stylistic terms.<sup>28</sup> For Demetrius, all forms of hyperbole are characteristically impossibilities and are “frigid,” i.e., “that which exceeds its appropriate form of expression.”<sup>29</sup> Although impossibility is the specific function of an *adynaton*, which is one form of hyperbole, he conflates the two terms rather than parsing out the distinctions. In so doing, he dismisses the “frigidity” of hyperbole as a stylistic vice, and he relegates it to being used only in comic poetry and to evoke laughter. This is not an uncommon tactic used to discredit and demean hyperbole, but it is also not a wholly negative association. Because Demetrius rejects the use of hyperbole, he makes a distinction between force (hyperbole) and grandeur (the eloquence of the grand style).<sup>30</sup> Here, a simplistic binary of excess is established. Hyperboles, as brute force, are considered distasteful and result only in laughter and jest because they signify nothing of importance and produce a “frigid” style, but grandeur is considered eloquent. Hyperbole is denigrated through impossibility, and its “frigid” style is separated from the eloquence of the grander style. Whereas Longinus appropriates hyperbole’s excessive and disruptive

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<sup>27</sup> Ettenhuber, “Hyperbole,” 205.

<sup>28</sup> “The most frigid of all figures is hyperbole, which is of three kinds. It is expressed either in the form of a likeness, for example ‘like the winds in speed’; or of superiority, for example ‘whiter than snow’; or of impossibility, for example ‘with her head she reached the sky.’ Admittedly every hyperbole is an impossibility. There could be nothing ‘whiter than snow,’ nothing ‘like the winds in speed.’ But this last kind is especially called impossible. And so the reason why every hyperbole seems particularly frigid is that it suggests something impossible.” See Demetrius, *On Style*, The Loeb Classical Library, trans. Doreen C. Innes (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 427.

<sup>29</sup> Demetrius, *On Style*, 114; quoted in, Ettenhuber, “Hyperbole,” 199.

<sup>30</sup> Debora K. Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric: The Christian Grand Style in the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 32.



functions for certain contexts and subjects, Demetrius seemingly rejects it outright, though this picture of Demetrius's interpretation is somewhat complicated in the next chapter.

The contentious and controversial history of hyperbole is already evident, and this trend continues within Roman rhetorical theory where hyperbole is viewed more favorably. Cicero, however, takes a rather ambiguous stance on hyperbole. On the one hand, Cicero offers his ontological position on the subject of excess. In Cicero's early work, *De Inventione*, the ontological concerns regarding moderation persist,<sup>31</sup> and his stance against excess is abundantly apparent. He repeatedly extols the four major virtues – wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance – that are to be nurtured while their opposites should be avoided. There is no mention of hyperbole specifically, but like Aristotle, the vices of excess can be viewed as embodied hyperboles that are to be avoided for their disruption of moderation. In like manner, in *De Oratore* the virtue of moderation as civic virtue is consistently privileged over excess and vice, and how knowledge is ethically communicated in practical and civic matters becomes more important. The form of embodied hyperbole as intemperate, unethical, excessive living stands in direct opposition to the moderate virtues of Cicero's ideal orator.

On the other hand, Cicero offers his epistemological position on the subject of excess. In *De Oratore*, he defines hyperbole as “exaggeration and overstatement of the truth for the sake of amplification or diminution.”<sup>32</sup> This is a telling statement because

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<sup>31</sup> For example, “*Temperance* is a firm and moderate control exercised by calculation over lust and other impulses of the spirit that are not right [*not straight*].” See Cicero, *De Inventione*, 2.54.164, trans. John F. Tinker, *Rhetoric and Composition*, <<http://rhetoric.eserver.org/categories/history/classical/genres-of-rhetoric.html#delib-part>> (23 October 2009).

<sup>32</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore*, trans. James M. May and Jakob Wisse (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.203.

hyperbole is shown to operate so the truth might be amplified, elaborated, or expanded upon in either vertical direction. Far from a negative view of hyperbole, Cicero appears to regard this trope as fostering epistemological inquiry, a playfulness with meaning, and the pursuit of knowledge by exaggerating or overstating the truth for a particular effect – the effect of elaborating and expounding upon the truth and meaning. Thus, Cicero’s view of excess is ambiguous. Embodied hyperbole is denigrated while hyperbole the trope is productive for engaging epistemological concerns. This latter view of hyperbole is more explicitly outlined in *Ad Herennium*.

In *Ad Herennium* (thought to be authored by Cicero for centuries), the epistemological connection to hyperbole is evident. The author, like Cicero, defines hyperbole as “a manner of speech exaggerating the truth, whether for the sake of magnifying or minifying something.”<sup>33</sup> Later, the author writes, “Emphasis [*significatio*] is the figure which leaves more to be suspected than has been actually asserted... The emphasis is produced through Hyperbole [*per exsuperationem*] when more is said than the truth warrants [*patitur veritas*], so as to give greater force to the suspicion.”<sup>34</sup> Neither observation condemns excess or intemperance. In the latter one, hyperbole’s epistemological playfulness with and (re)constitution of meaning is highlighted. Hyperbole is portrayed here as emphasizing a truth that is already known<sup>35</sup> thereby giving

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<sup>33</sup> [Cicero], *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan (London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 4.44.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.67.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen H. Webb writes of *Ad Herennium*, “Hyperbole does not create a truth, but rather magnifies something that is already true,” and he suggests that hyperbole is portrayed more like simile than metaphor, since metaphor creates new meaning. See Stephen H. Webb, *Blessed Excess: Religion and the Hyperbolic Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 8.

greater force to the suspicion that something more may still be revealed than what is explicitly stated. Hyperbole does not conceal in deceit but reveals through truth, and exaggerating the truth to reveal more than the truth warrants suggests that a plasticity of meaning is present in this discussion of hyperbole.<sup>36</sup> Hyperbole does not simply emphasize a truth that is already known in order to confirm one's already held beliefs, it surpasses the truth and states more than the truth warrants to highlight the complexity of meaning. Hyperbole reveals the malleability of truth, and this playfulness with meaning is precisely what Seneca observes in his discussion of hyperbole.

In *On Benefits*, Seneca offers a similar epistemological position regarding hyperbole when he posits, "The purpose of all exaggeration is to arrive at the truth by falsehood," and he suggests that through exaggeration one asserts "what could not possibly be in order that they might be thought to be as much so as possible."<sup>37</sup> In this commonly (re)interpreted passage by rhetorical theorists, Seneca states that the paradoxical function of hyperbole is to arrive at truth through a lie – to suggest impossibility as possibility and possibility as impossibility. The paradox of all language is that it lies while attempting to signify or accurately represent the truth, and hyperbole exploits this paradox productively. Hyperbole must point towards the impossible, the lie, in order to arrive tentatively at the possible, an assertion of truth: "Exaggeration never hopes all its daring flights to be believed, but affirms what is incredible, that thereby it

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<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Longinus states, "Hyperbole may tend to belittle as well as to magnify; the common element in both is a strain on the facts." See [Longinus], *On the Sublime*, 285. Or, as Quintilian will later argue, "It [hyperbole] is an elegant surpassing of the truth." See Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.67, trans. Lee Honeycutt, <<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~honeyl/quintilian/8/chapter6.html#68>> (28 October 2009).

<sup>37</sup> Seneca, *On Benefits*, trans. Aubrey Stewart (London: George Bell and Sons, 1905), 7.23.

may convey what is credible.”<sup>38</sup> The lie of hyperbole is not a falsehood intended to deceive but a concerted effort to destabilize perceptions of meaning in order to reveal alternative conceptions of truth and knowledge. Hyperbole is not simply a lie, but an excessive figural distortion on the side of truth. It is an exaggerated mis-recognition that leads to recognition and a theoretical method of epistemological inquiry that highlights the fragility of meaning through excess. In this theory of excess, affirming the incredible through exaggeration in the pursuit of knowledge is necessary because the known is not capable of expressing the as yet unknown, the as yet unrealized within knowledge itself. Thus, contrary to Aristotle and Demetrius, Seneca implies that a deficiency in our perceptions of reality and knowledge requires the disruption of excess, and hyperbole is the vehicle of this disruption. Quintilian explores these same views about hyperbole in Institutes of Oratory.

Only implied in Cicero, the author of Ad Herennium, and even Seneca, Quintilian offers several interesting explicit descriptions of hyperbole that carry stylistic and epistemological implications, and his more developed descriptions offer the most complex theory of hyperbole thus far. Indeed, Quintilian’s theory is the most influential theory of hyperbole in the history of rhetorical theory, and I will explicate his theory in more detail in the next chapter. On a stylistic level, he views hyperbole as a “bolder sort of ornamen [sic],” and he says, “It is an elegant surpassing of the truth and is used equally for exaggerating and extenuating.”<sup>39</sup> Rather than a vice or a lack, hyperbole is considered elegant, but this elegance can go awry if, at least the appearance of,

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Quintilian, Institutes of Oratory, trans. Lee Honeycutt, 8.6.67, <http://www.public.iastate.edu/~honeyl/quintilian/8/chapter6.html#68>, last accessed 2 November 2009.

moderation, i.e., decorum, is not maintained. For example, he states, “But even in the use of hyperbole, some moderation must be observed, for though every hyperbole is beyond belief, it ought not to be extravagant, since in no other way do writers more readily fall into...’exorbitant affection.’”<sup>40</sup> Here again, decorum is used to regulate hyperbole’s excesses that can move “beyond belief.” For Quintilian, elegant hyperboles are decorous while extravagant hyperboles push the boundaries too far, and when they move beyond moderation into “exorbitant affectation,” he considers them “absurdities.”<sup>41</sup> Again, a binary of excess is posited, but Quintilian’s binary is more complex than Demetrius’s.

On the one hand, Quintilian argues that hyperbole is an elegant ornament and excess is viewed as a good, but on the other hand, he also suggests that it should not become an extravagant ornamentation, which can be viewed as sophistic artifice. This is a stylistic distinction that hinges on decorum. Hyperbole is “a beauty” when the subject it is describing is appropriate and “extraordinary in nature.” There is a certain justification for hyperbole wherein hyperbole is effective when the form matches the subject matter discussed. When decorum is maintained, literal departure from the truth is “pardoned” because the figural falsehood is not affirmed but recognized.<sup>42</sup> Thus, an inhibitory caution is placed upon hyperbole because of its excessive disruptiveness, but its epistemological function remains a significant force in his theory.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 8.6.73.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 8.6.74.

<sup>42</sup> “It very often raises a laugh, and if the laugh be on the side of the speaker, the hyperbole gains the praise of wit, but if otherwise, the stigma of folly. It is in common use, as much among the unlearned as among the learned, because there is in all men a natural propensity to magnify or extenuate what comes before them, and no one is contented with the exact truth. But such departure from the truth is pardoned because we do not affirm what is false. In a word, the hyperbole is a beauty when the thing of which we speak is extraordinary in nature. For we are then allowed to say a little more than the truth, because the exact truth cannot be said, and language is more efficient when it goes beyond reality than when it stops short of it.” See Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.74-8.6.76.

On an epistemological level, Quintilian defines hyperbole stating, “It is sufficient to remark that the hyperbole lies, but not so as to intend to deceive by lying, and we therefore ought to consider more carefully how far it becomes us to exaggerate that which is not believed.”<sup>43</sup> Like Seneca’s definition, hyperbole is paradoxically not a lie intended to deceive but to reveal.<sup>44</sup> “A lie, expressed in linguistic terms, becomes truth on a hermeneutical level. Hyperbole thus acts a generator of meaning.”<sup>45</sup> Quintilian’s theory of language suggests that hyperbole is a redeeming figure that leads to an abundance of meaning rather than a lack. Peter William Shoemaker posits, “Implicit in this theory is an assumption that ordinary language is flat and banal, and therefore inadequate to describe the abnormal, the unusual, and the marvelous.”<sup>46</sup> Hyperbole breaks the bounds of language and attempts to describe the unbelievable and incomprehensible. It tropologically articulates what cannot be articulated through “ordinary language.” Quintilian’s definition of hyperbole gives it an epistemological playfulness that allows for a (re)constitution of meaning and being through a transcendence of language. By exaggerating meaning, one comes to the truth, but Quintilian also suggests something more than Cicero and Seneca. He contends that excess and exaggeration are inherent and productive forces within “human nature,” language, and one’s conception of these given realities.

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<sup>43</sup> Quintilian, Institutes of Oratory, 8.6.74.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen H. Webb calls this a “baffling statement” that reveals “hyperbole’s ambiguous relation to deception, it nudges – strains – toward the question of truth.” See Webb, Blessed Excess, 9.

<sup>45</sup> Stanivukovic, “Mounting Above the Truth,” 17.

<sup>46</sup> Peter William Shoemaker, Powerful Connections: The Poetics of Patronage in the Age of Louis XIII (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 84.

Quintilian asserts that the excessiveness of reality itself requires the use of hyperboles on a regular basis and that humans have a “natural propensity” to exaggerate.<sup>47</sup> He notes that when one speaks of something that transcends the normal limits of nature, it is better to go too far than not far enough since “no one is contented with the exact truth.”<sup>48</sup> Language, in fact, is more effective when it goes beyond its limits and the “exact truth” because the orator can then offer “a rich terrain for stylistic invention and play.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, the utilization of hyperbole is more than tropological or stylistic. It is a figure of thought. It is an epistemological theory of excess that acknowledges the propensity for excess and deceit in language as well as being, and it harnesses this excess to explore truth claims that may lie outside the bounds of ordinary language, “exact truth,” and accepted knowledge. Overall, the daring heights and risks of “elegant hyperbole,” i.e., good hyperbole, lead to an abundance of meaning rather than a lack of moral character, and the lie of hyperbole leads paradoxically to an assertion of truth. In this sense, hyperbole is a redemptive figure of virtue, stylistically and epistemologically, rather than a vice. However, the “extravagant hyperbole,” i.e., bad hyperbole, leads to a violation of moderate living as well as decorous speaking. Quintilian advises caution, but he also offers a justification for hyperbole that might operate within a decorum of excess where ordinary language is not enough to express the extraordinary nature of a particular situation or subject matter and epistemological inquiry is furthered by exceeding the truth it seeks to discover.

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<sup>47</sup> “There is in all men a natural propensity to magnify or extenuate what comes before them, and no one is contented with the exact truth.” Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.74.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Shoemaker, *Powerful Connections*, 84.

From these descriptions and characterizations of hyperbole by various theorists, we see that hyperbole is a contentious term from the beginning. It is described as an impossibility evoking a “frigid” style, adolescent, a vehicle for the sublime, and a lie on the side of truth. It is mistrusted and rejected by some for its lack of value, violation of decorum, shamefulness, and proclivity towards excessive desires. It is explored by others as a useful trope, a productive mode of inquiry, and an elegant ornament that enhances one’s style.<sup>50</sup> These observations indicate that hyperbole can be viewed on three different levels: 1) an excessive trope of language, 2) the tropological representation of rhetorical and embodied excess, and 3) a “trope-producing trope”<sup>51</sup> that pushes all tropes and figures toward excess and a possible violation of decorum. As such, hyperbole is often associated with sophistic discourse for its excess and artifice,<sup>52</sup> and even when hyperbole

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<sup>50</sup> Important to note is that hyperbole is considered by all of these theorists as an external, rhetorical tool. Excess is an internal vice, but the trope of hyperbole is an external expression. Even through excess, however, the concern for these theorists is still the projection of a certain way of living. The external is not a reflection of the inner life but a projection of perception. The way others perceive one’s life is of utmost importance. In this sense, outward perception is also a tool to be utilized, and the body is viewed as a utilitarian device to project virtue. Although Quintilian considered rhetoric to be an art of living, it is not until Tertullian, and then the Augustinian psychology of the self, that the inner life and emotions will be connected to rhetoric itself, i.e., an outward reflection of an inward devotion (a sacramental view of language), rather than viewing rhetoric largely as a means to an end, i.e., a tool of expression to persuade. Philosophically, these “pagan” rhetorical theorists are concerned with ethics and one’s moral life, but rhetorically, language is a device to be utilized in order to persuade. They largely reject the excessive artistry of sophistic discourse, but their view of rhetoric as a tool, a system of persuasion, is still aligned with the sophistic, utilitarian view of language. Thus, these rhetorical theorists’ rejection of excess is, generally, a rejection of what might be perceived as pursuing pleasure for its own sake or self-aggrandizement – a perception of excess.

<sup>51</sup> Mileur, *The Critical Romance*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> For example, Debora K. Shuger writes, “When, therefore, ancient...rhetorics criticize periodicity, ornament, and symmetry, they should not be perceived as rejecting oratory in favor of the plain style, but as defending the power and passion of genus grande from the encroachments of sophistic overrefinement.” See Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 25. In contrast to the aesthetic pleasure or the affective display of one’s skill advocated by the sophists, these ancient rhetorics regard ornaments of language, i.e., tropes, figures, periodicity, and rhythm, as acquiring value by creating a desired and appropriate emotional response instead of leading to stylistic vice. These ornaments were to be used in moderation so as to portray a particular moral, virtuous self to those with whom one lived. *Ibid.*, 51.



is celebrated, moderation is still privileged over excess.<sup>53</sup> A typical way to inhibit this excess is by suggesting it must always adhere to decorum in order to be effective. This inhibition by decorum is not necessarily a negative position to take because it responds to those who attack hyperbole as a stylistic vice, which I will discuss below as well as in the following chapters.

Christian rhetoricians are heavily influenced by these contentious conceptions of hyperbole as well as its association with sophistic discourse, and this is evident in the writings of the “Church Fathers” like Tertullian, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Augustine. These rhetorical theologians rarely, if at all, reference hyperbole specifically as a trope, but their overall attitudes about excessive vices, excessive eloquence, excessive living, ornament, and appearance suggest an adamant resistance to all things hyperbolic. Their treatises explicitly denounce excess as “sin,” i.e., embodied hyperbole, and ornate speech, but the rhetorical arguments they construct, as well as their advice about the uses and misuses of rhetoric, suggest a more ambiguous relationship with excess.

## HYPERBOLE AND CHRISTIAN RHETORIC: TERTULLIAN TO AUGUSTINE

When Christianity began to spread throughout the Roman Empire, many rhetoricians converted to Christianity but did not leave their rhetorical training behind.

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<sup>53</sup> There were also other philosophical schools of thought that held varying views about excess. These philosophies included Cynicism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism. Over-generalizing to an extreme degree, the Cynics utilized excess to defy convention. The Stoics favored moderation over excess, and the Epicureans lived life to its fullest, sometimes to excess and sometimes not. These philosophies and pagan rhetorical theories were significantly influential for Christianity and Christian rhetoricians, especially Stoicism. For example, Paul Tillich states that Stoicism “is the only real alternative to Christianity.” See Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 9. He further writes, “The Stoics were more important than Plato and Aristotle together for the life of the late ancient world. The life of the educated man in the ancient world at this time was shaped mostly by the Stoic tradition,” which is also true of Christians at this time and into the Roman period. See Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, ed. Carl E Braaten (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968), 7.

Some Christian converts did reject their rhetorical training altogether, but other Christian rhetoricians began blending Christianity with rhetoric even as they attempted to distance themselves from their rhetorical training. George A. Kennedy writes, “It is a remarkable fact that of the eight greatest Latin Fathers of the Church, five (Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, Lactantius, and Augustine) were professional teachers of rhetoric before they became Christians, while the other three (Ambrose, Hilary, and Jerome) had been thoroughly trained in the rhetorical schools.”<sup>54</sup> He further argues, “What dialectic is to rhetoric in Aristotelian rhetoric, hermeneutics is to homiletics in Christian rhetoric.”<sup>55</sup> What Kennedy is highlighting in these statements is the conversion of rhetoric to Christianity. Rhetorical issues became transposed theological and homiletic issues. The task, then, is to baptize rhetoric into Christianity.

It is important to note that Christian rhetoricians at this time (loosely conceived here as the second through fourth centuries) are largely influenced by Cicero’s writings. Christian rhetoricians lauded the ideal of “Ciceronian moderation” over and against the excessive ornamentations, pleasures, values, and vices of the sophists as well as pagan culture. Murphy states that Ambrose of Milan “recognizes the need for training of preachers and condemns not rhetoric itself but its sophistic abuses,”<sup>56</sup> and he continues, “Although attacks upon rhetoric had an ancient tradition, the Christian writer often saw in the rhetoric of his time that taint of a worldly, pagan culture which could lead men away

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<sup>54</sup> George A. Kennedy, Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 167.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>56</sup> Murphy, Rhetoric in the Middle Ages, 52.

from God.”<sup>57</sup> Christians viewed the excesses of pagan culture and their values to be anti-Christian, and the rhetorical expression of this attitude resonated through the excessive, artificial eloquence of the sophists. In contrast, many Christian rhetoricians equated Ciceronian rhetoric with the moderate teachings and values of Christianity through his blending of eloquence with wisdom, i.e., form with substance. The baptism of rhetoric into Christianity was thus largely a conversion of Ciceronian rhetoric to Christianity.

It is not surprising that rhetorical theologians would reject excess. The influence of Ciceronian moderation coupled with the Christian conception of “sin” made a rejection of excess and hyperbole a foregone conclusion because *hamartia* (“sin”) in the New Testament literally means “a missing of the mark,” as an arrow might miss its mark. Theologically, sin is viewed as an excessive moral divergence from the truth. In like manner, hyperbole literally means “overshooting the mark” or “throwing beyond” it. Thus, a rhetorical device such as hyperbole that intentionally seeks to miss the mark and diverge from given truths is easily equated with the sins and vices of pagan culture.

Although hyperbole is rarely explicitly mentioned, the attitudes of the “Church Fathers” toward excess are unequivocally negative. As the tropological and figural representation of excess as well as an excessive “trope-producing trope,”<sup>58</sup> hyperbole is thereby also rejected. Additionally, excessive language is intimately tied to excessive living, and as Alexandre Leupin writes, “The troping of values creates an anti-Christian excess,”<sup>59</sup> i.e., sin. The stylistic and embodied excess of the sophists as well as pagan

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>58</sup> Mileur, *The Critical Romance*, 12.

<sup>59</sup> Alexandre Leupin, *Fiction and Incarnation: Rhetoric, Theology, and Literature in the Middle Ages*, trans. David Laatsch (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2003), 185.

culture becomes a theological issue through sin, and the soteriological troping of pagan values is viewed as anti-Christian because of its penchant for excess. Hence, it is a small step to move from viewing sin as excess to viewing sin in one's life as the very embodiment of hyperbole. It is the excessive aspect of hyperbole that does too much, says too much, embellishes too much, and exaggerates the use of eloquence that these rhetoricians denounced because the "too much" led to vice and away from the "right amount" of Christian truth and virtue.

Paradoxically, some rhetorical theologians like Tertullian denounce as well as embrace excess, and they argue for a type of divine excess as distinct from sophistic excess. What occurs in rhetorical theology at this time is a theological (re)interpretation of the hyperbolic excess binary. Soteriologically, if sin and/as pagan excess is the embodiment of hyperbole, then only the lie of hyperbole is emphasized without its redeeming quality of lying on the side of truth. Hyperbole as sin, i.e., pagan excess, is viewed negatively as "evil" while hyperbole as divine excess, i.e., redemptive excess, is viewed positively as "good."<sup>60</sup> The redemptive hyperbolic circuit of a lie on the side of truth must be completed so it does not result in sin. Christologically, Christ is often viewed as the excessive expression of God's divine grace. This divine *logos* of excess is the very embodiment or incarnation of God that is the expenditure without reserve of God's love for creation. Christ is the figural representation of ideal excess that is always pointing beyond himself to the ideal of God, and thus, a hyperbolic figure.<sup>61</sup> Hence,

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<sup>60</sup> One could argue that the docetic schism actually hinges figurally on a bad hyperbole where Christ only appears to be human without being the incarnated embodiment of God. In this sense, the lie is not on the side of truth but an actual deceit rather than the revelation of a larger truth.

<sup>61</sup> For example, see the argument of unlimited development (discussed at the end of the chapter) explicated by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca in Ch. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of

Christ is the figural representation/embodiment of God's love as "good," i.e., an elegant hyperbolic figure of thought, while sin is the figurative expression/embodiment of "evil," i.e., extravagant hyperbole. Rhetorical theologians of this time struggle with this rhetorico-theological binary of excess, and this paradox highlights again the contentious historical development of hyperbole, especially when converting rhetoric to Christianity.

For example, the founder of Latin Christianity, Tertullian, is one of the first rhetorical theologians to attempt this conversion. What is interesting for my project is his implied attitude towards hyperbole, which culminates in a theological condemnation of the sins of pagan culture through a rejection of the empty eloquence and the excessive artifice of sophistic discourse. However, his use of the ornate, "Asiatic" style as well as his argument for "Christian ornament" – a Christian decorum of excess – often relies upon the very excess he condemns. These excesses also aid in establishing a Christian rhetoric through the conversion of tropes and figures for Christian purposes, which is often paradoxical and ambiguous.

## SECOND CENTURY: TERTULLIAN

Septimius Tertullianus, the founder of Latin Christianity, is a rather obscure figure who writes during the time of the "second sophistic," and his influence is quite far reaching.<sup>62</sup> Although Tertullian was not the first Christian to write in Latin, he was one

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Notre Dame Press, 2003), 290-292. However, I will significantly critique and augment these authors' argument in the following chapters.

<sup>62</sup> Those influenced by Tertullian include: Minucius Felix, Cyprian, pseudo-Cyprian, Novatian, Hippolytus, Dionysius of Rome, pseudo-Tertullian, Eusebius of Caesarea, the anonymous *Altercatio Heracliani*, Optatus of Milevi, Zeno of Verona, Lucifer of Cagliari, Hilarius of Poitiers, Pactatus, Pacian of Barcelona, Anon, Didymus of Alexandria (Didymus the Blind), Phoebadius, Gregorius Illiberitanus, Potamius of Lisbon, the anonymous *Collatio Alexandri et Dindimi*, Philastrius, Ambrosiaster, Chromatius, Salvianus, Pelagius, Rufinus (of Aquileia), Augustine, Petilianus, Vincentius Victor, Evagrius, Vincent of Lerins, Gregory of Elvira, Priscillian, Prudentius, Leo the Great, Claudianus Mamertus, the anonymous

of the first Christian theologians to write extensively in Latin,<sup>63</sup> and his Latin terms played a considerable role in changing the writings of Western theological scholarship dramatically.<sup>64</sup> In addition, Robert Dick Sider suggests that Tertullian's extensive theological works largely address the rhetorical debates of his time.<sup>65</sup> It is, in fact, only recently that scholars laud Tertullian as one of the greatest Christian rhetoricians of his time.

Like the other “Latin Fathers,” Tertullian’s view towards moral excess resided closely to his view of rhetorical eloquence and style – the synecdochal connection between excessive speaking and excessive living, between hyperbole as trope and as figure of thought. Sider argues that Tertullian's style was similar to that of Asiatic rhetoric,<sup>66</sup> an excessive style of rhetoric, and Leupin posits that tradition actually attributes the Asiatic, or “African,” style to Tertullian.<sup>67</sup> Rhetorical style was a major concern for Tertullian, as it was for Cicero and Quintilian,<sup>68</sup> and Tertullian struggled with

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*Praedestinatus*, Arnobius the Younger, Gennadius, Fulgentius of Ruspe, Fabius Planciades Fulgentius (Fulgentius the mythographer), Gelasius, Cassiodorus, Venantius Fortunatus, Isidore of Seville, the anonymous *Antiphonale Compendiense*, Venerable Bede, and Peter the Venerable. For a complete list with all references to Tertullian's texts see “Witnesses to the Influence of Tertullian (or, Who had read what?),” The Tertullian Project, <<http://www.tertullian.org/witnesses/witnesses.htm>> (28 October 2009).

<sup>63</sup> Walter H. Wagner, *After the Apostles: Christianity in the Second Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 188. See also Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

<sup>64</sup> Wagner, *After the Apostles*, xii.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Dick Sider, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Art of Tertullian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), xi-xvii.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Leupin, *Fiction and Incarnation*, 37.

<sup>68</sup> Debora K. Shuger argues, “In Roman rhetoric, the distinction between the grand and plain styles forms the core of the controversy between Cicero, Quintilian, and the ‘Atticists.’” See Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 7-8.

the proper place and delineation of style.<sup>69</sup> Tertullian emphasized the need for rhetorical style, but only in moderation. Like others before him, his concern with eloquence and style was tied to the excesses of the sophists, and it is his critiques of the style of the second sophistic that offer insight into his view of hyperbolic excess, artifice, and appearance.

Perhaps his most extended critique of sophistic excess is found in On the Apparel of Women. While this treatise is typically interpreted theologically to argue for Christian moderation in adorning oneself (men are also included in this argument), it can also be interpreted rhetorically as a response to the declamations of the sophists. Leupin argues, “Rhetoric’s conversion to Christianity is nowhere more clear than in *On the Apparel of Women*,” and he posits, “*On the Apparel of Women* becomes a point-by-point counter-text to the pagan vision of ornament.”<sup>70</sup> And he continues, “*On the Apparel of Women* is more than a simple denunciation of the feminine body and its adornment. It also attacks the pagan art of appearances along with the entire civilization conceived of as perverted by the false, by artifice, and by the obfuscation of nature.”<sup>71</sup> For Tertullian, sophistic ornament, excess, and pagan culture are false, perverse, and empty in contradistinction to what he calls “Christian ornament,” which can be viewed as “true eloquence” maintained

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<sup>69</sup> In On the Soul (*De Anima*), “The fault, I suppose, in the divine doctrine lies in its springing from Judea rather than from Greece. Christ made a mistake, too, in sending forth fisherman to preach, rather than the sophist [or, learned rhetorician].” See Tertullian, On the Soul (*De Anima*), 1.3, Christian Classics Electronic Library at Wheaton College, <[http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-22.htm#P2588\\_854958](http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-22.htm#P2588_854958)> (26 October 2009). Other translations write “learned rhetorician” rather than “sophists.” For example, see Ernest G. Sihler, From Augustus to Augustine: Essays & Studies Dealing with the Contact and Conflict of Classic Paganism and Christianity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923), 117.

<sup>70</sup> Leupin, Fiction and Incarnation, 34.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 36. Furthermore, On the Apparel of Women uses the cosmetics of women to “spell out the perverse artifices of the oratory art and of rhetorical culture” (35).

within a Christian decorum, and he uses the apparel of women to make his argument and his critique of pagan culture as well as sophistic rhetoric. Thus, his theological position on ornamental apparel and Christian modesty is also a rhetorical position regarding sophistic excess and the troping of pagan values, which becomes translated and viewed as “anti-Christian excess,”<sup>72</sup> i.e., hyperbole as a figure of thought.

Tertullian contends that perverse pagan values as well as sophistic ornament and artifice are to be avoided. Against the sophists, he argues that self-aggrandizement and eliciting applause from the audience through ornate language and stylistic devices are not enough. A Christian ornamentation for effect must arise from being itself – an individual’s “modest” Christian life. Tertullian argues that Christian excess and ornamentation must differ significantly from pagan excess and sophistic eloquence. Appearance must appropriately reflect interiority, not simply project one’s desired perception of the self.<sup>73</sup> In a turn Augustine will also make, the use of rhetorical devices must re-present one’s inner, moral self and God’s truth. Christian ornament, for Tertullian, concerns excess as figure of thought more than a tropological re-presentation of excess, and this Christian ornamentation is grounded ontologically in Christian modesty and morality, which results in rhetorical abundance. “To Christian modesty it is

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>73</sup> For example, “To Christian modesty it is not enough to *be* so, but to *seem* so too. For so great ought its plenitude to be, that it may flow out from the mind to the garb, and burst out from the conscience to the outward appearance; so that even from the outside it may gaze, as it were, upon its own furniture, (a furniture) such as to be suited to retain faith as its inmate perpetually. For such delicacies as tend by their softness and effeminacy to unman the manliness of faith are to be discarded...Clothe yourselves with the silk of uprightness, the fine linen of holiness, the purple of modesty. Thus painted, you will have God as your Lover!” See Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf04.iii.iii.ii.xiii.html>> (26 October 2009).



not enough to *be* so, but to *seem* so too.”<sup>74</sup> Interiority “flows out” and “bursts out” into exteriority.<sup>75</sup> Similar to Isocrates and Aristotle, Christian ornament is a reflection of one’s inner life expressed appropriately through language, which establishes a Christian decorum where excess is entirely appropriate – a Christian decorum of excess moderates and inhibits sophistic excess. Thus, sophistic ornament as excessive rhetorical artifice as well as pagan excesses are rejected, but Christian ornament (“true eloquence”) as the appropriate rhetorical expression of embodied divine excess and God’s truth nurtured in one’s modest inner life is encouraged.<sup>76</sup>

Paradoxically, Christian ornament as rhetorical excess, as trope and figure of thought, is derived from Christian moderation. Theologically, moderation regulates excessive living and the sins of pagan culture, i.e., embodied hyperbole. Rhetorically, on the other hand, moderation results in a decorous, Christian, ornamented style as well as an expression of one’s inner life that is presented and used for communicating the truth of Christianity. Embodied sophistic excess is avoided, but an ornate style, with its tropes and figures, is good when it is distinct from sophistic style and adheres to a Christian decorum of excess. Thus, Tertullian, in like manner to Quintilian, offers a binary of excess and thereby a binary of hyperbole as the tropological and figural representation of excess. On the one hand, he argues against the vices/sins of pagan culture and excessive ornamentation as empty eloquence and a stylistic vice – hyperbole as the “trope-

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Catherine M. Chin argues that Christianity actually takes shape in the form of linguistic excess through the multiplicity of interpretations. There is a clear division between Christian and pagan writing, and the excess of paganism is displaced with the divine excess of Christianity that comes from revelation rather than invention and empty eloquence. See Catherine M. Chin, Grammar and Christianity in the Late Roman World (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

producing trope” – as well as embodied hyperbole as sin that leads one astray from the Christian life. On the other hand, he highlights the necessity of tropological excess and ornamentation in order to communicate the truth of Christianity, and he does this by re-interpreting excess for a Christian context and developing a Christian decorum of excess.

Tertullian’s re-interpretation suggests that rhetorical excess is appropriate when it reflects an inner, modest life devoted to God, which establishes a Christian decorum of excess, and this implies a positive view of hyperbole in Tertullian’s writing. If pagan culture and sophistic ornamentation are excessive and deceitful both tropologically and as figure of thought, i.e., extravagant hyperboles that lie, then Christian ornaments are falsehoods on the side of truth, i.e., elegant hyperboles, which appropriately reflect inner devotion to God as divine excess and then exaggerate the truth in an attempt to reach the impossibility of this divine truth. Thus, his rhetorical concerns regarding style and the appropriate expression of excess are also theological concerns regarding one’s inner devotion to God and Christian modesty. These theological concerns can be interpreted and resolved rhetorically through hyperbole as trope and figure of thought as well as through a Christian decorum of excess; a complex and paradoxical position indeed.

### THIRD AND FOURTH CENTURY CHRISTIAN RHETORIC

After Tertullian, the tone of a Christian rhetoric and its response to the decadence of pagan culture as well as the excess of sophistic discourse becomes fairly well established, but Christians remain skeptical and even fearful of rhetoric overall, especially eloquence (the “seductress”). The power of rhetoric and its tropological and figural devices are very real threats to early Christians because of the persuasive power through eloquence these devices provide an orator to move as well deceive the

audience.<sup>77</sup> Christian rhetoricians want to harness the power of eloquence to move their audiences to conversion, but they are afraid the excess and deceit of eloquence will taint their message of Christian truth. They know that eloquence can lead one to deceit and sin just as easily as it can move one to truth because eloquence contains no moral certitude. As a result, some Christian rhetoricians at this time will completely reject eloquence, and others will tentatively court it for Christian purposes.

As a way to accept parts of rhetoric, e.g., eloquence, and reject others, all that is feared about rhetorical excess is equated with the artificial deceit of sophistic eloquence as well as pagan values, which is perceived to stand in direct opposition to the substantive truth of Christianity. Noted previously, almost any critique of the sophists is also a critique of hyperbole, and vice versa, since tropological and discursive excess is inherently structured by hyperbole as the “trope-producing trope” as well as the representative tropological representation of excess itself. Ergo, the condemnation of sophistic eloquence is the implicit condemnation of hyperbole, but it is also a necessary reclamation of eloquence, “true eloquence,” for Christian purposes, which will not reach fruition until Augustine. Thus, the development of a Christian eloquence begins with a rejection of the excessive trickery and deceit of sophistic eloquence, i.e., a rejection of the hyperbolic function of/within sophistic discourse.

Tertullian begins this conversion of pagan eloquence to Christian eloquence by displacing the excessive form of sophistic eloquence and replacing it with an excessive

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<sup>77</sup> Wayne A. Meeks writes, “Early Christianity was a movement of converts. That is, the Christians thought of themselves as people who had turned their lives around, from one state to another profoundly better. Turning around (Greek *epistrophe*, Latin *conversio*) is a metaphor that could have broad and multiple consequences for the way the early Christians perceived their moral possibilities and obligations.” See Wayne A. Meeks, The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 18.

form of Christian eloquence through appropriate ornamentation – a binary of hyperbolic excess. However, Christian writers beginning in the third century either reject all eloquence for simplicity, or significantly restrain its uses. In both instances, it is simplicity and not excess, even “Christian excess,” that is considered to be appropriate for Christian discourse and preaching. A simple style and an undiluted form of language with few or no embellishments are preferred over an excessive style because the substance of Christian truth alone is believed to be sufficient to persuade, i.e., convert, one’s audience. As shown below, there is a hyper-vigilance against the stylistic excesses of eloquence as well as excessive living for its obfuscation and/or dilution of the truth. Stylistic embellishments are equated with sinful excess, and the rhetorical issue of eloquence is again shown to be a soteriological issue for rhetorical theologians.

Christian rhetoricians know the power of eloquence to persuade, desire to harness that power but also fear it, often reject it as deceitful and sinful, and summarily view sophistic eloquence – as the unnecessary, deceitful, and excessive over-embellishment of language, i.e., sinful – to be an obfuscation of truth. Christian rhetoricians, then, must negotiate the tension between rhetorical, Ciceronian eloquence (“true eloquence”) utilized to communicate Christian truth for the purpose of conversion and sophistic artifice that only deceives. This negotiation occurs through decorum – substance and form, truth and its appropriate expression. Through decorum, rhetorical theologians moderate the excessive, i.e., hyperbolic, tendency of all tropes and figures in order to regulate sophistic excess as well as the hyperbole of embodied excess they view as sin. In opposition to sophistic and/or pagan excess that is deceitful and sinful stands the substantive, moderate nature of Christian truth.

Third century “Church Fathers” reject sophistic style in favor of a simple style that highlights Christian “continence” and “virtue.” Cyprian’s treatise, for example, “On the Dress of Virgins,” is an argument against ornamental excess as well as pagan culture that connects one’s use of language to one’s moral life. Similar to Tertullian, though harsher in his treatment of eloquence, Cyprian engages in a rhetorical critique of sophistic ornament through theological arguments for Christian modesty and purity as opposed to the fragrance of pagan culture. He argues for a Christian discipline that includes fleshly purity and a “seemliness of dress and ornament”<sup>78</sup> – a rejection of embodied as well as rhetorical excess. More explicitly, Cyprian writes in *Ad Donatum*, “A full eloquence may be the pride of vocal ambition, but in speaking of the Lord God, a pure simplicity of expression...which is convincing depends upon the substance of the argument rather than upon the forcefulness of eloquences.”<sup>79</sup> The “forcefulness of eloquences” as the troping of pagan values represented through sophistic excess and hyperbole, as the representative trope of this excess, is replaced with a simple style that is “convincing.” A simple decorum that privileges substance, i.e., scripture, over form is preferred out of a fear that all rhetorical embellishment may deceive and lead to a “pride of vocal ambition.” For Cyprian, excessive eloquence and excessive living are replaced by a simple “convincing” style and Christian discipline. This rejection of excess on two levels implies again the

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<sup>78</sup> For example, he writes, “Discipline, the safeguard of hope, the bond of faith, the guide of the way of salvation, the stimulus and nourishment of good dispositions, the teacher of virtue, causes us to abide always in Christ, and to live continually for God, and to attain to the heavenly promises and to the divine rewards. To follow her is wholesome, and to turn away from her and neglect her is deadly.” See Cyprian, “On the Dress of Virgins,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iv.v.ii.html>> (26 October 2009).

<sup>79</sup> Cyprian, *Ad Donatum*, 2; quoted in, James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from St. Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 51.

connection of language to being, and excess must be rejected for its disruptiveness and its deceit.

In the fourth century, the same basic attitude towards the excesses of eloquence is maintained, and the need for establishing a more Christian society by abolishing paganism of all types is more pressing. To accomplish this goal, an intellectual foundation for Christianity is a necessity.<sup>80</sup> Integral for developing this intellectual system is rhetoric, but it must be a Christian rhetoric that is distinct from the sophists. Hence, in the fourth century, with a turn towards the education of Christians that was only beginning in Tertullian's time, epistemological inquiry and its appropriate expression are brought to the forefront of the discussion about rhetorical eloquence. Certainly, ontological concerns about Christian piety are still important, but hermeneutical issues about the interpretation of scripture within third and fourth century Christian treatises begin to focus more on *movere* in preaching and the use of "sacred eloquence" to elicit conversion-as-persuasion. Inherent in this rhetorical concern is the continued tension between rejecting artificial sophistic eloquence and utilizing "true eloquence" and a Christian decorum of speaking and living to encourage virtuous living.

The debate about eloquence is a complex rhetorical and theological issue that hinges on a perception of hyperbolic excess. Lactantius, for example, is considered the

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<sup>80</sup> James J. Murphy writes, "It was a matter of the greatest moment, for upon its success depended the training of future apologists to defend doctrine against heresy, the formation of future poets to carry the Word of God to the people through literature, and the very education of the people themselves." See Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, 48. For further discussion of the political transformation from pagan to Christian society, see Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2003); Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Harvard University Press, 1993); Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Catherine M. Chin, *Grammar and Christianity in the Late Roman World* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); and Helmut Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995).

“Christian Cicero” for his eloquence, but he vehemently rejects the use of eloquence in his writings. In *Divine Institutes*, “Of Religion, Wisdom, and the Chief Good” and “Of Restraining the Pleasures of the Senses,” Lactantius suggests that virtue is a “beauty” while pleasure, a well known vice of excess as sin, is “not even a good,” is dangerous, and is not honorable.<sup>81</sup> Pleasure, as a hyperbolic figure of thought leading to embodied hyperbole, is to be despised for bringing the very feeling of excess, of “satiety,” and when the excessiveness of pleasure is itself in excess, it is “injurious” and a “deformity” – “Nothing is so hateful to God as an unchaste mind and an impure soul.”<sup>82</sup> He then equates pleasure with eloquence, which reinterprets pleasure tropologically and figurally thereby linking embodied excess itself to eloquence, and rejects excess/eloquence as dishonorable, injurious, and a deformity. He suggests those who are eloquent do not seek truth but pleasure and the appearance of truth, “which soothe[s] the ears” and captivates “by the sweetness of discourse.”<sup>83</sup> Thus, the issue of excess as pleasure/eloquence is a

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<sup>81</sup> In “Of Religion, Wisdom, and the Chief Good, he writes, “There is pleasure, which is desired by all; but this is common also to man with the beasts, and has not the force of the honourable, and brings a feeling of satiety, and when it is in excess is injurious, and it is lessened by advance of age, and does not fall to the lot of many... Therefore pleasure is not the chief good; but it is not even a good.” Lactantius, “Of Religion, Wisdom, and the Chief Good,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf07.iii.ii.iii.xi.html>> (2 November 2009).

In “Of Restraining the Pleasures of the Senses,” he also writes, “For a too great eagerness for pleasure both produces danger and generates disgrace, and that which is especially to be avoided, leads to eternal death. Nothing is so hateful to God as an unchaste mind and an impure soul. Nor let any one think that he must abstain from this pleasure only... but also from the other pleasures which arise from the rest of the senses, because they also are of themselves vicious, and it is the part of the same virtue to despise them.” See Lactantius, “Of Restraining the Pleasures of the Senses,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf07.iii.ii.viii.lviii.html>> (2 November 2009).

<sup>82</sup> In response to pleasure, Lactantius argues, “But nothing can be found more beautiful than virtue, nothing more worthy of a wise man. For if vices are to be avoided on account of their deformity, virtue is therefore to be desired on account of its beauty.” See Lactantius, “Of Religion, Wisdom, and the Chief Good,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf07.iii.ii.iii.xi.html>> (2 November 2009).

<sup>83</sup> For example, he writes, “But he who is carried away by hearing (to say nothing respecting songs, which often so charm the inmost senses that they even disturb with madness a settled state of the

rhetorical as well as theological concern, and rejecting excess on both levels of thought can be viewed as a stylistic resistance to figural depravity reflecting a concern regarding embodied hyperbole as sin in one's Christian life. The danger Lactantius highlights is that rhetorical excess, i.e., "an unchaste mind," might lead one to be "carried away by hearing" and "led aside to impious worship,"<sup>84</sup> i.e., "an impure soul." As the tropological representation of excess, hyperbole at the rhetorical or embodied level is rejected as sinful, and to escape the sin of excess, Lactantius denigrates eloquent artifice and pagan pleasure for substantive truth and virtue.

Unlike Tertullian's view of divine excess leading to the rhetorical abundance of "Christian ornament," Lactantius follows the more common view that all excess leads to a moral lack and vice, and he rejects eloquence-as-excess as sinful depravity outright. Gregory of Nazianzus, however, takes a different stance regarding eloquence, though not excess. He writes several encomia that show the structure and topics of the sophists, and Kennedy asserts that his encomium of Basil is "probably the masterpiece of sophistic Christian oratory."<sup>85</sup> Within the encomium, however, he (excessively) praises Basil for his restraint when utilizing eloquence, and he asserts the importance of eloquence when

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mind by certain elaborately composed speeches and harmonious poems, or skilful disputations) is easily led aside to impious worship. Hence it is that they who are either themselves eloquent, or prefer to read eloquent writings, do not readily believe the sacred writings, because they appear unpolished; they do not seek things that are true, but things that are pleasant; nay, to them those things appear to be most true which soothe the ears. Thus they reject the truth, while they are captivated by the sweetness of the discourse." See Lactantius, "Of Restraining the Pleasures of the Senses," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf07.iii.ii.viii.lviii.html>> (2 November 2009).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*, 164.



communicating ideas.<sup>86</sup> In a letter to Younger Nicobulus, Gregory again extols the importance of eloquence, a certain “grace,” that is to be restrained by moderation.<sup>87</sup> In the letter, Gregory is solely concerned with the ways Christian truth is communicated. He suggests that writings and orations should not be unadorned, but language must be “sweetened” through figures of speech that are “few and modest” and not “abused,” which “shews [sic] insatiability” and association with the sophists.<sup>88</sup> Gregory does not reject eloquence or its rhetorical devices, but he suggests that it must be used moderately and appropriately. Thus, decorum is shown again to be the vehicle for regulating rhetorical excess, and a Christian eloquence that relies only on a simple style further emerges.

Unlike the pagan rhetoricians who utilized various styles, only a simple style can enhance the substance of Christian truth because rhetorical excess reveals “insatiability” in one’s life. The fear, as with those before Gregory, is that figures and tropes in/of excess, the deceits of eloquence, may disrupt the moderation and balance one should

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<sup>86</sup> In the encomium, Basil writes of eloquence, “Eloquence was his by-work, from which he culled enough to make it an assistance to him in Christian philosophy, since power of this kind is needed to set forth the objects of our contemplation. For a mind which cannot express itself is like the motion of a man in a lethargy.” See Gregory of Nazianzus, “Funeral Oration on the Great S. Basil, Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia,” Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207.toc.html>> (3 November 2009).

<sup>87</sup> He writes, “The third point about a letter is grace: and this we shall safeguard if we do not write in any way that is dry and unpleasing or unadorned and badly arranged and untrimmed, as they call it; as for instance a style destitute of maxims and proverbs and pithy sayings, or even jokes and enigmas, by which language is sweetened. Yet we must not seem to abuse these things by an excessive employment of them. Their entire omission shews rusticity, but the abuse of them shews insatiability. We may use them about as much as purple is used in woven stuffs. Figures of speech we shall admit, but few and modest. Antitheses and balanced clauses and nicely divided sentences, we shall leave to the sophists, or if we do sometimes admit them, we shall do so rather in play than in earnest.” See Gregory of Nazianzus, “Letter LI to Nicobulus,” Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207.iv.viii.ii.html>> (3 November 2009).

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

hope to achieve through one's way of being in the world. This concern with eloquence is also observed in John Chrysostom's writing ("John the Golden-Tongued").

Like Gregory, Chrysostom understands the need for eloquence within Christian rhetoric. In On the Statutes, Chrysostom posits that an eloquence of style is helpful for avoiding tedium and creating variety, and he asserts, "The sermons *must* be varied and embellished; it *must* contain comparison, proofs, paraphrases, and the like, so that we may select what will profit our soul."<sup>89</sup> In this revealing passage, the importance of eloquence and figural embellishment is evident, and he states that "sermons *must* be varied and embellished" in order to "profit our soul."<sup>90</sup> There is a certain desperation in this passage that shows how important Chrysostom believes eloquence is for communicating the Christian message. The form and force of one's epistemological assertions *must* move one to a profitable way of being in the world, i.e., the Christian life, a particular ontological position. Thus, eloquence is not viewed as an excessive stylistic device but as a necessity, which is also revealed in Ambrose of Milan's distinction between secular eloquence (*sapientia saeculi*) and sacred eloquence (*sapientia spiritualis*). As is evident, the debate over eloquence is a controversial one, and the hyperbolic nature of language and ornamentation is feared for its de-stabilizing epistemological and ontological effects.

In reaction to sophistic eloquence and its excesses, rhetorical theologians reject excess in fear of rhetorical excesses leading to excesses of living. This threat of eloquence and its tropes and figures of excess, and thus hyperbole as the representative

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<sup>89</sup> John Chrysostom, On the Statutes; quoted in, Kennedy, Classical Rhetoric, 166, my emphasis.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., my emphasis.

tropological and figural representation of this excess, is equated with excessive pagan values that are disdained as sins, which results in the necessity of a Christian decorum of moderation when using eloquence at all. The troping of pagan values results in an anti-Christian excess that leads to a rejection of embodied excess as well as sophistic excess and, *mutatis mutandi*, hyperbole. In rhetorico-theological terms, the form of expression (the lie) is denigrated for the substance of the argument (the truth), and the fear of sin as an embodied hyperbole collapses the redemptive function of hyperbole into a soteriological misapprehension of ornamentation and eloquence, which makes the acceptance of eloquence in preaching a tenuous theological position that must be moderated through decorum. For many, the only “proper” manner to communicate the truth of God is through a simplicity of language that is viewed as undiluted by vice, untainted by sin, and free of obfuscation. Thus, the simple style of preaching known as the homily developed.

The homily became a popular style of sermon during the fourth century because it often lacked any figural expressions or attempt at a pleasing arrangement of ideas whatsoever.<sup>91</sup> Augustine, however, disparages the homily, and although he also shows a concern about eloquence and/as excess, he argues that eloquence is necessary when preaching in order to teach, to please, and move the audience. Thus, he does not connect eloquence to deceit or vice but to virtue. Eloquence and its rhetorical devices are not deceptions leading one to excessive living. Rather, eloquence and its tropes and figures are tools to be utilized in service to expounding upon and communicating Christian

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<sup>91</sup> Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, 55.

virtue, but eloquence is much more than just a tool for Augustine. It is a psycho-hermeneutical and spiritual necessity.

## AUGUSTINE

Although these previous Christian rhetoricians all contributed to the blending of rhetoric and Christianity, the most well known figure for his melding of Christianity and rhetoric is Augustine, and his complex contributions to rhetoric and Christianity merit an extended discussion. Much has been written of Augustine from a rhetorical perspective, and I will not recount those studies here.<sup>92</sup> For my argument, Augustine's stance regarding excess significantly differs from the other Christian rhetoricians of his time, but

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<sup>92</sup> For example, see Jeffrey Bullock, "Augustinian Innovation: A Spokesperson in a Post-Classical Age," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 20, no. 1 (1997) : 5-13; Tim Detwiler, "Viewing Robertson's Rhetoric in an Augustinian Mirror," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 11, no. 1 (1988) : 22-31; Richard Leo Enos and Roger Thompson et al., eds., *The Rhetoric of St. Augustine of Hippo: De Doctrina and the Search for a Distinctly Christian Rhetoric* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008); Keith V. Erickson, "The Significance of 'Doctrina' in Augustine's 'De Doctrina Christiana,'" *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 15 (1985) : 105-107; Gerald Fulkerson, "Augustine's Attitude toward Rhetoric in De Doctrina Christiana: The Significance of 2.37.55," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 15 (1985) : 108-111; W. R. Johnson, "Isocrates' Flowering: The Rhetoric of Augustine," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 9, no. 4 (1976) : 217-231; Michael C. Leff, "St. Augustine and Martianus Capella: Continuity and Change in Fifth-Century Latin Rhetorical Theory," *Communication Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (1976) : 2-9; Alexandre Leupin, *Fiction and Incarnation: Rhetoric, Theology, and Literature in the Middle Ages*, trans. David Laatsch (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2003); James J. Murphy, "Saint Augustine and the Christianization of Rhetoric," *Western Speech* (1958) : 24-29; James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetoric Theory from St. Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); James J. Murphy, "Saint Augustine and Rabanus Maurus: The Genesis of Medieval Rhetoric," *Western Speech* 31, no. 2 (1967) : 88-96; James J. Murphy, "Saint Augustine and the Debate about a Christian Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 46, no. 4 (1960) : 400-411; Gerald A. Press, "Doctrina in Augustine's De Doctrina Christiana," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 17, no. 2 (1984) : 98-120; Glenn H. Settle, "Faith, Hope, and Charity: Rhetoric as Aletheiac Act in On Christian Doctrine," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 17, no. 2 (1994) : 46-60; Christine Mason Sutherland, "Reforms of Style: St. Augustine and the Seventeenth Century," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1991) : 26-37; Dave Tell, "Augustinian Political Theory and Religious Discourse in Public Life," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 30, no. 2 (2007) : 213-235; Calvin L. Troop, "Augustine for Communication Scholars," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 28, no. 1 (2005) : 131-146; Calvin L. Troop, *Temporality, Eternity, and Wisdom: The Rhetoric of Augustine's Confessions* (University of South Carolina Press, 1999); and Stephen R. Yarbrough, "The Love of Invention: Augustine, Davidson, and the Discourse of Unifying Belief," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2000) : 29-46.

not from Tertullian. This is not surprising since, as I noted earlier, Tertullian was a major influence on Augustine.

On the one hand, like Tertullian and other Christian rhetoricians, Book IV of *De Doctrina Christiana* is a response to and an attack on sophistic excess – clarity is preferred to ornate, excessive speech. Augustine is also largely influenced by Cicero,<sup>93</sup> especially Cicero’s *Hortensius*,<sup>94</sup> and Calvin L. Troop suggests that Augustine attempted to become Cicero’s “ideal orator,”<sup>95</sup> which includes Cicero’s stance against the sophists. On the other hand, like Tertullian and in contrast to other Christian rhetoricians, Augustine fully accepts the use of eloquence and rhetorical devices, as he re-interprets them for a Christian context. Augustine also incorporates the three different styles of speaking – plain, moderate, and grand – into his homiletic theory, and he suggests that rhetorical excess and the grand style, where hyperbole may be employed, may be used with clarity when speaking about the extravagant things of God and in order to be

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<sup>93</sup> John D. Schaeffer writes, “If book 4 of the *De Doctrina* is read as advice on how to deliver an extemporaneous sermon, Augustine’s recommendations suggest that he is not simply opposing classical rhetoric: he is disavowing the rhetoric of the Second Sophistic movement and returning to the orally based rhetoric of republican Rome, which he is adapting to a textually based religion attended by an emerging sense of interiority.” See John D. Schaeffer, “The Dialectic of Orality and Literacy: The Case of Book 4 of Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*,” in *The Rhetoric of St. Augustine of Hippo: De Doctrina and the Search for a Distinctly Christian Rhetoric*, eds. Richard Leo Enos and Roger Thompson et al. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 291.

<sup>94</sup> Wendy Olmsted argues that in Augustine’s *Confessions*, he “rejects both the sophistic version of rhetoric as mere eloquence and the notion that argument should depend on subject matter alone – what James J. Murphy calls the ‘Platonic rhetorical heresy.’” See Wendy Olmsted, “Invention, Emotion, and Conversion in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” in *Rhetorical Invention and Religious Inquiry: New Perspectives*, eds. Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 65.

<sup>95</sup> Troop writes, “In his own time, reacting as Cicero did to Sophistic excesses, and conscientiously practicing a rhetoric that attempted to integrate style and substance, based on a love of wisdom and the end of achieving a happy life, Augustine attempts to become an ideal orator.” Troop, *Temporality, Eternity, and Wisdom*, 28.

persuasive, i.e., a Christian decorum of excess.<sup>96</sup> His integration of eloquence into preaching is, if not a replica, certainly an updated version of Tertullian's project. Augustine does develop a more complex Christian decorum of language, self, and preaching where rhetorical excess can be used effectively that is more influential than Tertullian's theory, but Augustine's view of excess is fairly identical to Tertullian's.

For Augustine, as for Tertullian, excess is both accepted/justified and rejected based on the context and the way it is used, and re-interpreting excess for a Christian context is a significant concern. For example, Augustine's interpretation of Ambrose's "sacred eloquence," a taming of sophistic (excessive) eloquence, has a prominent place in Augustine's rhetorical theory<sup>97</sup> and can be viewed as similar to Tertullian's argument for "Christian ornament." In both instances, sophistic excess is rejected, but a Christian rhetorical excess is accepted, which establishes a binary of hyperbolic excess and thereby a Christian decorum of excess.<sup>98</sup> Analogously, Augustine's sacred eloquence,

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<sup>96</sup> For example, he writes, "But when it is necessary to move and convince a listener by the grand style – as it is when one's opponent grants the truth and attractiveness of what is said, but is unwilling to act upon it – one must without doubt express himself *grandly*. But who is moved if he does not understand what is said, or whose attention is held if he is not pleased? Wherefore, in this style also, when an obdurate heart has to be bent by the grand manner of speech, unless the speaker makes himself both understood and enjoyed, he cannot make himself persuasive." See Saint Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1997), 4.26.58.

<sup>97</sup> See Amy K. Hermanson, "Religion's Rhetoric: Saint Augustine's Union of Christian Wisdom and Sophistic Eloquence," in *The Rhetoric of St. Augustine of Hippo: De Doctrina and the Search for a Distinctly Christian Rhetoric*, eds. Richard Leo Enos and Roger Thompson et al. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 311-314.

<sup>98</sup> "Augustine described temperance not as restraining all impulses but as restraining all competing impulses except one, so that love might give itself entirely and *without restraint* to that which is loved. On this view, the Greek ideal of moderation is set aside. Jesus' 'ethic of the extreme' gains supremacy over Aristotle's 'doctrine of the mean' and over the curbing of all passions in the Stoic ideal. According to Augustine, temperance and the other virtues are, so to speak, forms of *intemperate* love for God. There can never be too much love for God, nor too little of the impulses which impede it." See Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1950), 226.

Tertullian's Christian ornament, and Quintilian's elegant hyperbole stand in opposition to sophistic excess and/as extravagant hyperbole that violates decorum.

Augustine and Tertullian both argue that sophistic ornament is a "deceitful cosmetic," and they propose a Christian ornamental/sacred eloquent form constituted from and influenced by the substance of Christian truth as well as inward devotion to God – a unity of substance and form, eloquence and wisdom.<sup>99</sup> A telling passage regarding Augustine's view of excess occurs when he, like Tertullian and Cyprian, parallels sophistic eloquence with the ornamentation of women. Tertullian and Augustine engage in a troping of pagan values in order to discredit those values. Augustine cites Cyprian's "On the Dress of Virgins," and he says that those who have "discolored their faces with paint" are worse than adulterers.<sup>100</sup> He does not go so far as Cyprian who calls the vagina a "devil's gate," but he does write vehemently against the ornamentation of women's faces.

Augustine's concern is to establish a rhetorical Christian decorum while also psychologically connecting it to an embodied moral Christian decorum. For example, Augustine writes, "That you consider yourself adorned and beautiful, this is an insult to the divine work, a violation of truth," and he continues, "But can sincerity and truth remain when what is sincere is polluted, and when what is true is turned into a lie by

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<sup>99</sup> Augustine argues, "There are two things upon which every treatment of the Scriptures depends: the means of discovering what the thought may be, and the means of expressing what the thought is." See Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. Sister Therese Sullivan, 4.1.1, in *The Rhetoric of St. Augustine of Hippo: De Doctrina and the Search for a Distinctly Christian Rhetoric*, eds. Richard Leo Enos and Roger Thompson et al. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 35. Echoing Cicero, Augustine posits that the way an idea is expressed (homiletics) is just as important as discovering the idea through the interpretation of scripture (hermeneutics).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 4.21.48-49.

immodest coloring and deceitful cosmetics?”<sup>101</sup> This statement is certainly reminiscent of Tertullian’s treatise On the Apparel of Women, and it is also a now familiar view of sophistic excess polluting the truth and distorting one’s moral life – truth comes from God, and the adornment of humans is superfluous. Immodest and excessive cosmetics, as a violation of decorum, are deceitful and distort truth into a lie – the typical view of Christian rhetoricians regarding hyperbolic excess – hyperbole as figure of thought, e.g., pleasure, pollution, desire, moves towards a hyperbolic praxis as embodied hyperbole.<sup>102</sup> Just as for Tertullian, Augustine’s view of sophistic excess is entirely negative; however, associating truth with sincerity (an ethical expression of interiority emerging from the divine excess (desire) of charity and grace)<sup>103</sup> is an interesting psychological move that distinguishes Augustine’s position from Tertullian’s.<sup>104</sup> This move also establishes a Christian decorum of excess as distinct from sophistic excess.

Augustine’s connection of truth and sincerity to its rhetorical expression suggests that what one discovers hermeneutically is psychologically connected to the very expression of one’s spiritual interpretation. In this view, and in contrast to Tertullian, sophistic ornamentation does not just hinder or obfuscate communication, but it pollutes

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 4.21.49.

<sup>102</sup> In now familiar rhetorico-theological terms, embodied excess is connected to rhetorical excess, and eloquence remains a soteriological issue in terms of deceit, pollution, and lies, which is the problem of sophistic eloquence as well as human desires.

<sup>103</sup> See Olmsted, “Invention, Emotion, and Conversion,” 66-67; Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle, “Rhetorical Theology: Charity Seeking Charity,” in Rhetorical Invention and Religious Inquiry: New Perspectives, eds. Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 90; and Webb, “Hyperbolic Imagination,” 279-300.

<sup>104</sup> See Shuger, Sacred Rhetoric; Leupin, Fiction and Incarnation; and Sarah Spence, Rhetorics of Reason and Desire: Vergil, Augustine, and the Troubadours (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988). Spence, for example, writes, “The *Confessions* is not only the story of one life; it is the story of the conversion of an entire culture from one that set as its model the Isocratean orator to one that recognized the necessity of desire to rhetoric and tried to valorize its role” (56).



and alters the very substance of one's argument as well as one's inner self. Truth is actually "turned into a lie" through immodest ornamental deceit, and sincerity ceases to be sincere when "polluted."<sup>105</sup> Different from his predecessors who argued that sophistic eloquence, i.e., overblown and excessive speech, only deceives and hinders the communication of truth, the subtle argument Augustine makes is that sophistic excess actually alters one's inner life. Form is not simply a reflection of substance and one's life, but it can be a substantive distortion of truth and one's inner being. As a response to sophistic excess, and a critical redemptive turn for Christian excess, Augustine argues that maintaining decorum through sacred eloquence, i.e., "Christian ornament," is vital for one's preaching as well as one's Christian life since the hermeneutical process (substance) *and* its delivery (form) will generate the epistemological/ontological path to truth or ruin.

Augustine comes to this position on sacred eloquence, i.e., Christian excess, from two levels of thought/justification: decorum and an inner moral *ethos*. Michael C. Leff notes the first level in Augustine's thought when he writes, "The use of eloquence is justifiable, but only on the condition that it supports respectable ideas. Truly eloquent style has its origin in the message itself."<sup>106</sup> Eloquence, even with its excesses, is justified by substance, and the only eloquence that is worthy of a Christian orator comes from the message of truth itself, i.e., scripture. Establishing this sacred decorum is important for Augustine because, like Tertullian, it allows him to establish a sacred

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<sup>105</sup> Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 4.21.49.

<sup>106</sup> Michael C. Leff, "Saint Augustine and Martianus Capella: Continuity and Change in Fifth-Century Latin Rhetorical Theory," in *The Rhetoric of St. Augustine of Hippo: De Doctrina Christiana and the Search for a Distinctly Christian Rhetoric*, eds. Richard Leo Enos and Roger Thompson et al. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 240.

eloquence that utilizes rhetorical excess without falling into sophistic vice. Murphy writes, “Augustine postulates the existence of a new type of eloquence, ‘fitting for men most worthy of the highest authority and clearly inspired by God.’”<sup>107</sup> This new type of eloquence, with its tropes and figures, is the direct opposite of sophistic eloquence, and the same as Tertullian’s argument for a “Christian ornament.” Additionally, Augustine’s sacred eloquence posits the view of interpretation as “inspired by God” – a moral/psychological conception of invention as revelation – which suggests that form is not only derived from the substance of one’s argument but from an interior spiritual life, an inner moral *ethos*.

Augustine’s second level of thought regarding sacred eloquence – an inner moral *ethos* – is highlighted by Schaeffer. Contra Leff, and others like Christine M. Sutherland, Thomas O. Sloane, and Stanley Fish, Schaeffer argues that eloquence and style also come from the interiority of the speaker. Like Tertullian, Augustine contends that the interior life, a certain moral *ethos*, of the speaker is essential for developing the style of sermons.<sup>108</sup> Tertullian argues that a moderate inner life will lead to an exterior expression of Christian ornamentation (a Christian decorum of excess), and Augustine makes a similar argument.<sup>109</sup> It is the interior life, suggests Schaeffer, that is essential in Book IV. He writes, “Style may be adapted to the audience, to the subject, or to the

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<sup>107</sup> Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, 59.

<sup>108</sup> For example, Shuger argues, “Augustine, and subsequent Christian rhetoricians, therefore insist that true passion and eloquence flow from the interior motions of the Holy Spirit stirring the speaker’s heart and inflaming his words.” They do not abandon the trope of hyperbole or amplification, but attempt to establish a balance between art and grace, the exterior and interior. See Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 48.

<sup>109</sup> Augustine states, “Such a teacher [one of integrity] to render himself persuasive, may without presumption express himself not only in the subdued and in the moderate style, but also in the grand style, because his life is beyond reproach.” See Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 4.28.61.

effect desired, but it is always an authentic reflection of the preacher's interior state, which is achieved through a life of meditative reading and prayer."<sup>110</sup> The excesses of style, eloquence, and the passions are all to be governed by a moderate inner life (a psychological foundation for style) formed through reading and prayer.<sup>111</sup> The inner "noetic quest" of the spiritual life leads to knowledge, as faith, through the desired object that is God (*logos*), which results in a cultivation of the emotions (*pathos* or *affectus*), e.g., love.<sup>112</sup> Not only does substance affect form and vice versa, form is also governed by one's psychological spiritual life, which must be communicated appropriately (and passionately). Through sacred eloquence, form *and* substance are governed ontologically through an interior emotional life that leads to revelation of the excessive mysteries of God.

Augustine, like Aristotle, connects rhetoric to the emotions,<sup>113</sup> and these emotions must govern one's (excessive) speech through divine inspiration – language is a reflection of interiority. Because of the importance Augustine gives to emotions in general and hyperbolic emotions like charity or love in particular,<sup>114</sup> he must prove that the emotional aspect of rhetoric will aid in (re)orienting one's self towards the desired

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<sup>110</sup> Schaeffer, "The Dialectic of Orality and Literacy," 307.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 306-307.

<sup>112</sup> Shuger, "Philosophical Foundations," 55, 149.

<sup>113</sup> Debora K. Shuger, "The Philosophical Foundations of Sacred Rhetoric," in Rhetorical Invention and Religious Inquiry: New Perspectives, eds. Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 53. In contrast, "The influence of Boethius after Augustine would privilege the dispassionate nature of dialectic over rhetoric, but Augustinian Christianity, especially in the Renaissance, would "set affective inwardness over dispassionate intellection...in a way that links rather than opposes emotion and reason" (54).

<sup>114</sup> These terms are hyperbolic because they attempt to express the divine excess of God. The excess of God is the incomprehensible ideal, and thus, hyperboles are the most appropriate tropological expressions to attempt a description of this incomprehensibility.

object, i.e., God.<sup>115</sup> The linking of emotion and reason occurs because, for Augustine, passions (*pathos*) are derived from truth (*logos*) and the divine *logos* of excess (Christ).<sup>116</sup> Shuger writes (regarding the influence of Augustine on Renaissance rhetoric), “Affectivity, instead of being an irrational perturbation, thus moves into the center of spiritual experience.”<sup>117</sup> Thus, excess is appropriate when it is a divine excess communicated through language, but excess is inappropriate when it substantively distorts the revealed truth of God. In this sense, excess is not just a stylistic vice or an ornamental tool, but excessive emotion/passion can be redemptive or it can become a sin against the truth of God if one does not adhere to decorous expression.

Sacred eloquence is fostered and excess is inhibited by decorum and one’s inner spiritual life, i.e., one’s emotional state, and this interiority is connected to excessive passions like love and charity (hyperbolic terms), which all must come from God as well as substantive invention as a type of revelation derived from scripture.<sup>118</sup> For Augustine, excess can only come from God. This excess must be communicated effectively, and the most appropriate tropological expression of this excess is hyperbole, within a Christian

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<sup>115</sup> Shuger, “Philosophical Foundations,” 52.

<sup>116</sup> Noted at the beginning of this section, Christ himself is often viewed as the excessive expression of God’s divine grace. This divine *logos* of excess is the very embodiment of God that is the expenditure without reserve, i.e., uninhibited excess, of God’s love for creation. Christ is the figure of excess itself, and thereby, the very representation of hyperbole. In short, Christ is the hyperbolic representation of God’s love.

<sup>117</sup> Shuger, “Philosophical Foundations,” 53. The styles of rhetoric share a fairly contentious history, and it is not uncommon for Isocratean style to be compared to a Demosthenean style. The former is equated with an athlete and gymnastics of the mind while the latter is compared to the soldier, the warrior, and the battlefield. Isocratean style is contrasted with the Demosthenean grand style, its emotive force and passionate grandeur. For the Christian orator, this becomes a battle against sin. See Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 22, 124-126.

<sup>118</sup> The inhibition placed on excess (and style), then, is not wholly based on the substance of one’s argument, but it is largely due to one’s moderate inner life. One’s entire life of moderation, “clearly inspired by God,” will insure that sacred eloquence, including the grand style, is an authentic expression of substance, which is the truth of Christianity.

decorum of excess. God, the divine *logos* of excess as redemptive, is the excess that erupts into one's eloquence from interior devotion and prayer that inspires revelation. This divine excess is internalized and embodied in order to communicate one's revelation persuasively and appropriately. Interiority influences one's style, or form, and form alters substance while also being derived from substance. From this complexity, sacred eloquence emerges in contradistinction to sophistic eloquence. The embodiment of divine excess and its expression must be communicated appropriately and eloquently in one's sermon oration, and the tropological representation of this excess is hyperbole.

All of the "Church Fathers" affect the attitudes of Christian preachers toward excess and thereby hyperbolic tendencies of thought and language in the centuries to come, but none as much as Augustine. In the Middle Ages, however, theological views of excess related to style and eloquence are replaced with the rational discourse of dialectic. Those like Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, for example, take dialectic to new depths leading up to the Scholasticism of Anselm of Canterbury. *Inventio*, not *eloquentia*, becomes the only path of theology. Through Boethius, an abyssal opposition arises between eloquence as deceit and invention as certitude,<sup>119</sup> and eloquence is given over to dialectical inquiry and logic. The divine excess and sacred eloquence of Tertullian and Augustine is replaced with the calculated reason of logic. The tension between *inventio* and *eloquentia* is significant for hyperbole because tropes of excess like hyperbole and figures of excess like embodied hyperboles are largely abandoned for the definitive logic of dialectical truth. There is simply no room for hyperbolic excess in the realm of dialectic.

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<sup>119</sup> Thomas M. Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 100.

## HYPERBOLE BEYOND AUGUSTINE: THE PREACHING TRADITION OF THE MIDDLE AGES

Beyond Augustine into the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, preaching using a simple or plain style becomes rigorously instantiated, though preaching still maintained a certain *pathos* in order to persuade. A preacher's purpose is to convert and inflame passion in the audience, i.e., a conversion of emotions, but only through a plain style that jettisons artistic language and relies on psychological (Augustinian psychology) and theological argumentation guided by the Holy Spirit. Emotion and the effects of language come only from God,<sup>120</sup> which must not be contaminated by rhetorical excess. As with Augustine, excess erupted from a divine excess (a divine *logos* of excess), but it was contained, or controlled, within a plain, unadorned style.<sup>121</sup> Paradoxically, the use of emotions to persuade results in what some would call a grand plain style, but here, argument and dialectic are still privileged over eloquence and style. Rhetoric is denigrated, and dialectic is celebrated for its argumentative certitude. Eloquence and tropes are certainly considered to be useless since truth needs no adornment.

Despite the belittlement of rhetoric, the distrust of eloquence as deceitful, the disdain of rhetorical excess in preaching and more technical rhetorics, and the fear of excess in one's moral life, hyperbole is not altogether absent from the conversation. Ernst Robert Curtius asserts that a discussion of the link between hyperbole and epideictic, which is also noted by Greco-Roman rhetors, occurs in the Middle Ages regarding the ethical implications of "hyperbolical panegyric," or "panegyric 'outdoing,'" which leads to an "outdoing" *topos*. Curtius concludes that during the Middle Ages,

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<sup>120</sup> Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 51-53.

<sup>121</sup> The former from Tertullian, and the latter from Augustine.

especially in Christian rhetoric, “[The panegyric’s] chief trope is the hyperbole. The hyperbolic style is authorized not only by the pagan writers but also by the entire Bible.”<sup>122</sup> Again, there seems to be a binary of excess where “pagan” excess, i.e., secular eloquence, is rejected but Christian excess is accepted, i.e., sacred eloquence.

Mystical and apophatic theologians certainly employ the use of hyperbole within their discourse. Other medieval rhetorical theologians offer excessive arguments for the praise of God, panegyric sermons and poetry about the divine, and a defense of scripture’s rough rather than eloquent style. It is true that many theologians of Latin as well as medieval Christianity, e.g., Origen and Augustine, view scripture figuratively rather than literally and argue for a certain scriptural eloquence that reveals the mysteries of God, but their preferred figure is overwhelmingly metaphor rather than hyperbole. Perhaps the most overt link to hyperbole in medieval rhetoric is the use of *amplificatio*, but it remains disconnected from *elocutio*,<sup>123</sup> which serves to underscore again the distrust of deceitful eloquence as the lie of hyperbole.

Cassiodorus, Boethius, Priscian, Pope Gregory the Great, Isidore, Saint Bede, Alcuin, Hrabanus Maurus, Gerbert of Reims, Notker Labeo, and Alain de Lille all privilege argument over eloquence to prevent embellishment from distorting the substance of one’s argument. In fact, the Church’s attitude towards rhetoric at this time is that it should not be used in preaching at all.<sup>124</sup> Although rhetoric is still a subject of

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<sup>122</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 164.

<sup>123</sup> Walter J. Ong, S. J., *Ramus: Method, and the Decay of Dialogue from the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 213.

<sup>124</sup> Preaching in the Middle Ages became less and less important. Stephen H. Webb writes that the liturgical calendar became more important during the period preceding the Middle Ages, and the festal sermon became popular. He states, “By the fifth century, more and more worship services had a reading of

study at his time, it is only one of seven arts: the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic) and the quadrivium (geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music). The trivium is particularly for younger students.<sup>125</sup> It is not until the *ars praedicandi* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, leading into the Renaissance, that preaching begins to change from the homily to the “thematic” sermon and eloquence regains some importance.<sup>126</sup> The Dominican and Franciscan monastic preaching orders of the thirteenth century begin to develop more fully the treatises devoted to the arts of preaching, which are decisively more Ciceronian than Boethian.<sup>127</sup> The Cistercians also revive preaching somewhat by developing a more simplified liturgy.<sup>128</sup> Scholastic commentators beginning with Abelard remain loyal to Boethius through their construction of unadorned university

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the Scripture without a preaching of the Word.” See Stephen H. Webb, The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 113. At this time hagiography became prominent even over scripture. Lectionary preaching also became popular since most priests could not compose a well-organized sermon. In the eighth century catechetical preaching became important to establish cultural uniformity, and the same sermons were preached year after year. “Homilies” were sample sermons that priests could give verbatim (114). There seems to be “a direct correlation between the systemization of the liturgy and the decline of preaching” (115).

<sup>125</sup> Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication (Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 26. See also Walter J. Ong, S. J., Ramus: Method, and the Decay of Dialogue from the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 198.

<sup>126</sup> See Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, eds., The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001), esp. 525-528; Harry Caplan, Of Eloquence: Studies in Ancient and Mediaeval Rhetoric (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), esp. 105-134; Thomas M. Conley, Rhetoric in the European Tradition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990); Edward P. J. Corbett, Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), esp. 548-550; George A. Kennedy, A New History of Classical Rhetoric (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); George A. Kennedy, Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999); and James J. Murphy, Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetoric Theory from St. Augustine to the Renaissance (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974);

<sup>127</sup> Conley, Rhetoric in the European Tradition, 96. William of Auvergne, Robert of Basevorn, Raymond Llull, and Richard of Thetford all concentrated on a strong Ciceronian eloquence, an abundance of eloquence (*copia*), amplification, and are anti-Boethian (96-97). The Dominicans were even known as the “Order of Preachers.” See Webb, Divine Voice, 115.

<sup>128</sup> Webb, Divine Voice, 115. For example, Bernard of Clairvaux began a golden age of preaching that lasted from 1125-1274.



sermons, but these more practical monastic preachers and teachers promote the eloquence of the Ciceronian ideal.

Medieval rhetorics continue to struggle between excessive passions and eloquence, but discussions of *elocutio* largely disappear from more technical discussions of rhetoric and are replaced by a concern for the ethical behavior of the orator, which is tied more to dialectical argumentation than rhetoric.<sup>129</sup> Passions do not move but contribute to intellectual argumentation. It is not eloquence that persuades but a psychological mindset driven by simple, passionate expression within the substance of argument itself.<sup>130</sup> The excess of passions is thus suppressed through the intellectual dialectic of Scholasticism, and *elocutio* is separated from *inventio*. This position changes in the Renaissance where tropes and figures like hyperbole and amplification are not largely viewed as stylistic vices but as generators of imagination, inspiration, and the path to God,<sup>131</sup> and the Augustinian psychology of the will and emotion is dominant.

Outside of the purview of the preaching tradition, there are interesting theological and social developments regarding excess. First, a fascination with martyrdom, asceticism, mysticism, and saintliness becomes more extreme during the Middle Ages as well as fantastical descriptions of hell and divine retribution, e.g., Dante's hyperbolic poetry (part of the "outdoing" *topos* described by Curtius) and Dionysus the Areopagite's

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<sup>129</sup> Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 51.

<sup>130</sup> Peter T. King describes this mental architecture as "sub-personal functional mechanisms [that] are identified and organized into faculties; these faculties causally interact such that one reduces another from potency to act, perhaps through the intermediary of a mental representation (called a *species*), thereby giving rise to psychological phenomena." See Peter T. King, "The Inner Cathedral: Mental Architecture in High Scholasticism," *Vivarium* 46, no. 3 (2008) : 254.

<sup>131</sup> For example, see John Prideaux's *Sacred Eloquence* as highlighted in Ettenhuber's essay. Prideaux argues that hyperboles, and particularly "Sublime Hyperboles," allow one to make contact with God. Ettenhuber, "Hyperbole," 205-206.

use of the “hyper-negative” to describe and argue theologically for the incomprehensibility of God.<sup>132</sup> Paradoxically, while rhetorical excess is frequently rejected in discourse, its embodiment is often praised through rhetorical excess, e.g., the “hyperbolical panegyric.” To be sure, martyrdom was also praised by those like Tertullian and Cyprian, and it was a significant concern while Christians were sought out and persecuted. Yet, the writings of the Middle Ages transition from martyrdom to Christian asceticism (*askesis*), i.e., embodied hyperbole as the extreme training of the body and the soul. A significant interest in prophecy and apocalyptic discourse contribute to this development and call for those obedient to Christianity to prepare, or train (*askesis*), themselves for the coming apocalypse. Through asceticism and apocalyptic discourse, excess is given a positive teleology that was previously only reserved for moderation.

Second, a fascination with the grotesque (discussed in chapter four) leads to hyperbolic actions such as the carnival and the carnivalesque described by Mikhail Bakhtin<sup>133</sup> as well as hyperbolic literary forms such as the exaggerated grotesque of burlesque literature. These hyperbolic forms occur in the Middle Ages but gain

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<sup>132</sup> All mystical rhetoric is premised on a certain amount of hyperbole since its purpose is to describe the incomprehensible and unintelligible. Boyle writes, “This exaggeration of language is evident in the mystical predilection for hyperbole and exclamation and for the imagery of eroticism and intoxication.” See Boyle, “Rhetorical Theology,” 92. In terms of Dionysian theology, his hyper-negative (mystical) apophatic theology aspires to reach what it cannot reach, which is the precise function of hyperbole. Carlson writes of Dionysus’s language, “Literally hyperbolic, such language throws the subject of language beyond both its language and its subjectivity, into a ‘nowhere’ or ‘nothing’ of experience.” See Thomas A. Carlson, “Apophatic Analogy: On the Language of Mystical Unknowing and Being-Toward-Death,” in *Rhetorical Invention and Religious Inquiry: New Perspectives*, eds. Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 202. Again noting its hyperbolic element, Carlson writes, “The rhetoric of apophasis, by attempting to transcend language through language, serves as the indispensable vehicle for a spiritual practice that seeks a knowledge of the unknowable” (198).

<sup>133</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). See also David K. Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995).

momentum in the Renaissance, the Baroque, and Romanticism. Geoffrey Galt Harpham describes grotesqueries as standing “at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles.”<sup>134</sup> In Harpham’s understanding, the grotesque (a type of hyperbolic form) serves a positive function that expands one’s imagination rather than leading to vice. In like manner, Bakhtin argues that the carnival inverts social hierarchies when grotesque bodies are positively exaggerated, “hyperbolized,” to assert the impossibility that the poor are royalty in order to reveal the truth (the possible) that all hierarchies are based on social fictions. Embodied hyperboles and exaggerated concepts, e.g., the gargantuan, the colossal, the titanic, serve a positive role to reveal truths typically unacknowledged.<sup>135</sup>

Third, more complex theological arguments on the doctrine of God begin to develop, and they all must address God’s place or role in the universe and creation, especially in regard to other theological doctrines such as Christology, atonement, and eschatology. This ontological emphasis on transcendence and immanence as well as incarnation and *telos* leads inexorably to the question of excess in theology, e.g., God as excess in and/or through Creation, Christ’s sacrifice as excessive atonement for excessive sin, God as beyond description. A significant concern of theologians at this time is to attempt to prove the existence of God through logical argumentation. For example,

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<sup>134</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature (Aurora: The Davies Group, Publishers, 2006), 3. See also Virginia E. Swain, Grotesque Figures: Baudelaire, Rousseau, and the Aesthetics of Modernity (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

<sup>135</sup> Parody, caricature, melodrama, and satire are also styles that can be construed as hyperbolic, but the grotesque is a wholly hyperbolic form while these other styles are often more ironic than hyperbolic.

Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century offers the ontological proof of God's existence suggesting, and parroting Quintilian, that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived.<sup>136</sup> This is an interesting argument of *incrementum* that is a species of *auxesis*, which is a species of hyperbole (discussed in detail in the following chapters).<sup>137</sup> Yet, those like the Scholastic theologian Thomas Aquinas refute Anselm's argument.<sup>138</sup> Influenced by the rhetorical writings of Aristotle, Cicero, Ambrose, and Augustine, Aquinas offers an interesting view of excess, and as an example, I will briefly note Aquinas's view of excess towards sin and worship – a Christian binary of hyperbolic excess.

In "Whether Ambition is a Sin" of Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, he asserts, "The desire for good should be regulated according to reason, and if it exceed this rule it will be sinful. In this way it is sinful to desire honor in disaccord with the order of reason."<sup>139</sup> Reason is the mean, and any deviation from the mean is excessive, i.e., sinful. Even the virtue of honor may become sinful through excess. As stated previously, equating sin with excess is not surprising since sin "misses the mark," and hyperbole "overshoots the

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<sup>136</sup> Quintilian writes that *incrementum* can "proceed at once to something than which nothing greater can be named." See Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.4.7.

<sup>137</sup> One might also conceive of this argument as an argument of unlimited development that terminates at the ideal term. Only hyperbole, and litotes, can rescue the development from infinite expansion according to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. See Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 290-292.

<sup>138</sup> Anselm's argument holds sway for some time, but those like the Benedictine monk Guanilo in the late eleventh century argue against Anselm's argument. In Guanilo's "The Reply on behalf of the Fool," he asserts that if Anselm's argument were applied to any other topic, then it would seem ridiculous. Thomas Aquinas also refutes Anselm's argument, though somewhat more eloquently, by offering five "proofs" in which the existence of God might be demonstrated. One could argue that the refutation of Anselm's argument actually occurs because it ends the project of theology itself by terminating at the ideal term and dispensing with superfluous hyperbolic expressions about the ideal term.

<sup>139</sup> Aquinas, "Whether Ambition is a Sin," in *Summa Theologica*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <[http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.SS\\_Q131\\_A1.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.SS_Q131_A1.html)> (14 November 2009).

mark.” Viewed rhetorico-theologically, sin is a hyperbolic figure of thought that becomes an embodied hyperbole. More precisely, sin is the lie of hyperbole and a negative excess. Reason is the truth, and embodied hyperbole-as-sin is a lie intended to deceive. If hyperbole is a lie on the side of truth, as Seneca and Quintilian assert, then the function of hyperbole is to assert what is incredible to arrive at the credible, but for Aquinas, this redemptive hyperbolic function is denied. However, when speaking about God rather than human desires, Aquinas has a very different view of hyperbole’s excessive function.

In “Whether there can be any Excess in the Worship of God,” Aquinas offers a brief explication of excess – dividing it between absolute quantity and quantity of proportion – and he concludes by stating that there is no excess in worship.<sup>140</sup> What Aquinas reveals in this statement is the inverse supposition that there is actually nothing but excess in worship. Worship is completely hyperbolic thereby establishing a decorum of excess for worship. Excess is appropriate for worship because worship (form) is contingent upon the object being worshipped (subject matter, substance)<sup>141</sup> and the internal state of one’s soul, or mind. Not surprisingly, Augustine’s theological argument about rhetorical eloquence is almost exactly like Aquinas’s theological argument about

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<sup>140</sup> Aquinas writes, “A thing is said to be in excess in two ways. First, with regard to absolute quantity, and in this way there cannot be excess in the worship of God, because whatever man does is less than he owes God. Secondly, a thing is in excess with regard to quantity of proportion, through not being proportionate to its end. Now the end of divine worship is that man may give glory to God, and submit to Him in mind and body. Consequently, whatever a man may do conducing to God’s glory, and subjecting his mind to God, and his body, too, by a moderate curbing of the concupiscences, is not excessive in the divine worship, provided it be in accordance with the commandments of God and of the Church, and in keeping with the customs of those among whom he lives.” See Aquinas, “Whether there can be any Excess in the Worship of God,” in *Summa Theologica*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <[http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.SS.ii.SS\\_Q93.SS\\_Q93\\_A2.html?highlight=excess#highlight](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.SS.ii.SS_Q93.SS_Q93_A2.html?highlight=excess#highlight)> (14 November 2009).

<sup>141</sup> “Substance” is used here in a rhetorical, not a theological, sense.

God and worship, which indicates that eloquent speech for Augustine is a type of worship as praise to/of God through speaking. For Augustine and Aquinas, a certain decorum as well as an inner spiritual state must be present for proper worship, or sacred eloquence. Aquinas argues that “a moderate curbing of the concupiscences” is a prerequisite for the worship of God, but nothing offered to God is enough since one can never exceed the quantity or proportionality of the object being worshipped. Yet, as I have noted, hyperbole is not intended to throw beyond all reason and knowledge, which is more the function of the sublime or *adynaton*.

Hyperbole asserts the incredible to arrive at the credible; it lies on the side of truth. In Aquinas’s argument, God (the truth) is the impossible, and worship (the unrecognized falsehood) is the possible. He argues, within a classical theistic paradigm, that there is no excessive form of worship because excess itself is the appropriate and proportional response to the ideal concept of God, i.e., only hyperbolic assertions about God are possible. The lies of hyperbole are attempts to describe God, which is impossible, but these falsehoods are not intended to deceive. The lie of hyperbole functions here to reveal truths about God through language, which makes worship hyperbolic. Just as Anselm makes God the amplified term, i.e., through *incrementum*, in his ontological argument for God’s existence, Aquinas makes the same move. God is the extraordinary subject matter requiring excessive amplification in Aquinas’s decorum of excess. Hyperbole is a bridge between transcendence and immanence, infinity and finite assertions. Thus, Aquinas’s argument hinges on the function of hyperbole to assert the impossible in order to arrive at the possible.

As asserted earlier, these are subtle arguments regarding the excess of hyperbole. From the Church Fathers through the Middle Ages, hyperbole is rarely specifically referenced. Implicitly, either the error of sin and vice – embodied hyperboles – is discussed; or, divine excess as hyperbolic excess that must be appropriately expressed is posited – worship, martyrdom, and asceticism, and a paradoxical binary of excess is revealed. It is the misapprehending of hyperbole's function that causes hyperbole to be equated with sin. If the lie of hyperbole is taken on its own, then it is viewed as sin, but when hyperbole is allowed to function at its full potential, it is viewed as sacred excess for purposefully revealing truths and correcting moral ineptitudes. The misapprehension of hyperbole distorts its purpose, and it is viewed only as a lie.

A renewed interest in hyperbole as a trope does not occur until the Renaissance when the trope is explicitly discussed by numerous writers. In the Renaissance, much from the Middle Ages is overturned and reversed, including a renewed importance of rhetoric.<sup>142</sup> In rhetorical theory, tropes and figures regain prominence, and style and eloquence are again preferred over the cold logic of dialectic in order to impassion one's audience and move them to conversion. A Christian grand style is developed, and hyperbole is elevated to a status that is second only to metaphor. In fact, Christian rhetors argue that it is only through hyperbole that one can glimpse the beauty of God. It is to the Renaissance that I now turn.

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<sup>142</sup> Conley, Rhetoric in the European Tradition, 109.

## HYPERBOLE IN RENAISSANCE RHETORICAL THEORY (AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT)

The Renaissance is an important era for rhetorical theory as well as Christian theology and preaching through a renewed interest in Classical texts and rhetoric, “true eloquence,” that defined the humanism of the time.<sup>143</sup> Christian rhetoricians contribute significantly to theology, rhetorical theory, and the overall culture and aesthetic of the Renaissance. This “sacred rhetoric,” argues Debora K. Shuger, “is not a narrowly specialized compartment of the history of Renaissance rhetoric but its most vital and reflective branch.”<sup>144</sup> Rather than simply Ciceronianizing religious discourse like the Church Fathers, sacred rhetorics exhibit “a theoretical concern for language, making them articulate witnesses to the sacred aesthetics of the Renaissance.”<sup>145</sup> By linking style to passion, renewing an interest in sophistic discourse, and suggesting that “passion with its figures and tropes is also the language of divine disclosure,”<sup>146</sup> sacred rhetorics offer fertile ground for hyperbole. A significant influence for sacred rhetoricians’ view of excess is Augustine’s combination of divine wisdom and sacred eloquence as well as his concern for emotion and Christian inwardness.<sup>147</sup>

Most of Renaissance rhetorical theory, especially sacred rhetoric, is based upon Augustinian psychology that unites the passions and the will thereby associating style with interiority rather than exteriority. As noted previously, Greco-Roman pagan rhetoric

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 13.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 8-13.



views style, generally speaking, as only external ornamentation to be added appropriately to one's substantive argument, i.e., to be decorous, in order to teach, to please, and to move the audience. The sophists exceed this stance and view ornamentation as useful to gain applause by bringing pleasure to the audience, and in the process, the sophists engage in self-aggrandizement for their own sake. For Augustine, ornamentation is viewed as an external expression of internal passions that are nurtured through prayer and the Holy Spirit, which is a sacramental view of language: "Passionate discourse thus imitates the movement of thought and feeling, the contours of the speaker's inner life."<sup>148</sup> The proof of the orator's power is replaced with the power of the object of desire to inspire. The human artist is diminished so that the glory of God may be revealed. An orator in the service of God, Thomas Traherne writes, "Can never Exceed, nor be too high."<sup>149</sup> The use of rhetoric and its figures and tropes is not to be used for self-aggrandizement but to teach, to please, and to move one towards an emotional, inner conversion inspired by God thereby providing a positive place for hyperbole in persuasive discourse. As many Christian Renaissance rhetoricians iterate, the end of persuasion and preaching is conversion, i.e., persuasion is conversion and vice versa.<sup>150</sup> As Kenneth Burke might put it, identification is persuasion.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>149</sup> Ettenhuber, "Hyperbole," 206.

<sup>150</sup> Erasmus also asserts that the end of theology is conversion based on his views of Augustinian rhetorical theory. See Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977) and Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, Rhetoric and Reform: Erasmus' Civil Dispute with Luther (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

The real boon for rhetorical theory at this time is the privileging of eloquence over the Scholasticism of the Middle Ages, who Erasmus allies with the animals.<sup>151</sup> For Renaissance humanists, the abstract, speculative intellectualism of the Scholastics failed to engage the relevant, practical matters of life.<sup>152</sup> The humanists view Scholasticism as an act of dialectical logic through the intellect, judgment, and comprehension, and its religious end is contemplation.<sup>153</sup> In contrast, rhetoric seeks a movement of emotions (*affectus*) and the will to gain assent.<sup>154</sup> Through rhetoric and decorum, an extravagance, sublimity, and tropological fecundity are expressed through the ideal of eloquence and the theological virtue of charity.<sup>155</sup> Excessive tropes like hyperbole are given a pride of place, and metaphor, considered at times even by Aquinas to be “chaff,”<sup>156</sup> is almost dethroned as the predominant trope in rhetorical theory.<sup>157</sup>

These developments offer a space for the re-interpretation of hyperbole in a more positive way. Renaissance rhetorical theorists are still concerned with the view of hyperbole as a lie, but they re-shape this conception into a decorum of excess where

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<sup>151</sup> Boyle, “Rhetorical Theology,” 88.

<sup>152</sup> “Christian humanists such as Erasmus and Juan Vives attacked Scholastic contemplation as proud curiosity and promoted instead a Christian ethics that could inform everyday life.” See Joshua Scodel, *Excess and the Mean in Early Modern English Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 71. Interestingly, Scodel does not mention hyperbole in his work, which overtly discusses excess.

<sup>153</sup> Boyle, “Rhetorical Theology,” 90.

<sup>154</sup> Scodel, *Excess and the Mean*, 89.

<sup>155</sup> Boyle, “Rhetorical Theology,” 90. Scodel also writes, “Christian humanists such as Erasmus and Juan Vives attacked Scholastic contemplation as proud curiosity and promoted instead a Christian ethics that could inform everyday life.” See Scodel, *Excess and the Mean*, 71.

<sup>156</sup> Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle, “Chaff: Thomas Aquinas’s Repudiation of His *Opera omnia*,” *New Literary History* 28 (1997): 383-399.

<sup>157</sup> Stanivukovic asserts, “The abundance of hyperbole in Renaissance texts is a testimony to the fact that, in literature of that period, attention was paid to detail, and meaning was sought in individual elements of style as well as in larger structures.” See Stanivukovic, “Mounting Above the Truth,” 30.

hyperbole becomes an appropriate literary virtue, a lie on the side of truth. Stanivukovic writes, “Renaissance writers often turn the deception implied by hyperbole into a literary virtue. Based on the manipulation of lie and truth within the very form of the trope, deception through hyperbole helped Renaissance writers explore the problem of appearance and reality, not only in large structures but in a compact stylistic form as well.”<sup>158</sup> Rather than being equated with mere appearance and ornamentation, i.e., a linguistic lie, hyperbole actually helps Renaissance writers to explore the problem of appearance and reality, i.e., hermeneutical truth(s).<sup>159</sup> Renaissance writers construct a theory of hyperbole that is more complex, and as with Quintilian, the deceit of hyperbole is epistemologically necessary. The alleged vice of excess thus becomes a virtue, though still in moderation.

In 1777, Joseph Priestley writes, “The reason why the hyperbole is, in appearance, a greater violation of truth than most other figures, is only this, that in the hyperbole the untruth lies in the *affirmation itself*.”<sup>160</sup> In this sense, hyperbole is a tropological short circuit that carries the listener directly to the recognition that all tropes and figures carry an element of untruth within them since they are not literal but figurative statements. Other tropes and figures are eventually revealed as lies intended to reveal some truth, but hyperbole is a “*lowd lyer*” that shocks the audience into the untruth of the lie in order to take them to another alternative truth or version of reality. Renaissance writers re-explore the intricate functions of hyperbole; however, caution is still encouraged when

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>159</sup> “A lie, expressed in linguistic terms, becomes truth on a hermeneutical level. Hyperbole thus acts a generator of meaning.” Ibid., 17.

<sup>160</sup> Joseph Priestley, A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism (1777); quoted in Vickers, “The Rhetoric of Hyperbole,” 146.

using hyperbole and excess in one's style. Hyperbole is celebrated, but it is also mistrusted. The productive excessiveness Renaissance writers perceive in hyperbole can be too excessive even when exploring the transcendence of the divine, the sublime, the magnificent, and the wondrous through language.

The key for these writers is the attempt to communicate the “beyond” of thought and language – to make the transcendent immanent and define the infinite in finite terms. To do this, a heightened style, eloquence, and rhetorical ornamentation must be proportionate to the excellence of the subject being discussed. Decorum must be maintained. Yet, more than adhering to a grand style, these writers re-contextualize the functions of hyperbole to develop a type of hyperbolic style or decorum of excess often expressed through the epideictic genre.<sup>161</sup> Connecting hyperbole to epideictic is not an uncommon (discussed in the following chapter). Greco-Roman theorists note this connection, Augustine views sacred eloquence as praise of God through language, and Aquinas realizes the necessity of excess for worship, but Renaissance writers make the link of hyperbole to epideictic explicit and more intricate theoretically.

In this section, I will offer an explication of hyperbole during the Renaissance, and I will explore the views of excess held by the sacred and secular rhetorics of humanist writers. What I will find is that hyperbole continues to be a contentious term as well as a trope that offers epistemological and ontological playfulness within rhetorical theory and rhetorical theology.

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<sup>161</sup> For a discussion of hyperbole and epideictic outside of the preaching tradition, see J. A. Burrow, *The Poetry of Praise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

## “SECULAR” HUMANIST RHETORIC AND HYPERBOLE

Although Christian rhetoricians argue for the uses of amplification, magnitude, passionate speech, and hyperbole in the grand style, other rhetoricians discuss the function and form of hyperbole more explicitly. George Puttenham, in his hugely influential Arte of English Poesie (1569), asserts of hyperbole:

I for his [hyperbole] immoderate excesse cal him the ouer reacher right with his originall or [*lowd lyer*]...and this maner of speach is vsed, when either we would greatly aduance or greatly abase the reputation of any thing or person, and must be vsed very discretely, or els it will seeme odious, for although a prayse or other report may be allowed beyond credit, it may not be beyond all measure.<sup>162</sup>

Puttenham’s caution is to use hyperbole “discretely.” He also places it in the genre of epideictic oratory, which makes the use of hyperbole context specific thereby limiting hyperbole’s scope. Classical manuals of rhetoric also note the use of panegyric hyperbole, but Puttenham’s connection is overt.<sup>163</sup> For Puttenham, hyperbole is to be used discretely when the appropriate situation arises, e.g., a situation that calls for epideictic oratory, but even when praising or blaming, Puttenham is not favorably inclined towards hyperbole. The problem with hyperbole for him is not that it lies but that it is a “*lowd lyer*.” For Puttenham, as for Longinus, the deceit of hyperbole should be concealed and used discretely. Discretion and moderation must be used to temper the effect of hyperbole because praise may not be “beyond all measure;” or, as Quintilian says, beyond belief.

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<sup>162</sup> George Puttenham, Arte of English Poesie (1569), 159-160, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, <<http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=PutPoes.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=al>> (17 November 2009).

<sup>163</sup> For a further discussion of epideictic in the Renaissance, see O. B. Hardison, Jr., The Enduring Moment: A Study of the Idea of Praise in Renaissance Literary Theory and Practice (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962).

In The Garden of Eloquence (1593), Henry Peacham also connects hyperbole to epideictic, but more subtly, and Peacham asserts that hyperbole must be employed when describing things that are beyond description.<sup>164</sup> Not only does hyperbole succeed by drawing attention to itself, contra Puttenham, but it translates figurative language into emotional meaning – moving an audience through excessive praise.<sup>165</sup> Hyperbole bridges the gap between what is spoken and what is meant, as Thomas Wilson also posits in Arte of Rhetorique (1553).<sup>166</sup> Stanivukovic asserts that “an incredible, exaggerated utterance interrupts the language and logic of the existing argument,” by shifting “one level of meaning to another, re-invented meaning.”<sup>167</sup> In this sense, hyperbole is abstract and ambiguous through its description of something that cannot be described, i.e., the attempted apprehension of something that is beyond thought and/or language. Attaining the ideal is impossible. Hyperbole attempts this feat, but it does not intend to reveal complete comprehension of the ideal, which would devalue the thought or feeling hyperbole evokes. For Peacham, this attempt at comprehending the incomprehensible is

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<sup>164</sup> He writes, “This figure Cicero useth much in the praises of Pompey, He hath made saith he (meaning Pompey) moe battels then others have read, and conquered moe provinces then others have desired. Now in this excesse of his praise, Cicero meant not so much as he spake, but by making an incredible report, he doth signifie that the noble actes of Pompey were so worthy, and his victories so many, that they were almost incredible.” See Henry Peacham, The Garden of Eloquence: Tropes of Sentences (1593), The Perseus Digital Library, <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.03.0082%3Ahead%3D%2359>> (24 November 2009).

<sup>165</sup> “By highlighting the limits of figuration and productively destabilising the reader’s views of linguistic norms and conventions, it encourages active reflection on the different ways in which meaning is constructed and communicated.” See Ettenhuber, “Hyperbole,” 210.

<sup>166</sup> “Mounting aboue the trueth, is when wee doe set forth things exceedingly and aboue all mens expectation, meaning onely that they are very great.” See Thomas Wilson, Arte of Rhetorique (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), 183. Writing of Wilson’s assertions, Carla Mazzio posits that hyperbole suggests “something more complex than polemical vehemence.” See Carla Mazzio, The Inarticulate Renaissance: Language Trouble in an Age of Eloquence (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 53.

<sup>167</sup> Stanivukovic, “Mounting Above the Truthe,” 20.

a strength of hyperbole because it furthers one's imagination by asserting what is "almost incredible" through a type of "functional ignorance."<sup>168</sup>

Puttenham and Peacham are representative examples of the positive and negative views regarding hyperbole in the secular rhetorics of the time. Philip Sidney, in Defence of Poesy, argues that hyperbole can transform the audience.<sup>169</sup> John Hoskyns, in Directions for Speech and Style (1599) and Gabriel Harvey, in Ciceronianus (1577), also discuss hyperbole and amplification,<sup>170</sup> and they suggest that the use of tropes and figures must be appropriate to the substance of the argument. As with most rhetorical theorists discussed thus far, arguing for a decorum of excess is one way theorists attempted to limit as well as to give hyperbole a proper place within discourse.<sup>171</sup> Hoskyns echoes the definitions of hyperbole by Seneca and Quintilian by suggesting that hyperbole's articulation "beyond the truth" (the incredible) will descend to the truth (the credible), or that the "flat impossibility" of hyperbole may highlight "the unspeakableness than the untruth of the relation."<sup>172</sup> Noel Malcolm writes of the use of hyperbole in "nonsense poetry" of the Renaissance: "It makes reference to impossible things not because it is trying to describe an impossible world...but as a rhetorical figure, to emphasize and

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<sup>168</sup> As Ettenhuber's analysis of Peacham concludes, "Hyperbole asserts the importance of partial blindness and functional ignorance; the notion of complete comprehension devalues the thought or feeling that hyperbole evokes." See Ettenhuber, "Hyperbole," 210.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>170</sup> Stanivukovic, "Mounting Above the Truth," 14-15.

<sup>171</sup> As will become evident, attempting to rescue hyperbole by suggesting that its appropriate uses lie within the purview of epideictic discourse as well as arguing for a hyperbolic decorum are important, but they are also limiting in many ways. Epideictic discourse limits hyperbole to a certain ideal being discussed, and a hyperbolic decorum limits hyperbole's force or shock value as a trope or as a figurative mode of discourse.

<sup>172</sup> John Hoskyns, "Sidney's *Arcadia* and Rhetoric," in English Renaissance Literary Criticism, ed., Brian Vickers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 412.

dramatize impossibility itself.”<sup>173</sup> For Renaissance writers, hyperbole does not assert impossibilities and absurdities for their own sake, but to reveal the function that impossibility may have for meaning itself. The attempt by all of these theorists is to utilize the function of hyperbole to extend and play with meaning as well as to attempt to describe the impossible and create a sense of “wonder” by over-reaching the bounds of language.

Others write of the uses of hyperbole in Elizabethan drama and poetry as well as Tudor poetics,<sup>174</sup> which is beyond the scope of this project, but the overall attitude towards hyperbole in the Renaissance is that paradox, obscurity, and ambiguity all serve to avoid the trite and obvious in order to reveal life, force, wonder, and *energeia*.<sup>175</sup> The same is true for Christian rhetoricians, and I will now focus on the sacred rhetorics of the Renaissance. If the secular rhetorics of the Renaissance were concerned explicitly with

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<sup>173</sup> Noel Malcolm, The Origins of English Nonsense (Hammersmith: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 84.

<sup>174</sup> For example, see Vickers, “The Rhetoric of Hyperbole;” Harry Levin, The Overreacher: A Study of Christopher Marlowe (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1974); Madeleine Doran, “‘High Events as These’: The Language of Hyperbole in *Antony and Cleopatra*,” Queen’s Quarterly 72 (1965) : 26-51; Stanivukovic, “Mounting Above the Truth;” Ettenhuber, “Hyperbole;” Brian Vickers, ed., English Renaissance Literary Criticism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999); Peter Mack, Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Noel Malcolm, The Origins of English Nonsense (Hammersmith: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997); Michael Harrawood, “Overreachers: Hyperbole, the ‘Circle in the Water,’ and Force in *I Henry 6*,” English Literary Renaissance 33 (2003) : 309-327; Rosalie L. Colie, Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966); Peter W. Shoemaker, Powerful Connections: The Poetics of Patronage in the Age of Louis XIII (University of Delaware Press, 2007); Malcolm M. Day, “‘Naked Truth’ and the Language of Thomas Traherne,” Studies in Philology 68, no. 3 (1971) : 305-325; Lee Ann Sonnino, Handbook to Sixteenth Century Rhetoric (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968); Edward Tayler, Literary Criticism of 17<sup>th</sup> Century England (New York: Knopf, 1967); Neil Rhodes, The Power of Eloquence and English Renaissance Literature (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992); Warren Taylor, Tudor Figures of Rhetoric (Whitewater: Language Press, 1972); Henry W. Wells, Poetic Imagery Illustrated from Elizabethan Literature (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961); Christopher D. Johnson, Hyperboles: The Rhetoric of Excess in Baroque Literature and Thought (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); and Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>175</sup> James Biester, Lyrical Wonder: Rhetoric and Wit in Renaissance English Poetry (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 106-108.



hyperbole as a figure of thought via amplification, then the sacred rhetorics can be characterized as exploring the form and function of amplification within the grand style of Christian preaching.

#### SACRED RHETORIC: CHRISTIAN HUMANISM AND HYPERBOLE

The primary concern of sacred rhetorics during the Renaissance is the use of emotion to move its audience to conversion – to teach and to move the audience from one set of values to another religious set of values through a heightening of emotion – which Shuger suggests establishes a Christian grand style. Influenced heavily by Quintilian, Erasmus also “shifts the relationship of style and invention to promote the influential ideal of *copia* as eloquence, an ideal that effectively encourages Christian humanists to cultivate forms of hyperbolic excess.”<sup>176</sup> The product of this style constitutes a Christian aesthetic (including a Christian view of the sublime) and a theory of language within the overall context of Renaissance rhetoric.<sup>177</sup> In developing this Christian humanist style, the influence of Augustine can hardly be over emphasized, and through his psychology of the self, the tropes and figures of rhetoric are used not as decoration but as “the appropriate expression of the psyche in its attempt to apprehend and articulate transcendence.”<sup>178</sup>

As noted above, this represents a significant shift from the Greco-Roman view of tropes and figures as external ornamentation, to a view of tropes and figures as outward expressions of inner emotions, devotion, and the will – a sacramental, incarnational view

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<sup>176</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 74. Johnson further writes, “Erasmus teaches and models a form of discursive hyperbole that boldly marries amplification with invention” (75).

<sup>177</sup> Boyle, “Rhetorical Theology,” 88-90.

<sup>178</sup> Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 194.

of language. “The program was the transformation of speech into act, of oratory into flesh, just as Speech had become incarnate.”<sup>179</sup> John Donne, for example, views Christ as a rhetorical act, Erasmus considers “Christ as Speech” and Luther asserts that the Holy Spirit is a rhetorician.<sup>180</sup> In this sense, God is viewed as a rhetorician who is: 1) moving one’s inward emotional state, i.e., persuading humanity, 2) communicating and being communicated figurally through language itself, and 3) the incarnated *logos* in the “figure” of Christ. From the abstract intellectualism of the Scholastics, the Christian humanists emphasize an incarnational view of language and an Augustinian psychology that connects the emotions to rhetorical power. The Christian grand style and its epideictic proclivity uses a sacramental theory of language that emphasizes the inner/moral life of the speaker, the excessiveness of tropological description as it is appropriate for its subject matter, and the inventional process of the speaker that is guided by the Holy Spirit.

Developing a theory of language that is sacramental is a significant contribution of Christian humanists. Through *magnitudo* and *praesentia*, the purpose is to move the emotions (*affectus*) by making absent things present in order to combine the “excellent object with sensuous immediacy.”<sup>181</sup> Those absent, divine things of grandeur must be communicated with equal grandeur and incarnated into language and eloquence, i.e., a

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<sup>179</sup> Boyle, “Rhetorical Theology,” 88, 89.

<sup>180</sup> Shuger, “Philosophical Foundations,” 61.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 58-59. Although Francis Bacon does not hold a sacramental view of language, he suggests that eloquence is to effect the imagination, affect, and the will by bringing those things “distant” to visibility through reason and rhetoric. Bacon writes, “The duty and office of Rhetoric is to apply reason to the imagination for the better moving of the will...for the affections themselves carry ever an appetite to the good, as reason doth...after the force of eloquence and persuasion hath made things future and remote appear as present, then upon the revolt of the imagination reason prevaieth.” See Francis Bacon, The Works of Francis Bacon; quoted in, Shuger, “Philosophical Foundations,” 56-57. See also Conley, Rhetoric in the European Tradition, 167.

decorum of excess. The excellent object inspires an inward passionate response, which is then translated into external figurative language, especially heightened tropes and figures, whereby words incarnationally signify supernatural truth,<sup>182</sup> which includes hyperbole and sublime discourse. The incredible is made credible through the incarnation of the imagination and the divine into language, and hyperbole is suited particularly well to achieve this goal.<sup>183</sup> Attempting to communicate, to incarnate, what is incomprehensible is the main (paradoxical) function of hyperbole; thus, it is utilized in the sacred rhetorics to “shore up faith” and speak of those divine things that are beyond one’s ability to comprehend.

Perhaps the view of hyperbole Shoemaker derives from Balzac’s writings best summarizes hyperbole’s *raison d’être* in the sacred rhetorics, though Balzac himself was unconcerned with sacred rhetoric. Shoemaker writes, “Hyperbole expresses precisely that which we have difficulty believing. By going beyond the truth, it attempts to reproduce in language the sense of marvel that one experiences before the divine, the spectacular, and the unbelievable.”<sup>184</sup> Here again, one encounters the paradoxical and ambiguous nature of hyperbole that arrives at the truth by lying (in excess). The deceit, however, is only meant to be believed up to the limits of its own unbelievability.

Because of the limits of language, impossible heights must be asserted in order to attempt

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<sup>182</sup> Shuger uses this phrase when describing Lamy’s theory of language. Lamy combined Augustinian epistemology with the Longinian sublime “to create a theory of how words signify supernatural truth.” See Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 108.

<sup>183</sup> Bernard Lamy describes hyperbole as “a figure which represents things greater, lesser, better...than in reality they are. We make use of an Hyperbole, when our ordinary Terms being too weak or too strong, carry no proportion with our Idea; and so fearing to speak too little, we fly out and say too much.” See Bernard Lamy, *The Art of Speaking* (The Library of Princeton University: W. Godbid, 1676), 79.

<sup>184</sup> Shoemaker, *Powerful Connections*, 84. See also for a further discussion of hyperbole’s place in Balzac, Garasse, and Goulu’s writings as well as its relation to the comic and the sublime, esp. 83-93.

to describe the experiences of transcendence. The overall goal of using hyperbole is not to lie, but to, paradoxically, speak/praise the truth through that which is unbelievable. In epideictic and sublime discourse, even the grotesque discourse of the Renaissance, hyperbole functions particularly well because affect (*affectus*) replaces argumentation (*ratio*),<sup>185</sup> and the audience loses itself in the emotive language of the orator.<sup>186</sup> In the context of sublime discourse, the unbelievable becomes believable with little difficulty.

The Protestant rhetorician John Prideaux, in Sacred Eloquence (1659), argues for “Sublime Hyperboles” in his Christian rhetoric and seeks to establish a decorum of excess. Ettenhuber suggests of Prideaux’s writing and Christian rhetorics in general, “But for Christian theories of eloquence, hyperbole shores up faith and points the way to God precisely because it defies the laws of probability.”<sup>187</sup> Traherne demonstrates a similar feeling when he writes, “All Tropes are Clouds; Truth doth itself excel. / Whatever Heights Hyperboles can tell,”<sup>188</sup> and again, he writes of excess related to God:

What bound may we assign,  
O God, to any work of thine!  
Their endlessness discovers thee  
In all to be Divine ;  
A Deity  
That will for evermore exceed the end

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<sup>185</sup> “This sublimity toward which the humanists ascended was the consummation of charity in mystical union... This is utterly distinct from and utterly transcendent of the scholastic goal of contemplation, which completes the different and lesser theological virtue of faith. In contemplation there is only the quasi-union of the knower in the known, not the real union of the lover in the beloved.” See Boyle, “Rhetorical Theology,” 91.

<sup>186</sup> Shoemaker, Powerful Connections, 87.

<sup>187</sup> Ettenhuber, “Hyperbole,” 206.

<sup>188</sup> Thomas Traherne, “Life’s Blessedness,” in The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne, American Libraries, <[http://www.archive.org/stream/poeticalworksoft00trah/poeticalworksoft00trah\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/poeticalworksoft00trah/poeticalworksoft00trah_djvu.txt)> (18 November 2009).

Of all that creature's wit can comprehend.<sup>189</sup>

The excess of hyperbole points to incomprehensibility, which is celebrated in the Renaissance rather than avoided or displaced by certitude. As for Anselm and Aquinas, God is the ideal, elusive term implicitly buttressed by the amplification (*auxesis*) of hyperbole, but for Renaissance writers, hyperbole is explicitly recognized to be the vehicle for communicating this divine ideal. When speaking of God, language is inept and limited, but hyperbole as trope and figure of thought defies the laws of probability, replaces argumentation with affect, pushes the bounds of language, strains human knowledge to the point of shattering, and offers one the closest utterance of transcendent experience. In line with Quintilian and Seneca, most Renaissance writers understand that hyperbole is a “special kind of language, which goes beyond normal speech...in order to express a supra-normal idea or experience.”<sup>190</sup> The implication of this statement is that, like religious discourse in general, hyperbole is a special kind of language that attempts to express supra-normal, supra-rational, or super-natural ideas or experiences. The heights of hyperbole take the listener beyond normal experience. The abjected orator or writer must simply speak of the divine to communicate the improbable.

In sum, Christian humanist rhetoric of the Renaissance seeks to transcend the boundaries of thought and language through the use of hyperbole within a decorum of

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<sup>189</sup> Thomas Traherne, *The Poetical Works of Thomas Traherne*, American Libraries, <[http://www.archive.org/stream/poeticalworksoft00trah/poeticalworksoft00trah\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/poeticalworksoft00trah/poeticalworksoft00trah_djvu.txt)> (18 November 2009). This is a statement that is reminiscent of Anselm's argument that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived as well as Aquinas's views on worship.

<sup>190</sup> Vickers, “The Rhetoric of Hyperbole,” 143. Vickers recounts Priestley writing of hyperbole, “As we are led into no mistake by such terms, they are, in fact, to us who enter into this situation and feelings, more true and just expressions of those feelings than any plainer terms could have been” (146). For Priestley, hyperboles draw the hearers into discourse more than other tropes because they are more adept at expressing feelings that are often beyond description: “The *state of mind* produced by an attempt to realize hyperbolical expressions, may not be more than barely adequate to the ideas intended to be conveyed” (147).

excess, heightened speech, and epideictic discourse, and they replace the view of ornamentation as a vice by emphasizing passionate and redemptive discourse that is sincere. The purpose is to move the hearer to conversion through a conjunction of power and luminosity emanating from one's passions.<sup>191</sup> In Erasmus's last work, *Ecclesiastes sive concionator evangelicus* (1535), he explicitly connects psychology and religious expression to *elocutio* to highlight the theological and artistic aspects of sacred eloquence.<sup>192</sup> It is this spiritualized view of emotions and a sacramental view of language coupled with an intense awareness of decorum that inhibits hyperbole's use but also fosters a grand style and the productive use of hyperbole within sacred rhetorics. The subject matter discussed (divine discourse) must be proportionately elevated through language in order to create a suitable emotional response.<sup>193</sup>

From Aurelio Brandolini, Rudolph Agricola, Nicholas Hemmingsen, Melachthan, William Perkins, and Tridentine Rhetoric to Sturm, Vossius, Keckermann, Caussin, and Alsted, the Christian grand style uses incarnational theology, Augustinian psychology, a sacramental theory of language, and a decorum of excess in order to move the hearer to conversion through emotion. Christian epideictic preaching, noted earlier to be explicitly connected to hyperbole, reaches its greatest eloquence in the seventeenth century through those like Francois Fenelon, Robert South, James Arderne, Rene Rapin, and Robert

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<sup>191</sup> Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 122, 138-139.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 90. See especially Francois Fenelon, *Dialogues on Eloquence* (approx. 1679) and Bernard Lamy, *Art of Speaking*.

Ferguson. Yet, even within these traditions, extremism is viewed as absoluteness,<sup>194</sup> which those like Erasmus and Lamy try to avoid by calling for moderation and a cautionary use of hyperbole.<sup>195</sup> Thus, figures and tropes like hyperbole are viewed positively within the secular and sacred humanist rhetorics of the Renaissance, but moderation is still encouraged to inhibit its excesses. Hyperbole is still distrusted for its de-stabilizing, paradoxical, and ambiguous rhetorical power, and it remains a contentious term.

Beyond the Renaissance, a distrust of hyperbole is particularly present through the development of Ramism, which has a significant effect on Continental philosophers and rhetoricians of the Enlightenment. Influenced by Agricola, Ramus separates rhetoric from dialectic by absorbing decorum and style, including *amplificatio*, into a dialectical structure thereby viewing rhetoric as only the ornamentation of tropes and figures.<sup>196</sup> Bacon, Descartes, and Hobbes share a similar distrust of excessive ornamentation,<sup>197</sup> though Descartes utilizes the function of hyperbole through “hyperbolic doubt” for his system of thought.<sup>198</sup> Bacon views rhetoric positively and as a great art, but he separates

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<sup>194</sup> Religious extremism was a significant concern, and those like the “metaphysical” preachers were often accused of “vain showmanship for their extravagant use of figures of speech.” See Webb, *Divine Voice*, 123.

<sup>195</sup> For example, Lamy writes of hyperbole, “We say more than we intend, for fear we should say less. But these kind of Expressions are to be used with great caution and decorum: We must have a care that there be always a proportion betwixt the natural Idea of the Trope, and the thing we would explain; otherwise the Hearer may misunderstand, and take one thing for another.” Lamy, *Art of Speaking*, 87-88.

<sup>196</sup> Ong, *Ramus*, 212.

<sup>197</sup> Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition*, 162-176.

<sup>198</sup> “Hyperbolic Doubt is doubt taken-to-the limit, doubt in excess of everyday uncertainty and anxiety about what to believe.” See Catherine Wilson, *Descartes’s Meditations: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 51. Arriving at what is true requires hyperbolic doubt as excessive doubt about all that is known or believed. It requires an extreme distrust. Hyperbole itself is not distrusted, but it is a tool used to heighten distrust.

invention from rhetoric, though he is not a Ramist.<sup>199</sup> Bacon also opposes the excessive ornamentation utilized by Ciceronians of his day,<sup>200</sup> and he favors using hyperbole only when speaking about love.<sup>201</sup> In favor of reason, scientific Skepticism, the Cartesian method, and ideal scientific discourse, those like the “enthusiasts,” for example, are critiqued for their ‘unclear and *overblown* language.’<sup>202</sup>

In addition, the sacramental view of language is rejected by those philosophers like Locke and Hume (an admirer of Demosthenes)<sup>203</sup> because words are viewed as signs of things and not the things themselves embodied in language. Language is seen as imprecise and cannot convey knowledge accurately.<sup>204</sup> In fact, Locke’s and Hume’s epistemology is derived from sense perceptions (not testimony or revelation) as independent of language, which is the opposite view of a sacramental theory of language

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<sup>199</sup> Bizzell, The Rhetorical Tradition, 737. For example, Bacon’s The Advancement of Learning (1605) is a critique of Ramism. See Kennedy, Classical Rhetoric, 255.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 738.

<sup>201</sup> He writes, “It is a strange thing to note the excess of this passion, and how it braves the nature and value of things, by this; that the speaking in a *perpetual hyperbole* is comely in nothing but in love.” See Francis Bacon, “Of Love,” in Essays, Civil and Moral, The Harvard Classics, <<http://www.bartleby.com/3/1/10.html>> (25 November 2009), my emphasis.

<sup>202</sup> Conley, Rhetoric in the European Tradition, 168, my emphasis. Critiquing “enthusiasts” was a way to contain religious extremism and exuberance that many believed resulted in irrationality and passion. In England, silencing enthusiasts was a way to “stifle the extremes of both Protestantism and Catholicism in favor of the rule of reason and temperance. This preference for temperance and a renewed interest in science created an overall climate of resisting anything excessive – in the words of Bacon, anything “high flown and forward fancy.” Enthusiasm, which was a caricature of the prophetic and occasional form of Protestant preaching, was thus attacked by Enlightenment philosophers for its religious exuberance. See Webb, Divine Voice, 120-2.

<sup>203</sup> In Of Eloquence (1743), Hume would bemoan the lack of eloquence in his time. Adam Potkay also notes Hume’s regret and his desire to salvage the power of Demosthenes. He suggests that Hume’s fascination with Demosthenes was his utilization of eloquence “to bind people through a virtuous – and secular – appeal to their collective passions.” See Adam Potkay, The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 160.

<sup>204</sup> Bizzell, The Rhetorical Tradition, 814-815.



that considers knowledge and faith to be an outward expression of an inward experience and knowledge derived from God.

In response, Giambattista Vico argues against Cartesian philosophy and in favor of rhetoric as a superior philosophy of knowledge.<sup>205</sup> However, he is the first to create the concept of the “four master tropes,” later echoed by Hayden White and Kenneth Burke, and he excludes hyperbole from this conception thereby implying that it is a trope of lesser importance;<sup>206</sup> even linking hyperbole at one point to the thoughts of children as did Aristotle.<sup>207</sup> Interestingly, it is Kantian philosophy that offers the most productive use for hyperbole in the Enlightenment, but it is only implied since he has little regard for rhetoric.<sup>208</sup>

Those in the Scottish Enlightenment did reflect rhetorically on hyperbole briefly, though they simply took the negative rather than the positive Greco-Roman view regarding hyperbole, i.e., they distrust its excessive force and/or equate it with vice. Hugh Blair, for example, dismisses hyperbole suggesting that only young people and those with lively imaginations use it profusely – by lively imagination, Blair means “Orientals” and those he perceives as belonging to lesser developed cultures than Europeans.<sup>209</sup> He states that hyperboles are difficult to manage, a resource of an author

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 862 and Conley, Rhetoric in the European Tradition, 199.

<sup>206</sup> Brian Vickers, “The Atrophy of Modern Rhetoric, Vico to De Man,” Rhetorica 6, no. 1 (1988), 28.

<sup>207</sup> See Benedetto Croce, The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 223.

<sup>208</sup> Conley, Rhetoric in the European Tradition, 244-5. Hyperbole is implied in Kant’s theory of beauty and the sublime as well as his explication of excess as either magnitude (the mathematical sublime) or power (the dynamic sublime).

<sup>209</sup> Hugh Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (BiblioLife, 2009), 170.

of a feeble mind, and must be used with caution.<sup>210</sup> Although he has a negative view of hyperbole, he does note its frequency of use, and he observes that “our common forms of compliment are almost all of them extravagant Hyperboles.”<sup>211</sup> In addition, Blair often conflates the sublime with hyperbole, George Campbell discusses hyperbole only in passing,<sup>212</sup> Richard Whately does not discuss hyperbole explicitly but refers to excesses and vices,<sup>213</sup> and John Henry Newman equates an excess of emotions with sin.<sup>214</sup>

Overall, Renaissance writers are positively inclined to use hyperbole in their writing, and they find it a productive trope in epistemological terms. They are concerned with the transcendent and the supra-rational, and they use hyperbole to explore the “beyond” of language and the plasticity of meaning. Unlike the rhetorical theological theories of Latin and medieval rhetorics, hyperbole in the Renaissance is explicitly referenced, defined, and its function is extensively examined. It is not denigrated or misused, but it is inhibited for its unbridled excessiveness. In the Enlightenment, rhetoric and hyperbole are viewed negatively, and these concepts are often equated with religion, irrationality, and the “fairer sex.” A revolution in thinking about language and knowledge occurs, and there is little place for excess in the new scientific paradigm. A very different view of hyperbole occurs within Romanticism via the sublime.

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 170-1.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>212</sup> George Campbell, The Philosophy of Rhetoric (Forgotten Books, 2009).

<sup>213</sup> Richard Whately, Elements of Rhetoric (Central European University Press, 2009).

<sup>214</sup> John Henry Newman, An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent (Adamant Media Corporation, 2004), 415.

## HYPERBOLE IN ROMANTICISM AND CONTEMPORARY RHETORIC

What is important to note about Romanticism is that the overall tone of Romanticism leading into post-Romantic and contemporary theoretical discourse lends itself to a constructive development of a theory of hyperbole because of the tendency to exaggerate or offer extreme assertions, e.g., about the sublime. The penchant for excess in Romanticism heavily influences the thought of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Rudolf Otto's *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* as well as the ethical positions of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas are often hyperbolic, and much postmodern and poststructuralist discourse is also hyperbolic. For example, such concepts as *différance*, the trace, dissemination, the more, alterity, *aporia*, heterology, expenditure without reserve, and Dasein<sup>215</sup> all exhibit hyperbolic characteristics.

A “present absence” or an “absent presence” are equally hyperbolic because these assertions break the bounds of language and reasoning proper, they throw beyond thought and language in order to arrive at an alternate version of “reality” or “truth.” In this sense, hyperbole is similar to the “double death” of Maurice Blanchot, “death as possibility and as impossibility.”<sup>216</sup> Indeed, the “possibility of impossibility” and the “impossibility of possibility” are common hyperboles in postmodern as well as pre-modern discourse, e.g., Seneca and Quintilian, though the epistemological presuppositions in each are often significantly different. Hyperbole's very function is to

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<sup>215</sup> Heidegger discusses “Dasein” as something that has been *thrown*, an existing that is a *thrownness*. In Heidegger's precise sense, then, hyperbole could be construed as the excessive “not,” or “negativity,” which is constitutive of Dasein's thrownness – the “care,” the “Being-the-basis of a negativity). Being, then, is a hyperbolic endeavor to throw beyond itself, which is never completed, never arrives.

<sup>216</sup> Suzanne Guerlac, *The Impersonal Sublime: Hugo, Baudelaire, Lautreamont* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 67.

assert the impossible to arrive at the possible while knowing full well the impossible is not possible, but the possible must always strive towards and move through the impossible. Postmodern theorists often make these hyper-qualified hyperbolic statements without actually exploring hyperbole explicitly. They prefer, instead, to pursue explications of irony and catachresis. On the other hand, Romantic writers as well as contemporary discussions about Romantic writers, offer explorations of hyperbole that are more abundant, e.g., “*vertige de l’hyperbole*” of Victor Hugo.

In this section, I will briefly note the interaction between hyperbole and the sublime within Romanticism, and I will explore conceptions of hyperbole in contemporary rhetorical theory. I will not explore these time periods extensively because I will explicate their theoretical insights into excess and hyperbole in the next chapter.

## ROMANTIC HYPERBOLE

In the late eighteenth century a reaction to Enlightenment philosophies comes in the form of Romanticism. Wordsworth and Coleridge are noted to be the founders of Romanticism, and hyperbole is often employed within their writing. There is no specifically extended theory of hyperbole that develops during Romanticism, but the uses of hyperbole during this time cluster around the sublime, which is also popular during the Renaissance, through the writing of Longinus. On the Sublime was translated into French by Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux in 1674 along with Boileau’s essays on the sublime. From discussions of the sublime and the aesthetics of the Renaissance, an aesthetic theory of Romanticism developed, largely influenced by the writing of Edmund Burke<sup>217</sup> and his discussion of the sublime in terms of terror.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Kennedy, Classical Rhetoric, 264-5.

The sublime itself has a contentious history, and it is beyond the scope of this study to note all of the possible influences of hyperbole during Romanticism since the sublime (via hyperbole) affected art, literature, musical composition, poetry, and architecture. Suffice it to say, the hyperbolic pursuit of the sublime, the ideal, and the absolute are similar to the sacred rhetorics in their search for divine transcendence. If language is the outward expression of an inward devotion to and reflection on God in Christian humanist rhetoric, then the same is true for the Romantics. The difference is that instead of seeking “God,” the Romantics seek the authentic expression of inner individuality, sense perception, and the imagination through their own interior sacred power.<sup>219</sup>

The clear distinction between the sacred rhetorics, really all of rhetoric, and Romanticism is not just its object of study. Whereas the sacred rhetorics are concerned with communicating their experiences to an audience they seek to move towards conversion and/or persuasion, the Romantics are focused wholly inward and are little concerned with planned discourse and moving others’ will through reason and passion.<sup>220</sup> “The supersensible becomes the [inner, individual] medium for the supernatural.”<sup>221</sup>

<sup>218</sup> Theologically, this connection can be viewed in the writings of those like Karl Barth and Rudolph Otto, e.g., *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

<sup>219</sup> The Romantics pursued the “proliferating cross-sensory or intersensory metaphors in an attempt to express the sublimity of a perception that transcends the limits of rational thought.” See Webb, *Divine Voice*, 234. Holderlin, for example, contains a theme of excess that erupts from an inner fullness and transgresses one’s own limits. See Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1984), 61.

<sup>220</sup> For further discussion of the excessive interiority in Romanticism, see Joshua Wilner, *Feeding on Infinity: Readings in the Romantic Rhetoric of Internalization* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

<sup>221</sup> Webb, *Divine Voice*, 234.

Interiority, one's sense perceptions, is the medium – not oratory.<sup>222</sup> Although many Romantics often ignore the rhetorical aspect of the sublime, those in the Renaissance are fascinated with its rhetorical function, e.g., the “Hyperbolic Sublime” of Prideaux in Christian preaching and theology.

Despite all of the disagreements regarding the sublime and Longinus's intentions about the sublime during Romanticism,<sup>223</sup> what is important here is the rhetorical function of hyperbole and its interaction with the sublime. A theory of hyperbole is rarely developed at length in relation to the sublime, the two terms are often conflated, and rhetoric, in fact, is not viewed positively by Romantic writers. What does occur is a link between hyperbole and discussions of “dream,” “astonishment,” “terror,” and the

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<sup>222</sup> Theologically speaking, Romanticism fostered an eschatological vision that privileged emotion, enthusiasms, and other-worldly visions of heaven, i.e., the sublime and/as the ideal, rather than the bodily expression of the gospel, which is evidenced in America during the Awakenings of the nineteenth century as well as the character of conservative and fundamentalist, evangelical rhetoric and worship in the twentieth century. However, Romanticism would also displace apocalyptic millennial discourse somewhat by moving the focus of its teleology from the drama of history to the interiority of the individual self – “faith in an apocalypse by imagination and cognition.” See Wilner, *Feeding on Infinity*, 15.

On a different note, it is extremely fascinating that the Awakenings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well as conservative and fundamentalist, evangelical rhetoric in the twentieth century purported to privilege the Word over all else while actually seeking to move the audience's emotions regardless of the content of the sermon. As long as shared beliefs, e.g., doctrines or Christian “fundamentals,” are implied in the contractual agreement between speaker and audience, it matters very little what the preacher actually offers in terms of content or substantive argument. What the audiences wanted, and want, was a feeling of emotional transport, perhaps the “entrancement” described by Longinus. Just as many interpret Longinus as abandoning *logos* for *pathos*, so did many of the sermons of the Awakenings as well as the evangelical rhetoric of the twentieth century. Many sermons in both movements also relied heavily upon hyperbolic claims rather than logical argumentation in order to achieve their oratorical, emotive goals.

For further discussion of doctrinal agreement between speaker and audience, see Roderick P. Hart, “The Rhetoric of the True Believer,” *Speech Monographs* 38, no. 4 (1971): 249-262; though Hart comes to different conclusions as to how doctrinal rhetoric is utilized.

<sup>223</sup> Some like Samuel Monk, Matthew Arnold, and Benedetto Croce insist that the sublime is actually beyond definition. Interpretations of Longinus are also highly disputed. Some thought Longinus's *hupsous* (literally “height”) referred only to a heightened rhetorical style that was a practical concern for rhetoricians proper in order to, as Longinus says, reveal a speaker's power and gain fame – a political consideration rather than an aesthetic one. Others, like Wordsworth, thought Longinus's theory foreshadowed Romanticism in its belief that emotional intensity and irrational appeal were the definitive indicators of great literature. For further discussion, see Louis Wirth Marvick, *Mallarme and the Sublime* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

Romantic sublime, including the religious sublime.<sup>224</sup> The use and defense of hyperbole is pervasive, e.g., in Baudelaire and Hugo.<sup>225</sup> Hyperbole is the vehicle, both ontologically and epistemologically, for the sublime. In this sense, hyperbole is a redemptive figure for Romantic writers.<sup>226</sup> Hyperbole is “the trace of a movement towards the ideal.”<sup>227</sup> Whether this ideal can ever be communicated is a heated debate for Romantic theorists like Samuel Johnson, but certainly the most obvious trope for this task is hyperbole in its attempt to make the incredible seem credible, i.e., to translate the ineffable into language.

Through a defense of hyperbole, one of the predominant characteristics of Romantic writers is the connection and conflation of hyperbole with the sublime. Louis Wirth Marvick, like Longinus, fears this blending of hyperbole with the sublime, and he suggests that hyperbole must be regulated by irony so the hearer is able to recognize hyperbole as hyperbolic. Marvick asserts that Romantic writers tend to forget that the hyperbole is not the ideal, and carried away by emotions, they take the hyperbole literally

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<sup>224</sup> For example, Jean-Pierre Mileur writes, “Dream is for the nineteenth century that representation of literary hyperbole which, in our own time, has been taken over by difficulty.” See Mileur, The Critical Romance, 33.

<sup>225</sup> For example, see Guerlac, Impersonal Sublime.

<sup>226</sup> Hans Kellner writes about romanticism, particularly in France, “Hyperbole became the redemptive figure. Its gestures of excess indicate that the explanatory structures of analogy are challenged, that compromises will not hold, and that incommensurability marks the broken relations of individual and history.” See Ewa Domanska and Hans Kellner, eds., Re-Figuring Hayden White (Stanford University Press, 2009), 218.

<sup>227</sup> Marvick, Mallarme, 56. Marvick further asserts, “For unlike every other means of adding a formal significance to discourse, the use of hyperbole is intended to take us, not just *away* from the literal, but *to* the ideal. It is not merely a gesture but a displacement” (57).

rather than figuratively. Rather than noting the distance between the ideal and the real, many Romantics cannot distinguish hyperbole from truth.<sup>228</sup>

Other Romantic theorists like Harold Bloom also view hyperbole in terms of sublime representation, and he sees hyperbole as an emptying out of metonymy.<sup>229</sup> Suzanne Guerlac notes hyperbole's connection to the sublime as well, but not in such negative or overt terms as Marvick. She even suggests that criticism is praise (panegyric) through exaggeration (hyperbole) of the critical term, which Jean-Pierre Mileur also suggests when he says that difficulty arises as a kind of hyperbole that is the medium of the critic's existence.<sup>230</sup> Discussing the sublime in Hugo's writing, Guerlac asserts, "Hyperbole speaks a double language...It overstates...Hyperbole is intensive...it operates as a figure through its intensification of the literal, its maximization of it," but she continues, "The maximum is nonliteral, nondemonstrable, at the limit."<sup>231</sup> As noted previously of theological discourse, hyperbolic assertions comprise discussions of the ideal. In a similar though distinct move from both Marvick and Guerlac, Paul de Man suggests that irony actually tends towards hyperbole. Discussing Baudelaire, he posits that irony often begins as litotes and moves towards the absolute through and beyond

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<sup>228</sup> Marvick, Mallarme, 52.

<sup>229</sup> Peter de Bolla, Harold Bloom: Towards Historical Rhetorics (New York: Routledge, 1988), 29.

<sup>230</sup> Mileur, The Critical Romance, 11. Mileur is, in fact, one Romantic theorist who attempts to develop a theory of hyperbole on its own terms (discussed further in chapter three).

<sup>231</sup> Guerlac, Impersonal Sublime, 65-66. In this sense, her observation is similar to Perelman and Tyteca's view of hyperbole as operating in an argument of unlimited development (discussed below).



hyperbole, and he suggests that irony is the “unrelieved *vertige*” of “*vertige de l’hyperbole*” (Baudelaire’s phrase).<sup>232</sup>

From Romanticism, it is again evident that hyperbole has a contentious history. Viewed to possess a significantly positive function in Romantic writing through its connection to the sublime, hyperbole is still misconstrued and conflated with the sublime. Romantic writers and theorists both delimit and explore the ambiguity and paradox of hyperbole as a critical trope. As Mileur notes of this complexity, “Hyperbole challenges its own identity as a trope – at times, it seems to harden into a characteristic of language; at other times, it seems to describe a movement of consciousness, to constitute a subject.”<sup>233</sup> This protean and amorphous quality of hyperbole is tentatively explored in contemporary theory, and it is to contemporary rhetorical theory that I now turn.

#### HYPERBOLE IN CONTEMPORARY RHETORICAL THEORY

I will finish this chapter by examining the few discussions of hyperbole in twentieth and twenty-first century rhetorical theory. Although many philosophers, philologists, theologians, and theoreticians outside the field of rhetorical theory briefly examine or utilize excess in their arguments – Mikhail Bakhtin, Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Rudolf Otto, Mark C. Taylor, Willard R. Espy,<sup>234</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, Paul

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<sup>232</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, vol. 7 of *Theory and History of Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 215. See also Jean-Pierre Mileur, “Allegory and Irony: ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’ Re-Examined,” *Comparative Literature* 38, no. 4 (1986): 329-336.

<sup>233</sup> Mileur, *The Critical Romance*, 74.

<sup>234</sup> Espy even writes a poem to hyperbole: “Hyperbole speaks not amiss. / Though she may seem to overstate, / It’s just her way of emphasis. / She signs, ‘I perish for your kiss.’ / That’s not exactly so – but wait; / Hyperbole speaks not amiss,” and proceeding to the end of the poem, “Yet she speaks not in artifice; / Her words do not dissimulate. / Hyperbole speaks not amiss - / It’s just her way of emphasis.” See Willard R. Espy, *The Garden of Eloquence: A Rhetorical Bestiary* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers,

Ricoeur, Christopher D. Johnson, Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Zizek, Jean-Luc Marion, Paul de Man, among many others who I will discuss further in following chapters – the focus here is on hyperbole within rhetorical theory.<sup>235</sup> Despite hyperbole’s common use – “Hyperbole is so steadily droned into our ears that most of us have ceased to think of it as a figure of speech”<sup>236</sup> – few rhetorical theorists and critics endeavor to explore the form and function of hyperbole on its own terms. Instead, they opt simply to dismiss it as unimportant, a lie, of little value, or an aspect of metaphor and irony.<sup>237</sup> Marvick writes of hyperbole’s low standing, “If twentieth century critics have not appreciated the full meaning of hyperbole, it is doubtless because they have clung too tenaciously to their ability to see through it.”<sup>238</sup> With a few exceptions, the rhetorical critics and theorists who examine hyperbole do not develop a theory of hyperbole, view it negatively and with reservations, or so benign as not to warrant attention, which again highlights the contentious history of hyperbole.

For example, Edward P. J. Corbett cautions the use of hyperbole with restraint, but he also posits that inventing new hyperboles can “produce the right note of

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1983), 98. He defines hyperbole as “the boldest figure of rhetoric,” and it “enables us to describe what otherwise would be beyond description” (98).

<sup>235</sup> A discussion of hyperbole in this wider disciplinary sense will be addressed in chapter three.

<sup>236</sup> See Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 452. Noting hyperbole’s prevalence in our society, Corbett, like Aristotle and others, links it to adolescence, which is another way of dismissing it. Likewise, in communication studies, advertisers are often distrusted, and connecting hyperbole to advertisers is a way of showing distrust for hyperbole as well.

<sup>237</sup> For example, in the *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, Hienrich F. Plett defines hyperbole: “It is mostly a kind of metaphor or allegory that raises the referential object beyond probability.” See Hienrich F. Plett, “Hyperbole,” in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Thomas O. Sloane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 364. Surprisingly, Arthur Quinn leaves hyperbole and even amplification completely out of his popular book, *Figures of Speech: 60 Ways to Turn a Phrase* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>238</sup> Marvick, *Mallarme*, 60.

emphasis...or humor.”<sup>239</sup> Richard A. Lanham offers a pithy, though insightful, entry on hyperbole defining it as “exaggerated or extravagant terms used for emphasis and not intended to be understood literally; self-conscious exaggeration.”<sup>240</sup> James Jasinski, in Sourcebook on Rhetoric, places the entry for hyperbole under the broad entry on style. He utilizes Robert J. Fogelin’s portrayal of hyperbole as “a moment of excessive exaggeration”<sup>241</sup> and also links it to conspiracy theories. The subtle shift here is from a trope to a “moment,” which places a greater importance on hyperbole because it indicates a significant moment within discourse rather than a passing rhetorical flourish for effect. Indeed, Fogelin’s entry on hyperbole in Argumentation portrays hyperbole in a positive way. He writes of hyperbole, “Here I say something stronger than what I have a right to say with the intention of having it corrected away from the extreme, but still to something *strong* that preserves the *same polarity*.”<sup>242</sup> Here is Seneca’s and Quintilian’s definition again. Fogelin also considers hyperbole, as well as irony and meiosis, to be figurative modes of discourse with the intent of offering a corrective judgment non-literally and indirectly.<sup>243</sup> Fogelin’s view of hyperbole is quite positive, and describing it as a figurative mode of discourse elevates hyperbole’s status from a tropical ornament.

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<sup>239</sup> Corbett, Classical Rhetoric, 452.

<sup>240</sup> Richard A. Lanham, A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 86.

<sup>241</sup> James Jasinski, Sourcebook on Rhetoric: Key Concepts in Contemporary Rhetorical Studies (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2001), 549.

<sup>242</sup> Robert J. Fogelin, “Some Figures of Speech,” in Argumentation: Across the Lines of Discipline. Proceedings on the Conference on Argumentation, 1986, eds. Frans H. van Eemeren, Rob Grootendorst, J. Anthony Blair, and Charles A. Willard (New York: Foris Pubns USA, 1987), 267.

<sup>243</sup> Robert J. Fogelin, Figuratively Speaking (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 23, 40.

The authors of The New Rhetoric posit a more complex view of hyperbole and offer a longer though terse discussion of hyperbole. Their brief but dense section on an argument of unlimited development includes hyperbole and litotes within it and requires some explication. Unlimited development, quite literally, is an argument that proceeds in a direction without limit, an argument towards infinity, and it is structured hierarchically. An ideal term, or “god term,”<sup>244</sup> is posited as unrealizable, and the terms below that ideal term are utilized to describe and push towards the ideal term in an excessive way. Unchecked, the argument goes beyond reason. Paradoxically, the ultimate term is not the center of the argument and not the term the audience is interested in hearing. It is those certain terms that fall short of the ultimate term that are actually being debated.<sup>245</sup> Hyperboles are the terms at the center of the argument.

As a term of unlimited development, hyperbole serves an important function. The indictment of the argument by unlimited development is that it is impossible to proceed indefinitely in the direction indicated because it dead-ends at an absolute thereby making any further progress untenable.<sup>246</sup> Hyperbole serves to regulate this development. It gives a direction to thought through a “shock” that is “fired with brutality,” which intends to give an indication of the ultimate term.<sup>247</sup> Hyperbole exploits the weakness of the argument of unlimited development by offering a self-reflexive check on infinity. It delimits the limitlessness of unlimited development. Hyperbole aims at unlimited

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<sup>244</sup> The authors do not use this term, but they are describing Burke’s and Weaver’s notions of “god terms.”

<sup>245</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric, 290.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 290.

development, and it always has a purpose, which is to point towards the ultimate term without going beyond it to the point of absurdity. Hyperbole asserts the impossible to arrive at the possible.

This is, in fact, one way theology operates. If one were to make an unqualified statement that God is inscrutable, then theology would end with that statement.<sup>248</sup> The incomprehensibility of God must be modified by the qualifier of hyperbole because the ultimate term can only be debated through the limiting effect of hyperbole, i.e., asserting the impossible (God) to arrive at the possible (statements about God). Hence, in this view, theology is contingent upon hyperbole as a qualifier of theology's intent. For Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, hyperbole is the cautionary figure that inhibits the unlimited development of an argument thereby serving a positive function.<sup>249</sup>

However, relegating hyperbole to an argument of unlimited development limits the scope of hyperbole. Always equating hyperbole with the ideal also limits its critical range. Marvick, Guerlac, and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca restrain hyperbole within the purview of unlimited development and the ideal because, outside of these limits, hyperbole may become "too wild and unrestrained."<sup>250</sup> Webb, another contemporary theorist of hyperbole as well as a theologian, offers a critique of this view by suggesting that limiting hyperbole also limits its potential. Releasing hyperbole's extreme

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca also note that the opposite of hyperbole is litotes, and they suggest that litotes can become irony. Ibid., 291-2. Combined with Marvick's and de Man's conclusions about hyperbole, one could say that litotes arrive at hyperbole via irony, but this again limits the critical function of hyperbole by suggesting that irony is the self-reflexive figure that keeps hyperbole in check and able to operate effectively.

<sup>250</sup> Stephen H. Webb, *Re-Figuring Theology: The Rhetoric of Karl Barth*, SUNY Series in Rhetoric and Theology, eds. David Tracy and Stephen H. Webb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 87.

possibilities, it need not “further an argument of unlimited development; instead it can serve to end all arguments, to freeze all developments.”<sup>251</sup> This is an extreme position to take, and it oversteps the functions of hyperbole. It is not that hyperbole ends all arguments but transforms them into other ways of perceiving the world. As we saw in the Renaissance, it is a playful trope that expands meaning. Freezing all developments is actually what occurs in the argument of unlimited development, i.e., the argument ends at the ultimate term. Hyperbole is what prevents this from occurring. While I agree that hyperbole need not be limited to the ideal, the conclusion Webb reaches also limits the function of hyperbole by forcing functions onto hyperbole it does not possess.

Webb is an interesting author because of his work in rhetoric as well as theology, and he can be credited with offering the most extensive theory of hyperbole in contemporary theological and rhetorical discourse. Although he is a theologian and not a rhetorician, his work merits attention. He traces hyperbole through Karl Barth, Søren Kierkegaard, Georges Bataille, Friedrich Nietzsche, Flannery O’Conner, Emmanuel Levinas, and G. K. Chesterton. Webb’s project is to connect hyperbole to theology and argue that theology relies on hyperbole to function effectively. This is a commendable endeavor since (rhetorical) theologians, e.g., Paul Ricoeur and David Tracy, often discuss the excess of God, the excessive gift of grace, and the excessive sacrifice of Christ through metaphor and analogy without discussing the function of hyperbole within these arguments. Webb’s insights into hyperbole, though often inaccurate or perhaps over-zealous, are helpful for understanding how hyperbole might be utilized in contemporary rhetorical theory.

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 88.

He defines hyperbole as “a trope that beckons but also warns; it accomplishes an intensification that does not result in a metaphorical synthesis but brazenly both invites and distances the audience from the height of an apparently unreasonable position.”<sup>252</sup> This definition provides a constructive view of hyperbole, and it also fits into the overall characterization of hyperbole up to this point. Yet, Webb often forces hyperbole into precarious positions it may not be able to occupy. For example, Webb also argues, “Hyperbole allows one to say more than is strictly appropriate to the expectations set by the subject matter, the speaker, and the situation.”<sup>253</sup> Contrary to much of hyperbole’s rhetorical history, Webb asserts that hyperbole violates decorum, which is the same accusation theorists who view hyperbole negatively make. The attempt to inhibit hyperbole historically occurs through decorum, but a decorum of excess is often utilized to allow for the productive use of hyperbole in thought and language.

Webb also writes, “Hyperbole vertiginously suspends the logic of language, and therein lies the origin of its danger and power.”<sup>254</sup> Hyperbole simply does not suspend the logic of language, nor is this the origin of its power. As shown in this chapter, hyperbole pushes the limitations of language and logical reasoning to a breaking point through its own critical illogical function in order to reveal the ineptitude of language and undermine logical argumentation, similar to Derrida’s notion of *différance*. Hyperbole does not suspend the logic of language but asserts impossibilities as possibilities and possibilities as impossibilities to push language beyond its own limitations. It actually

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<sup>252</sup> Stephen H. Webb, “The Rhetoric of Ethics as Excess: A Christian Theological Response to Emmanuel Levinas,” *Modern Theology* 15, no. 1 (1999), 3.

<sup>253</sup> Webb, *Re-Figuring Theology*, 88.

<sup>254</sup> Webb, *Blessed Excess*, 18.

heightens the logic of language in order to undermine it. Thus, Webb's contributions are numerous, but his conclusions about hyperbole are often tenuous in ways that deflate his overall argument.

Outside of the realm of rhetorical theology, contemporary rhetorical theorists and critics often examine and utilize the form and function of hyperbole but do not discuss it explicitly or even acknowledge its existence. For example, the "enthusiasms" of the *Awakenings* are analyzed by rhetorical critics, "purple prose" is treated rhetorically, and "god terms" and ideographs are important rhetorical contributions that have not delved into the ways hyperbole actually enables those terms to function effectively. Fantasy theme analysis could benefit from a theory of hyperbole (perhaps renewing its usefulness), conspiracy theories are examined (sometimes noting hyperbole's uses), and prophetic and apocalyptic discourse as well as Christian fundamentalist rhetoric is extensively explored without a mention of the obvious hyperbolic nature of those discourses through their tautology and eschatological teleology. Even the brilliant analysis of Joe McCarthy's "fantastic moment" is discussed in hyperbolic terms without addressing hyperbole at all. Additionally, the hyperbolic assertions of postmodern and poststructuralist discourse regarding language, subjectivity, alterity, hospitality, and sacrifice are adopted for rhetorical purposes without noting their most significant rhetorical function, i.e., exaggeration.<sup>255</sup> Most confounding of all, epideictic discourse is

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<sup>255</sup> Allan Megill is one current writer to note the significance of exaggeration in postmodern and structuralist/poststructuralist discourse. His extensive analysis of Nietzsche, Foucault, Heidegger, and Derrida offers a much needed alternative reading of these writers. See Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Mileur also highlights the necessity of hyperbole in Foucault's, Derrida's, and de Man's writings. See Mileur, *The Critical Romance*, esp. 73-126. Additionally, De Bolla states, "Derrida's keenest insight, in my judgment, is that 'writing is unthinkable without repression,' which is to identify writing-as-such with the daemonizing trope of hyperbole." See De Bolla, *Harold Bloom*, 51.



extensively explored without ever mentioning its most vital and historically foundational trope.

There are also numerous expressions of hyperbole in popular culture and language, but these expressions are not examined rhetorically from a hyperbolic perspective.<sup>256</sup> Noted above, one could interpret the Awakenings as hyperbolic expressions of “enthusiasms.” One might even suggest that Jonathan Edwards’s “Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God” is an example of an intentionally hyperbolic sermon. Other examples of hyperbole in popular culture might include the “tall tales” of the American West, the political commentary of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, the comedy of Brian Regan, the exaggerated tactics of advertisements, certain elements in science fiction literature/film, the heavy metal music genre where everything is exaggerated, the comic book genre that often relies solely on hyperbole, and “end times” or apocalyptic discourse, which is almost entirely hyperbolic. These and other examples of hyperbole’s absence in rhetorical theory and criticism serve to highlight the lack of hyperbolic analyses in contemporary rhetorical theory and criticism thereby revealing the inherent distrust or off hand dismissal of hyperbole as an unimportant trope that is unworthy of attention. Of course, the very tradition of rhetoric largely distrusts and dismisses hyperbole, and it is not considered one of the “master tropes” originally posited

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It is true that much of Derrida’s own positionings inherently rely upon a hyperbolic style in order to reveal the limits he is exploring and that his descriptions of excessively hyperbolic concepts like “trace,” “dissemination,” and “*différance*” are hardly a conservative approach to hyperbole. Yet, his privileging of irony over hyperbole undermines his own philosophical assertions and positions by circumventing the very dimensions of hyperbole that he desires and attempts to explore through irony. Indeed, Derrida’s keenest insights are hyperbolic, but his predilection for irony hopelessly re-inscribes these insights into the very economy he seeks to exploit and explode.

<sup>256</sup> For an example of where this almost occurs, see Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter, “‘There’s Millions of Them’: Hyperbole in Everyday Conversation,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 36 (2004): 149-184.

by Vico. Contemporary theorists and critics can hardly be blamed for the centuries-old ambiguous and paradoxical perception of hyperbole, but it is time to begin exploring hyperbole in new ways that offers productive insights into rhetorical “texts” and theories.

## CONCLUSION

In this historical overview, the rich and contentious history of hyperbole is evident. Throughout much of its history, hyperbole is distrusted and/or dismissed as an insignificant trope that serves no critical tropological function within language and discourse. There are numerous times when hyperbole is viewed in a positive way, but even then, caution is suggested when using the trope. Overall, the form and function of hyperbole assigned to it by Greco-Roman rhetorical theorists, especially Quintilian, is simply repeated by later rhetorical theorists, and the protean form of hyperbole as an embodied excessive vice is warned against for its deviation from the ideal of moderation. The synecdochal connection between language and being is an important concern of rhetorical theorists and rhetorical theologians, but this important ontological function of hyperbole is typically not discussed positively, e.g., embodied hyperbole as sin or vice. The epistemological fluidity and playfulness of hyperbole is utilized more predominantly, but it is still resisted or inhibited in favor of a more stable system of meaning and being. In sum, hyperbole has never shed the tone of suspicion derived from its de-stabilizing effects.

From this historical overview, one gets a sense of the typical characteristics of hyperbole even if attitudes about it differ. It is regarded with caution because of its excess, but this aspect of hyperbole is often viewed as useful. It is accused of violating decorum, and it is also used to constitute its own decorum of excess, which often places it

into the categories of epideictic discourse and the grand style. To establish a decorum of excess, hyperbolic excess is often divided into a binary of excess where one type of excess – extravagant hyperbole, sin, or sophistic eloquence – is negative and the other type of excess – elegant hyperbole, divine excess, or Christian ornament and sacred eloquence – is positive. Hyperbole is also sometimes confused with the impossible or the ideal, which places hyperbole in the precarious position of a term that is easily conflated with other terms. In addition, hyperbole is typically understood to be a lie on the side of truth, though it is also considered simply a lie by some.

Perhaps the most important and misunderstood function of hyperbole, it is also its most re-interpreted function. For Seneca and Quintilian, hyperbole's deceit is figural, but its effects are literal and hermeneutically advantageous. For many other theorists and theologians, hyperbole's deceit is moral, and its effect is corruption. Yet, the figural deceit is simply the function of all tropes to offer alternative ways of perceiving the world. Hyperbole, however, heightens this function, which makes it a tenuous and distrusted trope for its audacious assertions. Significantly, hyperbole is most vehemently resisted when it is literally half-understood. Hyperbole is often rejected as a lie, which is only partly true, because it is a lie on the side of truth. It is not a falsehood intended to deceive but a pretense intended to reveal a larger truth, an alternative truth, and in this sense, hyperbole is a redemptive figure. Misunderstanding this aspect of hyperbole leads one to mis-perceive it as only a lie, but understanding its overall redemptive function allows one to (mis)recognize that the lie is intended to reveal other truths as well as correctives in judgment. Overall, the most consistent claims made of hyperbole are that it should be regarded with fear (the implicit claim) and suspicion (the explicit claim).

In order to offer a counterbalance to this fear and suspicion, I will explore the specific functions of hyperbole largely derived from its history in the following chapters. In chapter three I will examine the impossibility/possibility and truth/lie functions of hyperbole. In chapter four I will explicate a disorientation/re-orientation meta-function of hyperbole. I will argue that these are the three main functions of hyperbole that make it a critical trope for current theoretical discussion, and I will use the epideictic and grotesque genres to exemplify these claims.

### CHAPTER 3: THE IMPOSSIBLE LIE OF HYPERBOLE

The historicity proper to philosophy is located and constituted in the transition, the dialogue between hyperbole and the finite structure, between that which exceeds the totality and the closed totality, in the difference between history and historicity, that is, in the place where, or rather at the moment when, the Cogito and all that it symbolizes here (madness, derangement, hyperbole, etc.) pronounce and reassure themselves then to fall, necessarily forgetting themselves until their reactivation, their reawakening in another statement of the excess which also later will become another decline and another crisis.

Jacques Derrida

When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying the cross.

Sinclair Lewis

### INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter I offered an exploration of the rich and contentious history of hyperbole, and from this survey, it is evident that hyperbole has clearly defined functions but is a highly contested trope that is sometimes celebrated as well as misapprehended and marginalized. In contemporary rhetorical theory it receives neither the critical exploration nor the attention that other tropes like irony and metaphor are given, but it remains important for rhetorical discussion because of its theoretical contributions. As Christopher D. Johnson writes, “The hyperbolist perceives an extraordinary, outrageous, ridiculous, or ineffable *res* (thing, event, feeling, idea), while his or her *verba* (words, speech, language) strain discursive limits, analogical frameworks, and literary and rhetorical conventions, to represent that *res*.”<sup>1</sup> Here, Johnson highlights the importance for exploring hyperbole from its attempt to express the ineffable and extraordinary to its effect of stretching the limits of conventions and reason. All the while, this attempt is made despite the inadequacies of language and speech to

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher D. Johnson, Hyperboles: The Rhetoric of Excess in Baroque Literature and Thought (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 2.

communicate such an incommunicable and incomprehensible *res*. Thus, I will parse out the complexities and functions of hyperbole derived from its history in this chapter and the next and suggest various characteristics of this “master trope,” the “trope of tropes,”<sup>2</sup> in order to revive its importance as a critical tropological contribution to rhetorical theory and criticism.

Gerard Genette poses a crucial question for hyperbole in his essay, “Hyperboles.” He asks, “*Does not this hyperbolic mode of thought (wit) have its reasons, which commonsense ignores and which reason wishes to know?*”<sup>3</sup> The answer to this question may come in Genette’s own definition of hyperbole: “*One may call hyperboles the effects by which language...draws closer through contrast and discontinuity, as if by burglary, realities naturally far-removed.*”<sup>4</sup> Hyperbole holds extremities in tension. It represents the extraordinary and attempts to force the audience beyond the literal into the realm of the figural. It stretches the literal and maximizes it so that literal and figurative signification overlaps.<sup>5</sup> The “reason” of hyperbole is to force one beyond the normality of conventional thought by bringing that which is contradictory into view. “The same and the other are held together, ‘complicated,’ by hyperbole” because “Hyperbole speaks a double language...It overstates.”<sup>6</sup> This complicated double language of contradiction, i.e., *vertige de l’hyperbole*, fosters transition. More precisely, and aligned with Genette’s

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<sup>2</sup> Mileur, The Critical Romance, 125.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Hyperboles, 4. Johnson’s translation from the French.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>5</sup> Guerlac, The Impersonal Sublime, 66, 111.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 64, 65.

assertion, hyperbole is a double-dealing gesture of “duplicity.”<sup>7</sup> Driven to teach and to move, hyperbole is a double-cross for the purpose of transition, and this motive behind hyperbole occurs via three main functions.

The three tropological and figural functions of hyperbole I will explore in this and the following chapter are: 1) the relationship between impossibility and possibility, 2) a lie expressed on the side of truth, and 3) a disorientation leading to a re-orientation. The first two are explicit functions given to hyperbole during its history, and I will explore these two functions in this chapter, which I will use as a structuring guide. This will also illuminate the basic structure of hyperbole.

The first function is derived from Demetrius’s, Quintilian’s, and Seneca’s discussions of hyperbole where the purpose of hyperbole is to move through the difficulty of impossibility and transition towards other as yet unrealized possibilities. It is a play with epistemological and ontological assumptions that disrupts conventions and norms. The second function comes largely from Quintilian’s complex theory of hyperbole where he argues that hyperbole is a lie but not one intended to deceive. Paradoxically, he portrays a hyperbolic lie that leads towards truth(s), and he offers hyperbole as a rich tool for epistemological inquiry. In a sense, hyperbole is a self-reflexive conceit, a mask, which unmask the lie of the truth that only masquerades as the truth. In each case, I will use the epideictic and grotesque genres as examples that highlight these functions of hyperbole. I will use these genres to exemplify the functions

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<sup>7</sup> “‘Duplicity,’ which derives from the Latin *duplicitas* and is related to *duplex*, means doubleness, i.e., the state or quality of being numerically double or twofold... ‘Duplicity’ also means deceitful, deceptive, and double-dealing. Like every outlaw, the floating signifier invariably double-crosses.” See Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 174.

of hyperbole, and I will mainly use epideictic in this chapter and the grotesque in the next chapter, though there is definite overlap.

Epideictic is historically linked to hyperbole, and it is continually suggested by rhetorical theorists that this genre is where hyperbole belongs. The grotesque is a conceptual realm where excess and exaggeration are repeatedly used without mention of hyperbole. For each function of hyperbole, these two genres will serve to highlight the various functions of hyperbole. The two genres each exemplify in their own way some critical aspect of hyperbole, and they share two persistent themes of hyperbole – contradiction and transition; the *energeia* of hyperbole. That is, each function of hyperbole offers a contradictory position that operates as a critical transitional principle of epistemological and/or ontological importance.<sup>8</sup> These genres emphasize these two themes that pervade the three functions of hyperbole, but before exploring these themes and functions, I briefly return to Quintilian.

Quintilian's often uncertain theory of hyperbole is the defining moment for hyperbole within the history of rhetorical theory. As discussed in the last chapter, it is mainly Quintilian who sees the significant potential of hyperbole, and it is his theory of hyperbole that remains influential for rhetorical theorists and critics throughout hyperbole's contentious history. In contemporary rhetorical theory his insights are all but lost, and hyperbole is typically viewed as a lie that serves no critical rhetorical function.

As his theory of hyperbole is the most influential but is now occluded from view, it is only by going back to Quintilian that I can construct a foundation for a meaningful

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<sup>8</sup> Confirming my assertion, Johnson writes, "Hyperbole creates...a 'temporary, transitory' disruption between expression and communication. The hyperbolist uses the disruption of literal sense to communicate what could not have been otherwise communicated." See Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 11.



theory of hyperbole. I will use his insights as a foundation on which to build a theory of hyperbole, and from this foundation, I will re-explore and expand upon the functions of hyperbole. I will clarify Quintilian's insights throughout the chapter and offer a detailed analysis of different aspects of his theoretical contributions, but this first section will serve as a general overview of Quintilian's theory to prepare for the following analysis of hyperbole.

## QUINTILIAN REDUX

It is Quintilian's ambivalent theory of hyperbole, and his rhetorical theory in general, that is significantly influential for rhetorical theorists throughout history. Indeed, it leads to Erasmus's theory of *copia* as eloquence that became so important for Christian humanists of the Renaissance, and Quintilian's theory of hyperbole is pervasive throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Baroque, and Romanticism. One might further argue that it is not Aristotle's but Quintilian's summarizing clarification of rhetorical theory and its connection to philosophy that is so influential today. However, Quintilian's views regarding hyperbole are largely disconnected from hyperbole at present. Thus, it is Quintilian that I now briefly re-visit to elucidate some important aspects and issues of hyperbole such as decorum, *ethos*, *pathos*, *kakozelia*, and *kairos*, which will guide the overall discussion of hyperbole's functions.

To begin, hyperbole often requires the use of amplification (*auxesis*). Quintilian suggests that *auxesis* (Gk. αὐξέ-σις: the process, state, or condition of increasing; Lat. *amplificatio*: amplification) is a species of hyperbole,<sup>9</sup> and the four species of *auxesis*

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<sup>9</sup> Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.4.29, trans. Lee Honeycutt, <<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~honeyl/quintilian/8/chapter4.html>> (12 April 2010). See also Johnson,

Quintilian offers are *incrementum* (augmentation), *comparatio* (comparison), *rationatio* (reasoning), and *congeries* (accumulation). He also adds *ratio minunendi* (attenuation) under *congeries*.<sup>10</sup>

*Incrementum* may slowly build step by step towards or proceed all at once to the highest point or beyond it – “Every particular is an advance on that which precedes”<sup>11</sup>:

To vomit from excessive drinking would have been of itself disgusting, even if not before a public assembly; it would have been disgusting before a public assembly, even if not of a whole people; before a whole people, even if not the people of Rome; even if he had held no office, or not a public office, or not that of master of the horse.<sup>12</sup>

Through a series of “even if” clauses, Quintilian’s example builds numerically and spatially step by step to amplify the “disgusting” in an extraordinary situation.

*Comparatio* “seeks to raise itself on something lower”<sup>13</sup>:

Cicero, in his speech for Cluentius, having related that a woman of Miletus had received a bribe from the heirs in reversion to cause abortion in her own person, exclaims, of how much greater punishment is Oppianicus deserving for a crime of a similar nature? The woman of Miletus, in doing violence to her own body, tortured only herself; Oppianicus effected a like object by violence and torture to the body of another.<sup>14</sup>

Oppianicus is compared to a woman who gave herself an abortion for a bribe. By comparing Oppianicus to a woman and highlighting the violence done was only to herself, the rhetor amplifies the offensive violence of Oppianicus done to others.

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Hyperboles, 48-52. “More than just being another way of increasing or diminishing the value of a *res*, hyperbole may encompass or control...various kinds of amplification” (52).

<sup>10</sup> Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.4.1-8.4.28, trans. Lee Honeycutt, <<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~honeyl/quintilian/8/chapter4.html>> (12 April 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 8.4.3-8.4.9.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 8.4.8.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 8.4.9.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 8.4.11.

*Ratiocinatio* introduces “in one place and produces its effect in another; so that one thing is magnified in order that another may be corroborated; and thence we arrive by reasoning at that which is the object of our amplification”<sup>15</sup>:

This is done by Cicero, when he said, These are but trifling charges against such a criminal. The captain of a vessel, from a most honorable city, purchased exemption from the terror of scourging with a sum of money; to allow him to do so was humanity in Verres. Another, that he might not be beheaded, sacrificed also a sum of money; this was but an ordinary occurrence.<sup>16</sup>

Here, a captain from a most honorable city purchasing the safety of a vessel is heralded as virtuous and highly praised. This magnification in one context then strengthens the assertion that the crime under discussion is both trifling and ordinary.

*Congeries* is the “accumulation of a number of words or thoughts having the same signification; for though they do not ascend by steps, yet they are heaped up, as it were, by coacervation”<sup>17</sup>:

What did your sword do, Tubero, that was drawn in the field of Pharsalia? At whose body was the point of it aimed? What was the object of your appearance in arms? To what were your thoughts, your eyes, your hands, directed? What ardor inspired your breast? What did you wish or desire?<sup>18</sup>

Determining Tubero’s intent when using his sword is amplified by heaping sentence upon sentence and accumulating a mass of interrelated questions clustering around the main question of Tubero’s motives. Quintilian also suggests that *ratio minunendi* is similar to *congeries* “for there are as many steps when we go up as when we go down.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 8.4.15.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 8.4.19.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 8.4.26.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 8.4.27.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 8.4.28.

Hyperbole can and does operate in these ways, but Quintilian also distinguishes amplification from hyperbole as trope suggesting that amplification is a species of hyperbole as well as placing hyperbole in his discussion of tropes.

Christopher D. Johnson interprets Quintilian's theory of hyperbole suggesting that there are three characteristics of hyperbole: creating *pathos* where it is expected, using nature as an objective basis for exaggeration, and pointing to the conceptual and allegorical promise of hyperbole.<sup>20</sup> Rather than offering these three characteristics, it is sufficient simply to say that hyperbole is a linguistic vehicle of transcendence.

Hyperbole creates *pathos* in order to transcend the bounds of a given context, e.g., "nature" or language, by comparatively employing exaggeration to offer a new insight. This is perhaps the main reason the Romantics offer hyperbole as a vehicle for/towards the sublime. Hyperbole is that which attempts to transcend the ordinary and express the inexpressible.

In addition, Quintilian offers five types of hyperbole, which Johnson divides into two categories.<sup>21</sup> The first three are tropological – hyperbole by simile,<sup>22</sup> comparison,<sup>23</sup> and metaphor. The last two are figures of thought – hyperbole by exaggerating the facts, i.e., saying more than the truth,<sup>24</sup> and by "certain signs."<sup>25</sup> Quintilian also suggests that

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<sup>20</sup> Johnson, Hyperboles, 42.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> "You would have thought the Cyclades upturn were floating on the deep." See Quintilian, Institutes of Oratory, 8.6.68, trans. Lee Honeycutt, <<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~honeyl/quintilian/8/chapter6.html#68Quintilian>> (26 April 2010).

<sup>23</sup> "Swifter than the wings of lightning." Ibid., 8.6.69.

<sup>24</sup> "Vomiting, he filled his lap and the whole tribunal with fragments of undigested food." Or, more loftily, "Two rocks rise threateningly towards the sky." Ibid., 8.6.68.

“one hyperbole is increased by the addition of another”<sup>26</sup> (later theoretically extended by the *copia* of Erasmus)<sup>27</sup> noting that each type of hyperbole can be used in combination with other types as well as other tropes, which suggests both the contextual flexibility and adaptability of hyperbole. For my purposes, each of these “species” of hyperbole may be considered *topoi* from which I will draw when discussing each form and function of hyperbole in this chapter. In all of the functions I will discuss, I am assuming, as does Quintilian, that hyperbole is not excess beyond all measure but a purposeful measure of excess for effect/affect.

For Quintilian, hyperbole is both objective and subjective. It is an objective exaggeration of quantity or quality, and it is subjective in how it is received, which depends largely on the disposition of the audience toward hyperbole. Johnson suggests that one might view hyperbole in Quintilian’s theory as the linguistic means to achieve excess corresponding to *affectus*.<sup>28</sup> Unlike Isocrates and Aristotle who assign only the role of exaggeration to hyperbole somewhat distancing it from excess, though the excessive deviation from moderation is still a vital concern, Quintilian maintains the connection between objective exaggeration and subjective excess within the scope of hyperbole. Excess is the order, and hyperbole is the genus. This view, as shown in the last chapter, is quite significant for those like the Church Fathers who are obsessed with

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<sup>25</sup> “She o’er the rising tops of untouch’d corn would fly, nor in her course the tender ears would hurt.” Ibid., 8.6.69.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 8.6.70.

<sup>27</sup> “In brief, *copia* produces eloquence as well as understanding. Sometimes it is synonymous with ornament itself, but it is also described...as a faculty of mind, a now logical, now imaginative way of thinking about the world.” See Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 78.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 8.

the effects of excess, i.e., vices, on the individual. Thus, born out of Quintilian's theory, hyperbole's structure is twofold: the objective linguistic exaggeration of hyperbole is subjectively received and internalized as excessive *affectus*, e.g., perhaps as embodied hyperbole. The two are not separate but interrelated. Quintilian's radical move thereby gives hyperbole both an epistemological and an ontological justification for its use. Rather than dismissing hyperbole, Quintilian offers it as a critical rhetorical trope that engages and/or exploits significant rhetorical issues such as *ethos* and *pathos*.

Hyperbole's effectiveness, more than other tropes, is based on the audience's predisposition for exaggeration and excess, its very tropological function. Because hyperbole is a particularly risky trope, this means that *ethos* and *pathos* are important for hyperbole's reception more than other tropes. In Quintilian's framework, hyperbole as trope and as "sophisticated, discursive figure of thought"<sup>29</sup> interacts with, extends, and alters other tropes and perspectives by carefully maintaining an appropriate *ethos* with the audience so that *pathos* might be employed effectively. As Johnson says, "The hyperbolist constantly puts his *ethos* at risk, as he depends on the reader's good will and ability to decide how his inventions are received."<sup>30</sup> Hyperbole relies on *ethos* and *pathos* more than other tropes and figures because of the common accusation of *kakozelia*: "*Cakozelia*...encompasses every fault of excess caused by insincerity, pretence, ambition, or faulty judgment. It signals a distortion of the relation between subject and style, between things and words."<sup>31</sup> The very nature of hyperbole as a

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 34.

tropological representation of excess as well as hyperbole's penchant for privileging *affectus* over *ratio* places it in an equivocal relationship with decorum and the hyperbolist's *ethos* and use of *pathos*. This puts hyperbole precariously at the mercy of the audience's predisposition for both hyperbole and the hyperbolist.

As one tactic against hyperbole's failure, Quintilian suggests that hyperbole's daring may require the "proleptic blame of *remedium*."<sup>32</sup> As Quintilian quotes "a very elegant Greek saying," one should be "the first to blame [one's] own hyperbole."<sup>33</sup> Not simply blame however, *remedia*, as remedies or cures, are meant to be employed as precautionary and/or recovery tactics when using hyperbole in order to prevent its failure and dismissal, and Quintilian's caution against debasing one's *ethos* through "exorbitant affectation"<sup>34</sup> (*kakozelia*) is vital when hyperbole is used. As this anticipatory tactic indicates, the risk of hyperbole heightens the need for its justification.

Confirming my observations in the previous chapter, Johnson argues that for Quintilian there are two main justifications for hyperbole: 1) a speaker is moved in some extraordinary manner and 2) some incredible subject calls for expression.<sup>35</sup> The first is psychological, and the second is phenomenological, and both "motives depend upon the existence of an outrageous or extraordinary *res*."<sup>36</sup> Either psychologically or

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.3.37, trans. Lee Honeycutt, <<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~honeyl/quintilian/8/chapter3.html>> (12 April 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 8.6.74.

<sup>35</sup> See also [Longinus], *On the Sublime*, 283 and Brian Vickers, "The 'Songs and Sonnets' and the Rhetoric of Hyperbole," in *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1972), 140. Both argue that the incident as well as the intensity of emotion justifies the use of hyperbole just as Cicero, the author of *Ad Herennium*, Tertullian, Augustine, the Christian humanists, and others also contend.

<sup>36</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 44.

phenomenologically, these justifications are premised on hyperbole's response to an extraordinary exigence. An unusual psychological or phenomenological exigence can justify the use of hyperbole, but only if it remains decorous. Hyperbole risks violating decorum even as it pushes common notions of decorum to the limit. The extraordinary exigence demands an appropriately disproportionate response, which is negotiated through one's *ethos* as well as one's use of *pathos*. While Aristotle says that hyperbole is "too risky" in relation to decorum, Quintilian posits that hyperbole necessitates risking decorum. Establishing a binary of excess, a decorous hyperbole is an "elegant" hyperbole while an indecorous hyperbole is "extravagant," i.e., an "exorbitant affectation,"<sup>37</sup> and this extravagance leads to accusations of *kakozelia*.

To be hyperbolic is to risk, e.g., *pathos*, and to be at risk, e.g., *ethos*. The "incredible" risks violating decorum even as it attempts to stay within its bounds. Whether a stylistic or ethical risk, hyperbole exists in the space between the decorous and indecorous. Residing within a certain liminal decorum of excess, hyperbole can be justified, or "pardoned,"<sup>38</sup> when the subject matter demands an exceptional response, i.e., "when the *res* 'surpasses the ordinary limits of nature,'"<sup>39</sup> or language. To clarify, one might say that the exigence (*res*) as well as the end (the re-presentation of a *res*), justifies the means (*verba*) within the precarious space of a decorum of excess, and this decorum is maintained through *ethos* and *pathos*.

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<sup>37</sup> Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.73-8.6.74.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.6.75.

<sup>39</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 47.



The hyperbolist creates a considerable tension between the ideal and the real, the word and the world, the figurative and the literal, and this means “strong demands are made on judgment as well as taste.”<sup>40</sup> These strong demands require the use of hyperbole to seem appropriate, justified, and necessary, which places a significant burden on the hyperbolist. The deft use of both *pathos* and *ethos* is thus crucial when hyperbole is employed. Whether hyperbole as trope or figure of thought, each is governed by *ethos* as well as *pathos*, which, shown in the previous chapter, those like Longinus and Augustine posit. Discussing the sublime or the things of God, respectively, the need to invoke subjective intensity outweighs the objective limits of language, even decorous language, which creates a playfulness with meaning.

For Quintilian, hyperbole engenders a certain playfulness with extremes, and in this play with extremity, hyperbole expands the range of what is considered “truth” and decorous. For Quintilian, truth is fluid. It is not absolute or fixed,<sup>41</sup> and this is important for the functions he ascribes to hyperbole. He writes, “It is an elegant surpassing of the truth [*superiectio*] and is used equally for exaggerating and extenuating.”<sup>42</sup> Hyperbole can reveal by surpassing the truth, but it must remain appropriately disproportionate to do so. It must not venture “beyond belief,”<sup>43</sup> or beyond all reason, but it may go “beyond reality”<sup>44</sup> and “say more than the facts” since “no one is contented with the exact truth.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>42</sup> Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.67.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 8.6.73.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 8.6.76.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 8.6.75.

Indeed, Quintilian suggests that departure from the truth may be “pardoned” if the departure does not affirm the false.<sup>46</sup> That is, a hyperbole may be pardoned if it is elegant and believable, but if hyperbole goes too far or affirms what is false, then it is extravagant. This hyperbolic binary aids in governing the excessive impetus of hyperbole and gives it effective/affective rhetorical direction and force, which decorously maintains its epistemological playfulness without devolving into “absurdities,” i.e., *kakozelia*.

Highlighting this playfulness, Quintilian offers one of his most complex and paradoxical assertions: “It is sufficient to remark that the hyperbole lies, but not so as to intend to deceive by lying, and we therefore ought to consider more carefully how far it becomes us to exaggerate that which is not believed.”<sup>47</sup> Just as Seneca suggests, “The purpose of all exaggeration is to arrive at the truth by falsehood” and that through hyperbole “what could not possibly be in order that they might be thought to be as much so as possible,”<sup>48</sup> Quintilian makes the same claim. The lie of hyperbole is not a deceit but a falsehood intended to reveal because the exact truth is never enough. Compensating for this lack, hyperbole offers a different type of lie – a hyperbolic lie that brings epistemological abundance rather than lack.

Paradoxical in the extreme, Quintilian and Seneca imply that hyperbole operates through a different kind of logic that is not bound to linguistic or epistemological norms. It marks the disproportionality between the word and the world. Hyperbole is described

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 8.6.74.

<sup>48</sup> Seneca, *On Benefits*, trans. Aubrey Stewart (London: George Bell and Sons, 1905), 7.23.

as more than exaggerated or even decorative language, which might be partitioned off into the grand style or dismissed as bombast. It offers a different kind of speech where a lie that is not a deception can be employed on the side of a truth that necessitates the use of excess “because [reminiscent of Gorgias of Leontini’s maxim] the exact truth cannot be said, and language is more efficient when it goes beyond reality than when it stops short of it.”<sup>49</sup> This hyperbolic lie allows for a copious play with meaning via extremity that ventures, not beyond belief, but beyond the strict limitations of language, knowledge, or facts. Thus, the purpose of hyperbole for Quintilian, as for Seneca, is to reveal more than is stated, accepted, or commonly believed. There is a stylistic and epistemological playfulness created by hyperbole that not only stretches conventions, decorum, and the value of truth claims but also, perhaps especially, that which cannot be believed without the use of the extraordinary.

Quintilian suggests that the excessiveness of reality itself requires the use of hyperboles on a regular basis and that humans have a “natural propensity” to exaggerate.<sup>50</sup> He notes that when one speaks of something that transcends the normal limits of nature, it is better to go too far and risk saying too much than not enough since, as noted above, “no one is contented with the exact truth.”<sup>51</sup> Paradoxically, he posits that hyperbole is risky while also implying that the audience is already predisposed to hyperbole because it is in common use. Even if it not well received, it may be pardoned or recovered through *remedia*. One begins to wonder, then, what might cause hyperbole

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<sup>49</sup> Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.76.

<sup>50</sup> “There is in all men a natural propensity to magnify or extenuate what comes before them, and no one is contented with the exact truth.” See Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.74.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

to be so risky. The answer is that, in as much as Quintilian's discussion is a *remedium* itself, the use of elegant hyperbole all hinges on its response that is demanded or necessitated by a specific contextual situation, and this response must force one beyond the literal into the figural. Despite hyperbole's common use, which may or may not be recognized as hyperbole, it must seem appropriate and not be interpreted literally. Thus, the risk of hyperbole is the accusation of *kakozelia*.

A particular phenomenological exigence requires a psychological response that cannot be offered in any other way except through hyperbole: "Hyperbole is a beauty when the thing of which we speak is extraordinary in nature. For we are then allowed to say a little more than the truth."<sup>52</sup> The psychological or phenomenological justifications of hyperbole, then, both fall under the purview of *kairos*, which is implied by Quintilian when he suggests that "wit" may easily turn to "folly."<sup>53</sup> The decorous use of hyperbole requires the hyperbolist to make the forceful assertion at an opportune moment. Justified by exigence or not, if the hyperbole is not offered at the right moment, it will easily be accused of folly. Indeed, a *kairotic* moment (psychological justification) that is tied to a particular exigence (phenomenological justification) is the overall justification for hyperbole. One's *verba* must seem timely and appropriate when describing and moving one towards the believability of a *res*.

From this discussion, what is important to highlight is that the objective use of hyperbole facilitates a subjective response. This means that one's *ethos* as well as *pathos* are significant considerations when employing hyperbole, which may easily be accused

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 8.6.76.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 8.6.74.

of *kakozelia*. Whether hyperbole as trope or figure of thought, *ethos* and *pathos* govern hyperbole's departure from conventions and the "truth." In Quintilian's case, the elegant, decorous use of hyperbole is effective while the extravagant hyperbole is of little use. When hyperbole is a "beauty" it becomes a linguistic vehicle of epistemological and ontological transcendence that may come in various forms, and these forms paradoxically reach beyond reality, but not beyond belief, in order to effect perceptual and emotional change. The change fostered through hyperbole is justified phenomenologically and psychologically, and this justification is the crux of hyperbole's success or failure. To facilitate the justification of hyperbole, a decorum of excess is required where the appropriate response is a disproportionate response only hyperbole can offer.

Quintilian negotiates a more fluid conception of decorum for hyperbole at every turn. The binary of excess between elegant, i.e., beyond reality, and extravagant, i.e., beyond belief, hyperbole is perhaps his most overt attempt at accommodating decorum for hyperbole, and implying that a hyperbolic lie is distinct from a conventional lie is another attempt. He also suggests that hyperbole maintains its decorousness through its justification. Objectively justified by an extraordinary exigence or subject matter and subjectively justified by the need for extreme *pathos*, a fluid decorum of excess provides the hyperbolist with the necessary means to exert hyperbole's full force upon the audience at a particular *kairotic* moment. In a decorum of excess where excess, hyperbolic lies, and exaggeration are the norms, hyperbole seems entirely appropriate and may be offered forcefully at the opportune moment.

In sum, hyperbole is a trope and figure of thought that facilitates transition through the mode of contradiction, e.g., a lie that is not a lie. The motive of hyperbole is

change or transformation, and its function is to serve as the axis of transition upon which contradiction is balanced, which is only fully effective within a decorum of excess.

By re-visiting Quintilian's theory of hyperbole these important observations constitute the foundation upon which I will construct a theory of hyperbole. These are also the central issues hyperbole must face and the ones, which, paradoxically, make it so effective. Hyperbole pushes all boundaries of notions of rhetorical decorum, and it risks extraordinary heights to accomplish its goals. Avoiding *kakozelia*, of which it is so readily accused, is the burden the hyperbolist and hyperbole must bear above all tropes, and Quintilian offers these strategies to negotiate the tension between elegance and *kakozelia*. As I will show, these tactics offered by Quintilian are what can save hyperbole from its own excessive nature.

I will now proceed to an explication of hyperbole's functions, and I will begin with impossibility and possibility.

#### THROUGH IMPOSSIBILITY, TOWARDS POSSIBILITY

The contradictory, dialogical assertion that impossibility transitions towards epistemological and ontological possibilities is one function of hyperbole that is offered by those such as Seneca, Quintilian, and many rhetorical theorists in the Renaissance. This connection of hyperbole to impossibility and possibility, so important for earlier rhetorical theorists, is now disconnected from hyperbole in contemporary rhetorical theory. In the current context of postmodern and poststructuralist thought with its pension for deconstructive criticism and abandonment of moderation and aesthetic proportionality, this is an important function of hyperbole that should not be dismissed. Indeed, the possibility of impossibility and the impossibility of possibility are oft used

phrases within current poststructuralist discourse in the areas of, for example, theology, literary criticism, and philosophy, which shows that hyperbole can be a useful critical trope for current theoretical discussions. This function is particularly highlighted within epideictic, which I will discuss after explicating the impossibility/possibility function of hyperbole. Unfortunately, some theories of hyperbole overemphasize impossibility to the detriment of its transitional movement towards possibility.

### THE IMPOSSIBLE IMPOSSIBILITY OF HYPERBOLE

I begin with Demetrius because he offers a concise view of the relation between impossibility (*adynaton*) and hyperbole. Although one can easily view Demetrius's discussion of hyperbole negatively, as I did in the last chapter, his insights do offer important demarcations for impossibility that broaden hyperbole's scope. Demetrius describes hyperbole as "frigid," i.e., indecorous, but he insists, as Johnson notes, that "hyperbole is essential in the task of expressing the impossible."<sup>54</sup> For my purposes, Demetrius's demarcation of impossibility is a helpful heuristic for parsing out hyperbole's connection to the impossible. Demetrius writes of hyperbole:

The most frigid of all figures is hyperbole, which is of three kinds. It is expressed either in the form of a likeness, for example "like the winds in speed"; or of superiority, for example "whiter than snow"; or of impossibility, for example "with her head she reached the sky." Admittedly every hyperbole is an impossibility. There could be nothing "whiter than snow," nothing "like the winds in speed." But this last kind is especially called impossible. And so the reason why every hyperbole seems particularly frigid is that it suggests something impossible.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 349.

<sup>55</sup> Demetrius, *On Style*, trans. Doreen C. Innes, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 427.

For Demetrius, hyperbole is always connected to impossibility. Whether through likeness (hyperbolic simile), superiority (hyperbolic metaphor), or impossibility (hyperbolic allegory), they all suggest impossibility, which makes hyperbole the chief trope of excess since an impossible assertion is always excessive or in excess.<sup>56</sup>

Demetrius goes on to suggest that hyperbole is chiefly used by comic poets to create laughter, and given that hyperbole attempts to surprise, to shock, and to seek out the novel, this is not an unwarranted connection. Despite Demetrius's failure to make the bridge from impossibility to possibility, he does show how hyperbole can be employed in different contexts, i.e., epic, lyric, and comic drama, and use various other tropes, i.e., simile, metaphor, and allegory, for its surprising effect/affect.

In a more contemporary example of hyperbolic impossibility, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, as discussed in the previous chapter, place hyperbole within an argument of unlimited development, which gives hyperbole an argumentative form but severely limits its use since this is seemingly the only instance where it might be employed. An argument of unlimited development posits an ideal term that is always impossible and unrealizable. Assertions about the ideal come close to the ideal, but it remains inaccessible:<sup>57</sup> an “always receding...term in a given direction.”<sup>58</sup> The role hyperbole plays in this argument is to promote “a certain behavior.”<sup>59</sup> It gives “direction to thought, to guide it toward a favorable evaluation of this direction, and only by a return

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<sup>56</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 539, fn 94.

<sup>57</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 289.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.



shock is it intended to give an indication of the significant term.”<sup>60</sup> The risk of unlimited development is that it can be refuted by the accusation of absolutism or incompatibility,<sup>61</sup> which is somewhat mitigated by the direction hyperbole gives to the argument.

Hyperbole “draws the mind in a certain direction” and then descends back towards the “extreme limit of what seems...possible.”<sup>62</sup> However, while hyperbole may bring one in proximity to possibility, its purpose in this type of argument is always to buttress the unlimited development of the impossible term. It does not lead to possibility through impossibility. Rather, it leads to impossibility through descriptive and exaggerated possibilities, i.e., “stepping-stones.” The argument insists on the “possibility of always going further in a certain direction” and “continuing...passing beyond, in the direction indicated by two or three stepping-stones,”<sup>63</sup> e.g., *incrementum* and/or *congeries*. The goal is always impossibility. Thus, hyperbole is given only the function of moving towards impossibility by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. These authors argue that hyperbole always supports an impossibility, which effectively occludes hyperbole’s transitional movement back towards other epistemological and ontological possibilities.

Richard M. Weaver and Kenneth Burke call these impossible ideals “god terms.” Weaver’s conception of these terms is that the structure of the argument is a “hierarchy leading up to the ultimate good...links in a chain stretching up to some master link which transmits its influence down through the linkages.”<sup>64</sup> In Perelman and Olbrechts-

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 287, 288.

<sup>64</sup> Richard M. Weaver, The Ethics of Rhetoric (Davis: Hermagoras Press, 1985), 23.

Tyteca's view, hyperboles are these "links," or stepping-stones, stretching up to the ideal term, which Frances N. Teague suggests puts hyperbole "at the service of existing hierarchies."<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, Burke allows for the possibility that a reverse direction is possible in which these links are viewed as "emanating" or "radiating" from the ideal, which he calls the "spiritual source."<sup>66</sup> In this view, the ideal term is emptying itself out rather than filling itself up through the so called "links." There is a move back towards possibility. Burke argues that in the drive towards god terms, words, which are to things as spirit is to matter, stretch and expand language and meaning only by moving back towards possibility from impossibility.

In contradistinction to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, Burke sees how an impossible ideal might lead to other possibilities of meaning and being. Although Burke does not reference hyperbole, his logological argument about god terms offers one a view as to how a movement through impossibility might "emanate" or lead one towards other possibilities. One might even suggest that Burke's logological project is an extended hyperbolic figure of thought moving towards perspectival possibilities of meaning and being through excessive incongruity. That is, he reveals how the contradiction between impossibility and possibility can produce transitional epistemological and ontological possibilities, which is precisely the function of hyperbole. Thus, whereas Weaver's view of god terms moves only in the direction of impossibility, Burke's framework offers the unintentional insight that the shocking impossibility of hyperbole can lead towards

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<sup>65</sup> Frances N. Teague, ed., Acting Funny: Comic Theory and Practice in Shakespeare's Plays (Fairleigh Dickinson University, 1994), 135.

<sup>66</sup> Kenneth Burke, The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 26.

possibility via excess, but this is only implied. It is also uncertain as to whether Burke sees the movement towards or away from god terms as more important

As I will show below, the transition towards possibility is vital for hyperbole. In the epideictic genre, for example, one might say that “this person was like no other person who ever lived,” and one hyperbole may be built upon another.<sup>67</sup> It is not that the one being praised is literally the greatest person who ever lived, but what is being communicated is the possibility that this person was truly exceptional. Or, in the grotesque, one might bring two disparate and impossible things or concepts together through hyperbole as do the novels of Flannery O’Connor<sup>68</sup> and H.P. Lovecraft, the music of Richard Wagner, David Alfaro Siqueiros’s *Echo of a Scream* (1937) or Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1510).<sup>69</sup> In each instance a grotesque impossibility is asserted, but the impossibility always has the purpose of revealing some truth, some other possibility, through different hyperbolic expressions of impossibility.

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<sup>67</sup> Quintilian offers this example: “As Cicero, in speaking against Antony, says, ‘What Charybdis was ever so voracious? What Charybdis, do I say? If such a monster ever existed, it was but one animal, but the whole ocean, by Hercules, would scarcely have been able, as it seems to me, to have swallowed up so many things, so widely dispersed, and lying in places so distant, in so short a space of time!’ But I have noticed, as I think, an exquisite figure of this kind in Pindar, the prince of lyric poets, in the book which he has called ὕμνοι, *Hymns* for he says, that the impetuosity of Hercules in attacking the Meropes, who are said to have dwelt in the island of Cos, was comparable neither to fire, nor wind, nor the sea, but to lightning, as if other objects were insufficient, and lightning only suitable to give a notion of his rapidity.” See Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.70-8.6.71.

<sup>68</sup> For further discussion, see Anthony Di Renzo, *American Gargoyles: Flannery O’Connor and the Medieval Grotesque* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993) and Marshall Bruce Gentry, *Flannery O’Connor’s Religion of the Grotesque* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986).

<sup>69</sup> For further discussion, see Wolfgang Stechow, “Hieronymus Bosch: The Grotesque and We,” in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections*, eds. James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 113-124.

In *Echo of a Scream*, one can see the wretched scream shrieking from the distorted and disproportionately large head of an infant that is melded to rubble and metal on a battlefield. Emerging from the infant's mouth as a tongue is the same infant in smaller bodily form, and this other/same child is also screaming. Sitting atop the dismantled battle scene, this juxtaposed impossibility is a shockingly grotesque hyperbolic metaphor. Immediately disorienting, this image portrays a variety of dialogical interpretations, e.g., the effects of war on innocent life or the distorted sense of reality war creates, and this occurs hyperbolically by moving through the impossible image towards other perspectival possibilities.

In the opening lines of At the Mountains of Madness, Lovecraft writes, "Doubt of the real facts, as I must reveal them, is inevitable; yet if I suppressed what will seem extravagant and incredible there would be nothing left."<sup>70</sup> Lovecraft relies on incredible and impossible grotesqueries of hybridity in his novels, and here, he reveals how important this grotesque exaggeration is for Madness. Without hyperbolic impossibility, there is nothing to write and no story to tell. Grotesquely aligning doubt with facts and suppression with extravagance, the impossible for Lovecraft is the impossibility of facts and language itself to express what can only be expressed through the incredible and grotesque excessiveness. For him, the truth itself is a hyperbole, and it always leads towards an infinite array of possibilities.

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<sup>70</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, At the Mountains of Madness: The Definitive Edition, Kindle Books (New York: The Modern Library, 2005), locations 363-68.

## HYPERBOLE AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF IMPOSSIBILITY

It is Seneca who completes the circuit from impossibility to possibility. In On Benefits, Seneca writes, “Exaggeration never hopes all its daring flights to be believed, but affirms what is incredible, that thereby it may convey what is credible.”<sup>71</sup> Through exaggeration one asserts “what could not possibly be in order that they might be thought to be as much so as possible.”<sup>72</sup> Seneca posits that hyperbole is well suited to express the inexpressible, which leads to a realization of what is possible. Seneca, like Quintilian, asserts that hyperbole must affirm what could not possibly be, i.e., that which is beyond reality but not beyond belief. Pushing the bounds of belief for the purpose of transition, Johnson suggests that, for Seneca, “In the larger pursuit of ‘truth,’ hyperbole’s provisional violence against belief and reason becomes necessary and fitting,” and the extraordinary becomes a “driving cognitive force.”<sup>73</sup> Through a momentarily violent teleological suspension of belief and reason, one is able to convey and even alter what seems credible and possible, and the brutal contradiction between reality and ideality fosters an epistemological and ontological change or transition from one perspective to another.

The danger of hyperbolic impossibility is the intense, contradictory strain it places on normative conventions and accepted truths. It “both invites and distances the audience from the height of an apparently unreasonable position.”<sup>74</sup> Hyperbole maintains, even as it frustrates, the tension between the ideal and the real, and the movement through

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<sup>71</sup> Seneca, On Benefits, trans. Aubrey Stewart (London: George Bell and Sons, 1905), 7.23.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Johnson, Hyperboles, 292, 293.

<sup>74</sup> Webb, “The Rhetoric of Ethics as Excess,” 3.

impossibility towards possibility is the hyperbolic disruption of conventional belief and reason. Noel Malcolm writes, “It [hyperbole] makes reference to impossible things not because it is trying to describe an impossible world...but as a rhetorical figure, to emphasize and dramatize impossibility itself.”<sup>75</sup> For Malcolm and Seneca, extraordinary impossibility is a driving cognitive force dismantling normative assumptions about reality through its inconceivable idealized heights. The unattainable ideal is not an absurdity but an epistemological tool that fosters real phenomenological and psychological transition. Malcolm stresses that the importance of hyperbole is not to offer an “impossible world” but, as a heuristic device, to (re)present a world re-imagined through impossibility. Impossibility both undermines and reveals the limits of possibility in order to disclose other possibilities.

Through the contradictory double-dealing of hyperbole, a revealing transition occurs, and this transition, noted by Goran Stanivukovic in the previous chapter, is the place where “an incredible, exaggerated utterance interrupts the language and logic of the existing argument,” by shifting “one level of meaning to another, re-invented meaning.”<sup>76</sup> Hyperbole reveals the implications that impossibility may have for meaning itself by disrupting reality and offering other possible (re)interpretations of that reality. As Katrin Ettenhuber asserts of Peacham’s insight into hyperbole, “By highlighting the limits of figuration and productively destabilising [sic] the reader’s views of linguistic norms and conventions, it encourages active reflection on the different ways in which meaning is

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<sup>75</sup> Noel Malcolm, The Origins of English Nonsense (Hammersmith: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 84.

<sup>76</sup> Stanivukovic, “Mounting Above the Truth,” 20.

constructed and communicated.”<sup>77</sup> Disrupting the “normal,” hyperbolic impossibility shocks and disturbs, and this achieves “the conceptual effect of suggesting the insufficiency or inexhaustibility of meaning.”<sup>78</sup> The epistemological play of hyperbole can foster transformations of both meaning and being by transcending the meaning of a given context while still remaining bound to it. Hyperbole offers, sometimes subtly and sometimes forcefully, what could be. It presents the possible through the difficult challenge of the impossible.

In a simple example, if one says, “It’s hotter than hell,” then, assuming hell exists and that it is in fact hot beyond the bounds of reality, this impossible assertion as hyperbolic allegory forces one to conclude that it is extremely hot, which is not beyond the realm of the credible. In popular culture, nothing is hotter than hell. It is an impossibility used to convey the given hotness of a particular context. Or, if one says, “Obama is Hitler,” then this impossibility is a departure from the normative view of the President that leads to the possibility that Obama possesses certain characteristics or tendencies of Hitler. In each case, an epistemological, even enthymematic, leap is made from impossibility to possibility. Without moving back towards possibility, these impossible assertions cease their productive figural work and end in absolutism whereby one may simply refute the statements by pointing out their literal impossibility.

A significant risk of hyperbolic impossibility, and hyperbole in general, is that the sign might be taken for the thing itself. However, the extraordinary as a driving cognitive

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<sup>77</sup> Ettenhuber, “Hyperbole,” 210. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka also writes, “It is the way of excess that generates confusion.” See Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, ed., *Beauty’s Appeal: Measure and Excess* (New York: Springer, 2007), 49.

<sup>78</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 5.

force attempts to counter this impulse by interrupting the logic of literality long enough to, if only partially, disrupt one's literal interpretation of the hyperbole and figurally move from one level of meaning to another. Hyperbole, as Ettenhuber says, encourages active reflection on meaning, and this active reflection is premised upon hyperbole's reception.

For example, Jacques Derrida is sometimes interpreted literally and dismissed out of hand, or his language is mocked for its impossible obscurity. Derrida's hyperbolic language is not literally true, but if taken in this way, then his insights may cease to be effective. However, his hyperbolic disruption of reason and the logic of language attempts to force one into a moment of interruption where belief is violently suspended through the (il)logic of the extraordinary. Even producing disturbing *affectus* through *vertige de l'hyperbole*, Derrida's hyperbolic heights take one away from the ordinary world of rationality, reason, and language. Though it may only be momentary, Derrida's hyperboles resist the closure of impossibility as he risks obscurity in order to generate epistemological insight, even clarity.

When he paradoxically asserts that the "supplement" is both abundance and fills a lack or when he posits the impossibility of possibility and/or the possibility of impossibility, these hyperboles forcefully depart from epistemological norms and the convention of "writing." He shifts one level of meaning to another. "The hyperbolic situation, according to Derrida, creates the necessity of interpretation – a necessity which different people respond to in different and (equally) contingent ways."<sup>79</sup> Out of his hyperbolic language of contradictions that offers provisional violence against

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<sup>79</sup> Mileur, *The Critical Romance*, 80.



interpretation, belief, and reason, come other epistemological and ontological possibilities. Derrida's impossible hyperboles also reveal the complexity of impossibility itself, i.e., that the impossible holds possibilities in its grasp and that the possible is at the same time a purveyor of impossibilities. He risks being misunderstood in order to communicate his complex ideas. Derrida's conceptual insights, as well as his language, are equally hyperbolic, and for this reason, his contradictory hyperbolic language is often resisted and accused of *kakozelia*. This resistance is lessened within Derrida's decorum of excess where both language and thought are excessive and all is disproportionate, one might even say grotesque, but if the force of hyperbole still fails to move one beyond the literal into the figural, then *remedia* may become necessary to guard against accusations of absurdity.

For Derrida, he seems not to offer any *remedia*, and the magnitude of his hyperbole is thus often lost on his audience; yet, his "writing" within a decorum of excess is what can save the hyperbole. In other cases where a decorum of excess is not established, *remedia* are necessary. In defense against accusations of *kakozelia*, one might say, for example, "Of course Obama isn't Hitler. That's impossible." Preemptively, one might say, "Obama is Hitler, so to speak." The force of the hyperbole is mitigated by specifically pointing out that the assertion is impossible and is not literally true and that the hyperbolist did not intend it to be taken so. If one's audience does not take the hyperbole figuratively, then its excess may need to be pardoned through the tactic of *remedia*. The risk of hyperbole, however, becomes more tenuous when it exerts a more forceful disruption of beliefs, and the offering of *remedia* must be more discursively complex.

Inasmuch as all theology is a type of apologetic, it is also a *copia of remedia*. One might even say that all theologians are highly skilled hyperbolists making their theological arguments within a decorum of excess. Through a series of “is” statements, e.g., “Salvation is...,” “God is...,” or “Christ is...,” theologians attempt to describe something that is presumably indescribable. The “is” makes an impossible assertion that must somehow move towards other possibilities of thought, but the figurative nature of theology is often obscured by the veil of the literal. A decorum of excess aids in squelching hyperbole’s mis-interpretation, but despite theology’s reliance on hyperbole, and figurative language in general, the literal often prevails. Even though theology’s extraordinary subject and copious language offers what is beyond reality in order to communicate multi-perspectival truths, it is often perceived as beyond belief. This leads to accusations of *kakozelia*.

As such, there is an implied “but” at the end of theological assertions – “God is omnipotent, but...” – and this “but” is the anticipation of objections and the prelude to a *remedium*. The idealizations theology posits are impossible hyperbolic figures of thought that must be qualified in order to move towards other (re)interpretive possibilities. They are impossible possibilities, which even “literal believers” realize, though perhaps unwittingly. Christian literalists, for example, typically accept that it is impossible to describe God, but they then proceed to do so. The impossible assertion is not enough. There must be possible descriptions and interpretations about God’s indescribability, which is also the acceptance that assertions about God are figurative in nature. Interpreting a hyperbole too literally is also a form of excess, i.e., absolutism, but failing

to recognize a hyperbole qua hyperbole is its failure since hyperbole cannot exist in the literal realm.

The literal can and does end in impossibility and absolutism, which signifies the failed reception of hyperbole. However, the project of theology, even fundamentalist theology, is thoroughly dependent on the tropological and figural functions of hyperbole in order to operate at all because hyperbole (literally?) offers theology the possibility to figurally conceptualize “God” as extraordinary and beyond reality, which it does voluminously. If this hyperbolic movement is not received or perceived by the audience, then the assertion ceases its figural movement, and this effectively ends the task of theology to persuade through its unending array of *verba* pointing to an extraordinary, re-imagined *res*, i.e., “God.” The “but” of hyperbole is the disruption of the “is” of the literal, and the movement beyond reality is a resistance to positions that are beyond belief. Thus, wittingly or unwittingly, most theological discussions are *remedia* in defense against accusations of *kakozelia*, and this tactic is used to ensure the positive reception of one’s position. By moving through impossibility towards theological possibilities, the work of hyperbole is a necessary theological trope and figure of thought, but it is still a fragile rhetorical move necessitating careful employment by the hyperbolist.

For example, one might assert that “God is omnipotent” (a hyperbolic metaphor). This hyperbolic impossibility is extremely risky and is indefensible if taken literally. It can result in the absolutism of unlimited development and be dismissed as impossible. Indeed, this risk is explicitly acknowledged by theologians, and “God is omnipotent” is extensively qualified because it brings up problematic issues such as theodicy, salvation,

and free will. In reference to theodicy, for example, one might say “God can stop evil but allows it to happen, and it is not up to us to judge the ways of God because no one can know the mind of God.” Implicitly an argument for the figural, the problematic assertion that “God is omnipotent” is thereby somewhat alleviated in the minds of the audience, and the impossible assertion “God is omnipotent” then becomes a possibility for conceiving of theodicy in different ways. This is just one *remedium* offered in defense of “God is omnipotent,” but there are certainly other capacious and unending arguments offered. Various *remedia* from differing theological positions are necessary to ensure this hyperbole’s positive reception.

Hyperbole’s effectiveness is based on the disposition of the audience, and it is thus extremely contextual, which is why there are a surfeit of theological positions. Johnson writes, “Hyperbole acquires immense dramaturgical subtlety from the context in which it is spoken, from the *ethos* of those who speak it, and from the way it is heard by others.”<sup>80</sup> The hyperbolist must choose carefully when hyperbole’s force will be most suasive, especially since hyperbole is such a surprising and disturbing trope. This, however, places the burden on the hyperbolist to employ the hyperbole effectively, appropriately, and at the opportune moment. The overall motive of the hyperbolist is transforming one’s perspective or emotional state, and the main impetus of hyperbole is to serve as a transitional axis upon which contradiction balances. The hyperbolist is in a precarious, duplicitous position and must maintain the tension between impossibility and possibility without seeming ridiculous.

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<sup>80</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 364.

Hyperbole marks a fine line between wit and folly, wisdom and absurdity, and the hyperbolist must artfully negotiate this tight rope with his or her audience. Hyperbole, above all other tropes, can quickly fall prey to accusations of *kakozelia*, but through its figurative force and its decorous excessiveness, its impossible heights can lead to transformative possibilities. This is particularly evident in epideictic where the impossibility of hyperbole is employed to offer transformation or renewal to a community or individual based on re-invented or re-invigorated creations of reality.

#### HYPERBOLE EXEMPLIFIED IN THE EPIDEICTIC GENRE

Historically, hyperbole is placed within the epideictic genre. From Quintilian to Puttenham, the “elegant” and “discrete” use of hyperbole when epideictically praising or blaming is hesitantly viewed as a “beauty,” or at least tolerated. Puttenham places hyperbole, the *lowd lyer*, within epideictic even as he cautions against its liability to sabotage what is being praised.<sup>81</sup> Ben Witherington III asserts, “Dramatic hyperbole...is customary in epideictic rhetoric,”<sup>82</sup> and he also notes in another work, “Epideictic rhetoric is...the rhetoric of hyperbole and the ongoing appeal to the deeper, more visceral emotions like love and hate, fear and faith/trustworthiness.”<sup>83</sup> Of the Middle Ages, Ernst Robert Curtius asserts, “[The panegyric’s] chief trope is the hyperbole,”<sup>84</sup> and Simon Gaunt also asserts that in medieval rhetorical manuals where the panegyric is given

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<sup>81</sup> Ettenhuber, “Hyperbole,” 200-1.

<sup>82</sup> Ben Witherington III, 1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 73.

<sup>83</sup> Ben Witherington III, Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James and Jude (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 185.

<sup>84</sup> Curtius, Latin Middle Ages, 164.

utmost importance, “Hyperbole was thought to be particularly appropriate to panegyric.”<sup>85</sup> Despite this historical connection between hyperbole and epideictic, it is currently not mentioned in epideictic literature,<sup>86</sup> but epideictic is a representative example of how hyperbole functions through impossibility and possibility.

Current epideictic theory in general tends to focus on a contextualized communal function based on the referencing of shared values and the offering of an alternative or re-formulation of those values with the purpose of renewing and/or transforming communal identity, though some suggest that all epideictic is mainly for the purpose of transformation.<sup>87</sup> In order to “increase the intensity of adherence to certain values,”<sup>88</sup> these re-formulated values are posited in contrast to the current situation and positioned in relation to a new version of reality. Shared values are referenced (as virtuous), altered

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<sup>85</sup> Simon Gaunt, Troubadours and Irony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 9.

<sup>86</sup> For example, Walter H. Beale, “Rhetorical Performative Discourse: A New Theory of Epideictic,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 11 (1978) : 221-246; Theodore C. Burgess, Epideictic Literature (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2007); Richard Chase, “The Classical Conception of Epideictic,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 47 (1961) : 293-300; Robert Danisch, Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Necessity of Rhetoric (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007); Bernard K. Duffy, “The Platonic Functions of Epideictic Rhetoric,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 16 (1983) : 70-93; Celeste Michelle Condit, “The Functions of Epideictic: The Boston Massacre Orations as Exemplar,” Communication Quarterly 33 (1985) : 284-299; Michael K. Carter, “The Ritual Functions of Epideictic Rhetoric: The Case of Socrates’ Funeral Oration,” Rhetorica 9 (1991) : 209-232; Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Nicole Loraux, The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); Donovan J. Ochs, Consolatory Rhetoric: Grief, Symbol, and Ritual in the Greco-Roman Era (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993); Christine Oravec, “‘Observation’ in Aristotle’s Theory of Epideictic,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 9 (1976) : 162-173; Lawrence W. Rosenfield, “The Practical Celebration of Epideictic,” in Rhetoric in Transition, ed. E. E. White (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), 131-155; Dale L. Sullivan, “The Ethos of Epideictic Encounter,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 26 (1993) : 113-133; Bradford Vivian, “Neoliberal Epideictic: Rhetorical Form and Commemorative Politics on September 11, 2002,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 92 (2006) : 1-26; and Jeffrey Walker, Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>87</sup> See Yun Lee Too, “Epideictic Genre,” in Encyclopedia of Rhetoric, ed. Thomas O. Sloane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 252.

<sup>88</sup> Perelman and Tyteca, The New Rhetoric, 51.

or re-formulated, and put into conflict with present contextual values that are excessively blamed (as vices), which (re)constitutes communal identity.<sup>89</sup> Robert Danisch writes, “Practicing epideictic rhetoric...involves telling the history of the present so that one can understand how subjects are constituted in a given historical moment and so that one can begin the project of self-creation.”<sup>90</sup> Beginning the project of self-creation occurs by re-positioning the re-formulated values in relation to an impossibility through *auxesis* as “any kind of amplification of the context.”<sup>91</sup>

Noted above, Quintilian suggests that *auxesis* is a species of hyperbole, and Erasmus writes in his development of *copia*, “Speech is varied by *auxesis*, i.e., by amplification, when in order to render something more effectively we put in place of an appropriate word a stronger one [*comparatio*].”<sup>92</sup> In epideictic, the *auxesis* of an ideal occurs chiefly through *incrementum*, *comparatio*, and *congeries*. *Incrementum* may proceed by one step, by several, or at once. *Comparatio* increases a lesser thing’s importance by implying a logical connection with a greater thing, and *congeries* heaps one word or sentence atop another in order to produce *copia*. These species of *auxesis* magnify “the importance or gravity of something by referring to it with a

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<sup>89</sup> Bonnie Dow, “The Function of Epideictic and Deliberative Strategies in Presidential Crisis Rhetoric,” Western Journal of Speech Communication 53 (1989) : 299.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Danisch, “Power and the Celebration of the Self: Michel Foucault’s Epideictic Rhetoric,” Southern Communication Journal 71, no. 3 (2006) : 293.

<sup>91</sup> Kenneth Snipes, “Literary Interpretation in the Homeric Scholia: The Similes of the Iliad,” The American Journal of Philology 109, no. 2 (1988) : 210. Amplification “basically...covers all the means for endowing a subject with *magnitudo*, for making something seem exceptionally terrible, splendid, great, dangerous, desirable, and so on. Most tropes and figures, commonplaces, dialectical proofs, and rhetorical *colores* belong under amplification.” See Shuger, Sacred Rhetoric, 223-4.

<sup>92</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, On Copia of Words and Ideas, trans. Donald B. King and H. David Rix (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2005), 35.

disproportionate name.”<sup>93</sup> In response to an extraordinary exigence and in order to highlight the importance of a transformed or renewed sense of reality, an impossibility is offered within a decorum of excess at an opportune moment in order to transition towards this new or revived creation of reality by heightening and amplifying its significance as well as the critique of a given context.

In epideictic, impossibility is most notably expressed through *auxesis* as some idealization of thought intended to heighten the critique of a given context. This disproportionate assertion occurs after shared values are referenced and then re-formulated. In light of the re-formulation, a new or renewed version of reality is offered as an “invented great,”<sup>94</sup> or a “greater beauty” as Aristotle says,<sup>95</sup> which is then praised to promote adherence to these altered values. Just as in an argument of unlimited development, “The ideals it [epideictic] describes are rarely actually attained...a speaker confidently praises values in hopes that the audience will work to implement them.”<sup>96</sup> The praise of re-invented or re-invigorated values through *auxesis* amplifies the importance of the “invented great” as well as a critique of the present moment with the purpose of implementing a transition. As Cindy Koenig Richards argues, “[Epideictic promotes] identification with a new or different vision of community through the

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<sup>93</sup> Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors, Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student (Oxford University Press, 1998), 403.

<sup>94</sup> Cindy Koenig Richards, “Inventing Sacagawea: Public Women and the Transformative Potential of Epideictic Rhetoric,” Western Journal of Communication 73, no. 1 (2009) : 3.

<sup>95</sup> Henry W. Johnstone, Jr. and Mari Lee Mifsud, “Wedge and Bridge: A Note on Rhetoric as Distinction and as Identification,” Rhetoric Society Quarterly 29, no. 2 (1999) : 76.

<sup>96</sup> George A. Kennedy, A New History of Classical Rhetoric (Princeton University Press, 1994), 60.



re-creation of an ‘invented great,’”<sup>97</sup> and she continues, “By venerating a figure that integrates known history, established beliefs, and imagined possibilities, epideictic can subvert some elements of the existing social order while affirming others.”<sup>98</sup> The re-assessment and re-formulation of values is thus also the positing of another disproportionately idealized version of reality for the purpose of communal or individual transformation and/or renewal.

Although *auxesis* is now largely disconnected from epideictic theory, it is the operative function of hyperbole within epideictic discourse, though it is not limited solely to epideictic. Timothy Long states that *auxesis* is “a major technique of ancient epideictic oratory,” and it “calls upon the orator to conjure an imaginary object or state, desirable or abhorrent, for detrimental comparison with an opponent’s proposal.”<sup>99</sup> Within epideictic, idealized conceptions of language, thought, community, or even critical terms are buttressed by hyperboles through *auxesis* that “conjure” an imaginary invented great in order to compare it to an opposing version of reality. Furthermore, the epideictic genre is structured around hyperbolic gestures of “amplification and enhancement,”<sup>100</sup> as “activities that lend themselves to heightening and tend to draw the speaker into excesses.”<sup>101</sup> In other words, hyperbole offers an imaginary, disproportionate name meant to emphasize or exaggerate its importance within epideictic

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<sup>97</sup> Richards, “Inventing Sacagawea,” 3.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Timothy Long, “Persuasion and the Aristophanic Agon,” Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association 103 (1972) : 299.

<sup>100</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric, 51.

<sup>101</sup> Sullivan, “Epideictic Encounter,” 118.

rhetoric, and overall, its effect is intended to lead to transformations of meaning and being.

#### HYPERBOLIC IMPOSSIBILITY IN EPIDEICTIC FORM

When Anselm suggests that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived in identical language to Quintilian – *incrementum* may “proceed at once to something than which nothing greater can be named”<sup>102</sup> – Anselm is using hyperbole in his epideictic argument for the ontological proof of God’s existence to refute the non-existence of God. Using shared theological values, re-formulating them, and using *auxesis* to posit an impossible ideal, Anselm uses hyperbolic logic to assert his impossibility that nevertheless leads to other theological possibilities. Aquinas is doing the same when he argues that there is no excess in the worship of God, i.e., there is nothing but excess in worship. Žizek makes the same move when he posits the philosophical statement that in Christ’s appearance, “It becomes clear that God is NOTHING BUT the excess of man, the ‘too much’ of life which cannot be contained in any life-form, which violates the shape (*morphe*) of anthropomorphism.”<sup>103</sup> In each case, hyperbole is forcefully employed to make an epideictic argument for alternative possibilities of perceiving reality, which is arrived at by moving immediately to and through impossible idealizations.

In these cases *incrementum* is used to proceed at once to a hyperbolic position. In a more gradual example, Lincoln builds his hyperbolic argument incrementally in “The Gettysburg Address,” but the effect of his epideictic speech is the same:

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<sup>102</sup> Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.4.7.

<sup>103</sup> Slavoj Žizek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 132.

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.<sup>104</sup>

Lincoln uses hyperbole to heighten the gravity of the situation and offer a vision for the future. Using *incrementum*, Lincoln suggests that there is a “great task remaining before us,” and “we take increased devotion” from those who “gave the last full measure of devotion.” Culminating, Lincoln concludes that this government has “a new birth of freedom,” which “shall not perish from the earth.” As he epideictically creates his vision of the future to stir the audience’s *pathos*, he invokes the past battle, connects it to the present, and increases the importance of the situation as well as his “greater beauty” for the future. His speech, in fact, hinges upon his use of hyperbole. Without it, he may not quite make the transition from a nation being tested by war, which might not endure (the opposing view), to a nation that will not perish from the earth. An impossible responsibility, leading to an impossible vision, only hyperbole is equal to the task of epideictically moving through impossibility towards a possibility for the future.

As discussed, hyperbole is justified by a phenomenological or psychological situation, and this justification is achieved largely based on exigence, *pathos*, and *ethos*. In these examples, it is the exigence that justifies the means. Proving God exists is certainly a monumental task, and hyperbole is perhaps the only trope adequate for Aquinas’s defense of worship as well as Zizek’s disruption of the signified “God.” Certainly the exigence of the Civil War calls for an extraordinary response, and Lincoln

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<sup>104</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “The Gettysburg Address,” [Abraham Lincoln Online](http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm), <<http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm>> (14 April 2010).

cannot move his audience through impossibility towards possibility without the *pathos* of hyperbole, i.e., *affectus* as/in excess. Each example is also dependent upon *ethos* for the positive reception of hyperbole. Anselm's and Aquinas's status as venerated theologians, Žižek's theoretical prowess, and Lincoln's position of president contribute to the audience's reception of hyperbole. Extraordinary situations and subject matter require an extraordinary response, which is delivered through hyperbole.

Another example of hyperbole used within epideictic is that of Derrida. In a type of epideictic form<sup>105</sup> within a decorum of excess, Derrida writes:

By escaping it [the project of thinking]: that is to say, by exceeding the totality, which – within existence – is possible only in the direction of infinity or nothingness; for even if the totality of what I think is imbued with falsehood or madness, even if the totality of the world does not exist, even if nonmeaning has invaded the totality of the world, up to and including the very moments of my thought, I still think, I am *while* I think. Even if I do not *in fact* grasp the totality, if I neither understand nor embrace it, I still formulate the project of doing so... This is why, by virtue of this margin of the possible, the principled, and the meaningful, which exceeds all that is real, factual, and existent, this project is mad, and acknowledges madness as its liberty and its very possibility. This is why it [the project of thinking] is not human...but is rather metaphysical and demonic.<sup>106</sup>

In epideictic terms, the project, or exigence, is (re)thinking the “self,” the Cogito or “I,” which necessitates an epistemological and ontological transition. These positions, which are possible “only in the direction of infinity [*incrementum* and/or *congeries*] or nothingness [*ratio minunendi* and/or *litotes*],” are the impossibilities Derrida attempts to

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<sup>105</sup> Rollins also notes the connection of Derrida to epideictic, particularly his eulogies. She writes, “Derrida is one of our most accomplished and sensitive epideictic orators.” See Brooke Rollins, “The Ethics of Epideictic Rhetoric: Addressing the Problem of Presence through Derrida's Funeral Orations,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2005) : 11. Although her argument centers mainly on Derrida's eulogies, her discussion of epideictic theory in general in relation to Derrida's thought is intriguing. For my argument, Rollins's discussion of presence in Derrida's epideictic is worthy of note because Rollins argues that Derrida's work that displaces presence is also the attempt to recall or re-present presence as an ethical movement, which occurs in the present even as the present is already past and future.

<sup>106</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 56-7.

move through towards other possibilities. Philosophically, this is the history, or “myth,” of the “self” from Descartes to the present, and by referencing these shared myths, Derrida establishes a type of *ethos* with his readers allowing for a believable critique he soon offers. The “margin of the possible,” i.e., the project of exceeding this totalization, is a duplicitous impossible possibility. It is a moment of undecidability that is also a hyperbole, which serves to heighten the critique of one’s interpretive conception of the historical “self” or “I” as the “real, factual, and existent.” This hyperbole and/as a critique of the present philosophical moment leads to a (re)interpretive stance regarding a future, though absent, possibility.

The lie, i.e., “falsehood or madness,” is the “opening” for a moment of (re)formulating the “truth” of the project of exceeding, and the repetition of “still formulat[ing] the project of doing so” is the work of errant hyperbole. Through *auxesis*, Derrida builds one hyperbolic statement upon another with “even if” clauses: “Even if the totality of what I think...even if the totality of the world...even if nonmeaning...Even if I do not *in fact* grasp the totality.” Each “even if” statement builds on the previous one until finally culminating in madness and the demonic, which are positive terms of possible impossibility for Derrida.

Derrida considers demonic hyperboles to be “marvelous transcendence,” which he translates from “*daimonias hyperboles*,” and he describes his project as the “attempt-to-say-the-demonic-hyperbole from whose heights thought is announced to itself, *frightens* itself, and *reassures* itself against being annihilated or wretched in madness or in death.”<sup>107</sup> One may be annihilated in the impossibility of madness, i.e., an excess of

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 61.

*affectus*, but it is madness that is the impossible possibility within his project of possible impossibilities. Derrida writes of demonic hyperbole:

This demonic hyperbole goes further than the passion of hybris [and]... Assuming that it is deranged and excessive, it implies the fundamental derangement and excessiveness of the hyperbolic which opens and founds the world as such by exceeding it. Hybris is excessive and exceeds only *within* the space opened by the demonic hyperbole.<sup>108</sup>

The demonic hyperbole is hyperbole functioning to open and found the world by exceeding it. Opening and founding the world by exceeding it is the impossible task Derrida must move through in order to move towards madness that is the “very possibility” of the project of thinking. Out of the undecidability, the “doing so,” i.e., the decision to begin that is madness and “always hyperbolic,”<sup>109</sup> is the repetitive *auxesis* of hyperbolic impossibility. To attempt this project of madness is an impossible possibility facilitated through the hybris of “demonic hyperbole.”

In sum, moving through impossibility towards possibility is one contradictory transitional function of hyperbole. Demetrius and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca focus on the impossibility of hyperbole while Seneca and others focus on its use of impossibility to transition towards possibility. Through this transition, the epistemological and ontological importance of hyperbole is highlighted for its play and expansion of meaning and being. Moving through the difficulty of impossibility, hyperbole disrupts and reveals the limits of possibility so that other avenues of meaning and being may arise. In the example of epideictic, hyperbole operates through *auxesis* in

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>109</sup> “The reason for not speaking [i.e., undecidability], like the awaited justification for speech, is an illusion. Therefore, the decision to begin is always hyperbolic, outside articulation, exceeding ostensible pretexts,” and again, “Between the ‘madness’ of decision and the normalcy of an articulation which can never comprehend its own origins, there is a gap, the space of fiction or fantasy, which only hyperbole can traverse.” See Mileur, *The Critical Romance*, 86.

order to accomplish the task of moving from impossibility to possibility. An impossible future or revived ideal is asserted in order to critique the present and move one's audience towards a possible transformation and/or renewal. Through hyperbole, a contradictory transition from impossibility to possibility occurs. This transition is also the case in the next function of hyperbole, which is a lie on the side of truth(s).

#### A LINGUISTIC LIE ON THE SIDE OF HERMENEUTICAL TRUTH(S)

Hyperbole is often accused of being simply a lie, *kakozelia*, or a *lowd lyer*, but its history often reveals another relationship between lie and truth. As Johnson states, "To hyperbolize is to tell and not to tell enormous truths in one eloquent breath."<sup>110</sup>

Unfortunately, this link between truth and lie within hyperbole's overall function is now replaced by only one side of its function – to lie. Hyperbole is not to be trusted or believed. Easily open for attack of being only a lie for its seeming insincerity and violation of decorum and moderation, hyperbole is often lambasted for its bombastic and artificial ornamentation, but there is another side to hyperbole repeatedly overlooked – a lie on the side of truth(s).

Hyperbole offers one a lie that paradoxically does not intend to deceive but to productively de-stabilize and surpass a particular truth, a given interpretation of a truth, in order to offer the possibility of re-interpreting one's perception of that truth. Without negotiating and moving through the tension between truth and lie, however, hyperbole's power is diminished or even undone. That is, hyperbole forcefully attempts to radically disrupt one's given interpretation of reality through the shocking and de-stabilizing effect of a heuristic conceit. Hyperbole is duplicitous and offers a lie that is a double-cross. A

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<sup>110</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 85.

hyperbolic lie both is and is not a lie, and this duplicity is the attempt to compel one to see beyond the lie that is offered not to deceive but to create a moment when assumed truth(s) might be re-interpreted and foster a transition from one meaning to another. If this process is mis-apprehended or resisted, if the hyperbolic lie is not recognized as such in order to heighten the suspicion that more is being communicated than what is actually stated, then the re-interpretive work of hyperbole fails, which is why the positive reception of hyperbole is so vital for its effectiveness.

Related to but also distinct from hyperbole's impossibility/possibility function, e.g., a lie need not be an impossibility, the truth/lie function is more specifically designed to intentionally create epistemological playfulness. Hyperbole's truth/lie function self-consciously and brazenly exaggerates a falsehood, which may not be an impossibility, in order to force one to self-reflexively re-evaluate one's perspective in regard to meaning. A hyperbolic lie presents one with such a radical contradiction, e.g., Obama is Hitler, that one's attention is arrested and not allowed to resolve the conflict immediately or easily. The suspicion that something more is being said is heightened, but one may not instantly see any particular truth(s) in the lie or even apprehend what is occurring perceptually. In the face of such a shocking or surprising contradiction, one is forced to look beyond the deceit for other truth(s) or perspectives that might be indicated by the hyperbolic lie.

It is the purpose of this section to explore the productive contradictory connection between truth and lie as a hyperbolic function, which one might view as an objective, linguistic lie transitioning towards subjective, hermeneutical truth(s). In a poststructuralist context, truth is shown to be subjective and perspectival rather than objective and enduring. Nietzsche's essay, "On Truth and Lie," which influences much



poststructuralist thought, is one example of this occurrence. He argues that objective truth is actually a metaphorical construction that is forgotten to be a subjective convention, which means that what one holds to be a truth is a lie in that there is no absolute truth. Conversely, a lie is also the truth. More precisely, a lie masquerades as the truth. Truth is a figural expression, not a literal reality.

Despite hyperbole's attempt to force one to see beyond its literal assertion to other figural revelations, this endeavor can and does fail. Rather than seeing some other truth(s) or insights through hyperbole's falsehood, one may simply see the lie as a lie. In this sense, hyperbole is a heuristic device inviting one to explore the possibilities for expanding one's conception of truth(s) beyond its conventional bounds. It is a heuristic that produces real, contextual change by leading to an epistemological insight. A blindness to this insight robs hyperbole of its power. Just as one might "forget," as Nietzsche says, that a particular truth is premised upon one's (re)interpretation and perception of that truth, one might also mis-perceive that a hyperbolic lie always points beyond itself. Hyperbole attempts to guide one through the lie in order to allow for a (re)interpretation of a given perception of reality or assumed truth.

For example, many Christians today privilege interpreting scripture literally rather than figuratively. Despite a centuries old tradition at least beginning with Origen and moving through Augustine, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, the figurative exploration of scripture is often abandoned by those like Fundamentalist Christians who prefer an inerrant and literal view of scripture. Here, the (re)interpretation of truth is devalued in two ways. First, it is interpreted literally, which denies its rich

transformative, even transcendent, power. Second, the ways that Christians might perceive truths within scripture as revealed through rhetorical means is all but lost.

On the first count, those like the Fundamentalists might benefit from the corrective of Nietzsche's insights. On the second count, they might also benefit from the insight of hyperbole. It is not that hyperbole, or rhetoric in general, is an outright lie. Rather, the epistemological double-cross precludes a revealing observation, which is a subjective hermeneutical revelation. Through this duplicitous paradox, a destabilizing transition occurs from one given to another, which must then be repeated in order to foster further (re)interpretive development. Hyperbole is the "maximization" of the literal, which is non-literal, at the limit. "It marks the literal (in excess) as figure through a certain impersonality. It suggests a kind of figure without a face, a mask that is one with the masked."<sup>111</sup> Hyperbole unmasks the truth by putting on a mask-as-lie in order to merge with the truth-as-masked and move beyond it. The linguistic deceit of hyperbole is forceful and shocking but only temporary, and it is employed in the service of a disruptive hermeneutical transition from one way of perceiving the world to another.

For example, when Demetrius says something is "whiter than snow," which he considers an impossibility, this is not actually true. What this hyperbole signifies is that something is extremely white. It is not a true statement, but it is one that offers the truth of the "whiteness" of something, which alters one's perceptual field on two levels. It forces the hearer to recall their given perception of snow, and it then requires the hearer to apply that perception to the present context. On these subjective and objective levels,

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<sup>111</sup> Guerlac, *The Impersonal Sublime*, 66.

hyperbolic metaphor surprises the hearer with its deceit thereby forcing one beyond the literal statement into a figural hermeneutic realm.

Taking this simple observation to a more theoretical level, the lie of hyperbole is not a falsehood intended to deceive but a concerted effort to destabilize perceptions of meaning in order to reveal alternative conceptions of truth and knowledge. Hyperbole is not simply a lie, but an excessive figural distortion on the side of truth. For those like Quintilian, it is an exaggerated mis-recognition that leads to recognition and a theoretical method of epistemological inquiry that highlights the fragility of meaning through excess. In this theory of excess, affirming a falsehood through exaggeration in the pursuit of knowledge is necessary because the known is not capable of expressing the as yet unknown, the as yet unrealized within knowledge itself.

#### QUINTILIAN'S ELEGANT SURPASSING OF THE TRUTH

Quintilian offers a detailed and profound explication of this function of hyperbole. Implied in Seneca's discussion of the impossibility/possibility of hyperbole, Quintilian explicitly suggests that hyperbole is an "elegant [i.e., decorous] surpassing of the truth"<sup>112</sup> (*superiectio*). Or, as Longinus says, hyperbole is a "strain on the facts."<sup>113</sup> On an epistemological level, Quintilian defines hyperbole stating, "It is sufficient to remark that the hyperbole lies, but not so as to intend to deceive by lying, and we therefore ought to consider more carefully how far it becomes us to exaggerate that which is not

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<sup>112</sup> Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.67, trans. Lee Honeycutt, <<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~honeyl/quintilian/8/chapter6.html#68>> (2 November 2009).

<sup>113</sup> [Longinus], *On the Sublime*, 285.

believed.”<sup>114</sup> Quite plainly, Quintilian makes his claim: hyperbole lies but not to deceive. On its face, this claim is a complete non sequitur because a lie is by definition always intended to deceive. Paradoxically, this statement reveals two levels of Quintilian’s epistemological theory: 1) epistemological enquiry cannot survive on truth alone and 2) a hyperbolic lie is different from a lie in its general sense of the term.

In order to explore questions regarding the truth, a rhetorical deception is necessary to push the truth beyond normal ways of perceiving it, and hyperbole is particularly effective at engaging in this task. Within the realm of hyperbole, a lie is not necessarily a lie, which is true of all tropes and figures. Yet, Quintilian gives the hyperbolic lie a pride of place above other tropes and figures because hyperbole is specifically given the paradoxical role of a lie that does not deceive. Duplicitous hyperbole must surpass the truth through a deceit in order to reveal other truths about and beyond conventional truth claims, a double-cross, but this tactic must be used with caution.

After suggesting that hyperbole might elegantly surpass the truth, Quintilian then goes on to suggest that one must consider its use – “We therefore ought to consider more carefully how far it becomes us to exaggerate that which is not believed” – and this statement can be interpreted in two ways. It does become a rhetor to exaggerate what is not believed. Or, it does not become a rhetor to exaggerate what is not believed. In the context of his overall treatment of hyperbole, both interpretations are correct. Avoiding *kakozelia* is of utmost importance, but moving the audience beyond their given reality is often necessary based upon subject matter defined by the exigence.

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<sup>114</sup> Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.74.

Hyperbole is already in excess, so it is already prone to *kakozelia*, which is why he advises caution and moderation against “extravagant” hyperbole.<sup>115</sup> The “wit” of hyperbole may easily become “folly,”<sup>116</sup> and hyperbole’s triumphant reception may easily turn to dismissal. On the other hand:

Hyperbole is a beauty when the thing of which we speak is extraordinary in nature. For we are then allowed to say a little more than the truth, because the exact truth cannot be said, and language is more efficient when it goes beyond reality than when it stops short of it.<sup>117</sup>

An extraordinary subject matter that defies ordinary description demands a response worthy of it, which makes hyperbole such an important trope because of its excessive epistemological nature, as well as the *affectus* it invokes. It is hyperbole that purposefully pushes the bounds of prosaic, ordinary language and decorum in order to risk the force of excess and exaggeration that can describe the abnormal, the unusual, and the marvelous.<sup>118</sup> Within a decorum of excess, hyperbole moves along the margins of language and attempts to describe what cannot be articulated through normal linguistic and psychological means, which is worth the risk of *kakozelia*. The abnormal and unusual demand a different use of language and heightened speech.

In Quintilian’s example, “Vomiting, he filled his lap and the whole tribunal with fragments of undigested food.”<sup>119</sup> Here, the astonishing nature of this scene requires the lie of hyperbole to describe the indescribable amount of vomit ejected from one’s body

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 8.6.73.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 8.6.74.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 8.6.76.

<sup>118</sup> Peter William Shoemaker, *Powerful Connections: The Poetics of Patronage in the Age of Louis XIII* (University of Delaware Press, 2007), 84.

<sup>119</sup> Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.68.

and to evoke the *pathos* associated with it. The deceit is necessary to achieve one's subjective means, which is objectively justified by the exigence. Beyond belief, without hyperbole, normal means of description are inadequate. If one does not risk hyperbole, then the assertion may fail. If one does risk hyperbole, then the assertion may also fail, but its success is worth the risk. One must risk being misunderstood in order to communicate an extraordinary *res*. Thus, an extraordinary response must be employed, and it is better for this hyperbolic response to go beyond reality than fall short of it. While caution may be advised by Quintilian, he lands firmly on the side of risking accusations of *kakozelia* to make one's point.

Further explicating the lie of hyperbole, Quintilian writes:

It is in common use, as much among the unlearned as among the learned, because there is in all men a natural propensity to magnify or extenuate what comes before them, and no one is contented with the exact truth. But such departure from the truth is pardoned because we do not affirm what is false.<sup>120</sup>

Not only is hyperbole given the task of lying on the side of truth, hyperbole is privileged over the truth itself. It is the universal nature of both "unlearned" and "learned" humanity to hyperbolize because the exact truth is not enough. One must use a hyperbolic, decorous lie to move beyond a particular assumed truth towards other hermeneutical truths, which are also not enough – alleged "truth" is infinitely deferred and disrupted. To risk hyperbole is to risk epistemological boundaries in the pursuit of knowledge. All the more reason to risk hyperbole is that if it does fail, then it may be "pardoned," e.g., through *remedia* or the *pathos* it creates, for its appropriate disproportionality.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 8.6.75.

The linguistic lie is thus worth the risk in order to communicate more profound hermeneutical truth(s) as well as the truth that the “truth” is an unsatisfying deceit. A given truth is not enough, and one must employ hyperbole to throw beyond this truth and reality through the paradoxical task of offering a deceit that is not deceitful in order to arrive at a more expanded conception of a particular truth. There is a significant tension operating in Quintilian’s argument between falsehood and truth, and this tension, he asserts rather explicitly, can only be maintained through the duplicity of hyperbole, which forces the hearer beyond their epistemological limits.

Going back to the example of Nietzsche for a moment, his Overman (*Übermensch*) or his assertion of the death of God, which are both beyond the reality of good and evil, can be interpreted as hyperbolic lies on the side of other (re)interpreted truth(s). The Overman is not an actual being but a surpassing of the truth of humanity. The death of “God” is also not the actual death of “God” but a hyperbolic lie intended to excessively disrupt normative, i.e., classical theistic, conceptions of “God” and put them to rest. These lies are hyperbolic figures of thought with the purpose of dismantling conventions of meaning and being. Nietzsche writes, “Facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations.”<sup>121</sup> He puts a strain on the facts, and just as for Quintilian, the truth is never enough. Language, in fact, is more efficient when it goes beyond reality rather than stopping short of it.

Nietzsche “re-mystifies” the truth through his hyperbolic lies. As Allan Megill writes:

[Nietzsche] wants to say that there is no such thing as a thing – that every “thing” is only a mask for some other “thing,” which in its turn will be seen to be only a

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<sup>121</sup> See Craig Hovey, *Nietzsche and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 9.

mask as well...the process of interpretation itself [is] a process infinite in its unfolding, for the ground is never reaching, the “original” or “transcendental” signified never uncovered.<sup>122</sup>

Nietzsche offers linguistic lies in order to present alternative hermeneutical truth(s). He does not offer hyperbole as beyond belief but beyond the reality of deeply held beliefs. The *affectus* this causes in the audience is often extreme, and he is often misinterpreted and accused of *kakozelia*. Indeed, until Walter Kaufmann’s rather recent re-interpretation of Nietzsche, this accusation was commonplace. Yet, through Nietzsche’s use of a decorum of excess, those like Kaufmann eventually see the truth in the lies of Nietzsche’s hyperbolic logic – what Nietzsche might call “the magic of the extreme.”<sup>123</sup>

Webb notes two rather obvious hyperboles in Nietzsche’s discourse that are worth quoting. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes, “No one has ever had more of the new, the unheard-of, the really new-created in artistic means to squander...before me one did not know what can be done with the German language” (EH, 74-5). He later writes, “I am not a man I am dynamite...I am by far the most terrible human being there has ever been” (EH, 127).<sup>124</sup> In these statements, Nietzsche presents his audience with objective lies in order to reveal subjective truth(s) about himself and his Overman. Out of a “fragmented individuality” that he sees as a crisis of representation, he (re)presents his audience with a “mythos of the future,”<sup>125</sup> which he often does through *affectus* rather than *ratio*.

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<sup>122</sup> Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, 85.

<sup>123</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 396.

<sup>124</sup> Webb, *Re-Figuring Theology*, 97.

<sup>125</sup> Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, 82.



Nietzsche's objective justification for his hyperbole is the crisis of representation, and as Webb suggests, "Nietzsche's hyperbole is intended because he thought he was responding to a crisis, which could only be overcome in the most extreme terms."<sup>126</sup> Nietzsche thought he must excessively disrupt the normative values of society and philosophy to force subjective transition of meaning and being. The crisis for Nietzsche is the common belief in rigidified Apollonian ideal illusions as transcendent knowledge, and in response, he risks a hyperbolic Dionysian interruption as critique.<sup>127</sup>

Responding to the crisis of representation at a *kairotic* moment, Nietzsche engages in a type of epideictic form by referencing common values, e.g., good and evil, as "myths that will be useful in the present," which are propagated by "history."<sup>128</sup> He then re-formulates or transvalues those values in light of an impossible hyperbolic lie, e.g., the disproportionate Overman, described through *auxesis*, which heightens the critique of his present (philosophical) situation. The hermeneutical truth(s) his linguistic lies create within a decorum of excess offer errant insights of transformation in the present as well as into the future.

In sum, hyperbole can elegantly surpass the truth because: 1) no one is content with the exact truth, 2) the exact truth can never be stated, 3) language is more efficient when it goes beyond reality, and 4) it is better to say too much than not enough. Hyperbole radically resists the closure of presumed absolute truths and disrupts through its duplicity to both lie and not lie. It is these observations by Quintilian that play out

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<sup>126</sup> Webb, Re-Figuring Theology, 95.

<sup>127</sup> Megill, Prophets of Extremity, 83.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

time and again within the history of rhetoric and, as shown in Derrida's and Nietzsche's discourse, within the history of philosophy as well.

### THE INFLUENCE OF QUINTILIAN'S THEORY OF HYPERBOLE

Much ado is made during the Renaissance about appearance and reality. New hermeneutical theories are developed and the relation between truth and artifice as well as impossibility and possibility are produced. Regarding hyperbole, however, most discussions are redundant and even exact copies of Quintilian's views of hyperbole. John Hoskyns, for example, suggests that hyperbole's articulation "beyond the truth" will descend to the truth, or that the "flat impossibility" of hyperbole may highlight "the unspeakableness than the untruth of the relation."<sup>129</sup> As for Quintilian, Hoskyns posits that hyperbole's moving beyond the truth does not lead to a deceit but to another yet unrealized truth through the paradox of contradiction. Bernard Lamy also practically plagiarizes Quintilian in his The Art of Speaking.<sup>130</sup> On the other hand, Baroque writers do extend, and even diverge from, some of the typical suggestions made about hyperbole. Baltasar Gracian, for example, makes a distinction between "witty exaggeration" and rhetorical hyperbole,<sup>131</sup> but these excursions do not affect my overall argument. The main functions of hyperbole remain intact.

One summary statement of Renaissance hyperbole, confirming my own assertions, is offered by Stanivukovic who writes, "A lie, expressed in linguistic terms,

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<sup>129</sup> John Hoskyns, "Sidney's *Arcadia* and Rhetoric," in English Renaissance Literary Criticism, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 412.

<sup>130</sup> For example, see Bernard Lamy, The Art of Speaking (The Library of Princeton University: W. Godbid, 1676), 79, 87-88.

<sup>131</sup> For further discussion see Johnson, Hyperboles, esp., 95-251.

becomes truth on a hermeneutical level. Hyperbole thus acts as a generator of meaning,<sup>132</sup> and he continues:

The significance of hyperbole here lies in the particular use of the referential meaning it contains. The writer draws on a concrete reference from a familiar myth, evoking particular expectations, which are betrayed by relating the mythical story to a new literary reality. The hyperbolic form suggests this deviation from the expected to the newly created reality.<sup>133</sup>

These statements about Renaissance hyperbole are a concise summary of Quintilian's theory of hyperbolic truth and lie as well as my observations about hyperbole within that framework. Offering a *copia* of meaning, hyperbole betrays the conventional and the normative in order to deviate from accepted truths and perceptions of reality.

Reminiscent of an epideictic form, the hyperbolic form references familiar truths and shared values, re-formulates them, and offers new (re)interpretive possibilities through a linguistic deceit. For Stanivukovic's interpretation of hyperbole in the Renaissance as well as for Quintilian's theory, hyperbole offers a deceit that is not a falsehood, which generates meaning by moving beyond the reality of accepted truth(s).

In a more contemporary context, similar assertions as Quintilian's about excess and hyperbole are offered, but the bounds of the hyperbolic are also expanded. Suzanne Guerlac, for example, writes of hyperbole:

The expression exceeds the thing expressed. The signifier outreaches the signified, remarking the enunciation within the utterance, keeping alive its force. The excess of the signifier marks a redundancy that renders the signified a signifier in its turn – a signifier of excess. It renders the signified a kind of proper name that designates excess – itself in excess.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Stanivukovic, "Mounting Above the Truths," 17.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>134</sup> Guerlac, *The Impersonal Sublime*, 66.

Her statement is evocative of Quintilian's descriptions of hyperbole as a necessary surpassing of the truth, though she translates it into a poststructuralist context. Guerlac's assertion highlights the epistemological playfulness Quintilian ascribes to hyperbole. Hyperbole's figural expression exceeds the literal thing expressed. She also pushes Quintilian's theory forward by explicitly suggesting that hyperbole throws beyond the signified "truth" but also renders the signified a signifier, which signifies excess itself.

Combining Guerlac's and Quintilian's insights, no one is content with the exact truth, and more than that, the truth is a hyperbolic lie that comes to signify excess itself. Not only does hyperbole carry a signifier beyond the signified, but the signified also relies upon hyperbole because the exact truth is not enough: "It [hyperbole]...both oversteps the limit of the signified and constitutes the signified through the limit."<sup>135</sup> The signified must be thrown beyond the limit even as it always already transgresses the limit through the deceit of impossibility. As Weiss states, "All signifieds are...figures and tropes,"<sup>136</sup> and this is the promise of hyperbole: that it will bludgeon with hammer blows the literal into figurality and move one beyond the literal in order to force a deeper (re)interpretation. It resists, disrupts, transgresses, double-crosses, and undermines truth through errant<sup>137</sup> repetition in order to keep open the fluctuating gap between the signifier and the signified.

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Allen S. Weiss, The Aesthetics of Excess (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 63.

<sup>137</sup> Mileur writes of Paul de Man, "In the final analysis, the relationship between statement and meaning, blindness and insight, has the *structure* of error without being *an* error; it might be called errancy or, tropologically, hyperbole." This "errancy" is an infinitely and paradoxically purposeful wandering. See Mileur, The Critical Romance, 113. See also Taylor, Erring.

Guerlac's observations are premised upon much of Derrida's thought, and his views about hyperbole are equally illuminating in light of Quintilian's discussion on the hyperbolic tension between truth and lie. In a significantly similar manner to Quintilian, Derrida writes, "The economy of this writing is a regulated relationship between that which exceeds and the exceeded totality: the *différance* of the absolute excess."<sup>138</sup> Although Quintilian and Derrida are operating from considerably different epistemological assumptions, their insights are nevertheless related, or at least parallel. For Quintilian, a hyperbolic lie is that which exceeds beyond reality through the efficiency of exaggerated language. The process of this exceeding is never complete because the truth never satisfies, and hyperbole must repetitively move elegantly beyond reality (already in excess) but never extravagantly beyond belief. For Derrida, *différance* as repetitive hyperbole is the regulating position of deconstruction that exceeds the always already exceeded totality, which is and is in absolute excess. Again, the truth never satisfies.

Derrida's connection to Quintilian becomes more apparent when he offers his most extended and explicit observation about hyperbole:

*At its height* hyperbole, the absolute opening, the uneconomic expenditure, is always reembraced by an *economy* and is overcome by economy. The relationship between reason, madness, and death is an economy, a structure of deferral whose irreducible originality must be respected. This attempt-to-say-the-demonic-hyperbole is not an attempt among others; it is not an attempt which would occasionally and eventually be completed by the saying of it, or by its object, the direct object of a willful subjectivity. This attempt to say, which is not, moreover, the antagonism of silence, but rather the condition for it, is the original profundity of will in general.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 62.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-62.

He also asserts, “I maintain [that hyperbole] cannot be enclosed in a factual and determined historical structure, for it is the project of exceeding every finite and determined totality.”<sup>140</sup> This is a dense definition of hyperbole, which needs explication, and there are many similarities to Quintilian’s thoughts about hyperbole. First, Derrida uses hyperbole to make his argument. Through *incrementum*, he builds his praise of hyperbole through two “it is not” statements and one “This attempt to say” statement. This *incrementum* culminates in suggesting that hyperbole is the “original profundity of will in general.” Thus, using hyperbole tropologically, at a linguistic level, already shows Derrida’s inclination towards hyperbole.

Second, as a figure of thought, Derrida invokes the “attempt-to-say-the-demonic-hyperbole” as the overall project of uneconomic expenditure and “exceeding every finite and determined totality.” Although hyperbole is always re-economized even “*at its heights*,” it attempts to surpass the “truth” in its duplicitous movement towards “original profundity,” which it will never attain within an economy of reason, madness, and death. The heights of hyperbole always descend back into re-economization. This highlights two characteristics of “demonic hyperbole” for Derrida: 1) its infinite deferral within a system it attempts to exceed and 2) its necessary force of repetition.

The double-dealing demonic hyperbole ceaselessly attempts to exceed that which it can never exceed. Derrida is not content with the truth, and he speaks the lie of exceeding economy in order to emphasize the repetitive necessity of making the attempt, i.e., to push the “truth” beyond its limits, “because the exact truth cannot be said.”<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>141</sup> Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, 8.6.76.

Through this repetition, the signifier exceeds the signified and, as Guerlac states above, “Marks a redundancy that renders the signified a signifier in its turn,” which reveals that the signified is already in excess. “Language is more efficient when it goes beyond reality.”<sup>142</sup> By attempting-to-say-the-demonic-hyperbole, a type of cleaving occurs that binds and keeps separate, a “holding open the differential *interval* of the between”<sup>143</sup> through hyperbole’s errant, duplicitous repetition that will never be completed but is always necessary and always in excess. Thus, Derrida’s overall assessment of hyperbole is positive as both trope and figure of thought. Like Quintilian, it is a deceit that leads to other truths; a duplicity that leads towards epistemological transition.

Re-interpreting the Hegelian dialectical process, Slavoj Žižek contends, “*The excess of ‘exaggeration’ is the truth which undermines the falsity of the balanced totality.*”<sup>144</sup> Like Quintilian, what Žižek’s (hyperbolic) assertion suggests is that hyperbole’s deceit leads to another view of truth by surpassing it in a “paradox of truth-in-exaggeration.”<sup>145</sup> Žižek argues that the alleged “balanced totality” is the actual falsehood and the hyperbolic lie as the excess of exaggeration, the excess of reality within a fantasmatic narrative of/as a spectral event, is the truth: “‘Truth’ resides in the excess of exaggeration as such.”<sup>146</sup> That is, hyperbole can reveal the epistemological insight that every attempt at a fixity of meaning is excessively disrupted or (re)interrupted

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<sup>142</sup> Quintilian, Institutes of Oratory, 8.6.76.

<sup>143</sup> Mark C. Taylor, Altarity (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 49. “The strife of the tear captures the duplicity of cleaving. To cleave... is both to separate, divide, or split, and to adhere, cling, or stick. Tearing alternates between two rhythms – one centrifugal, the other centripetal” (50).

<sup>144</sup> Slavoj Žižek, The Plague of Fantasies (London: Verso, 1997), 92.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 92. See also Slavoj Žižek, The Fragile Absolute or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For? (London: Verso, 2000), esp. 54-81, 113-122.

through forceful exaggeration, and this truth about symbolization is the undermining of radically contingent symbolic fictions posing as a totality.

The truth never satisfies, e.g., the anxiety of desire, and hyperbole must move beyond this reality. Every “truth” offered is a hyperbolic deceit that is the truth about a balanced totality masquerading as the truth. The truth(s) revealed through the lie of hyperbole is that the signified is always already in excess as an empty signifier, and this duplicity exposes the fact that, as Taylor says, “The floating signifier invariably double-crosses.”<sup>147</sup> The “excessive fixation” on an empty signifier is double-crossed by the exaggeration of symbolization that resists the closure of the balanced totality through this “disruptive ‘exaggeration’ which disturbs its [the balanced totality’s] poise”<sup>148</sup> and allows for adaptation and a radical change in self-perception.<sup>149</sup>

The indeterminacy of such empty signifiers – indicating the plasticity and contingency of meaning and symbolization – can, therefore, only emerge through the violence of interpretation and/as the efficiency of exaggerated language: “a violent act of disfiguring the interpreted text.”<sup>150</sup> In short, the excess of exaggeration is what allows for a perspectival shift/mobility where limits, norms, order, and conventions are battered with hammer blows through a disfiguring (re)interpretation that is (re)constituted through thought and language itself. As Weiss states, “Overdetermination is...the basis for all interpretation and exegesis, including philosophy.”<sup>151</sup> The excess of exaggeration, the

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<sup>147</sup> Taylor, Erring, 174.

<sup>148</sup> Žizek, Plague of Fantasies, 92.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>151</sup> Weiss, Aesthetics of Excess, 78.



hyperbolic lie on the side of truth, is the objective expression that forces one into the violence of subjective (re)interpretation. As Žižek states when combining Badiou and Hegel, “The subject emerges in the event of ‘exaggeration’, when a part exceeds its limited place and explodes the constraints of balanced totality.”<sup>152</sup> Through its duplicity, hyperbole disfigures, destabilizes, and unmasks a given truth through the force of its deceitful assertion, which pushes hermeneutical limits to the breaking point in order to foster epistemological and ontological transition and insight.

Another example of this function of hyperbole to speak a lie on the side of truth as the excess of exaggeration occurs through the hyperbole embedded within the epideictic form of Michael Moore’s films. Moore relies on a nostalgic American past in order to gain *ethos* with his audience and re-formulate shared values like individualism, active citizenship, and patriotism. He then critiques the present moment based on these re-formulated values. Much as the “Spanish hyperbolists” did, Moore implements hyperbole as an ethical response to the exigence of greed (*codicia*), despondency (*desaliento*), and a precipitous descent leading to disastrous collapse (*despenamiento*),<sup>153</sup> and this ethical response is embedded within his epideictic form. Through *auxesis*, he offers a “greater beauty” of what America might once more become when the greed of a corrupt government is squelched.

For Moore, a corrupt government is his exigence that demands an extraordinary response, which is the objective (phenomenological) justification for using hyperbole. His *ethos* is established through his persona of being a regular, though intelligent,

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<sup>152</sup> Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 92.

<sup>153</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 131.

individual who is passionate about defending America from corruption. From his dress to the “dumpy” way he presents himself, he plays on a “Joe the plumber” persona that is often respected by his audience, e.g., in his movie “Slacker Uprising.” This aids in his task of implementing forceful *pathos* that is the subjective (psychological) justification for the use of hyperbole. His hyperbole is certainly not well received by all in his audience, and he is often accused of *kakozelia* whereby his “wit” seemingly turns to “folly.” Yet, as Quintilian notes, it is better to attempt too much than not enough. Moore’s attempts can always be “pardoned” when the falsehood is not affirmed but the insight expands perspectival limits.

Here, the success or failure of hyperbole is shown again to be contingent upon its reception. Some may accuse him of *kakozelia*, but others will readily accept his hyperbole as pushing the truth to its limits, though it is uncertain as to whether his hyperbole is intentional. One might suggest that a hyperbole cannot be a hyperbole if it is unintended; however, the function of hyperbole and its effects are still operative whether it is intended or not. The structure of the argument remains hyperbolic, and the emotional effects it produces are quite real as hyperbole moves the audience primarily through *affectus* rather than *ratio*. The possible reception of hyperbole as revealing alternative interpretations about the truth also occurs whether the hyperbole is intended or not.

In his most recent film, “Capitalism: A Love Story,” as well as in his previous films, “Sicko” and “Fahrenheit 9/11,” he builds his argument from beginning to end incrementally through *affectus* rather than *ratio*. In each film he stacks one hyperbole upon the next, i.e., one “strain on the facts” to the next. Each time, the emotions of the

audience are stirred until they presumably move into outrage. As Moore says about “Capitalism,” “The film will blow their minds,”<sup>154</sup> which implies both a transition in thinking as well as heightened emotion when these new realizations are subjectively (re)interpreted and integrated into one’s worldview. Stirring the audience through *pathos* and strengthening his *ethos*, he strains the facts in order to surpass the truth. His hyperbolic heights always move in a descent back towards a political reality where his falsehoods are intended to duplicitously transition towards other revealed truths.

In a statement about the health care bill that is related to the issues he raises in “Sicko,” he says, “To My Fellow Citizens, the Republicans: Thanks to last night's vote, that child of yours who has had asthma since birth will now be covered after suffering for her first nine years as an American child with a pre-existing condition.”<sup>155</sup> This type of exaggeration (hyperbolic metaphor) is intended to reveal what he believes to be hidden truths about American corruption: “They [the viewers of “Capitalism”] will see things and learn things about the economic calamity we are in that have not been shown to them on the evening news.”<sup>156</sup> In Žižek’s terms, the excess of Moore’s exaggeration is the truth undermining the appearance of a balanced American economic totality. The empty signifier becomes greed itself, and Moore can violently (re)interpret that greed filling it

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<sup>154</sup> See Michael Moore, “‘Capitalism: A Love Story’ House Parties this Weekend – 1,000 to be Held across the Nation!,” MichaelMoore.Com, <<http://www.michaelmoore.com/words/mikes-letter/capitalism-love-story-house-parties-weekend-1000-be-held-across-nation>> (16 April 2010).

<sup>155</sup> See Michael Moore, “The Great thing about the Health Care Bill that has Passed? It will Save Republican Lives, Too (An Open Letter to Republicans from Michael Moore),” MichaleMoore.Com, <<http://www.michaelmoore.com/words/mikes-letter/great-thing-about-health-care-law-has-passed-it-will-save-republican-lives-too-open-letter-republicans-michael-moore>> (16 April 2010).

<sup>156</sup> Moore, “House Parties.”

with whatever signified he deems appropriate, e.g., governmental and corporate corruption.

One scene in “Capitalism” has him standing before the New York Stock Exchange holding a moneybag asking for America’s money back. His objective gesture is a hyperbolic lie, and the conceit reveals Moore’s subjective truth that America has been robbed by the government in league with corporations. This hyperbolic sign signifies the entirety of the film’s message (as well as the message of his other films): corporate and governmental greed has exploited and taken the common American citizen’s money and freedom. As Moore says, “Track the crime of the century from Wall Street to your street.”<sup>157</sup> Whether capitalism is the crime of the century or not (*comparatio*), his objective exaggeration leads his audience to their own subjective conclusions about capitalism, which, for Moore, is that the government has sold out to Wall Street. This statement in itself is a hyperbolic figure of thought transcending both films, and it is parallel to Derrida’s discussion of demonic hyperbole.

These two individual’s contexts are quite different, but the impetus is the same. In Derrida’s case, the truth-as-totality is what must be repeatedly exceeded through hyperbolic *différance* because hyperbole will always be re-economized into the system of totality it attempts to disrupt and transgress. This exigence requires the response of demonic hyperbole in order to crack the walls of the tower of truth-as-totality and reveal the project of madness that lies beneath. In Moore’s case, the alleged truth about the American government and capitalism as totality is a lie, which can only be revealed

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<sup>157</sup> See <<http://www.michaelmoore.com>> (16 April 2010).

through various hyperbolic deceits that will lead to the possibility of de-stabilizing this perception.

For both Derrida and Moore, the project of thinking the demonic hyperbole is a repetitive necessity in order to disrupt conventional assumptions. Moore's films are always re-economized, literally within a market economy where he makes large quantities of money, but his films attempt to move beyond the accepted truth of capitalism to reveal other truths about this economic system. By making multiple films, and repeating the gesture of madness, he is repetitively chipping away at the façade of conventional norms. One film is not enough. The attempt to hyperbolically reveal must always be (re)attempted.

In sum, the contradiction between truth and lie leads to an epistemological transition through the work of hyperbole as trope and as figure of thought. The epistemological heights of hyperbole transform thought in its descent back towards reality, and the truth that is the lie is double-crossed by the lie that reveals other truths. Hyperbole can elegantly surpass the truth because: 1) no one is content with the exact truth, 2) the exact truth can never be stated, 3) language is more efficient when it goes beyond reality, 4) it is better to say too much than not enough, 5) the project of thinking must attempt to exceed its bounds for epistemological transformation to occur, 6) the excess of exaggeration is the truth that disrupts the presumed balanced totality, and 7) the signified is already in excess and must be pushed beyond itself through the destabilizing hyperbolic signifier. Through objective and subjective use, objective and subjective justification, exigence and *ethos*, *auxesis*, and duplicitous transition, hyperbole is seen as a complex and important rhetorical device.

## CONCLUSION

The two functions of hyperbole discussed in this chapter are important for constructing and understanding an overall theory of hyperbole. They are the functions historically ascribed to hyperbole, and they also enrich one's understanding of hyperbole. Simply viewing hyperbole as an impossibility or a lie is a deficient interpretation of hyperbole. For those like Seneca and Derrida, it is moving through the difficulty of impossibility towards possibility that signifies the significance of hyperbole. For those like Quintilian and Nietzsche, it is viewing hyperbole as a deceit on the side of other truths, and the undermining of the "truth" itself, that allows its epistemological and ontological force to be perceived. Transgressing and constituting signifieds at the limits of signification, hyperbole reveals the excess of meaning and being contained within the abundance of the signifier that signifies and constitutes excess itself. Indeed, the economy of signification itself operates within a decorum of excess that reveals both the insufficiency and inexhaustibility of language and meaning.

Within a decorum of excess, hyperbole is shown to operate appropriately and effectively. Hyperbole balances on the edge of *kakozelia* more than other tropes, and its reception is paramount. Offering a hyperbole risks misunderstanding, and its subjective and objective justification is the responsibility of the hyperbolist. Providing phenomenological and psychological transition out of contradictory epistemological and ontological positions places a strain on language and perspectives, and the burden a hyperbolist bears requires a complex feat of rhetorical dexterity. Negotiating *ethos* and *pathos* at every figurative turn, the hyperbolist must both prepare and astonish the audience at an opportune moment in order to move them beyond the literal and into the

figural, which can move the audience into a position of transition. The contradiction of hyperbole is easily viewed as folly rather than wit, and an effective transition can only be maintained within a decorum of excess where the excess of exaggeration is the norm and disproportionality is entirely appropriate and timely.

Through *auxesis*, hyperbole duplicitously resides within a realm of copious *verba* and stylistic excess that guides one towards the re-presentation of a *res* through contrariety and paradox, but the interpretation of the hyperbole is left entirely in the hands of the audience. The double-dealing hyperbole risks its position of elegance for the sake of the audience who is seemingly eager to dismiss it, but the astonishing *res* hyperbole can re-present is worth the risk. Its risk is worth it because the alleged truth is never enough. The “truth” can only be meaningfully explored and disrupted by moving beyond its own presumed reality-as-totality, and hyperbole shatters the absolute closure of assumed truth thereby allowing for shocking and forceful epistemological and ontological transition. The surprising and baffling errant logic of hyperbole disrupts and dismantles normative epistemological frameworks with hammer blows.

Exemplified in the epideictic and grotesque genres, hyperbole moves within an alternate reality of logic and reason where an impossibility can but might not lead to other possibilities and a lie can but might not lead to other hermeneutical truths. Used intentionally or unintentionally, hyperbole bludgeons the literal and forges it into the figural, and this ambitious project can only be accomplished through an excess of *affectus* and the exaggeration of reality. Paradoxically moving between one extreme and the other, hyperbole both tells and does not tell. It both reveals and re-veils. It both disorients and re-orientes in one eloquent breath.

## CHAPTER 4: THE DISORIENTING RE-ORIENTATION OF HYPERBOLE

All visions of what is not are hyperbolic and therefore, from within the “economy” which they transgress, appear in the aspect of monstrosity (or madness) – some actually are.  
Jean-Pierre Mileur

The road to excess leads to the palace of wisdom.  
William Blake

### INTRODUCTION

In the last chapter I explored the impossibility/possibility and truth/lie functions of hyperbole that serve to facilitate phenomenological and psychological transition through epistemological and ontological disruption. These two fundamental functions of hyperbole are mainly established by Quintilian and are carried forward in the historical discussion. The two functions together constitute a third meta-function, which I derive from two unelaborated statements by Paul Ricoeur. In this chapter I will explicate the meta-function of hyperbole to re-orient perspectives and interpretations of a given context or reality through disorientation. That is, it is now clearer that each function of hyperbole re-orient through disorientation. Furthermore, while the first two functions have a clear historical grounding in rhetorical theory, this meta-function has no explicit ties to previous theories of hyperbole. Thus, this chapter aids in reviving and revivifying hyperbole as a critical trope by offering a new contribution to the theory of hyperbole.

The disorientation/re-orientation meta-function comes from two somewhat problematic rhetorico-theological statements made by Ricoeur, which I will significantly expand upon since they are left unexplored by him in any meaningful way. His statements suggest what I suspected all along about hyperbole, but I was unable to articulate it succinctly. As such, Ricoeur’s insight is the inspiration for this function, and



the main statement I will focus on is offered by Ricoeur regarding parables in the New Testament. He writes, “[Hyperbole] reorients by first disorienting [the law of paradox and hyperbole]...[and] makes the extraordinary break forth in the ordinary [the law of extravagance].”<sup>1</sup> Specifically indicating the paradoxical extravagance of hyperbole, Ricoeur unintentionally highlights the overall function, or “law,” of hyperbole. This disorientation/re-orientation function Ricoeur posits is crucial for hyperbole because it operates at a meta-theoretical level guiding the first two functions. The overall purpose of hyperbole as trope or figure of thought is to disorient through contradiction and re-orient towards a transition in meaning and being. Hyperbole can teach and move its audience and offer them what they already desire – epistemological and ontological expansion – and this is exemplified in the grotesque genre.

As in the previous chapter I will use the epideictic and grotesque genres as examples that reveal this forceful demand of hyperbole. I will focus mainly on the grotesque genre, but epideictic will sometimes come into play. The disorienting function of hyperbole as a double-dealing gesture of duplicity that creates *vertige de l’hyperbole* coupled with the re-orientation hyperbole facilitates is pervasive and typified in the grotesque.

The grotesque is certainly a disorienting genre, and it achieves this disorientation by bringing disparate elements together in paradoxical and contradictory combinations through hyperbole’s impossible deceits. Using hyperbole, the grotesque also re-orient the audience towards other perspectival and (re)interpretive possibilities. The grotesque specifically highlights Gerard Genette’s statement about hyperbole I quoted in the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur, Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 229.

previous chapter: “*One may call hyperboles the effects by which language...draws closer through contrast and discontinuity, as if by burglary, realities naturally far-removed.*”<sup>2</sup> This is, in fact, an excellent summary statement about a main characteristic of the grotesque genre to fuse contrarities into hybridities of thought and language. As is already evident from the last chapter, precariously holding discontinuities in tension is a significant function of hyperbole, and this errancy fosters as yet unrealized epistemological and ontological possibilities.

I will begin with a discussion of Ricoeur’s insight into hyperbole’s disorientation/re-orientation function, and I will also note some difficulties with his observations. I will then proceed to offer a more detailed discussion than in the last chapter regarding a decorum of excess where *kairos* and decorum work in tandem to re-orient through disorientation. Next, I will use the grotesque to highlight this aspect, or operation, of hyperbole, and I will specifically show a decorum of excess operating within the grotesque genre. Finally, I will offer two variations on the theme of hyperbole in a grotesque key: 1) paradoxical *verba* and the insight of *res* and 2) transgressive deformation and errant transformation. These variations serve the same function, but they each reveal different ways of conceptualizing the meta-function of hyperbole to re-orient through disorientation. This is how I will construct the final meta-function of hyperbole, which is epitomized in the grotesque genre, and further reveal hyperbole’s critical contributions to rhetorical theory and criticism.

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Hyperboles, 3. Johnson’s translation from the French.

## HYPERBOLIC DISORIENTATION AND RE-ORIENTATION

### RICOEUR'S HYPERBOLE

The operative impetus of hyperbole to re-orient through disorientation is, as I said, not one historically ascribed to it. It is implied but never fully articulated. Ricoeur, then, offers a keen insight into hyperbole, but he does not elucidate his statements in any detail. As noted above, Ricoeur posits that hyperbole paradoxically “reorients by first disorienting [the law of paradox and hyperbole]...[and] makes the extraordinary break forth in the ordinary [the law of extravagance].”<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur also suggests, “Hyperbole, like paradox, leads us back to the heart of existence.”<sup>4</sup> In these two statements, a world of possibilities is opened for hyperbole. To this end, I will explore these statements in order to establish disorientation and re-orientation as a meta-function of hyperbole, and I will examine *kairos* and decorum to reveal their importance for this function, as they are imperative for all functions of hyperbole. I will then show how the grotesque exemplifies this “law” of hyperbole.

The first observation to re-iterate is that disorientation/re-orientation is an umbrella function of hyperbole that also buttresses the previous two functions of hyperbole. It is not overt but causes overt emotional responses and consequences. It is always operating within hyperbole, and it pervades every aspect of this trope's functions. When one asserts a hyperbolic impossibility or a hyperbolic lie, the intention is to disorient one's audience by shocking them and disrupting previously held assumptions

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<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 229.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

about reality. Once this disorientation occurs, the audience is ready for a re-orientation; a paradoxical movement leading towards transition.

Almost as sensory deprivation (attenuation) or overload (accumulation or *incrementum*) prepares one for indoctrination or brainwashing, hyperbole disorients the hearer in order to de-stabilize their thoughts and perspectives. Only when this disorientation is invoked is the hearer then ready to be re-oriented to another way of thinking or being. To be clear, I am not suggesting that hyperbole brainwashes, but the momentary shock of hyperbole can induce a similar psychological effect or experience, e.g., when Longinus uses hyperbole to “transport” the audience into the realm of the sublime.

The second observation to highlight is Ricoeur’s subtle detour from Quintilian’s theory of hyperbole. Ricoeur’s departure is also distinct from every other rhetorical theorist examined thus far. For Ricoeur, hyperbole forces the extraordinary to break *into* the ordinary – a transcendent movement into immanence. For other theorists, hyperbole is an extraordinary break *from* the ordinary – a movement from immanence towards transcendence or a transcendent movement across immanental boundaries. This is, in fact, the novelty of Ricoeur’s claim, and it is an important distinction to make. In the latter instance, hyperbole is simply a deviation from the conventional and normative, a rhetorical hyperbole. In Ricoeur’s case, hyperbole ushers the extraordinary into the ordinary as if from some other realm, a theological hyperbole. It appears as a type of onto-theological metaphysics of presence where one receives a pre-packaged hyperbole from some extraordinary realm, but this is antithetical to rhetorical hyperbole because the purpose of rhetorical hyperbole is to use as well as to respond to the extraordinary.

However, Ricoeur's theological hyperbole that leads one back to the heart of existence nevertheless highlights the transitional effect of hyperbole, which still reveals interesting hyperbolic movements within discourse.

For example, Flannery O'Connor's grotesque novels engage hyperbole from a rhetorico-theological perspective. Theorists of the grotesque often reference O'Connor as exemplifying the "literary grotesque," and their characterizations accentuate Ricoeur's understanding of hyperbole as a disorientation leading one back to a re-orientation that reveals the essence of existence. James Goodwin suggests that to convey matters of faith O'Connor uses "exaggerated and overdetermined methods," and he quotes O'Connor in Mystery and Manners, "You have to make your vision apparent by shock – to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures."<sup>5</sup> The prevalence of hyperbole is perhaps obvious in these statements. Exaggeration, overdetermination, and shocking visions are all evident references to hyperbole, and the shocking, shouting, and startling figures in O'Connor's novels disorient through hyperbole. Her use of hyperbole is a disorienting break from the ordinary, but the re-orientation also occurs from a vision that breaks into the ordinary revealing "the heart of existence."

Goodwin suggests that O'Connor's literary grotesque discloses "intrinsic truths," and again quoting O'Connor, "Reveals what we are essentially."<sup>6</sup> Through hyperbole, these intrinsic truths and what we are essentially are seemingly extraordinary insights that break into the ordinary. O'Connor employs hyperbole as a deviation from the ordinary,

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<sup>5</sup> James Goodwin, Modern American Grotesque: Literature and Photography (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2009), 97.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 98.

but it then rebounds back allowing the extraordinary to break into the ordinary. The insight this brings is the “truth,” one’s essential nature, or the heart of existence. In this sense, Ricoeur’s claims are not completely different from other rhetorical theories of hyperbole, which suggest that the heights of hyperbole always descend back into a contextual reality revealing a transitional insight regarding meaning and being. Yet, his metaphysical assumptions remain distinct from rhetorical hyperbole. Operating within a Christian context, O’Connor and Ricoeur share the same presuppositions about reality that perhaps guide their perceptions about hyperbole, but despite Ricoeur’s superb insight into hyperbole’s disorienting/re-orienting function, his claims remain somewhat rhetorically problematic.

Out of his Christian context, Ricoeur’s definition of hyperbole is inexorably tied to *kairos*, or a *kairotic* moment, as Paul Tillich puts it. *Kairos*, theologically speaking, is interpreted as “the time of God” or the “fullness of time” when the in-breaking of the kingdom of God can occur and reveal or bring one to the “heart of existence.” It is a moment where *chronos* time is radically disrupted and transcendence and immanence coalesce. Rhetorically, *kairos* is the “timely” or “opportune” moment when the most suasive force might be implemented in order to affect some type of change. Ricoeur’s claim is thus premised upon a metaphysics of presence whereas rhetorical *kairos* is premised upon a more socio-political context. Theological *kairos* assumes a revelation of some essence of being, while rhetorical *kairos* makes no such presupposition. These difficulties with Ricoeur’s understanding of hyperbole aside, his statements about disorientation and re-orientation reveal two important aspects of hyperbole I wish to explicate: *kairos* and decorum.

*Kairos* is an important part of rhetorical theory in general, and it is particularly crucial for hyperbole. *Kairos* is implied throughout each function of hyperbole discussed thus far. Whether advising the caution of timely moderation or the encouragement of timely exaggeration, *kairos* surges as an undercurrent guiding the uses and abuses of hyperbole. Most significantly, *kairos* largely determines the effectiveness of hyperbole since the reception of hyperbole is almost entirely dependent upon its timely use by the hyperbolist. While Ricoeur's statement about hyperbole emphasizes *kairos*, most other theories of hyperbole discussed thus far stress decorum, but these are interrelated conceptions. Concisely, Ricoeur makes *kairos* explicit and decorum implicit while other rhetorical theorists of hyperbole make decorum explicit and *kairos* implicit.

The issues of decorum and *kairos* have emerged throughout this overall project, and it is now time to explore these issues. I save this discussion for the final section for two reasons. First, these rhetorical concepts operate at a meta-hyperbolic level, and hyperbole's disorientation/re-orientation function does as well, which means that this function exemplifies the use of *kairos* and decorum. They are always present and always crucial, but they are never quite overt, though the effects they create will hopefully become obvious and tangible.

Second, I posit that, within a decorum of excess, *kairos* facilitates hyperbole's disorienting function and decorum facilitates hyperbole's re-orienting function. As a type of dialogical counter-balance, the initial shock of hyperbole is forced onto the audience at a *kairotic* moment through *kairotic* speech, and the ensuing disorientation is mitigated by a decorous re-orientation. *Kairos* and decorum are the churning inner conflict of hyperbole. Derrida's characterization of hyperbole in terms of the "demonic" thus seems

appropriate. Hyperbole has hidden depths that are in constant turmoil and are not revealed all at once, but it is this turmoil that makes hyperbole so effective at disturbing one's audience enough to make them re-consider their initial positions.

A hyperbolic assertion may seem shocking and “all at once,” but the forceful implications of hyperbole are often unrealized until after the initial encounter. A seemingly distasteful violation of decorum, one may not be initially prepared for the *kairotic* moment of hyperbole's force. This is one reason why hyperbole and decorum appear to have a love-hate relationship. To take the personification further, hyperbole and decorum are at once intimately wedded as well as bitter enemies. Hyperbole is always pushing, de-stabilizing, and risking decorum, fighting for its chance to shock and disrupt, and decorum is always attempting to contain and tame hyperbole even as it damns hyperbole's nature to exceed every boundary.

#### A DECORUM OF EXCESS: *KAIROTIC* DISORIENTATION AND DECOROUS RE-ORIENTATION

Decorum, as a balance or propriety that “becomes the measure for assessing the rhetorical quality for expression,”<sup>7</sup> is an important issue to address in terms of hyperbole because hyperbole may easily fall victim to accusations of *kakozelia*. It is, in fact, through decorum that hyperbole is often condemned as unnatural, disorderly, and tasteless. This indictment is offered despite the fact that even in nature harmony and balance are often disrupted through the brutal force of “natural” disasters such as earthquakes and typhoons, which, like hyperbole, often strike without warning. As evidenced by Quintilian's difficult, though dexterous, negotiation between hyperbole and

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Leff, “The Habitation of Rhetoric,” in Argument & Critical Practices Proceeding from the Fifth SCA/AFA Conference on Argumentation, ed. Joseph Wenzel (Annandale: SCA, 1987), 6.



decorum, maintaining a decorous approach to extraordinary subject matter is risky and uncertain. As Johnson writes, “Hyperbolic amplification proves a means of exhausting or mocking received ideas, including the idea(l) of decorum.”<sup>8</sup> Hyperbole is often more effective when it pushes decorum to its limits and offers the audience the unexpected, even the impossibility of moderation itself.

Historically, rhetorical theorists arbitrate this issue of violating moderation and decorum by offering a more fluid conception of decorum regarding hyperbole. For example, Quintilian separates a more decorous elegant hyperbole from extravagant hyperbole, and Erasmus largely rejects the strictures of decorum within his system of *copia*. Or, rhetorical theorists accommodate hyperbole by re-constituting a separate type of decorum where hyperbole might operate, e.g., Tertullian’s “Christian ornamentation,” Longinus’s elevated or sublime style, and Renaissance rhetorician’s conception of “sacred rhetoric.” The issue of violation is also mitigated through one’s *ethos*, e.g., in Augustine’s framework as well as Quintilian’s. As discussed in the previous chapter, *ethos* is critical for the reception of hyperbole, and it, combined with *pathos*, becomes a subjective justification for the use of hyperbole. Decorum, defined by its exigence, offers both an objective and subjective justification for hyperbole. Adjusting decorum for hyperbole is thus one strategy that is beneficial for its justification and its eventual reception, which is why it is a common move for theorists of hyperbole, and it seems that decorum is as flexible as hyperbole is unaccommodating.

Michael Leff suggests that decorum is adaptive and adjusts the structure of a given discourse in relation to its specific context. It is a “flexible standard for assessing

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<sup>8</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 12.

the intrinsic merit of a rhetorical product,”<sup>9</sup> and Robert Hariman argues, “Failure to adapt indicates to observers that either the actor or the code is too rigid to warrant continued respect [i.e., one’s *ethos*] in a changing world.”<sup>10</sup> Conceiving of decorum as flexible based on its context as well as influencing one’s *ethos* directly based on this flexibility allows for the (re)constitution of a type of decorum of excess,<sup>11</sup> which heightens hyperbole’s effectiveness and is not contradictory to the notion of decorum overall. Decorum is contingent, and it alters over time and among styles of oratory.<sup>12</sup> Johnson

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<sup>9</sup> Leff, “The Habitation of Rhetoric,” 7.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Hariman, “Decorum, Power, and the Courtly Style,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 78, no. 2 (1992): 164.

<sup>11</sup> Charles W. Mignon makes a similar argument regarding Edward Taylor and what he sees as a decorum of imperfection. See Charles W. Mignon, “Edward Taylor’s ‘Preparatory Meditations’: A Decorum of Imperfection,” PMLA 83, no. 5 (1968): 1423-1428. See also Annick Paternoster, “Decorum and Indecorum in the ‘Seconda redazione’ of Baldassare Castiglione’s ‘Libro del Cortegiano,’” The Modern Language Review 99, no. 3 (2004): 622-634; Paul Achter, “Comedy in Unfunny Times: News Parody and Carnival after 9/11,” Critical Studies in Media Communication 25, no. 3 (2008): 274-303; and Patricia Roberts-Miller, “John Quincy Adams’s Amistad Argument: The Problem of Outrage; or, the Constraints of Decorum,” Rhetoric Society Quarterly 33, no. 2 (2002): 5-25. Roberts-Miller suggests that a typical conception of decorum as moderation leaves little space for “principled dissent” and “sincere outrage,” and Achter posits that expressing anger and rage are often viewed as a violation of decorum, which I would categorize, with Plato, as hyperbolic expressions. Plato suggests that “when desire without reason drags us toward pleasures and rules in us, the name *wanton outrage* is applied to the rule.” He contrasts this with a certain decorum of moderation and suggests that the excessive desirous soul lacks reason and pursues only pleasure. “Sincere outrage” has no place, then, within the purview of his praised moderation. See Plato, Phaedrus, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 237d-238a. Plato’s view is then carried through Aristotle’s “vehemence” and Cicero’s “intemperance” up into the Renaissance. Yet, if decorum is adaptive and flexible as Leff suggest, then a decorum of excess that incorporates sincere outrage and anger into its response are appropriate expressions premised upon its given context.

Paul Goring also offers an interesting historical moment when decorum is allegedly violated but is significantly effective, and this effectiveness can be understood in terms of a decorum of excess. Methodist preachers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were often accused of “enthusiasms,” i.e., an “excess of religious zeal,” that were distasteful, “frantic,” and “extravagant.” While the effectiveness of such extravagance may seem puzzling, I posit that this instance of alleged violation is actually a re-negotiation of decorum where extravagance is precisely appropriate within a decorum of excess or “enthusiasm.” That is, the Methodist preachers condemned as mad and socially depraved by anti-Methodists were operating within an appropriate decorum of excess for others. Viewing “enthusiasms” from this perspective of decorum alleviates the question of effectiveness because the extravagant sermon was entirely decorous for the audience thereby rendering it effective and persuasive. See Paul Goring, The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth Century Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 70-72.

<sup>12</sup> See Joy Connolly, The State of Speech: Rhetoric and Political Thought in Ancient Rome (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 171. This is derived from a Ciceronian conception of

even suggests that “decorum is best illustrated by the juxtaposition of the most ingenious and atrocious examples. To arrive at a notion of decorum (or taste), the negative and the extreme are necessary starting points.”<sup>13</sup> In this view, hyperbole is a necessary element of decorum in general.

A decorum of excess is here conceived as a type of errant decorum that emphasizes the poetic within the oratorical; a style of *plus ultra*. It is a decorum where exaggeration is an appropriate disproportionate expression regarding that which exceeds. Within this errant decorum, the vividly disproportionate response to an extraordinary exigence or subject matter is the appropriate “right action” that achieves suasive effect.<sup>14</sup> This decorum highlights the justification for hyperbole. “Hyperbole does not merely say the ‘something more’; it does so for a purpose.”<sup>15</sup> Where exaggeration is demanded, only a decorum of excess – where the economy of the decorum is excessive and the risk of heightened speech is appropriate (*to prepon*) – will suffice. In this decorum, the *pathos* used, the exigence, the magnitude of subject matter, and the result of hyperbole’s force

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decorum premised upon “natural laws” that Cicero viewed as both contingent and necessary. See also Stephen J. McKenna, *Adam Smith: The Rhetoric of Propriety* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

As Craig R. Smith writes of Cicero’s conception of decorum, “He extends the notion of propriety to questions of ethical conduct, thereby specifically linking it to *ethos*...Cicero is so taken with this linkage that he develops four divisions by which a public orator can organize his life with propriety. Style also helps to convey the truth and leads Cicero to develop elaboration, illumination (*illustrare*), paradox (*admirable*), and expansion. Because of their relationship with spoken truth, these devices became part of invention as well as style. This vastly expanded the less detailed notions of ‘appropriateness’ and ‘fitness of function’ developed by the Greek Sophists.” See Craig R. Smith, “Roman Decorum as a New Praxis for Existential Communication,” *Western Journal of Communication* 56, no. 1 (1992): 76.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Hariman, “Decorum,” in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, ed. Thomas O. Sloane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 200.

<sup>15</sup> Webb, *Re-Figuring Theology*, 88.

can function as *remedia* that pardon and/or justify the extraordinary means employed, but the possibility for the accusation of *kakozelia* remains acute.

The allegation of *kakozelia* is perhaps the most significant reason hyperbole is dismissed as a critical trope, which is why a decorum of excess is vital for hyperbole to function effectively. Psychologically and phenomenologically disrupting appeals to harmony and proportion, e.g., aesthetically and ethically, is a perilous rhetorical move, and the vice of excess is often resisted and rejected. A decorum of excess is thus characterized overall as risky even as its risks can bring variety, vividness, and clarity of insight to the rhetorical situation.

One contemporary example of using a decorum of excess is offered by Joshua Gunn in his article “ShitText: Toward a New Coprophilic Style.” Using a decorum of excess while arguing for his excessive new style is his goal, though he does so unintentionally and without reference to hyperbole. He argues that this style links the biological (“shit”) to the rhetorical (“speech”). He writes, “This style of public address must be akin to street shitting! This style must *truly* be risky and creative...The new style must counter the strategies of the anti-diarrheal with the diarrheic.”<sup>16</sup> Unwittingly resuscitating the Cynic practice of defecating in the middle of the street before declaiming, i.e., “street shitting,” “prideful overproduction” is the risk of this style, which is also its justification. Within a decorum of excess, shitting and countering the anti-diarrheal must be disproportionately appropriate and occur at an opportune moment. This shocking gesture is the risk of hyperbole in Gunn’s argument where all is exaggerated for a disorienting effect/affect.

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<sup>16</sup> Joshua Gunn, “ShitText: Toward a New Coprophilic Style,” *Text & Performance Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2006) : 93-94.

Gunn's decorum of excess helps him create effective exaggeration within a disorienting economy of *affectus*. A coprophilic style hyperbolically posits shitting as both biological and rhetorical excess, and in doing so, it comes dangerously close to *kakozelia*. From the root *kakos* meaning "bad" and related to *kakke* (Lt. *cacare*) meaning "excrement" or "feces," perhaps a *kakozeliac* style is a more appropriate name for his essay. Yet, Gunn's shockingly hyperbolic argument is mitigated within a decorum of excess where his excess is "pardoned," i.e., it is published in a scholarly journal. He even offers a *remedium* at the beginning of his essay in the form of a letter written to the editors of the journal explaining the shocking nature of his article.

His argument is a hyperbolic lie intended to reveal other truths about rhetoric in general thereby re-orienting one's perspective towards what rhetoric might mean through the (re)interpretive lens he presents. Much as those in the "second sophistic" might do, Gunn argues for *kakozelia* even as he largely avoids accusations of *kakozelia* by maintaining a decorum of excess.

Overall, a decorum of excess is a decorum that is in excess, i.e., in *copia*, and engenders a style of *plus ultra*. It adapts to the unexpected risk of exaggeration – to the point of violation – required to facilitate transformation within a given context. It is an expansion of decorum that risks and pushes decorum to its fluid limits in order to accommodate excess and/as exaggeration. In a sense, hyperbole feigns violating decorum for rhetorical effect while remaining within the bounds of decorum. Like the grotesque, hyperbole "forcibly joins the decorous with the unexpected," and this joining occurs in the ambiguous space between virtuous form and rebellious content, which

becomes a “scene of transformation.”<sup>17</sup> A decorum of excess offers a nebulous, tenuous space where appropriate form is melded with disproportionate content for the purpose of a transition in thought and emotion, which relies on *pathos* and/or *ethos* to insure its transitional effects. In the end, this decorum contains or manifests a suitable, though often unexpected, response to the magnitude of the subject/situation under discussion, and its effect is the shattering insight of hyperbole that must be offered at the opportune moment. That is, *kairos* is an important element of a decorum of excess.

Appropriating a hyperbolic risk within a decorum of excess is marked by a certain *kairos* as a moment of timeliness able to be infused with potent rhetorical power.<sup>18</sup> John Poulakos suggests that *kairotic* speech is necessary “to create an impression of timeliness in the audience,”<sup>19</sup> and Scott Consigny defines *kairos* as “momentary ‘openings’ or opportunities to which the skilled artisan must respond accurately and forcefully.”<sup>20</sup> These “openings” for hyperbole in particular are the narrow gaps within discourse when

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<sup>17</sup> Kathryn Hume, “Robert Coover: The Metaphysics of Bondage,” The Modern Language Review 98, no. 4 (2003) : 827-828. Or, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham writes, “The grotesque often arises in the clash between the ‘virtuous’ limitations of form and a rebellious content that refuses to be constrained.” See Harpham, On the Grotesque, 7.

<sup>18</sup> See Dale L. Sullivan, “*Kairos* and the Rhetoric of Belief,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 78 (1992) : 317-332. For an interesting argument that is often contradictory to Sullivan’s presentation of *kairos* regarding Plato and Aristotle see James L. Kinneavy, “*Kairos* in Classical and Modern Rhetorical Theory,” in Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis, eds. Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002) and James L. Kinneavy and Catherine R. Eskin, “*Kairos* in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*,” Written Communication 2 (1994) : 131-142. Isocrates also emphasized *kairic* thought and action within his system of rhetorical *paideia*. See Phillip Sipiora, “Introduction: The Ancient Concept of *Kairos*,” in Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis, eds. Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> John Poulakos, “*Kairos* in Gorgias’ Rhetorical Compositions,” in Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis, eds. Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 90.

<sup>20</sup> Scott Consigny, “Gorgias’ Use of the Epideictic,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 25, no. 3 (1992) : 284. Consigny also quotes Eric Charles White as stating that *kairos* denotes “a passing instant when an opening appears, which must be driven through with force if success is to be achieved” (285).

hyperbole can exert its full potential. If the opening is missed, then hyperbole is likely to fail miserably. As a response to a particular exigence, the use of *kairos* aids in creating a forceful *pathos* deemed necessary by the hyperbolist. If *kairotic* speech fails to appear timely, then *pathos* will seem unnecessarily extravagant and artificial, and hyperbole will fall flat as “folly” and be misunderstood as *kakozelia*. As Longinus says, hyperbole can overshoot its mark: “Overdo the strain and the thing sags, and often produces the opposite effect to that intended.”<sup>21</sup> A decorum of excess attempts to regulate this overshooting and harnesses the force of *kairos* to insure that disproportionate hyperbolic power appears appropriate and occurs at the opportune moment. *Kairos* disorients, and the elegant use of hyperbole moves the audience decorously towards re-orientation by highlighting and justifying the appropriateness and necessity of the assertion.

The gravity of extraordinary situations requires extraordinary risks, and this risk only functions effectively within a decorum of excess where hyperbole and *kairos* work in tandem. As Poulakos argues about *kairos*, “Extraordinary circumstances and unprecedented conditions compel one to resort to kairotic speech, that is, speech that risks violating established norms of propriety and decorum,”<sup>22</sup> and Longinus argues that hyperbole is also most effective when it is employed at a time of crisis.<sup>23</sup> In this sense, hyperbolic speech is *kairotic* speech that risks violating norms and decorum in order to respond appropriately to a particular exigence defined by extraordinary circumstances. The crisis may be such an “overwhelming threat” and an “intensity” that “achieves

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<sup>21</sup> [Longinus], *On the Sublime*, 281.

<sup>22</sup> Poulakos, “*Kairos* in Gorgias,” 92.

<sup>23</sup> [Longinus], *On the Sublime*, 283.

psychotic proportions”<sup>24</sup> that only a disproportionate hyperbolic response is appropriate. The pre-Socratic ethic, especially in the Pythagorean school and Gorgias’s thought, of “Know the opportunity” (*kairon gnothi*) is thus vital for the functioning of hyperbolic risk.<sup>25</sup>

In order to accomplish this risky task, Poulakos argues (via Gorgias) that one must use *kairotic* speech to “avoid employing what is normatively typical because the typical in the form of the expected is the exact opposite of the unique in the form of the timely”<sup>26</sup> in order to “dislodge a generally held view by means of new and surprising arguments,” which recasts “common belief in a new light.”<sup>27</sup> Within rhetorical theory, there is nothing more capable of casting beyond reality or more unexpected or atypical than a hyperbolic shock “fired with brutality,”<sup>28</sup> and this disorienting disruption must rely on the audience’s perception of timeliness and decorousness if it is to be received as wit instead of folly. The risk of hyperbole is the risk of *kairotic* speech operating within and as a part of a decorum of excess, and the risk effects a re-orientation of thought or reality that results in perspectival transition. This is often seen when hyperbole is used within epideictic.

Expanding on Poulakas’s conception of *kairos*, Dale L. Sullivan argues that epideictic rhetoric itself is *kairotic* in nature,<sup>29</sup> and with Rosenberg, posits that epideictic

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<sup>24</sup> Darsey, *Prophetic Tradition*, 23.

<sup>25</sup> Kinneavy, “*Kairos* in Classical and Modern Rhetorical Theory,” 59.

<sup>26</sup> Poulakos, “*Kairos* in Gorgias,” 91.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>28</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 290.

<sup>29</sup> Sullivan, “*Kairos* and the Rhetoric of Belief,” 325-326.



operates as a “suprarational rhetoric that goes beyond the rational capacity to confront an individual’s being with the radiance of Being.”<sup>30</sup> Within epideictic discourse, the epistemological and ontological disruptiveness of hyperbole functions as a response to an exigence by forcefully throwing beyond one’s perception of a rational economy, i.e., a given interpretation of reality, and highlighting circumstantial contingency. This disorienting ambiguity is only momentary, but employed at the right moment, it dislodges one’s interpretive lens long enough to re-orient a given perspective and effect transformation/renewal. In tandem with *kairos*, embedded within a decorum of excess, and grounded in *pathos* and/or one’s epideictic *ethos*,<sup>31</sup> hyperbole functions effectively in all of its paradoxical and excessive ambiguity within epideictic.

#### FOUCAULT’S HYPERBOLE

A philosophical example of a decorum of excess used in epideictic is offered through Allan Megill’s analysis, in Prophets of Extremity, of Foucault’s discourse. Although Megill never references hyperbole, his argument is based entirely on analyzing the use of hyperbole within Foucault’s discourse. I will not trace the intricacies of Megill’s analysis of Foucault’s “discursive formations,” “subversive discourses,” and “discourse as praxis.” I will simply draw attention to Megill’s unwitting insight into Foucault’s use of hyperbole. Additionally, and without knowing it, Megill also argues that Foucault’s work takes the form of epideictic, which Robert Danisch asserts as well.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 329. Sullivan is here quoting Rosenberg.

<sup>31</sup> Sullivan, “The *Ethos* of Epideictic Encounter,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 26 (1993): 113-133.

<sup>32</sup> Danisch, “Power and the Celebration of the Self,” 291-307.

Commenting on Foucault's use of epideictic, Danisch argues that Foucault's discourse "does not seek to get the past right, nor does it seek to establish policy proposals for future courses of action...it seeks to reveal and transform the present, and this is precisely what makes his rhetoric epideictic."<sup>33</sup> Danisch asserts that Foucault attempts to "uncover what lies hidden" and "play on the dominant values of his audience and show what makes various communities cohere."<sup>34</sup> Danisch makes a convincing case that Foucault's work is epideictic, but what he misses, and what Megill unintentionally emphasizes, is that Foucault also uses hyperbole throughout his arguments asserted at opportune openings within discourse and philosophical thought. As Mileur asserts, "Foucault locates hyperbole at the heart of philosophical language,"<sup>35</sup> which is to say that hyperbole is necessarily at the heart of his critiques. Foucault uses a decorum of excess within epideictic to errantly assert hyperbolic impossibilities that are duplicitous in order to arrive at other possibilities.

Megill argues that the impossible task of attempting to say too much in order to say what must be said but is never fully articulated is precisely what Foucault is pushing the exploration of "truth" towards, of "changing the way things are."<sup>36</sup> Disrupting literal sense through hyperbole "to communicate what could not have been otherwise communicated," Foucault, as a hyperbolist, wants the audience to believe an

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 293.

<sup>35</sup> Mileur, *The Critical Romance*, 92.

<sup>36</sup> Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, 245.

“extraordinary ‘idée,’”<sup>37</sup> a re-imagined *res*. In this sense, the very basis of Foucault’s writing is premised upon hyperbole.

In particular, Megill writes, “It can be argued that Foucault is engaging in a legitimate rhetorical tactic, telling us lies about the past in order to open our eyes to the reality of the present,” and he continues, “Despite its inadequacies or even its outright falsehoods, such an account is justified insofar as it enables us to see more clearly the reality of this disciplinary society.”<sup>38</sup> As if re-appropriating Quintilian’s theory of hyperbole for a Foucauldian context, Megill emphasizes Foucault’s tactical, i.e., opportune, use of hyperbolic lies, which are “pardoned” because of the purpose they serve to elegantly surpass the truth. The justification Megill offers for Foucault’s use of excess is the exigence of the present extraordinary political/historical reality, Foucault’s “crisis orientation.”<sup>39</sup> Objectively and subjectively justifying Foucault’s hyperbole, Megill offers his reader the (re)interpretation of Foucault’s discourse as disorienting and disproportionate. His “fictioning” of the past and present results in a decorous surpassing of the truth, which re-orient’s perspective “to see more clearly the reality of this disciplinary society.”

In Megill’s understanding of Foucault’s “fictioning,” he notes that there is an “odd interplay between truth and lie: a lying history is legitimized by the existence of a ‘true’ political reality; a lying politics is legitimized by the existence of a ‘true’

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<sup>37</sup> Johnson, Hyperboles, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Megill, Prophets of Extremity, 244.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

history.”<sup>40</sup> With Quintilian, Megill sees a distinction in his analysis of Foucault’s writing between a lie intended to deceive and a hyperbolic lie intended to push epistemological and ontological limits. For Megill, Foucault’s “‘fictioning’ of the past is at the same time a fictioning, and a mystifying, of the present”<sup>41</sup> in a disorienting display of hyperbolic force that pushes truth beyond its bounds. That is, he fictions the past and uses a given interpretation of the present that is a “useful tool” intended to mystify and “disorder order.”<sup>42</sup> Foucault “seizes upon an interpretation already in place, ‘which it must upset, overturn, shatter with hammer blows.’”<sup>43</sup> The truth is the hyperbolic lie, i.e., the excess of exaggeration, on the side of truth(s) that disorients and disorders order with hammer blows at a *kairotic* moment, which then leads to a re-ordering or re-orientation that is a revelation of what lay hidden.

Foucault’s *kairotic* speech (what he might call the fearless speech of *parrhesia*)<sup>44</sup> is shocking, disproportionate, and risky, but it is necessary to alter given interpretations of reality, which Foucault sees as extraordinarily oppressive and skewed. He risks being mis-apprehended in order to create moments of apprehension. Historical scholars note the inaccuracy of Foucault’s work suggesting it is folly, but in doing so, they miss the wit of his hyperbolic (re)interpretations made within a decorum of excess.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. As Foucault says, “One ‘fictions’ history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one ‘fictions’ a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth” (235).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>44</sup> Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Semiotext(e), 2001).

What Megill suggests these scholars miss, for example, is that The Archaeology of Knowledge is a parody. Parody and hyperbole are distinct from each, but they share similar functions and characteristics, e.g., they each exaggerate and position oppositional impossibilities against each other as falsehoods, which might lead to other possible alternative truths.<sup>45</sup> In this hyperbolic parody, Megill suggests that Foucault is attacking Cartesianism as “the whole subjectivist emphasis that allegedly underlies modern science and technology.”<sup>46</sup> Foucault accomplishes this goal by offering The Archaeology of Knowledge as a parodied response to the Discourse on Method that posits the impossibility of Descartes’s “method” against Foucault’s own elusive anti-method.<sup>47</sup> The hyperbolic parody results in disorientation that is meant to lead to a perspectival re-orientation.

In contrast to Descartes, Foucault attempts the Dionysian project of “smashing science altogether” by the “*grotesque* parodying of an Apollonian scientific formalism.”<sup>48</sup> In this sense, Foucault is “engaged in undermining a whole structure of thinking, a whole approach toward ‘reality’ that he sees as oppressively uncreative.”<sup>49</sup> If this is indeed Foucault’s risk in Archaeology, then he is using hyperbolic lies within a disorienting/re-orienting decorum of excess to make his hyperbolic argument of smashing science altogether. With the hammer blows of hyperbole, Foucault offers Archaeology as a

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<sup>45</sup> For example, see Simon Dentith, Parody (Routledge, 2000) and Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

<sup>46</sup> Megill, Prophets of Extremity, 228.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

hyperbolic lie intended to reveal the impossibility of Descartes's method as well as the truth that his subjectivist views underlie all of science and technology. Although Foucault's *Archaeology* may be misunderstood as folly, the disorienting and "grotesque" force of his *kairotic* speech is managed within a decorum of excess where his witty hyperbole may be successfully employed.

What this discussion reveals is that a decorum of excess is necessary for the effective implementation of hyperbole. A disorienting hyperbolic assertion, i.e., *vertige de l'hyperbole*, is made at a *kairotic* moment within a decorum of excess where a disproportionate response to an extraordinary situation is the appropriate one, which facilitates a re-orientation towards meaning and being. Operating as a meta-function, the disorientation/re-orientation function of hyperbole exerted at the opportune moment is when a hyperbolic lie can be a beauty and an impossibility can lead to other possibilities. This is particularly evident in the grotesque genre.

#### HYPERBOLE EPITOMIZED IN THE GROTESQUE

Jean-Pierre Mileur and Christopher D. Johnson both suggest that there is something monstrous about hyperbole, and Johnson posits that hyperbole can go in either of two directions: the grotesque or the sublime. Obviously, monstrosities immediately leap to the mind when the grotesque is mentioned, but this is perhaps not true of hyperbole. From the Latin *monstrare* – meaning to indicate itself, or something beyond itself, so that it is a sign of things to come<sup>50</sup> – both the grotesque and hyperbole indicate something beyond reality and are phenomena at the limits of philosophical articulation

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<sup>50</sup> David Summers, "The Archaeology of the Modern Grotesque," in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 29.

always pushing epistemological and ontological limits.<sup>51</sup> As trope or figure of thought, hyperbole is always present in the grotesque – “the monstrous is one of the hyperbolist’s most characteristic subjects”<sup>52</sup> – and this genre exemplifies the disorientation/re-orientation function of hyperbole.

First, I will offer an initial look at hyperbole’s absent presence in theoretical grotesque literature, which will reveal hyperbole’s prevalent but unacknowledged presence in the grotesque. It will also show hyperbole’s disorientation/re-orientation function operating within the grotesque. Next, I will examine specifically how the grotesque operates through a decorum of excess of disorientation and re-orientation. I will then offer two variations of disorientation and re-orientation on the theme of hyperbole in a grotesque key: 1) paradoxical *verba* and the insight of *res* and 2) transgressive de-formation and errant transformation. These variations serve the same function, but they each reveal different ways of conceptualizing the hyperbolic function of disorientation and re-orientation in discourse.

It is important to emphasize at this point that hyperbole does re-orient through disorientation, but the re-orientation is not necessarily a synthesis or resolution. As Mileur says, “The curve of hyperbole appears as the path of desire,”<sup>53</sup> and this desire as errant re-orientation is never satisfied and always unfinished. Hyperbole offers a transition that reveals some other way of thinking or being in the world, which is never fixed or stable. It leads towards other possibilities and other perspectival truths, and the

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<sup>51</sup> Mileur, *The Critical Romance*, 92.

<sup>52</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 43.

<sup>53</sup> Mileur, *The Critical Romance*, 81.

re-orientation out of disorientation may, in fact, be a *res* that is disorienting. This is particularly evident within the grotesque where all is uncertain and may feel like “walking on the edge of a precipice from which one might fall at any moment.”<sup>54</sup>

When discussing the grotesque and using it to show hyperbole’s function, one difficulty that arises is its definition, which is quite stupefying itself. As Wolfgang Kayser states, “The creator of grotesques...must not and cannot suggest a meaning.”<sup>55</sup> It is difficult to give form to an expression of ambivalent meaning and formlessness. In a particularly well crafted grotesque passage of hyperbolic eloquence, Kristen A. Hoving writes:

The grotesque is a slippery idea. Like slime mold, it is difficult to grasp, sliding first one way, then another, only to ooze through clutching hands and splatter to the ground...It undoes form, picking away at beauty, rationality, harmony, and shape like fingernails worrying a scab. By means of parasitic prefixes it sucks its life from what it is not, becoming *misshapen*, *deformed*, *unfocused*, *indistinct*, *disintegrated*, and *antithetical*.<sup>56</sup>

A quite disorienting contiguous amalgam of *congeries*, Hoving reveals the problematic, elusive notion of the grotesque while also offering some of its tentatively agreed upon characteristics such as being elusive, undermining form, and operating through contradiction. Even conceiving of the grotesque as a genre is a slippery theoretical move because it oozes across linguistic, formal, and generic boundaries and categories. This is

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<sup>54</sup> James J. Troiano, “The Grotesque Tradition and the Interplay of Fantasy and Reality in the Plays of Roberto Arlt,” *Latin American Literary Review* 4, no. 8 (1976) : 8.

<sup>55</sup> Wolfgang Johannes Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 186.

<sup>56</sup> Kristen A. Hoving, “Convulsive Bodies: The Grotesque Anatomies of Surrealist Photography,” in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 220.



why the examples I offer in this section may not seem immediately “grotesque” but are, in fact, grotesque expressions.

For this reason, some suggest the grotesque might be a particular style, an aesthetic category, a form, an operation, or an incongruous image. Others simply create their own thematic, generic, or historical category for the grotesque, e.g., the mystical grotesque, the science-fictional grotesque, grotesque realism, the literary grotesque, the grotesque-absurd, the satiric grotesque, the tragicomic grotesque, the carnivalesque grotesque, the romantic grotesque, or the modern grotesque. Referential inferences are made, but no theorist succeeds in definitively naming the grotesque. The grotesque, each theorist asserts, suggests no particular form or meaning, but although theorists of the grotesque often avoid the project of formal definition, they do offer “characteristics” or “operations” of the grotesque.

One concisely culminating attempt at summarizing the characteristics and operations of the grotesque is offered by Dieter Meindl:

The grotesque emerges as a tense combination of attractive and repulsive elements, of comic and tragic aspects, of ludicrous and horrifying features. Emphasis can be placed on either the bright or the dark side (or pole) of the grotesque. But without a certain collision or complicity between playfulness and seriousness, fun and dread, the grotesque does not appear to exist.<sup>57</sup>

A contradictory creature, the grotesque brings contrarities together and makes the familiar strange. It is a “semi-exotic” space where the strange and the familiar meet,<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Dieter Meindl, American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 14.

<sup>58</sup> Arthur Clayborough, The Grotesque in English Literature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 238.

e.g., in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death."<sup>59</sup> No matter the differing characteristics enumerated across the literature of the grotesque, the one unifying concept is that of disorienting contradiction, paradox, or incongruity,<sup>60</sup> e.g., Kenneth Burke offers

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<sup>59</sup> Perhaps one of the best characterizations of the grotesque, Kayser maintains, is offered by Poe when he writes in "The Masque," "There were much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the *bizarre*, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust." See Meindl, American Fiction, 45.

<sup>60</sup> For example, see James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates, eds., The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997); Zahra A. Hussein Ali, "The Aesthetics of Transgression: Khalil Hawi's 'The Sailor and the Dervish' and the European Grotesque," Journal of Arabic Literature 28, no. 3 (1997) : 219-241; Frances K. Barasch, "Definitions: Renaissance and Baroque, Grotesque Construction and Deconstruction," Modern Language Studies 13, no. 2 (1983) : 60-67; Frances K. Barasch, "The Grotesque as a Comic Genre," Modern Language Studies 15, no. 1 (1985) : 3-11; Frances K. Barasch, The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings (The Hague: Mouton, 1971); Kenneth Burke, Attitudes Toward History, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); David Christenson, "Grotesque Realism in Plautus' 'Amphitruo,'" The Classical Journal 96, no. 3 (2001) : 243-260; Frances S. Connelly, ed., Modern Art and the Grotesque (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); David K. Danow, The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995); Edward Diller, "Aesthetics and the Grotesque: Friedrich Dürrenmatt," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature 7, no. 3 (1966) : 328-335; Brad Epps, "Grotesque Identities: Writing, Death, and the Space of the Subject (Between Michel de Montaigne and Reinaldo Arenas)," The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association 28, no. 1 (1995) : 38-55; Peter Fingesten, "Delimiting the Concept of the Grotesque," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 42, no. 4 (1984) : 419-426; James Goodwin, Modern American Grotesque: Literature and Photography (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2009); Joan Gordon, "Hybridity, Heterotopia, and Mateship in China Mieville's 'Perdido Street Station,'" Science Fiction Studies 30, no. 3 (2003) : 456-476; Geoffrey Harpham, "The Grotesque: First Principles," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 34, no. 4 (1976) : 461-468; Lee Byron Jennings, The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963); Farrell Lee, "Grotesque and the Demonism of Silence: Beckett's 'Endgame,'" Notre Dame English Journal 14, no. 1 (1981) : 59-70; James Naremore, "Stanley Kubrick and the Aesthetics of the Grotesque," Film Quarterly 60, no. 1 (2006) : 4-14; Elsa Nettels, "The Grotesque in Conrad's Fiction," Nineteenth-Century Fiction 29, no. 2 (1974) : 144-163; Ashton Nichols, "'Will Sprawl' in the 'Ugly Actual': The Positive Grotesque in Browning," Victorian Poetry 21, no. 2 (1983) : 157-170; William Van O'Connor, "The Grotesque in Modern American Fiction," College English 20, no. 7 (1959) : 342-346; Christina Ferreira-Pinto, "The Fantastic, the Gothic, and the Grotesque in Contemporary Brazilian Women's Novels," Chasqui 25, no. 2 (1996) : 71-80; Peter L. Podol, "The Grotesque Mode in Contemporary Spanish Theater and Film," Modern Language Studies 15, no. 4 (1985) : 194-207; Delma Eugene Presley, "The Moral Function of Distortion in Southern Grotesque," South Atlantic Bulletin 37, no. 2 (1972) : 37-46; Victor I. Scherb, "Blasphemy and the Grotesque in the Digby 'Mary Magdalene,'" Studies in Philology 96, no. 3 (1999) : 225-240; Paulette Singley, "Devouring Architecture: Ruskin's Insatiable Grotesque," Assemblage 32 (1997) : 108-125; Michael Steig, "Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 29, no. 2 (1970) : 253-260; James J. Troiano, "The Grotesque Tradition and the Interplay of Fantasy and Reality in the Plays of Roberto Arlt," Latin American Literary Review 4, no. 8 (1976) : 7-14; Cynthia Grant Tucker, "*Petrarchisant sur l'Horrible*: A Renaissance Tradition and Baudelaire's Grotesque," The French Review 48, no. 5 (1975) : 887-896; and Michiko N. Wilson, "Oe's Obsessive Metaphor, Mori, the Idiot Son: Toward the Imagination of Satire, Regeneration, and Grotesque Realism," Journal of Japanese Studies 7, no. 1 (1981) : 23-52.

the grotesque as a perspective by incongruity.<sup>61</sup> Olga Muller Cooke writes, “It is in that admixture of extremely heterogeneous elements, embracing such polarities as the horrific and the humorous, the ludicrous and the absurd, that the grotesque resides.”<sup>62</sup> The main hyperbolic function represented by the grotesque, then, is its disorienting contradictory nature, which always leads towards some transition of thought, emotion, experience, insight, or psychological state. Its excessive *verba* inevitably leads to the re-presentation of an extraordinary *res*. The subversive force of the grotesque is to excessively (re)present contradiction, and this occurs through the disorientation and re-orientation function of hyperbole.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham asserts that the grotesque is a fusion and co-presence of something that is “illegitimately in something else,” which creates a “distinct feeling of repulsion.”<sup>63</sup> This uneasiness, whether extreme or mild, can be stirred by overtly hyperbolic combinations of bodily distortion. In the Renaissance grotesque, for example, this fusion occurs by blending animal and vegetable together in an impossible grotesque amalgam of illegitimate and deceitful hybridity that creates a feeling of repulsion, a repulsion that nevertheless fascinates and exploits curiosity.<sup>64</sup> Yet, the disquietude of the grotesque may also be a disorienting hyperbolic figure of thought such as when two conflicting philosophical and/or theological combinations are melded together, e.g.,

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<sup>61</sup> Kenneth Burke, Attitudes Toward History, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>62</sup> Olga Muller Cooke, “The Grotesque Style of Belyj’s Moscow Novels,” The Slavic and East European Journal 32, no. 3 (1988): 399.

<sup>63</sup> Harpham, On the Grotesque, 11.

<sup>64</sup> See Summers, “The Archaeology of the Modern Grotesque,” 26-28 and Kari E. Lokke, “‘Bluebeard’ and ‘The Bloody Chamber’: The Grotesque of Self-Parody and Self-Assertion,” Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies 10, no. 1 (1988): 10.

Thomas J. J. Altizer's "Christian atheism," which can cause an equally unsettling reaction as two opposing worldviews are violently blended together, and "the deepest foundations of our being are interfered with."<sup>65</sup>

In either instance, a fusion of contrarities creates *pathos* of excessive discomfort, and fascination, through hyperbolic disorientation. As Webb writes of hyperbole, "Decentering the ordinary in a horizon of limitless possibilities can draw together disparate standpoints onto an open plane of a passionate and inclusive imagination."<sup>66</sup> Drawing together contradictory standpoints is the work of hyperbole in the grotesque, which creates an *affectus* in the audience of excessive, errant psychological states. Through impossibility, disorientation, and the lie of hyperbole, the grotesque brings together incongruous elements that intend paradoxically to shock, disturb, re-orient, and transform. As Johnson says of hyperbole in general, "Extremes converge to precipitate a state bordering on madness and catastrophe," and this convergence allows hyperbole to "interrogate the immanence of superfluity and monstrosity."<sup>67</sup> Balanced on the edge of madness, the grotesque offers one a (re)interpretation of reality through hyperbole. The transition this creates may lead to the realization of disorientation itself, other disorienting possibilities, but the transition is always an imaginative epistemological and ontological expansion, which is facilitated by hyperbole's phenomenological and psychological disruptiveness.

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<sup>65</sup> Jennings, *The Ludicrous Demon*, 9.

<sup>66</sup> Webb, *Blessed Excess*, 120.

<sup>67</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 334.

For example, hyperbole in the grotesque disorients by assembling a strange conflation of disparate elements indicating something beyond itself, but these elements need not constitute an actual monster or even something like a gargoyle, which many grotesque theorists consider Gothic rather than grotesque. Noel Carroll, for instance, suggests that the Left Behind series as well as clowns are grotesque.<sup>68</sup> A grotesquerie need only to be some disorienting amalgam of contradictory thoughts or elements, e.g., a confusion of the real and the ideal,<sup>69</sup> creating excessive *affectus* in the audience that is disconcerting, disruptive, discomforting, and discombobulating.<sup>70</sup> Not typically considered grotesque, Hercules, or his modern counterpart Superman, is an example of the contradictory fusion between mortal (the real) and immortal (the ideal) that creates a feeling of wonderment and also fear in the audience. Hyperbolically overreaching the bounds of mortality, Hercules's immortality expresses itself through impossible feats of strength within a body that is a conceit. He is not quite human or inhuman but a "subversion of our common expectations of the natural and ontological order."<sup>71</sup> He is an amalgam of the two thrown together in a mythological hyperbole. In this sense, Christ may also be considered a hyperbolic grotesquerie.

Despite the grotesque's reliance upon disproportionate and incongruent exaggeration and excess to facilitate its perspectival re-orientation, the functions of hyperbole that make the grotesque possible are often ignored by theorists of the

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<sup>68</sup> Noel Carroll, "The Grotesque Today: Preliminary Notes Toward a Taxonomy," in Modern Art and the Grotesque, ed. Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 291-312.

<sup>69</sup> Barasch, The Grotesque, 158.

<sup>70</sup> Fingesten, "Delimiting the Concept of the Grotesque," 419.

<sup>71</sup> Carroll, "Grotesque Today," 296.

grotesque. Most theorists limit the grotesque to the realm of metaphor and myth without mention of hyperbole, but exaggerated mythic allusions and metaphoric amplifications are ineffective, perhaps even impossible, without hyperbole. Webb even contends that the grotesque actually operates in opposition to metaphor and in line with hyperbole. He argues that bringing incongruent realities together is the work of hyperbole because grotesque incongruence does not lead to the synthesis of metaphor<sup>72</sup>: “Hyperbole is a trope that beckons but also warns; it accomplishes an intensification that does not result in a metaphorical synthesis.”<sup>73</sup> Webb’s assertion, however, is a bit excessive and actually delimits the use of hyperbole while attempting to refuse metaphor access to the grotesque. Certainly, metaphor is used extensively in the grotesque and is vital for its expression, but grotesque theorists limit the possibilities of the grotesque, and even metaphor in the grotesque, by ignoring the functions of hyperbole.

Hyperbole, in fact, is frequently dismissed in the grotesque as “mere” and “extravagant exaggeration.”<sup>74</sup> Two notable exceptions are Suzanne Guerlac and Mikhail Bakhtin. Guerlac’s “impersonal sublime” relies on both hyperbole and the grotesque. She suggests that the logic of excess, a “hyperbologic,”<sup>75</sup> is what guides the grotesque

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<sup>72</sup> Webb, *Blessed Excess*, 92.

<sup>73</sup> Webb, “The Rhetoric of Ethics as Excess,” 3.

<sup>74</sup> For example, Jennings writes, “Throughout the nineteenth century the idea persists – especially among German aestheticians – that the grotesque is merely a species of low comedy or some type of extravagant exaggeration or aimless combination of opposites.” See Jennings, *The Ludicrous Demon*, 2. Frances S. Connelly also writes, “The complex and contested meanings of the word ‘grotesque’ have lost their resonance and devolved to describe something horrible, or something horribly exaggerated.” See Frances S. Connelly, “Introduction,” in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5. The denigration of exaggeration as a devolution of thought is a now familiar theme of this project, but it is baffling that exaggeration is dismissed even in the realm of the grotesque where an exaggeration of opposites and hybrids is the *raison d’être* of the grotesque.

<sup>75</sup> Guerlac, *The Impersonal Sublime*, 111.

and that the grotesque's rhetorical figure is "accumulation, exaggeration, or hyperbole."<sup>76</sup>

Within the grotesque, "The same and the other are held together, 'complicated,' by hyperbole."<sup>77</sup> This is the paradoxical disorientation that is the promise of hyperbole, but it is incomplete. Guerlac does not highlight hyperbole's transition towards re-orientation.

On the other hand, Bakhtin argues that hyperbole is a positive figure for grotesque realism that fosters liberation and transformation, but he downplays the disorientating effect of hyperbole opting instead to highlight bewilderment as caused by other concepts such as parody. Each theorist gives hyperbole an important role in the grotesque, but their theoretical insights are deficient without using the complete function of hyperbole to re-orient through disorientation, which is so demonstrable within the grotesque genre. In addition, these two theorists' acknowledgement of hyperbole operating within the grotesque is hardly a significant contribution to the breadth and depth of grotesque theoretical literature. However, by combining Guerlac's and Bakhtin's insights, the grotesque illuminates the disorientation and re-orientation function of hyperbole.

For example, Georges Bataille's complex and grotesque scatological project uses hyperbole to achieve its effect. Relying on the functions of hyperbole, he explores the grotesque world of surrealism with all of its admixtures, "heterogeneous matter," and amalgams of imagery that are perpetually out of joint with reality. Bataille's hyperbolic body imagery, much like Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of bodily exaggeration within grotesque realism, emphasizes orifices and openings from which ejaculate, vomit, and defecation spew forth. Bodily functions are exaggerated (hyperbole as trope) and

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 64.

celebrated as “sacred” animality (hyperbole as figure of thought) with the intent of confounding, overturning, and transgressing typical distinctions between what is sacred and profane.

Notions such as the “festival,” similar to Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, intrigue Bataille for its transgressively paradoxical and seemingly disparate elements of death, abhorrence, liberation, desire, sacrifice, and eroticism, which hyperbolically disrupt psychological states and foster heightened emotions and “sacred” experiences.<sup>78</sup> For Bataille, the grotesque festival corresponds to the object of horror that is a “fetid, sticky object without boundaries, which teems with life and yet is the sign of death...it is death gorging life with decomposed substance.”<sup>79</sup> Here, the sacred, rather than the profane, is paradoxically aligned with the horrific, and this shocking hyperbolic sacred that pushes boundaries and gorges life with death (hyperbolic personification) leads inexorably to a perspectival reinterpretation through bewildering transgression.

In a telling passage that highlights his use of hyperbole in the grotesque, Bataille writes:

The movement of the festival *liberates* these animal forces, but now their explosive liberation interrupts the course of an existence subordinated to ordinary ends. There is a breakdown – an interruption – of the rules; the regular course of things ceases; what originally had the meaning of the limit has that of shattering limits. Thus, the *sacred* announces a new possibility; it is a leap into the unknown, with animality as its impetus.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> See Georges Bataille, “The Phaedra Complex,” in The Bataille Reader, eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 253.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Geroges Bataille, “The Festival, or the Transgression of Prohibitions,” in The Bataille Reader, eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 251.



Through *auxesis*, the “sacred” is itself described as a type of hyperbole that interrupts the ordinary and shatters limits through the impossibility of the unknown, which leads to new possibilities. The addling “leap into the unknown” transitions to re-orientation through the extraordinary nature of the sacred, and homogenous impossibility leads to heterogeneous possibilities such as the hyperbolic contrariety of the profane being sacred and the sacred being profane. The festival is a hyperbolic lie that casts the world upside down, and it is a moment of transgressive transition where the ordinary is made extraordinary in order to conceive of reality differently. “Everything that ‘justifies’ our behaviour needs to be re-examined *and overturned*.”<sup>81</sup> Transposition for Bataille relies on a hyperbolic logic operating within the grotesque, which skews the world enough to view it awry and push epistemological and ontological boundaries towards other grotesque possibilities, and he offers exaggerated transgressive inversions and orifices within a decorum of excess.

The grotesque, then, highlights the disorientation/re-orientation function of hyperbole well. The exaggeration of the grotesque is confusing and leads to an errant re-orientation of thought and being. Perplexing and frightening impossibilities are offered that disrupt order and normalcy – “the norms of common life are replaced by an ‘anti-norm’”<sup>82</sup> – and only the errant wandering that occurs after this disorientation will take one along the path towards a possible re-orientation. This function of hyperbole elucidated by the grotesque also reveals how a decorum of excess might function within a particular genre.

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<sup>81</sup> Geroges Bataille, “Desire Horrified at Losing and at Losing Oneself,” in *The Bataille Reader*, eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 259.

<sup>82</sup> Jennings, *The Ludicrous Demon*, 10.

### KAIROTIC DISSONANCE AND DECOROUS RESONANCE

Discussed throughout this chapter, the reception of hyperbole is crucial, and the same is true of the grotesque.<sup>83</sup> Theorists of hyperbole are at pains to accommodate hyperbole, especially through the fluidity of decorum, to insure its positive reception, but the notion of decorum in the grotesque is often befuddling while the importance of its reception is quite clear. Buried within the theories of the grotesque, however, is a notion of decorum that is a decorum of excess. Inadvertently, grotesque theorists offer an important example of how a decorum of excess operates within discourse even as they fail to see its use.

As I argued above, *kairos* and/as *kairotic* speech as an “opening” in thought and/or discourse is a key factor for a decorum of excess, and it serves the function of creating dissonance within the audience by relying heavily on *pathos*. The disproportionate expression of hyperbole asserted at a *kairotic* moment is then mitigated and re-directed towards a more decorous, resonant perspective that is intended to be well received. “The hyperbolist constructs his readers as much as he awaits them,”<sup>84</sup> and the purpose of a decorum of excess is to aid the hyperbolist in preparing the audience for a positive perception and reception of hyperbole, i.e., that hyperbole resonates with the audience. Relying more on *pathos* than *ethos*, the grotesque demonstrates the operation of a decorum of excess well.

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<sup>83</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque*, 181-182.

<sup>84</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 5.

John R. Clark writes, “The grotesque was always understood to be excessive, requiring boundaries and regulation lest it burgeon, ‘break out,’ or get out of hand,”<sup>85</sup> which is precisely the problematic relation between hyperbole and decorum. Indeed, replacing “the grotesque” in Clark’s statement with “hyperbole” still renders the statement equally true. Quoting Victor Hugo, Guerlac notes that the grotesque is an “irruption, an overflow, like that of a torrent that has burst its banks,”<sup>86</sup> and Leesa Fanning writes, “The disruptive force of the grotesque threatens to exceed containment and rupture discrete figural form.”<sup>87</sup> The excessive dissonance of the grotesque and its penchant for seemingly exceeding and de-forming decorum is reiterated throughout the literature. This apparent violation of decorum is often celebrated in grotesque literature, but so is the resonant insight the grotesque creates in the individual. It is also consistently implied that the grotesque does operate within its own type of decorum, which I suggest typifies a decorum of excess.

It is the risk of hyperbole to push the boundaries of decorum that aids the grotesque in its flight from the ordinary and the appropriate and then back towards a certain resonance with the audience: hyperbole offers a “‘temporary, transitory’ disruption between expression and communication.”<sup>88</sup> Without a decorum of excess, the grotesque might always be dismissed as *kakozelia* thereby deflating its transitional power. Insightful theorists of the grotesque such as Clark and Harpham do see the importance of

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<sup>85</sup> John R. Clark, The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 18.

<sup>86</sup> Guerlac, The Impersonal Sublime, 24.

<sup>87</sup> Leesa Fanning, “Willem de Kooning’s *Women*: The Body of the Grotesque,” in Modern Art and the Grotesque, ed. Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 241.

<sup>88</sup> Johnson, Hyperboles, 11.

decorum for the grotesque, which aids in creating an errant resonance with the audience. Harpham writes, “The grotesque implies discovery, and disorder is the price one always pays for the enlargement of the mind.”<sup>89</sup> The grotesque necessitates a certain decorum to achieve its effects in the minds of the audience, but this process must first pass through a juxtaposing amalgam of *kairotic* incongruity.

John Ruskin suggests separating the noble grotesque from the ignoble grotesque.<sup>90</sup> Whereas the noble grotesque evokes meaningful insight and emotion and is a highly poetic means of expression, the ignoble grotesque is a ridiculous absurdity, a superfluous decoration. A noble grotesque reveals truth(s), but an ignoble grotesque is simply a falsehood. Ruskin is here trading in hyperboles and negotiating decorum. Just as Quintilian separates elegant hyperbole from extravagant hyperbole in order to constitute a more fluid sense of decorum, Ruskin does so within the grotesque.

In a different move, Michel Chaouli suggests, “The disgusting has its own peculiar spatial logic,” and he posits that “the disgusting” is out of place and that its effects cannot be “contained in a delimited area.”<sup>91</sup> Yet, he then suggests that an appropriate space for the disgusting is the abject space discussed by Julia Kristeva.<sup>92</sup> Ascribing the disgusting its own “spatial logic” and offering abject space as a scene of appropriateness for the grotesque, Chaouli inadvertently implies the importance of giving the grotesque a certain space where it might operate effectively. This is the space of

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<sup>89</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, 231.

<sup>90</sup> See John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (General Books LLC, 2009).

<sup>91</sup> Michel Chaouli, “Van Gogh’s Ear: Toward a Theory of Disgust,” in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 50.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

decorous excessiveness where *kairotic* dissonance and decorous resonance are cleaved together in a hyperbolic logic of contrariety.

In yet another attempt at discussing decorum and the grotesque without the insight of hyperbole, Harpham suggests that the grotesque does not violate decorum because the system of decorum the grotesque operates within has “indeterminacy or ambivalence as the norm.”<sup>93</sup> Or, as Lee Byron Jennings puts it, there is an “alien chaos principle at work” in the grotesque,<sup>94</sup> and Bernard McElroy suggests that the grotesque can only exist in a grotesque world.<sup>95</sup> In each statement, these authors unintentionally describe a decorum of excess where the principle and norm of this economy is excess itself.<sup>96</sup> In fact, Harpham’s description coupled with his earlier assertion that the grotesque leads to discovery through disorder, suggests that a positive reception of the grotesque relies on a *kairotic* moment when the grotesque’s insight may be revealed through decorous indeterminacy and ambivalence.

According to Harpham, the grotesque is predominantly dependent upon its reception and perception by the audience – “It is our interpretation of the form that matters, the degree to which we perceive the principle of unity that binds together the

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<sup>93</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, 102. He suggests, “All systems of decorum, whether political, cultural, or artistic, are designed to keep the low and the marginal in their places. But they are afflicted with built-in obsolescence. Beginning with the assumption that value and meaning are not randomly or equally distributed throughout the cosmos (the mythic assumption), they systematize methods of discriminating the meaningful from the meaningless.” He sees this as an important characteristic of the grotesque.

<sup>94</sup> Jennings, *Ludicrous Demon*, 14.

<sup>95</sup> Hume, “Robert Coover,” 828.

<sup>96</sup> As noted above, Kathryn Hume argues, “The grotesque forcibly joins the decorous with the unexpected.” See Hume, “Robert Coover,” 827-828.

antagonistic parts.”<sup>97</sup> A positive perception is dependent upon the ability to eventually interpret the grotesque, which depends on a decorous re-orientation. Harpham continues, “The more naïve and intense our belief, the more violently will be the transition from one interpretation to another, and the stronger our experience of the grotesque.”<sup>98</sup> The more intense the magnitude of a belief in a given context, the more dissonant will be the errant transition to resonance. Exemplified in the grotesque, hyperbole discordantly and disproportionately dislodges belief(s) and moves from one interpretation to the next based on the contingent interpretation of the hyperbole itself. One must be receptive to the grotesque image or discourse in order for it to be effective, and a decorous excessiveness that gives the grotesque its power errantly re-directs the audience towards a (re)interpretive transition. Hyperbole responds with appropriate disproportionality to the exigence of a perceived incorrect or incomplete interpretation, and the interpretation must be, as Foucault says, shattered with hammer blows. This hyperbolic bludgeoning must occur at the opportune moment or opening for its full effect to be felt.

The resonance achieved through hyperbole, however, is never a firm or constant moment but is always contingent. Likewise, “The perception of the grotesque is never a fixed or stable thing, but always a process, a progression.”<sup>99</sup> The objective content of the grotesque and one’s perception of it evolves, or transitions, through time.<sup>100</sup> The hyperbole of the grotesque image or discourse is perpetually in transition, and the

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<sup>97</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, 17.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>100</sup> Melissa Gniadek, “The Art of Becoming: Sherwood Anderson, Frank Sargeson and the Grotesque Aesthetic,” *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 23, no. 2 (2005) : 24.

mutability of a decorum of excess allows for the perceptual fluidity of the grotesque, based on contextual constraints and the changing nature of those constraints,<sup>101</sup> to move one errantly towards transition. From one historical context to the next, the grotesque is always changing, taking on new meanings and shedding old ones, and no matter what the grotesque might “mean” for one context, it always remains “occluded and imperfectly perceived.”<sup>102</sup> It is for this reason that the grotesque often appears as *kakozelia* and thereby necessitates the use of *kairos* in a decorum of excess. The grotesque is a vehicle of disproportionate hybridity that shocks through a tragicomic suddenness that arrests thought and attention at a particular moment for the purpose of transition, not dismissal.<sup>103</sup>

In the gap of perception, which is a perpetual interval, the grotesque erupts into errant apprehension.<sup>104</sup> Gilles Deleuze writes of thought in general, “Ideas swarm in the fracture, constantly emerging on its edges, ceaselessly coming out and going back, being composed in a thousand different manners.”<sup>105</sup> In the grotesque fracture where an amalgam of ideas swarm in differential composition, this gap of perception is the jarring *kairotic* moment when the grotesque can exert its full hyperbolic and emotional/psychological force. As Mileur writes, “Between the ‘madness’ of decision and the normalcy of an articulation which can never comprehend its own origins, there is

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<sup>101</sup> Harpham, “The Grotesque,” 463.

<sup>102</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, 17.

<sup>103</sup> Gordon, “Hybridity, Heterotopia, and Mateship,” 456-476.

<sup>104</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, 19.

<sup>105</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 169.

a gap, the space of fiction or fantasy, which only hyperbole can traverse.”<sup>106</sup> Within the grotesque, hyperbole is implemented in this space of fiction or fantasy. This gap is a *kairotic* “space between,” e.g., an abject space, and “this mid-region is dynamic and unpredictable, a scene of transformation or metamorphosis.”<sup>107</sup> The excess of the grotesque is always in transition from one interpretation to another, and it is facilitated by the hyperbolic “act of transition” or “act of transformation” from seemingly meaningless dissonance to meaningful resonance.<sup>108</sup>

These gaps are where the grotesque hyperbolically explodes at a *kairotic* moment when all hope of resonance is lost. It is at these moments when disharmonious grotesqueries, as form(less) and impossible representations viewed awry, are offered, which “impales us on the present moment, emptying the past and forestalling the future.”<sup>109</sup> Out of the perpetual gaps between interpretation and comprehension the “prodigious hyperbole” of grotesque ornament causes the eye to wander<sup>110</sup> towards a reverberating image of perception, and the duplicity of hyperbole resists absolute closure, i.e., resonance itself is always in transition.

The subject remains in the repetition of errant hyperbolic transition that is nevertheless an attempt to re-orient one’s perspective out of disorientation, and this process of confusion generates new insight.<sup>111</sup> As Mark C. Taylor posits, “Repetition

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<sup>106</sup> Mileur, *The Critical Romance*, 86.

<sup>107</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, 10.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-27, 41.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.



ruptures the closed circle in which beginning and end, Alpha and Omega are one. By holding open the time of space and the space of time, ‘repetition,’ in Lacan’s words, ‘demands the new.’”<sup>112</sup> The repetition of hyperbole is not infinite deferral but infinite (re)interpretation. It is in this process of repetition that the subject errantly wanders towards a resonance of apprehension that, without hyperbole, will forever recede from view and elusively defer both interpretation and comprehension.<sup>113</sup>

For example, when Žižek argues that an empty signifier can repetitively signify contradictory impossibilities as alleged signifieds, he is positing a discursive hyperbolic figure of thought in a grotesque frame, which can disrupt belief through the disorienting recurrence of the violence of (re)interpretation. His hyperbole causes *affectus* as interpretive and psychological disruption, and his hyperbolic logic relies on disproportionality and excess as normative expressions within the economy of his discourse. Through *auxesis*, Žižek uses the empty signifier as a discursive hyperbole that is a *kairotic* gap of perception within discourse (the curve of hyperbole) that serves to re-orient one to other subjective (re)interpretive possibilities (the path of desire). His dissonant *verba* stretches discursive limits in order to reveal an always unfinished errantly resonant *res*.

Žižek suggests in On Belief that a signified might be that “Alien Thing” of science-fiction horror movies where the monstrous Thing is either wholly other – the radical transcendental Otherness of “God” – or exactly the same with a barely noticeable difference – the radical immanence of “Christ” that is the excessive “too much” of

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<sup>112</sup> Taylor, Altarity, 95.

<sup>113</sup> Johnson, Hyperboles, 231.

humanity that is never fully human.<sup>114</sup> In the grotesque juxtaposition of the signifieds “God” and “Christ,” the empty signifier holds both signifieds in a dissonant, *kairotic* gap of disproportionality that can lead to a decorous resonance out of the turmoil, which may be a re-imagined *res* of infinite dissonance that nevertheless leads errantly to (re)interpretive possibilities.

The coalescence of transcendence and immanence in Žižek’s example is *kairotic* in a theological sense, and the ambivalent convergence of these seemingly opposed notions is grotesque in a hyperbolic sense of incongruity. The grotesque wholly other “God” and wholly same “Christ” signify the excess of signification that dislodges the presumed signified status of “God” by amalgamating “the horrific or alien with the desire to shock by exposing repressed truths,” which “can also be aligned with Freud’s concept of the uncanny and abjection.”<sup>115</sup> Through *auxesis* in a grotesque frame, Žižek offers a dissonant hyperbolic lie intended to disrupt epistemological and ontological presuppositions within a resonant decorum of disproportionate (re)interpretation. *Kairotic* speech in Žižek’s grotesquerie distorts the expected and makes the familiar unfamiliar, and hyperbole channels this disillusion into an appropriate disproportionate expression of contradiction moving towards other resonant possibilities.

The empty signifier offers a jarring tension of disequilibrium, and as in the grotesque, “There is a recombining of the elements of experienced reality to form something alien to it.”<sup>116</sup> This alienating opening in Žižek’s discourse when two

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<sup>114</sup> Žižek, *On Belief*, 131-132.

<sup>115</sup> Heather McPherson, “Ingres and the Poetics of the Grotesque,” in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 140.

<sup>116</sup> Jennings, *Ludicrous Demon*, 9-10.

disparate theological positions, or beliefs, are placed in discord is the *kairotic* space when a (re)interpretive moment occurs that might augment one's perspective enough to err towards resonance. The hyperbole might be rejected as *kakozelia*, but within Žizek's decorum of excess, the hyperbolic logic of his argument evokes the force of *pathos* to move his audience that is predisposed to excess repetitively towards the realization that absolute signifieds are necessarily empty signifiers within a playful and unsettling economy of imaginative (re)interpretation.

The Icelandic musicians Sigur Ros also express the (re)interpretive dissonance and resonance of hyperbole in a grotesque frame. Their album entitled "( )" offers a rich expression of hyperbolic grotesquerie through their tracks that are all "untitled." Without words and in the perpetual interval of the space between, they express their music through repetitively dramatic vocalizations that swirl in an amalgamation of grotesque dissonance, imaginative tonality, and various forms of instrumentation. Even the instruments they choose such as strings, brass, electric guitar, and drums are distorted in intentional misuse and alteration to exploit the conventionality of typical musical progression, which is the resonant insight of their music.

Playing on the postmodern notion of absent presence and present absence, they *crescendo* incrementally towards impossible heights of disproportional dissonance that seemingly violate all notions of musical decorum, but at the opportune moment, they descend once again into the resonant depths of insight, even if that insight is inexorable dissonance. Attenuation and *litotes* increase the ambivalence of the exaggeration, and the *pathos* induced through *kairotic* discord resolves itself, if only partially, within a decorum of excess where new interpretive perspectives are errantly opened to the audience.

In their newer album, “Takk...,” they again play on the theme of hyperbolic *copia* that repetitively exploits the perpetual interval between. Through the rich effervescent Icelandic language, the thematic progression of the overall album is one of contradictory and impossible heights and depths. Progressing slowly by augmenting and building one voice upon the other, one instrument upon another, and blending their phraseology in a grotesque cacophony of sound, they then move suddenly and shockingly to a hyperbolic apogee only to alter their course abruptly and unexpectedly in a radical *diminuendo*. Evoking *pathos* at every turn, they assert their forcefully excessive indulgences through opportune openings in rhythm, time, and meter.

Moving along the margins of vast and monstrous vocal and instrumental landscapes, they present tonal disharmony leading inevitably to timbre, in thought if not in sound. In doing so, they both disrupt and prepare the audience for the positive reception and interpretation of their hyperbolic grotesquerie, where dissonance is the norm even as their variations on that dissonance are always shockingly unexpected. They push and bend the boundaries of decorum by posing oppositional movements, instruments, and vocals against one another in impossible grotesqueries of sound that offer (re)interpretation and resist closure, and their juxtaposed phrases and themes evoke dissonant feelings of uncanniness and fascination that lead errantly towards resolution out of the aural gaps they exploit.

Through a decorum of excess, the grotesque moves towards an altered resonance through the dissonance of oppositions in a decorous movement of transition. Repetitively pushing the limits of decorum through radical disequilibrium within the perpetual interval of the space between, hyperbole expands epistemological and ontological boundaries

within the grotesque that leads to a resounding insight, even if that resonance is the inevitability of dissonance. Thoroughly hyperbolic, the grotesque exemplifies the errant movement of resonant dissonance and dissonant resonance out of which a partial insight may be revealed.

## TWO VARIATIONS ON THE THEME OF HYPERBOLE IN A GROTESQUE KEY

Shown thus far, the disorientation/re-orientation function of hyperbole, and thus all functions of hyperbole, relies on a decorum of excess to operate effectively. Drawing from the example of the grotesque, this can be viewed as a type of dissonance moving towards resonance. Furthermore, under the function of disorientation and re-orientation I offer two brief conceptual variations on the theme of hyperbole that are revealed by the grotesque genre. The first variation expresses itself through paradox and insight, and the second variation arises out of the movement from de-formation to transformation. The first operates on a more objective level. The second operates on a more subjective level, but they each use hyperbole as trope and figure of thought to foster a transition towards re-orientation within a decorum of excess. Each one is a hyperbolic movement of contradiction that offers one the opportunity for epistemological and ontological transitions, and they are both present in the grotesque. The variations are subtle perspectival alterations of this function of hyperbole, but I offer these two perspectives in order to elaborate upon and to show the flexibility and complexity of the disorientation/re-orientation function of hyperbole.

# PARADOXICAL *VERBA* AND THE INSIGHT OF A RE-PRESENTED *RES*

Sometimes considered a species of hyperbole, especially by Baroque writers like Gracian, paradox and hyperbole “often share the same methods and subject matter,”<sup>117</sup> and Ricoeur posits that hyperbole is “like paradox” and even operates through the “law of paradox and hyperbole.” Indeed, exaggeration is fundamental to both, and paradox “represents another method of conceptualizing the impossible and the extraordinary.”<sup>118</sup> Johnson, interpreting Gracian, says that hyperbole is haunted by the “specter of paradox,” and Guerlac posits, re-appropriating Lacoue-Labarthe, “‘The paradox states a law of impropriety as an infinite exchange or identity of opposites’ operated through hyperbole.”<sup>119</sup> Out of the incomprehension of paradoxical *verba*, hyperbole leads one towards the partial apprehension of a re-presented *res* – a “paradox of truth-in-exaggeration.”<sup>120</sup> Particularly manifested in the grotesque genre, discombobulating juxtaposition is a hyperbolic paradox leading to a new, yet unrealized, insight.

Paul de Man argues in Blindness and Insight, that criticism engages in a type of paradoxical blindness that results in insight.<sup>121</sup> Through disorienting blindness, one moves paradoxically towards insight within the overall scope of criticism itself. In the same sense, hyperbole also requires a certain blindness regarding its insight in order to function effectively. As Katrin Ettenhuber’s analysis of Peacham concludes, “Hyperbole

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<sup>117</sup> Johnson, Hyperboles, 124.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Guerlac, The Impersonal Sublime, 52.

<sup>120</sup> Zizek, Plague of Fantasies, 95.

<sup>121</sup> Paul de Man, Blindness and Insight : Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

asserts the importance of partial blindness and functional ignorance; the notion of complete comprehension devalues the thought or feeling that hyperbole evokes.”<sup>122</sup> Conceptualizing the baffling heights and incongruities asserted through hyperbole are only partially comprehended because it is only in the hazy space of “para” that one is disoriented enough to release presuppositions about thought and reality thereby preparing the way for a newly re-imagined *res*. Hyperbole’s repetitive resistance to closure is particularly evident in the grotesque.

The grotesque, as Harpham suggests, places one into the “para” of paradox, which is a “preludial condition that dissolves in the act of comprehension;”<sup>123</sup> however, Harpham later writes, “Interpretation always falls between the poles of absolute certainty and absolute indeterminacy, but...an interpretation accompanies every act of perception whether we want it to or not.”<sup>124</sup> Harpham highlights the paradoxicality of the grotesque that dissolves in the act of comprehension, but he also asserts that the comprehension it leads towards is never complete but always in the process of (re)interpretation.

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. posits that the grotesque “obstructs the mind from completing its effort of quick understanding, arresting it when it wishes to get on with its routine of knowing, and forces it to learn something it is not sure it wants to know.”<sup>125</sup> Some transition towards the re-presentation of an extraordinary *res* will occur out of the confounding paradox of hyperbole, but it will never be complete and remains in ceaseless

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<sup>122</sup> Ettenhuber, “Hyperbole,” 210.

<sup>123</sup> Harpham, On the Grotesque, 23. See also Kathleen Hayes, “Grotesque Paradox in the Works of Karel Matej Capek-Chod,” The Slavonic and East European Review 78, no. 2 (2000) : 267-300.

<sup>124</sup> Harpham, On the Grotesque, 113-114.

<sup>125</sup> Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., “On the Grotesque in Science Fiction,” Science Fiction Studies 29, no. 1 (2002) : 78.

repetitive gestures of (re)interpretation. The obstruction of the mind in the grotesque is the partial blindness of hyperbole functioning in that discourse. Hyperbole paradoxically stretches the imagination, emotions, and one's grasp of/on reality, which expands epistemological and ontological horizons through partial blindness and ambiguous apprehension, and this is acutely evident in Mark C. Taylor's grotesque, hyperbolic discourse.

Taylor's grotesque *copia* of a/theological discourse demonstrates the use of hyperbolic paradox well. Constructing his grotesque a/theological concepts, he moves one errantly towards tentative apprehension, not comprehension, within his discursive hyperbolic arguments. Juxtaposing incongruous concepts, Taylor offers one a world of *heteroglossia* "compossibilities" where "altar-ity" and nonabsent absences (re-appropriated from Blanchot) reign within a decorum of excess. His a/theological project itself is a paradoxical notion. This disparate and opposing concept radically (de)constructs a hybridity of theology and an un-theology of "nots." The "not" un-theology of unthought he presents is nevertheless a theological project, a postmodern theology he has pioneered, that offers insight from the re-presentation of a theological *res* through hyperbole.

Using hyperbole as trope and figure of thought, Taylor violently pulls *verba* apart and re-assembles it in a disorienting amalgam of radical theo-philosophical ideas. Speaking of Heidegger, for example, Taylor writes, "Riddles. Riddles that riddle the Heidegarrian text. First Greek. Then Christian. Then 'neither Greek nor Christian.' But first, a further delay – a supplementary deferral in which Der-rid-a again tells us what he



is not telling us or is telling us by not telling us.”<sup>126</sup> Undermining and riddling theology at every turn, Taylor forcefully pushes language to its limits in his decorum of excess in order to take one suddenly and shockingly into paradoxical heights that descend again into the realm of insight.

Out of the radical theological tradition of Thomas J. J. Altizer and the crisis of the “the death of God,” Taylor develops Altizer’s hyperbolic paradox of Christian atheism. Pushing this notion beyond itself, transgressing itself, Taylor’s copious and contradictory *verba* inevitably, though hesitantly, leads to a re-presented and transformed understanding of a *res*. He argues that the anxiety of a/theology fosters bewilderment that “creates seminal openings – openings that make it possible to re-examine and reformulate established assumptions and presuppositions.”<sup>127</sup> The labyrinthine errancy of his discourse exploits *kairotic* openings that beget *vertige de l’hyperbole* in the reader, i.e., an excess of *affectus*, which is necessary in order to disrupt conventions but eventually re-orient one towards a new apprehension of a *res*.

Taylor’s intent overall is to push theology and philosophy paradoxically beyond itself. He accomplishes this feat through the unintentional use of hyperbole in the framework of the grotesque. Within the hyperbolic grotesquerie of deconstructive writing that is “always paradoxical, double, duplicitous, excentric, improper...errant”<sup>128</sup> – “Writing that attempts to trace the border and retrace the margin can...be described as

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<sup>126</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Notes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 51.

<sup>127</sup> Taylor, *Erring*, 17.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

*erring*”<sup>129</sup> – Taylor employs hyperbole as trope and figure of thought at every a/theological turn.

In *Erring*, Taylor writes of the postmodern “closure of the book” by pointing specifically to the paradoxical binaries from which he operates and also disrupts. In one representative passage, he writes:

Along the margin of the book, opposites that Western thought traditionally separates and holds apart appear to be confused: inside/out-side, identity/difference, remedy/infection, purity/pollution, propriety/impropriety, good/evil... The paradoxes that result from this interplay of opposites mark the closure of the book and point toward erring scripture.<sup>130</sup>

These paradoxes mark the conceit of the closure of the book, but they are also the impetus from which he (re)formulates the transition towards the re-presentation of an unexpected *res*, i.e., “toward erring scripture.” The paradoxes trace both closure and errancy, and this is the impossible grotesque space in/from which his writing is amplified. Using paradox as a guide, Taylor explores the impossible possibility and the possible impossibility of paradox through hyperbole.

Writing in “para” – in/through the “parapraxical imagination” that “does not seek to heal the wound of words but keeps the mind open by refusing to mend its tear”<sup>131</sup> – Taylor traces these oppositional concepts along the margins of (un)thought that “mark” the openings within discourse where an astonishing (re)apprehension of a *res* may be gleaned. He does not abandon these contrarities but fuses them together in hyperbolic grotesqueries of thought such as the “not”: “Not is... a strange, irregular ruler that creates

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>131</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Tears* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 226.

irresolvable paradoxes. Perhaps the most puzzling paradox of the not is its necessary incomprehensibility.”<sup>132</sup> This hyperbolic “not” emerges in Taylor’s discourse as he “cleaves” incongruities in order to push towards the apprehension that theology and a/theology are equally and inevitably impossible. Forging another hyperbolic grotesquerie to aid in this paradoxical task, he develops the concept of “alartity.”

Altartity is both distinct from and similar to alterity. It is a *tertium quid*, a grotesque “impossible third,” which cleaves impossibilities in a transgressive space of disruption: “To cleave...is both to separate, divide, or split, and to adhere, cling, or stick...This separation that joins and joining that separates transforms the tear of cleaving into the tear of pain.”<sup>133</sup> The hyperbolic cleaving of the tear of grotesque altartity is a hyperbolic figure of thought that creates *pathos* in the audience through the anxiety caused by the tear of cleaving – “The strife of the tear captures the duplicity of cleaving”<sup>134</sup> – and these tears are the “seminal openings” where the transition towards partial insight can begin. At the “altar” itself, this hyperbole as trope is in “para” at the rift, or *Riss* of Heidegger, where contradictions are bound together and also split apart. The altar is the objective representation of hyperbole that is the impossible space of paradoxical *verba*, and altartity is its subjective manifestation as a hyperbolic figure of thought that moves towards a certain re-formulated *res*. The paradoxical maneuvering of Taylor’s “nonsynthetic imagination”<sup>135</sup> both uses and is in excess.

In a particularly disorienting passage from Tears, Taylor writes:

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<sup>132</sup> Taylor, Notes, 238.

<sup>133</sup> Taylor, Altartity, 50.

<sup>134</sup> Taylor, Tears, 113.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

The trace of the fugitive gods is the nonabsent absence of the Holy. This trace is a different trace, the trace of difference itself, which can never be expressed directly, revealed totally, or known completely. It is ever elusive, evasive, excessive. Irreducibly ex-orbitant, the Holy eternally returns to interrupt the circulation of knowledge and to disrupt every form of reciprocal exchange. To hear the “inhuman,” “anonymous,” “uncanny” murmur of the Holy is to become open to that which cannot be conceived, grasped, mastered, or controlled. To be “released” or “drawn” into the un-dis-closable openness of this rending difference is to overcome nihilism by no longer “giving a negative reading to that which is.” Released from the need to assert self by negating other and incorporating difference, one is free “to read the word ‘death’ *without* negation.”<sup>136</sup>

Amidst this teeming sea of philosophical complexities and amalgamations, Taylor’s use of hyperbolic *copia* and *congeries* reveals a decorum of excess at work as he navigates across an ambiguous theo-philosophical topography. Incrementally augmenting, accumulating, and building towards the climax of death without negation, he erects one hyperbole on top of the other in grotesque combinations, and radical *verba* leads one to partial insight from an unexpected *res*. “To walk in the shadow of this death is to linger in the Night. Night...an other Night...Night of the Other...Other of the Night...Holy Night...Night beyond Night...White Night...Vigil Night...Waking Night...Night of the Wake.”<sup>137</sup> Certainly a disorienting goop of *verba*, the re-orientation towards thinking the nonabsent absence of the Holy, which “always implies a certain excess...that is unmasterable,”<sup>138</sup> is achieved through a decorum of excess where his *pathos* of confusion pushes one into the realm of insight.

The insight is never comprehended completely, and his stretching of language is also a stretching of the self. Straining the facts and surpassing the truth, Taylor’s *verba*

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 119-120.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 106.

brings epistemological and onto-theological presuppositions to the margins of possibility. His hyperbolic paradoxes remain in suspended apprehension, and his drive towards the re-presentation of a *res* occurs through repetitive, errant hyperbole. In *Erring*, his immense hyperbolic project builds as one massive demonstration of *incrementum* and *congeries* driving towards the insight of a “Divine Milieu,” and this extraordinarily grotesque concept swims in the uncanny realm of repetitive, marginal disruption.

In the Divine Milieu, “Eternal recurrence is a *paradoxical* movement of repetition that itself neither begins nor ends.”<sup>139</sup> The milieu is the impossible space “between extremes.” It “marks a middle way that is thoroughly liminal. At this threshold, opposites cross” in a spatical miasma of hyperbolic disproportionality. “The margin itself, however, is not reducible to the extremes whose mean it forms.”<sup>140</sup> Offering the grotesque milieu as a mean between two extremes, Taylor nevertheless constitutes this space as hyperbolic where the grotesque impossible third resides and “can never be contained, captured, or caught by any fixed pair of terms.”<sup>141</sup> Within the Divine Milieu, impossible and disparate concepts are cleaved together in a grotesque monstrosity of hyperbolic paradox where the mean itself is exploited as impossibility, and this is his theological re-presentation of the astonishing *res* that theology and a/theology each inhabit the space of impossible possibility and possible impossibility.

Taylor’s insight is that theology itself is an a/theological project that is incomprehensible – that theology itself is, in fact, a grotesquerie expressed as a

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<sup>139</sup> Taylor, *Erring*, 113.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

hyperbole. “To write beyond the end of theology is to write the lack of language...[and] this lack of language is inscribed in and as the failure of words.”<sup>142</sup> Revealing the deficiency and limitlessness of language, Taylor uses hyperbole to offer the tear, which “eludes the economy of representation,” as a lack of language through the excess of writing. Indeed, theology and a/theology both rely on hyperbole to express the inexpressible and the mystical. Theology is a contradictory impossibility arriving at other incomprehensibilities through grotesque deceits that are not lies. It is a gargantuan *copia* of *verba* that is unending. Infinitely differing and deferring, theology is a hyperbole that cleaves and transgresses itself, which, as Bakhtin says, is “the very nature of exaggeration,”<sup>143</sup> and this transgression suggests both the insufficiency and inexhaustibility of meaning.<sup>144</sup> Not always well received by his audience and often accused of *kakozelia*, Taylor’s decorum of linguistic excess still evokes a *res* of errant transformative “compossibilities,” even if it is only partially apprehended by those who are predisposed to receive it.

#### TRANSGRESSIVE DE-FORMATION AND ERRANT TRANSFORMATION

More subjective than objective, this variation of hyperbole shown in the grotesque relies heavily on *pathos* to move its audience. In the errant movement towards subjective transformation, transgressive exaggeration is uncontained while always already being re-contained. As Derrida says, hyperbole is beyond all totalizing structures but also always re-economized. More precisely, hyperbole does not move beyond belief but beyond

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<sup>142</sup> Taylor, *Tears*, 223.

<sup>143</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 307.

<sup>144</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 5.

reality in order to de-stabilize beliefs. It forces the center to the boundaries in order to expand or annihilate one's conception of the center. Mileur defines transgression specifically as a hyperbolic movement: "A hyperbolic reduction of hyperbole to a point or moment of crossing, which constitutes the limit it profanes as well as its origin and end."<sup>145</sup> He sees the moment/movement of transgression as entirely hyperbolic. At the moment of an impossible crossing that is an a/teleological teleology, a hyperbolic suspension of the teleological, hyperbole does not destroy boundaries but repetitively transgresses them. Transgression is both possible and impossible, and it is sustainable only through errant hyperbolic repetition, which must be perpetually attempted, though it is never complete. Transgressive de-formation is a hyperbolic impossibility errantly wandering towards the possibility of transformation. It is a hyperbolic conceit on the side of hermeneutical truth(s), and it is ever moving towards and away from these subjective insights.

In this vein, Mileur writes, "The subject is...an errant hyperbole,"<sup>146</sup> and the work of hyperbole is the "extremely hyperbolic representations of the subjectivity that remains unaccommodated in language."<sup>147</sup> The subject, as Peter de Bolla states is "the excess or overplus of discourse itself."<sup>148</sup> Uncontained and infinitely transgressing itself as well as epistemological and ontological boundaries, the residual, de-formed subjectivity as excess left unaccommodated can only express itself through the excess of exaggeration,

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<sup>145</sup> Mileur, The Critical Romance, 102.

<sup>146</sup> Mileur, The Critical Romance, 103.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>148</sup> Peter de Bolla, The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics, and the Subject (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 6; quoted in, Frances Ferguson, Solitude and the Sublime: The Romantic Aesthetics of Individuation (New York: Routledge, 1992), 18.

but it is also always errantly wandering towards and away from the margins of subjectivity, i.e., transformative moments within thought and discourse. “The subject becomes aware of *himself* as the hyperbolic, transgressive element in his language; he is the point of disorder, the wrinkle, the fold, the source of the disquietude that he tries in vain to eliminate from the otherwise placid surface of language.”<sup>149</sup> Itself the hyperbolic figure of thought for Mileur, the subject moves through the de-formation of transgression and errantly, tentatively hopes for a glimpse of transformative possibilities. Continually in the act of becoming, the self is transformed through repetitive hyperbolic transgression. Bakhtin’s and Kayser’s understandings of the grotesque exemplify this movement of hyperbole from transgressive de-formation towards errant transformation.

It is Bakhtin’s notion of grotesque realism, which is constituted through the carnivalesque, that highlights this variation of hyperbole well. In a time of transition that is his exigence, Bakhtin views the grotesque (in Rabelais) in entirely liberating terms. Through the excessive transgressive de-formation of the carnivalesque, he sees the grotesque as the “contradictory and double-faced fullness of life”<sup>150</sup> that offers a significant act of subjective regeneration and renewal. In much the same way as Bataille views the festival as a transgression leading to transformation,<sup>151</sup> the grotesque body is the act of becoming and growth within the exaggerated carnivalesque narrative of turning hierarchies upside down and inside out.

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<sup>149</sup> Mileur, The Critical Romance, 90.

<sup>150</sup> Bakhtin, Rabelais, 62.

<sup>151</sup> Georges Bataille, “The Festival, or the Transgression of Prohibitions,” in The Bataille Reader, eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 248-252.



In grotesque realism, all is exaggerated, de-formed, and parodied. Bodies are gigantic and monstrous. A fusion of body parts and food are distorted and disproportionate, and bodily functions are over-emphasized. Bakhtin writes, “Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style,”<sup>152</sup> and he continues, “The exaggeration of the inappropriate to incredible and monstrous dimensions is...the basic nature of the grotesque.”<sup>153</sup> These disproportionate fundamental attributes that are the basic nature of the grotesque offer one a decorum where the hyperbolic is the most appropriate expression – exaggerating the inappropriate is the appropriate thing to do. Out of this exaggeration comes errant transformation.

In a theological context, Wilson Yates writes of Bakhtin’s eschatological view of the grotesque, “The grotesque can participate in human life in a transformative fashion, even though the nature of transformation may vary markedly in extent and insight.”<sup>154</sup> Out of the de-formation of death, struggle, and suffering, the grotesque can foster re-birth, liberation, and grace.<sup>155</sup> Using hyperbole as both trope and figure of thought, the grotesque “discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life.”<sup>156</sup> In Bakhtin’s decorum of excess of grotesque realism where exaggerated potentiality, i.e., the “logic of contradiction,” is the norm, the transgressive

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<sup>152</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 303.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>154</sup> Wilson Yates, “An Introduction to the Grotesque: Theoretical and Theological Considerations,” in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections*, eds. James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 59.

<sup>155</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 52 and Yates, “An Introduction,” 59.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

de-formation of the carnivalesque is performed at an opportune moment of transition that leads to the errant transformation of the grotesque. This *kairotic* moment is the opening where laughter erupts, and laughter as the “unaccommodated” facilitates subjective liberation and errant transformation through an excess of *affectus*.

Out of this laughter, the residual grotesque body is always in the “act of becoming,” which is never finished or completed. The body is transgressed and then subject to “positive exaggeration, to hyperbolization,”<sup>157</sup> i.e., the subject as an errant hyperbole. This positive exaggeration leads to images of bodily life such as “fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance”<sup>158</sup> where bowels, genital organs, and anus are the “convexities and orifices” that overcome the confines between the world and the body through an “interchange and an interorientation.”<sup>159</sup> The decorum of excess of grotesque realism where the *pathos* of exaggeration, disproportionality, de-formation, and distortion are the norms facilitates the “act of becoming” through a transgression of convention, and transgressing its own limits is “the very nature of exaggeration.”<sup>160</sup> Out of this repetitive, hyperbolic transgression, the self outgrows itself and becomes a new, other self.

In contradistinction to Bakhtin, Kayser views the grotesque in more tragic terms. Kayser suggests that the grotesque is still contextual and perspectival but that grotesque realism is no longer operative.<sup>161</sup> Instead, he sees the Romantic grotesque as a tragicomic fusion of disparate elements that are “unnatural” combinations, which shatters coherence

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 317.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 317.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 307.

<sup>161</sup> Kayser, *The Grottesque*, 181.

and highlights a fragmentation of historical order.<sup>162</sup> Kayser explicates the grotesque in terms of the tragicomic<sup>163</sup> – what Frances K. Barasch calls a “grotesquerie”<sup>164</sup> – but, unlike Bakhtin, he places a heavier emphasis on the tragic. Laughter is on the fringe of the grotesque and is bitter, cynical, and “satanic.” Rather than (hyperbolic) parody, Kayser emphasizes (hyperbolic) satire and the fantastic, which become predominant characteristics of the modern grotesque and are focused more on transgression and disorder than transformation.<sup>165</sup>

Kayser suggests that the grotesque is a structure that is constituted by the estranged and de-formed world, a play with the absurd, and an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world, which arises in times of confusion and insecurity.<sup>166</sup> “The ambiguous way in which we are affected by it results from our awareness that the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the impact of abyssal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence.”<sup>167</sup> From the grotesque realism of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance grotesque to the Romantic and modern grotesque, there is a shift from comic transformation to tragic and inward horror, but this subjective dread and terror nevertheless seeks a transition in its attempt to subdue the aw(e)ful de-formation of the demonic.

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>164</sup> “‘Grotesquerie’, a collective form of ‘grotesque’, denotes the coexistence of comic and horrific elements in equal parts and the sum of these parts – the absurd.” See Barasch, *The Grotesque*, 10.

<sup>165</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque*, 59.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 184-188.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 37.

Meindl suggests that this shift of liberation to horror and anxiety in the romantic grotesque is the “consequence of the confrontation between a subjective and individualistic outlook – as cultivated by the romantic hero and artist.”<sup>168</sup> “The horror-oriented grotesque, which plays the decisive part in bringing about the reorientation [of a romantic epistemology], is promoted by dark or negative romanticism, which discards the Enlightenment construct.”<sup>169</sup> Meindl suggests, as does Bakhtin, that laughter can liberate; however, the laughter of the romantic grotesque is filtered through fear, “an existential, demonic sphere” that functions as a defense against and a threat to the individual.<sup>170</sup> For Kayser and Meindl, the *kairotic* moment of the grotesque is still laughter, but it is a more threatening laughter that can both subdue the demonic and threaten the annihilation of the individual.

Combining these two perspectives, hyperbole serves to exaggerate, de-form, distort, fragment, transgress, and estrange. Bakhtin emphasizes folly, which is actually wit, and bodily as well as phenomenological distortion, which leads to psychological transformation. Kayser highlights the tragic and psychological estrangement, which leads to phenomenological alteration. In each instance, disorienting impossibilities and hyperbolic lies are ever present within the grotesque. The de-forming impossibilities and deceits of hyperbole – the gargantuan, the monstrous, the absurd, and the ludicrous – all foster transgression and estrangement from the normative and conventional, but this

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<sup>168</sup> Meindl, *American Fiction*, 20.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

fragmentation and distortion can lead towards a subjective transformation in thought and emotion.

Returning to the example of Lovecraft's At the Mountains of Madness, the hyperbolic, phenomenological de-formation of Bakhtin's grotesque is particularly evident. In Madness, Lovecraft joins animal and vegetable together in a tragicomic display of force where his hybrid monstrosities stretch epistemological and ontological limits. In Lovecraft's novel all is stupendous, nightmarish, frightful, ultra-dimensional, exaggerated, disproportionate, de-formed, and in the process of potential revelation.<sup>171</sup> Describing the monstrosities discovered at the mountains, he writes, "All guesses about its external members had been correct, and on the evidence of these one could hardly hesitate to call the thing animal; but internal inspection brought up so many vegetable evidences that Lake was hopelessly at sea,"<sup>172</sup> and "It was partly vegetable, but had three-fourths of the essentials of animal structure."<sup>173</sup> The grotesqueness of these creatures is further emphasized through hyperbolic paradox when he describes them as both "excessively primitive and archaic" and "the very extremes of specialized development."<sup>174</sup> Using hyperbole, Lovecraft's de-formed monsters overturn and transgress the "natural" and/as subjectivity, but his phenomenological distortions also offer one the transforming psychological insight that all that is normative is disfigured.

Bakhtin's carnivalesque also suggests that conventional norms must be thoroughly disfigured, which necessitates the grotesque process of always becoming.

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<sup>171</sup> Lovecraft, Madness, location 828.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., location 748.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., location 758.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., location 753.

This is also true of Lovecraft. Through hyperbolic grotesqueries he creates an unsettling *affectus* by resolutely undermining all conventions of “nature” and classical decorum by crafting “hideously amplified worlds of lurking horrors which nothing can erase from our emotions, and which we would refrain from sharing with mankind in general if we could.”<sup>175</sup> The “natural” is disrupted and de-formed in his imaginative descriptions of Cyclopean cities “embodying monstrous perversions of geometrical laws and attaining the most grotesque extremes of sinister bizarrerie.”<sup>176</sup> His lurking horrors of transgressive de-formation lead one through labyrinthine *copia* to the insight that all is not right with the world.

The “natural” is not, in fact, natural and always in the act of becoming. The “truth” exists in a hyperbolic realm where all is amplified, exaggerated, and frightful, but out of his deformities, an errantly perspectival transformation emerges that can be psychologically liberating. Relying on a decorum of excess where de-formed disproportionality is the appropriate and the shocking is the timely, Lovecraft offers phenomenological transgression as the conduit for psychologically transformative errancy.

For Rudolf Otto, on the other hand, it is not anthropomorphic or naturalistic de-formation that transforms, but a de-formation/re-formation of the wholly other as a (re)conceptualization of “God,” i.e., *mysterium tremendum*, which often creates a feeling of psychological estrangement and the “demonic,” a diabolic disordering. Operating from the Kantian notion of the sublime, Otto nevertheless responds within Kayser’s

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., location 818.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., location 849.

grotesque frame to the rupture between the rational and the non-rational, and his discussion of the wholly other de-forms/transforms one's ontological state and phenomenological worldview by grotesquely transgressing psychological limits and expectations. In doing so, he presents the audience with an unsettling melding of rationality and non-rationality effectively blurring the conventional boundaries between two presumed rigidly oppositional extremities. Steeped in incongruity, *mysterium tremendum* for Otto may be hyperbolically beyond reality, i.e., the non-rational, but it is not beyond belief, i.e., the rational.

In a quagmire of interrelated though distinct terms, Otto argues that *mysterium tremendum* evokes a horrific feeling of dread and can be summarized in two words – “absolute unapproachability.”<sup>177</sup> In a grotesque frame, he hyperbolically asserts, “The ‘wholly other’...[is] that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the ‘canny’, and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment.”<sup>178</sup> Initially revealing the ominous savagery of *mysterium tremendum*, Otto begins to build a description of the wholly other as that which transcends, transgresses, estranges, and exceeds boundaries as a de-formed, demonic figure of thought. He also makes the assertion that *mysterium tremendum* is fascinating (*et fascinans*), a fascination with “awefulness” and “wonderfulness”<sup>179</sup>: “At its highest point of stress the fascinating

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<sup>177</sup> Rudolf Otto, The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational, trans. John W. Harvey, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 20.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 32.

becomes the ‘overabounding.’”<sup>180</sup> Not only is the grotesque, “monstrous” wholly other something beyond the usual and familiar that stirs wonder, fear, and astonishment, it is also intensely psychologically fascinating from which one cannot quite break one’s “numinous” gaze.

The numinous is the state of consciousness that is directed towards *mysterium tremendum*,<sup>181</sup> which contains the contradictory elements of “awefulness” and “majesty.”<sup>182</sup> By gazing into the impossible abyss of *mysterium tremendum* one’s *affectus* is directed towards a “numinous experience.”<sup>183</sup> A “‘creature-feeling’ or creature-consciousness”<sup>184</sup> is a response to and a result of the numinous experience occurring at a precise moment. At this “‘mystical’ moment,” the wholly other is an expression of a transcendent “beyond” where numinous consciousness is transgressed and errantly transformed through a “‘Dionysiac’ element of transport and fervour” that is “stressed to excess.”<sup>185</sup> Through hyperbole, Otto re-conceptualizes the possibility of the impossible, and the impossible itself, within the numinous experience.

The numinous cannot be strictly defined, but it is connected to “the holy,” which contains a “moment” that is inexpressible, “ineffabile [sic],” and “completely eludes apprehension in terms of concepts.”<sup>186</sup> The “holy,” as grotesquely sublime (shadows of

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 34, 37.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 5.



each other)<sup>187</sup> and resisting complete comprehension, includes a feeling of “overplus,” which equivalent words in Latin, Greek, and Semitic languages designate “*only* this overplus,” and this “‘extra’ in the meaning of the ‘holy’ above and beyond the meaning of goodness” is identified by the numinous.<sup>188</sup> Out of the *kairotic* moment of the overabounding “holy,” the closure of which is disrupted and subverted through the grotesque and hyperbole, the numinous re-directs one’s thoughts towards an errant re-formulation of the wholly other, an infinite perspectival re-orientation.

Subjectively and objectively justified, Otto constructs his hyperbolic argument through *auxesis*. He also uses subjective hyperbole, creating *pathos* and causing *affectus*, when describing that “demonic” feeling of *mysterium* that is filtered through the numinous towards a new experience of “creature-consciousness,” and this *affectus* exceeds all boundaries and categories within a decorum of excess. An ineffable impossibility, hyperbole builds towards the grotesque “sublimity” of the “holy” – “The grotesque...confounds the very distinction between grotesque and sublime through its own duplicity [i.e., a subtraction that is also an addition]”<sup>189</sup> – which is the *kairotic* moment when this sublimity is revealed as the de-formed whereby the now dissonant numinous is then re-channeled through one’s consciousness towards errant transition.

The hyperbole builds slowly or arrives all at once in the mind of the individual at an apex of experience that is a horrific mystery, a “daemonic dread,” of *mysterium tremendum*:

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<sup>187</sup> Csicsery-Ronay, “On the Grotesque,” 79. “The sublime is law set free of life; the grotesque is life set free of law” (82).

<sup>188</sup> Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 5-7.

<sup>189</sup> Guerlac, *Impersonal Sublime*, 18, 28.

The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its 'profane', non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering...[but] it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious.<sup>190</sup>

Here, Otto uses *auxesis*, which is consistently associated with the grotesque,<sup>191</sup> that builds towards the horrific and the glorious. Breaking from ordinary "profane" experience at a *kairotic* moment, the grotesqueness of *mysterium tremendum* is errantly grasped by and also creates hyperbolic effects. In impossible heights and depths of hyperbole that strains and moves beyond "truth," *mysterium tremendum* comes "like a gentle tide" (hyperbolic simile) or a "sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul" (hyperbolic metaphor), which both de-forms numinous consciousness and transforms creature-consciousness out of its hyperbolic hideousness.

Through a violent movement of disrupting spasms and convulsions, one is transported into the realm of the demonic or the realm of the beautiful, depending on how *mysterium tremendum* is received and integrated into one's numinous experience. Juxtaposed by its "boundless awe[fulness]" and "boundless wonder,"<sup>192</sup> *mysterium tremendum* is a grotesquery of thought and a deceit where coherence is shattered and impossible oppositions are held in tension in what Taylor calls the space of the impossible third, i.e., a *tertium quid*. In this space of unnameable excess, *mysterium*

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<sup>190</sup> Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 12-13.

<sup>191</sup> Guerlac, *Impersonal Sublime*, 25.

<sup>192</sup> Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 42.

*tremendum* evokes the *affectus* of a de-formed numinous monstrosity, which prepares one for transition. *Mysterium tremendum* may arrive suddenly or slowly, and the transformation it causes does so as well.

The numinous experience is an ontological, psychological movement where “*I* pass over or make the transition from one feeling to another as my circumstances change, by the gradual decrease [attenuation] of the one and the increase [accumulation] of the other.”<sup>193</sup> Through the *auxesis* of hyperbole, one transitions through *pathos* from a de-formed sense of *mysterium tremendum* towards a transformed conception of wholly other that is excess and in excess. After achieving the height of hyperbole, “This process [of psychological movement] is one of steady ‘descent’ into the interiors, into the ‘grottoes’ of being, in the hope of finding a core, but always finding more transformation.” “Awareness is turned inward toward...contingency and change, with the added problem that this may actually change the thing being observed [i.e., that ‘Alien Thing’ that may be perceived as wholly other],”<sup>194</sup> which for Otto is the inner self as object of subjective observation. Without unity or synthesis, the wholly other is and creates a metamorphic flux within the individual that is errant, perceptual transition in a world that is radically mutable.

Within a Kantian framework, Otto posits that the extraordinary “sacred” experience breaks from the ordinary “profane” experience, which issues from intuition and towards “cognitive apprehension” whereby one’s perceptual field is altered, supplemented, or transcended by “peculiar interpretations and valuations,” e.g. judgments

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>194</sup> Csicsery-Ronay, “On the Grotesque,” 83, 85.

about ethics or aesthetics.<sup>195</sup> Beyond sense-perception, however, religious ideas and feelings reside in the mind independently of sense-experience, and hyperbole “precipitates a heuristic experience in which imaginative and cognitive limits are tested,” which may cultivate “lasting ambiguity.”<sup>196</sup> Attempting to synthesize opposites – the rational profane with the non-rational sacred (though these reverse and bleed into each other) – through Kantian “imagination,” Otto nevertheless presents an ambiguous contrariety causing cognitive dissonance, creating astonishment rather than admiration, and evading complete comprehension.<sup>197</sup>

The wholly other does not break into the ordinary, but religious ideas and feelings break from ordinary perception creating a psychological and ontological deformation/transformation even as complete comprehension is never attained. Within a decorum of excess, the magnitude of *mysterium tremendum*, which is most effectively described through disproportionality and diabolical disruption, breaks from, or transgresses, the ordinary at a “moment” when one’s attention is shockingly arrested and prepared for an errant transformation of thought and emotion. The non-rational, *a priori* elements of “holiness” converge to reveal “the hidden depths of the spirit itself.”<sup>198</sup> In a grotesque key, Otto’s *mysterium tremendum* can only be conceptualized through hyperbolic force within a decorum of excess where all is monstrous, overstated, and an overplus. Out of this transgressively de-forming experience of psychological

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 117, 118.

<sup>196</sup> Johnson, *Hyperboles*, 8, 11.

<sup>197</sup> To introduce another contradiction into the discussion, Taylor, as do many scholars today, departs from Otto’s interpretation of Kant and argues that the imagination is precisely that which does not synthesize but “disturbs, upsets, unsettles.” See Taylor, *Tears*, 221.

<sup>198</sup> Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 140.

estrangement, epistemological and ontological transformation emerges as a perpetual phenomenological act of hyperbolic becoming.

The transgressive de-deformation transitioning towards errant transformation is hyperbole functioning in the grotesque to disorient and re-orient one's given perception and interpretation of reality. Bakhtin's and Kayser's conceptualizations of the grotesque highlight this movement well. Whether a phenomenological disruption moving towards a psychological change or a psychological de-stabilization moving towards a phenomenological re-orientation, the de-forming/transforming theme of hyperbole's disorienting/re-orienting function is pervasive within the grotesque. The insight of the grotesque reveals the function of hyperbole.

## CONCLUSION

The disorientation/re-orientation function of hyperbole is a complex one. Implied in the two foundational functions of hyperbole, this meta-function operates at a meta-theoretical level encompassing both of those foundational functions. Even the intricacies of hyperbole such as a decorum of excess are governed by disorientation and re-orientation, which is why this is also the most important function of hyperbole. Revealing the underlying impetus for hyperbole to re-orient through disorientation, this function is the foundation upon which hyperbole succeeds or fails.

Various tactics such as *remedia* are employed to prevent hyperbole's failure, but if one cannot see beyond the literal, then the insights hyperbole can offer are forfeit. The *pathos* used to move the audience, the dissonant *kairotic* moment and/or speech achieved, and a decorous re-orienting within a decorum of excess are all for naught if hyperbole suffers rejection and the condemnation of *kakozelia*. Impossibility and hyperbolic lies

may achieve *vertige de l'hyperbole*, but if it is not well received and re-directed towards some transition of meaning or being, then hyperbole is rendered useless and even detrimental to one's overall argument. In every instance, however, the primary purpose of hyperbole is disruptive, errant transition, i.e., to teach and to move.

Exemplified in the grotesque as well as epideictic, the risk of hyperbole is the risk of disorienting/re-orienting change or transformation. A grotesque body or a Foucauldian panegyric, hyperbole offers the promise of transition, but its price is the movement through disorder, contradiction, and deceit. This movement heightens the risk of being misunderstood, and risking misapprehension in order to alter one's perspective or interpretation of reality makes hyperbole a particularly precarious trope. More than any other trope, hyperbole's shocking, surprising force is radically paradoxical and confounding. It does not synthesize or gently compare. It does not make tentative connections or subtly undermine. It bludgeons and befuddles. It emphatically disrupts, rends veils, dismantles, de-forms, transgresses, and deconstructs. It brings blunt force trauma and power (*energeia*), and its intent is brutality.

Re-presenting an extraordinary *res*, insight, transformation, and decorous re-orientation is the hyperbolist's goal, but the hyperbolist attempts this persuasive feat by violently stretching and bending *verba* and decorum to its limits. The promise of hyperbole is also its most profound danger. The hyperbolist moves the audience into the uncertain, slippery *tertium quid* of "beyond reality" where hyperbole may seem "beyond belief," and only the audience can accept the invitation back towards a (re)interpreted reality where norms are actively being violated and truth is surpassed in the name of new epistemological and ontological insights.

Yet, even the errant *res* hyperbole offers may be disorienting itself, as it is with Taylor and Sigur Ros. Resisting the confines of synthesis, hyperbole moves dialogically, paradoxically, and discursively in between and at the margins of thought and language as it exploits and explodes perceptual gaps where disorientation and the possibility of re-orientation occurs. The insights apprehended may be disturbing and frightening, as in Lovecraft and Otto, and it is for this reason that disorienting impossibilities and hyperbolic lies are resisted. Not all are receptive to hyperbole's heights, but those who venture into the unknown of the nonabsent absence will undoubtedly return with a transformed and more resonant apprehension of an extraordinary *res*. Hyperbole can offer important phenomenological and psychological purpose to its audience, and this purpose is the desire for transformation that is achieved through and is always already in excess.

## CONCLUSION: THE GREATEST TROPE IN THE HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSE

The language of mystical unknowing thus circles around its God in a hyperbolic naming  
which speaks the radical anonymity that sustains the soul's insatiable desire.  
Thomas Carlson

When we try to follow virtues to their extremes, vices appear from everywhere which  
mingle imperceptibly with them...And vices are there in crowds at the other end. The  
result is that we get lost in the vices and no longer see the virtues.  
Blaise Pascal

## DISRUPTING THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE AND KNOWLEDGE

The function of hyperbole, from its attempt to express the ineffable and extraordinary to its effect of stretching the limits of conventions and reason, makes it an important and vital trope and figure of thought. These attempts at description and disruption are made despite the inadequacies of language and speech to communicate what may be perceived as an incommunicable and incomprehensible *res* balanced on the edge of madness and monstrosity. Regardless of these insufficiencies, hyperbole (re)presents the extraordinary by operating, or “throwing,” beyond reality but not beyond belief. It joins the decorous with the unexpected and makes the unbelievable believable, and it can strengthen *pistis* and point the way “beyond” as it defies the laws of *ratio* and probability through its forceful use of *pathos* to move the audience.

One might hesitate or recoil at the use of hyperbole because our relation with hyperbole is a difficult and strained one, but it is the chief way the inexpressible is communicated. Hyperbole is often used to describe indescribable events in order to communicate a departure from the ordinary that seems beyond reality. From 9/11 to Katrina, these events can only be described through the force and contrariety of



hyperbole. Impossible events in the mind of Americans, they are perceived as beyond reality and almost beyond belief. Through the descriptions of these events, an infinite array of *verba*, the use of hyperbole leads one to a re-imagined *res* within a decorum of excess where most are receptive to hyperbole because of the magnitude of these events, which only hyperbole can figurally push the imagination towards through a descriptive and emotional surplus of reality. Offering impossible descriptions of psychological and phenomenological contradictions as hyperbolic lies on the side of expanding conceptions of truth(s), the possibilities such as altering the American consciousness from a perception of invulnerability to vulnerability, i.e., 9/11, or bringing the cohesion of a newly created sense of American identity, i.e., Katrina, can be constructed.

Presenting the American audience with the wounding and healing of hyperbole, hyperbole offers a salve in response to extraordinarily traumatic events, which it also excessively describes. Hyperbole forces one to gaze into the face of exaggerated contradiction and intense anxiety so that one may come out on the other side of horrific experiences. 9/11 and Katrina are literal events, but these events are duplicitously assuaged within the festering wound of hyperbole. As a type of poison that is also antidote, hyperbole both exploits and delimits our fear of excess.

Hyperbole is a different type of language operating within its own (il)logic of excess. It offers a different kind of speech where a lie that is not a deception can be employed on the side of a particular conception of truth(s), which is always lacking, that hyperbole thoroughly disrupts through the abundance of excess. Hyperbole stirs one's emotions through the convergence of power and luminosity in a grandiose display of insight that transcends or throws beyond the purview of logic and reason thereby creating

the intensity of *vertige de l'hyperbole*, which threatens to dismantle the conventions of reason and rationality. Revealing that reason is madness and madness is reason through its “mad audacity,” this vertigo is precisely the disorienting crux of hyperbole’s function to momentarily suspend presuppositions before they are re-oriented towards audacious phenomenological and psychological re-formulations, though full comprehension is effaced from view.

In an age of excess when we are struggling with the transcendent and immanent and are emerging out of the dizzying stupor of existentialism (the impossibility of possibility) and the disorienting promises of romanticism (the possibility of impossibility), we are grasping errantly for something more, and it is hyperbole that aids in this task. From the litigious discussions of impossibility and difficulty to the conceptual (re)articulation of transgression, the unconscious, subjectivity, and the destabilization of systems of knowledge and economy, hyperbole is the most effective, duplicitous, and (in)appropriate attempt at expressing these often confounding and inexpressible positions.

Often accused of tastelessness and insincerity, a new aesthetic understanding of hyperbole for an age of excess that is itself re-formulating what it means for some thing, thought, or idea to hold aesthetic value can be significant. The grotesque and the sublime are obvious expressions of this ambiguity as they are sometimes regarded with disdain and sometimes revered as aesthetic vehicles *par excellence*. Balancing upon a precarious marginality, the aesthetic (re)assessment of these concepts resides tenuously within the perceptual gaps riddling notions of transcendence and immanence.

Between one's perception of transcendence and the residual materiality/corporality of immanence, hyperbole resides in the perpetual interval cleaving these two spatio-temporal (im)possibilities together by disturbing, disrupting, and transgressing norms and conventions while hinting at new and re-imagined realities. Signifying lack as well as abundance, hyperbole forcefully beckons the hearer to "throw beyond" convention and risk a de-stabilizing epistemological and ontological shock of transformation where immanence and transcendence grotesquely coalesce.

Hyperbole is a tenuous bridge between transcendence and immanence. The immanent often fails to describe the extraordinary adequately, and it is at this moment that hyperbole becomes vital and necessary. When language or thought must transcend epistemological and ontological boundaries in order to describe the magnitude of a given situation, hyperbole is the tropological formation and figure of thought that can reveal the transcendent power to re-imagine immanence. Unlike any other trope, hyperbole traumatically and forcefully pushes and strains meaning and being to the margins of thought whereby one might surpass a given perspective or worldview and re-envisage the world differently. Through paradox and obscurity, hyperbole reveals the wondrous and the marvelous about a given context. Beyond "ordinary" language and a "given" reality, hyperbole may be viewed with fear and suspicion, but it is the most appropriate vehicle to think and to express the inexpressible.

The madness of demonic hyperbole, the-attempt-to-think-demonic-hyperbole, offers "marvelous transcendence" (*daimonias hyperboles*) and is a redemptive figure of turmoil revealing other truth(s) and possibilities, which are as yet unrealized potentialities. The hyperbolist acknowledges that hyperbole's attempts at audacity are

never enough, but hyperbole errantly repeats itself anyway in order to shatter with hammer blows the ossification of the literal – where not enough is too much – and move one into the figural – where too much is not enough. Transcending temporal and spatial perspectival realities, *daimonias hyperboles* exorbitantly attempt to re-present what might be beyond one's epistemological and ontological realities.

Hyperbole holds the real and the ideal in irresolvable tension. It reveals the impossible distance between the ineptitude and the infinite multiplicity of language to describe that which is indescribable. Hyperbole is a trope of and for use in the present moment, making the distant seem immediate, even as it always points beyond itself to something more, making the disparate seem possible. One may not fully comprehend what that more might be, but a glimpse, a glimmer of apprehension, is offered through hyperbole. It bridges the gap between what is spoken and what is meant and can translate figurative language into emotional meaning. Hyperbole is the possibility of always (re)imagining something more and other that is just beyond one's grasp. At the far reaches of the imagination when seeing through a glass darkly is not enough, hyperbole shatters the glass and strains one's perceptions to a breaking point in order to exceed one's given reality.

Creating significant moments of *inventio* as well as *elocutio*, the hyperbolist self-consciously uses hyperbole knowing that it may be misunderstood or mis-apprehended. The enormity of a particular exigence is so severe that the only trope capable of communicating the extraordinary is the one that so adamantly risks miscommunication. Impudent in the extreme, hyperbole prefers too much over not enough, and the

affirmation of hyperbole is its impossible lie that must be re-directed towards and through errant, alternate ways of perceiving meaning and being.

Hyperbole dramatizes the impossible itself and is, as Puttenham suggests, a “*lowd lyer*.” The extremity of hyperbolic speech and/as *kairotic* speech offers disrupting contradictions to force some type of transition onto the hearer, even if that transition is to a place of disturbing ambiguity. Out of this ambiguity, change occurs. Slowly or all at once, feigning subtlety or wielding brutality, the hyperbolist risks hyperbole’s own misapprehension for the benefit of the audience to see beyond itself towards as yet unrealized horizons of (re)imagination. However, it is fear and suspicion of exaggeration and excess that problematizes our relation with hyperbole. We are not quite certain what to do with it or how to contain and control it, and we are often afraid of the radical disruption it offers even as we seek psychological and phenomenological transformation that can only occur through tenacious inordinateness.

#### EXCESSIVE MODERATION AND MODERATING EXCESS

The difficulty with embracing this trope of excess arises out of our problematic relation with excess itself. Ingrained into the very fabric of our social order is an uncertain and conflicting view of excess. To be “in excess” is to delve into the realm of sin and vice, and we are taught from an early age to resist this excess. One must not embody excess because one must not sin or live in vice, which violates the moderation that is seemingly held in such high regard. The accusation of “too much” is a phrase as profane as any curse one might utter. That one has too much money is an accusation of greed. That one eats too much is the condemnation of gluttony. That one thinks about

sex too much is the deplorable vileness of lust, and the list of sins and vices goes on. Excess is not to be trusted.

Many say that America overindulges, lives in excess, and gorges itself on consuming everything it can. For this, it is viewed as evil by some and the Promised Land by others, though the latter deny America's excessiveness even as they relish in it. This is the paradox of our relation to excess. It is feared and suspect, but it is also desired and embraced. It is this confusing relationship with excess and exaggeration that causes our enigmatic relation to hyperbole to exist, and the contradiction within hyperbole itself is a contradiction that both satiates and fuels the desire for excess.

On the one hand, we have embraced the golden mean as the golden rule from our Greco-Roman and Puritan ancestors. On the other hand, the golden rule of our society is to consume voraciously without reserve whether this is commodities, knowledge, or religious experience. We search after prosperity and living life to its fullest while also restraining ourselves. When one buys something "on sale," for example, does this not express the paradox of excess perfectly? Yes, one might have spent a lot of money, but think of all the money saved!

Confounding in the extreme, those who live moderately are praised but also viewed as economically, experientially, and socially poor. Those who live in excess and/or possess a disproportionate amount of wealth are praised but also vilified and envied (yet another excess). Embedded within the American psyche, it is said that if we live right, in moderation, then we will be blessed. If we work hard and keep our noses to the grindstone, then one day we will be rewarded. Karma happens, and when it does, sacrifices made will be replaced with abundance. The relation to excess is equivocal and

pervades every aspect of our lives. Both poison and remedy, hyperbole-as-*pharmakon* evades complete comprehension.

The Puritan mindset of prudence, for example, is thoroughly entrenched within the American consciousness, but this alleged attitude of radical moderation has its own excesses. Puritans literally expunged excess from their midst, though this occurred paradoxically through excessive acts such as witch-hunts, and justifications for this excess were offered as a defense of moderation. Many even said that we did not excessively conquer other civilizations because it was our manifest destiny, i.e., an abundant blessing bestowed by God for our moderate, Christian living and restrictive obedience. One might even suggest that the exaggerated restraint of prohibition is the excessive resistance to excessive debauchery. It seems that appearance is what matters. One's outward self must seem prudent even as a surfeit of desires swirl within the inner self, but as Tertullian and Augustine remind us, the inner erupts into the outer. Even as we embody hyperbole, we also attempt to smother it beneath a façade of prudence. The apparent self we project is the literal lie exceeding the hermeneutical truth(s) of our inner self. Excess cleaves our outside to our inside and our inside to our outside.

Just as Greco-Roman rhetorical theorists and the "Church Fathers" wrote about excess, those who espouse a prosperity gospel today paradoxically encourage living in moderation in order to gain abundant blessings, e.g., wealth. For the Greco-Romans and "Church Fathers" the blessings of state, democracy, citizenship, or God were the reward. In this view, one is not to live excessively in vice, which leads to intemperate living or even the gates of hell, but one is to exude austerity while at the same time spending,

consuming, and even thinking lavishly about God, politics, or philosophy – with a nod to moderation – which leads to success and enlightenment.

One must live moderately and “above reproach” as Paul says and not be a “leaky jar” as Plato says, but theologically and philosophically the “good news” must be heard and lived to the extreme. One must seize every opportunity but not appear to be an opportunist. It is no wonder that a trope which embodies excess is resisted, enveloped in paradox, and viewed as such a contradictory expression. It is no wonder that hyperbolists are demonized and considered deceivers. Is not “Satan” the very embodiment and scapegoat of what we view as all that is excessive, as the ultimate hyperbolist?

Excess is our insatiable desire never to be fulfilled but always sought, and we have paradoxical (mis)understandings of how to deal with it or what to do with it. Religious institutions, e.g., Christianity, presumably act as vanguards against excess, but their stipulations and doctrinal declarations and our obedience to them are also excessive. The “not” to one kind of excess is the “yes” to another kind. Yet, the Christian message is itself excessive. God gives a surplus of love without remainder through Christ who exceeds normative human boundaries. Grace and salvation are excessive concepts and are offered excessively to forgive an excess of sin. As Paul says, “Where sin abounds, grace much more abounds.” Christ’s sacrifice to ensure this grace and salvation is an excessive gesture, but this excess is controlled and contained by those who espouse it. If God as an impossible possibility actually existed, would that not be more monstrously terrifying than our impossible conceptions of God?

Rather than operating within a type of decorum of excess, the Christian message is tamed and toned down within a highly regulated restricted economy of religion. Grace



and salvation are offered only to those who accept it in a particular form and a particular way, e.g., only through baptism, only through the Eucharist, or only through the Church. In Catholicism, access to this excess is restricted even further through the confessional and the priesthood. Most intriguing of all, those who are “saved” often cannot accept the grace they are promised, and they turn to an excess of shame and guilt. They suffer inwardly for their sin because they cannot integrate excess positively into their lives. It seems that the excessive exaggeration of “original sin” is too much and far outweighs the promise of and the desire for infinite grace. Psychologically, the complexities of excess are confusing, and we are confused by it. The same is true of exaggeration.

“I thought you were just exaggerating.” “That’s a mere exaggeration.” “Come now, don’t exaggerate. Tell the truth.” These are the phrases one hears time and again, and yet, we enjoy exaggeration, or we are at least fascinated by it. The exaggerated grotesqueries of disasters, violence, and even terrorist acts where, say, the overabounding incongruity of a plane flying into a building or a student assassinating fellow students holds our attention. We cannot look away. We must see it again and again. It is repeated on every news station at our disposal. We are psychologically bound to exaggeration and excess as we are to its opposite.

Even in academic “disciplines,” we are to be modest in our claims and are not to exaggerate our conclusions – because that is a lie – but what if the magnitude of our conclusions deserves or even demands to be exaggerated? What if too much is exactly the right amount? Or, we are taught not to deviate from our restricted economy of writing, but what if what we need to communicate is precisely an unrestricted economy, an excess of *verba* to arrive at the re-presentation of an extraordinary *res*? We must write

conservatively but publish excessively. We indulge in philosophical excesses and praise them as heralds of a new paradigm or era, but we contain them in theoretical constructs while also explicating them incessantly. We attempt to disorder order through epistemological and ontological excess and exaggeration – “in theory” – but we loathe giving up our order of disorder.

Even if the exorbitant theories of academics might result in physically violent consequences, we continue to embrace and to contain them within our conventional modes of communication since they are *only* figures of thought. We argue for exaggerated reform and even excessive revolution despite the fact that we do not actually live out and express these thoughts in our everyday lives because we might be perceived as an extremist. Even if we did, would it be as intense as our writings signify? Are not revolutionaries often put to death, the ultimate excessive cessation of life? Social movements as the excessive representations of thoughts and ideas are squelched or tamed down into manageable, moderate, academically demarcated “moments” in history. Academics speak of excessive “transgression,” “anarchy,” “heterology,” or “alterity,” but we do not always act out or integrate these concepts into our lives because they are too much. They become traumatic, and so we cover them with excessive fantasies, which are displaced by other “theoretical” fantasies and replaced with yet other, “safer,” fantasies.

The scientific paradigm exemplifies the tenuous relation we have with excess. Exploring and discovering, ever expanding the horizon of knowledge, are concepts already prone to excess, and we have a seemingly insatiable desire to push them even further. Moving along the curve of hyperbole/hyperbola science flirts with transgressing the limits of human knowledge even as it moderates this process by categorizing and

compartmentalizing its discoveries into constricted modes of examination. In highly controlled experiments, the unknown and uncontrollable are harnessed by placing them into knowable parts. Excessively capturing, violently tearing apart, and dissecting our world, scientists paradoxically attempt to counteract and unify all that is unknowable and mysterious while also theorizing about the inexplicable, e.g., in quantum theory and quantum mechanics, which is also an attempt to explicate the unknown. A battle rages within the scientific paradigm between excess and moderation.

Teetering on the fragile edge of excess, science inhibits excess with excessive control. The physical sciences scrutinize the outer world, and neurophysiology and neuropsychology delve into the inner world of the brain and the human psyche. Probing and searching, the amorphous realm of the unconscious is dismantled and put together again. The impetus to investigate is always excessive, but the impulse to restrain this force, e.g., through bioethics and the scientific method, is equally as strong. Explaining the literal with hyperbolic conceptual models, i.e., lies on the side of perceptual truth(s), scientific hyperbolists move through disorienting impossibilities towards other possibilities of thought and knowledge.

Radical in the extreme, the epistemological and ontological promises of hyperbole are both fascinating and viewed as dangerous, and our relation to hyperbole and our relationship with hyperbolists are dubious at best. Academics both embrace Derrida's scandalous re-interpretation of a *res* and resist his *verba* as "errant texts [that] graph an infinite course at the edge of the abyss, of madness and of silence."<sup>1</sup> We hesitantly meander around Heidegger's *verba* seeking his re-imagined *res* about Being, worlding,

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, *Tears*, 103.

and revealing/unconcealing difference between Being and beings as a surplus and an excess. We both praise and fear Taylor's a/theology because it threatens the clearly demarcated systematics of theology. We revel in the theoretically transgressive deformation of the carnivalesque, but we balk at its transformation when it is our bodies that might be transgressively exaggerated. Praising and resisting hyperbolists like Rabelais, Žižek, Bataille, and Foucault, disordering societal norms and conventions is both exciting and terrifying.

Societies seek spiritual resonance, but they do not want to pass through disorienting dissonance to achieve it. They seek societal transformation but cling to the accepted order. The hyperbolists they praise, e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr., are also the ones they destroy. Moving through impossibilities towards other possibilities is simply too impossible, and transformation through hyperbole is stifled and dismissed. The jump into contradiction is too inconvenient, which is another way of saying too much than one can handle.

Religions praise impossibilities and mysteries, but it seems that only saints, mystics, and ascetics are willing to embody hyperbole and move through this unknown terrain to arrive at other possibilities of meaning and being in the world. One is not even quite sure what to do with these extremists. They are excommunicated or venerated and sometimes both. Surprising and disturbing, those who live a life of embodied hyperbole are often excommunicated in life, which is quite an excessive gesture, but venerated after the excessive finality of death.

A monastic life or the life of a nun is an exaggerated one, though highly admired. We allegedly value obedience, but the very lives of hyper-obedience they lead are

recondite. For this, they must be physically and spatially compartmentalized into monasteries and nunneries and placed at the psychological and geographical margins of societal and religious life. Those such as the Quakers are also both revered and placed at the fringes of society. Amish communities are misunderstood, and their radical separation from normative society is viewed as an excessive lifestyle. As we learn from Otto, it is easier to accept the rational and distance ourselves from the non-rational, and even Otto's psychological *mysterium tremendum* is a defense against irrationality since he constructs and dissects it within a rational framework.

Whatever else hyperbole may be, it is the attempt to contain our fear of excess within a tropological expression because it exposes the inadequacy and inexhaustibility of language and reality. Out of fear and suspicion, those who view moderation as the golden mean of rhetorical decorum approach the excess of hyperbole as too much. Even those who view hyperbole more positively still tend to emphasize a certain moderation and caution its use. Stretching the limits of language, thought, and decorum, those who see the epistemological and ontological benefits of hyperbole attempt to accommodate its forceful onslaught of tropological force, but the risk of this hospitable view of hyperbole is the risk of misapprehension. Perhaps no other trope creates as much anxiety or is as psychologically disturbing for rhetors and audiences as hyperbole.

## IMPLICATIONS

### RHETORICAL THEORY AND CRITICISM

Rhetorically negotiating the psychological struggle with excess is a daunting task because hyperbole is not simply psychologically frustrating but is also problematic rhetorically. Hyperbole is a lie. It is just a deceit. It is ridiculous and foolish. It serves

no productive rhetorical purpose. These are the typical accusations (as defense mechanisms?) made of hyperbole. Indeed, the history and exploration of hyperbole is a venture into contradiction, ambiguity, extremity, and paradox. Though it may be similarly defined throughout its rhetorical history, the attitudes held regarding this tropological representation of excess are widely divergent and even oppositional.

Largely forgotten or neglected as a critical trope in current rhetorical theory, I explored the two functions and one meta-function of hyperbole in order to offer a different view of hyperbole than current rhetorical scholars are used to, and it presents hyperbole in a new light. Through my analysis of hyperbole, for example, I was able to produce fresh insights into the epideictic and grotesque genres, tropological theory, *kairos* and decorum, sophistic rhetoric, and the relation between hyperbolist and audience. Examining the epideictic and grotesque genres, I showed that hyperbole expresses itself in a variety of forms, and these forms reveal much about hyperbole as well as the hyperbolist.

It seems that overall, rhetoric has a love-hate relationship with hyperbole born out of fear, confusion, and suspicion, and the prejudices against hyperbolists can be severe. Using a variety of *remedia* and relying more on *affectus* than *ratio*, the hyperbolist negotiates the tension between unsettling transformation and the audience's affinity for stability, order, and normativity. Just as a prophet, the hyperbolist stands at a distance from the audience and offers a radical message of transition. The hyperbolist stands alone and can be judged harshly unless *ethos* and *pathos* are used effectively. Interpreted literally, the hyperbole fails, but the instances of hyperbole's failure are equally as interesting as its successes. Understanding the complexities of hyperbole's functions and

its operations within a decorum of excess can help rhetorical critics and theorists recognize, explore, and even re-evaluate these successes and failures. Thus, one implication hyperbole offers for rhetorical theory and criticism concerns the question of judgment.

For example, certain judgments made about hyperbole's use within discourse and who might be considered a hyperbolist can be re-considered. Are the apocalyptic sermons of John Hagee any less eloquent than the eschatological speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.? Is the political hyperbolic satire of John Stewart any less sophisticated than traditional political discourse? Is the rhetorical "street shitting" of Gunn's essay any less decorous than a papal encyclical or a presidential inauguration? Are the hyperbolic lies within Foucault's discourse to be dismissed for their historical inaccuracies? Does not the apocalyptic message of the Left Behind series offer *kairotic* speech in the same way as political activists or radical environmentalists? Should fear and suspicion truly dictate what rhetorical theorists and critics consider eloquent or stylistically acceptable? We are too bound to historical presuppositions about rhetoric that we often miss the art of hyperbolic persuasion with its radically altered epistemological and ontological perspectives, its alternative forms of inquiry, and our judgments about hyperbolic "texts" or theoretical concepts may thus be skewed.

Considering rhetoric's exploration of the sublime, for example, judging how the sublime is either communicated and/or imagined successfully or unsuccessfully can be reconsidered by more fully apprehending hyperbole's functions and the hyperbolist's role in a rhetorical situation. That the sublime is buttressed by hyperbole can aid in significantly pushing rhetorical theory's interest in the sublime forward. As the vehicle

for expressing the ineffable, hyperbole gives further insight into how the sublime functions and operates effectively or ineffectively within discourse and aesthetics. Actually constructing an aesthetic theory using hyperbole could radically alter impressions and conclusions regarding the sublime and the beautiful.

Perhaps exploring certain aesthetic issues and transcending presumed aesthetic categories through a grotesque hyperbolic framework or combining the sublime and the grotesque, as Victor Hugo suggests, through hyperbole, since hyperbole tends to go in either direction towards the sublime or the grotesque, might reveal new insights into hyperbole, aesthetics, and our perceptions about aesthetic judgment. Or, rhetorically constructing a theory of the Longinian sublime combined with his understanding of hyperbole and then applying it to Kantian notions of the infinite and sublime, erupting at the limits of human consciousness in the irreducible excess of the infinite, and the beautiful is certainly worthy of consideration. Perhaps, as Johnson asserts, despite Kant's alleged aversion to rhetoric, he uses hyperbole to structure many of his arguments. This perspective could radically alter certain judgments made about Kant's overall discourse. Disrupting commonly held assumptions regarding these issues, hyperbole, and the hyperbolist is one way rhetorical critics and theorists might re-evaluate their observations concerning various aesthetic theories.

As already suggested in the previous chapters, exploring other tropes in relation to hyperbole is a task rhetorical theorists must examine and re-formulate. Considered by several theorists of hyperbole to be a trope-producing trope and the master trope, an understanding of tropological theory in general must be re-visited. The four master tropes, so named by Vico and solidified by Burke, are now put into question and are



effectively destabilized from their venerated pedestal. If hyperbole is indeed a trope-producing trope and the most effective way to express the inexpressible, then it is not simply the four master tropes that need theoretical expansion but a new conceptualization of how tropes operate within discourse through hyperbole. Judging how these tropes work in tandem must also be re-examined.

Re-conceptualizing hyperbolic metaphor or hyperbolic simile or hyperbolic parody, or satire, or irony are all productive ways hyperbole might be employed within rhetorical theory, which can foster re-interpretations of these tropes and genres. How does a metaphor operate differently from a hyperbolic metaphor? What does it mean that irony might function through hyperbole and produce *vertige de l'hyperbole*, e.g., as Hugo and de Man suggest? In what ways does hyperbole produce and facilitate the use of these tropes and genres? I have already shown how the epideictic and grotesque genres exemplify hyperbole and can be re-interpreted through hyperbole. Certainly, this affects one's understanding of genre criticism and how it might be approached. Our judgments about eloquence, style, *kairos*, and decorum must also be re-configured.

Understanding Zizek's or Derrida's oeuvres as using a hyperbolic style and *kairotic* speech within a decorum of excess to make their arguments changes the accusations of *kakozelia*, with which they are often lambasted, to praise of intricately woven hyperbolic arguments. That is, they might be praised as adept and skillful hyperbolists who fully embrace hyperbole's functions. Using hyperbole to critique and deconstruct others' hyperboles can shed new light on various "texts" using this excessive style as well as hyperbole itself. Already entrenched within the infinite differing and deferring movement of signification, hyperbole seems an appropriate expression of this

type of writing-in-excess that is already in excess and signifies excess. Always pointing beyond itself, the differing and deferring signification of language requires a surpassing of alleged truth(s) that is the work of hyperbole. How one approaches language itself might be re-considered.

The excessive re-duplication of writing effaces the author/self, and the hoped for but never attained hyperbolic transgression of writing is the process of becoming-as-repetition that embraces and also displaces transgression with transformation as errant hyperbole. The impossibility of transgression is asserted in order to arrive at the possibility of the author/self that can only erupt from the excessive fissures within writing as moving beyond truth and reality itself, and the impossibility of desire doubles back upon itself in order to perpetuate the possibility of the work of writing as a hoped for, even eschatological, vision of what writing-the-self might one day become but never is.

Rhetorical critics might even re-explore criticism, as performance, itself as a hyperbolic endeavor. For example, Guerlac notes, "If exaggeration was a term of criticism, criticism is transvalued into praise through exaggeration of the critical term."<sup>2</sup> Or, as Mileur says, "The work is a hyperbole, the intersection of other hyperboles, and the subject is, insofar as he can be written about at all, another hyperbole."<sup>3</sup> Viewing a critical term as hyperbolic and even approaching a piece of criticism itself as a hyperbole, one might consider this critical work as a flow of *verba* that stretches discursive limits and leads one towards the re-presentation of a *res*; or, as an impossible lie errantly wandering towards other truth(s). In particular, Guerlac's statement implies that criticism

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<sup>2</sup> Guerlac, *The Impersonal Sublime*, 64.

<sup>3</sup> Mileur, *The Critical Romance*, 86.

might even use hyperbole in epideictic form whereby it references the shared values or terms of criticism, it re-formulates them, and offers a new literary reality as an invented great through the work of *auxesis* within a decorum of excess. As de Man says, “The work must become a project aimed toward an unreachable goal,”<sup>4</sup> and this unreachable goal is the invented great that promises attainment while at the same time defers its presence in endless repetition.

The analysis and critical term(s) of the critic are then judged to be valid or invalid based on the coherence of the argument, the employment of the term(s), and the critic’s epideictic *ethos*. In this view, offering a profusion of praise or exaggeration of the critical term, “text,” the critic’s conclusions, or even the critic’s brilliance itself in order to reveal a unique insight at an appropriate and opportune moment is the purpose of criticism. Often, impossible uses and disproportionate, daring heights are imbued upon the critical term so that the criticism itself, the critical position maintained, may arrive at other possible conclusions. The act of criticism itself may be judged to be a significant, though unrealized, expression of hyperbole.

## RHETORIC AND RELIGION

The second major implication hyperbole offers rhetorical studies is related to the relationship between rhetoric and religion. The entire rhetorical approach to and connection with religion and theology becomes more complicated through the lens of hyperbole. If theologians are adept hyperbolists, then rhetoricians can both learn from and explicate their theoretical constructs of *remedia* and *affectus* in inventive new ways.

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<sup>4</sup> De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 43.

Viewing apologetics or heresies from a hyperbolic perspective, even placing them into the same category of hyperbolic discourse, is certainly an imaginative way to (re)examine these divergent theological positions. Exploring cataphatic and apophatic rhetoric through hyperbole is another worthwhile endeavor since *via positiva* and *via negativa* are replete with disorienting hyperbolic lies and impossibilities and flourish within a decorum of excess.

Viewing specific rhetorical theologians such as Tertullian, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Erasmus, and even Luther and Calvin through the lens of hyperbole significantly alters our presuppositions about these theologians as well as how their theologies are constructed and interpreted. A staunch dialectical Scholastic, Aquinas's use of hyperbole can reveal the necessity of hyperbole for rhetorical theological discourse. Or, re-interpreting Augustine's blending of rhetoric and Christianity through the lens of embodied hyperbole can affect the perceptions of his inward psychological turn and his theory of preaching within a decorum of excess.

A radical theo-philosophical re-interpretation of Jonathan Edwards is currently underway, and a new apprehension of hyperbole certainly casts the significant disconnect between his theology and many of his sermons in new light. Indeed, approaching "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" from a hyperbolic perspective completely modifies our typical interpretations of that sermon. As Edwards was fascinated with the psychology of "enthusiasms," perhaps this sermon offers a heuristic through the impossible lie of hyperbole in order to move towards other possible truths about Christianity or the psychology of the Awakening since this sermon is highly divergent from his theology and philosophy. One could even approach his sermon from the

standpoint of an Augustinian psychology within a decorum of excess of worship through preaching. Are not the sermons and revivals of George Whitefield, which induced psychological and physical “enthusiasms,” also hyperbolically employed? Perhaps all of the Awakenings erupted out of a decorum of religious excess where exaggerated falsehoods were preached on the side of re-conceptualizing given truth(s).

From Anselm’s ontological argument for the existence of God to current Fundamentalist rhetoric, political rhetoric, and theoretical theo-philosophical discourse, hyperbole and its decorum of excess re-maps the theoretical field of rhetoric and religion. Even apocalyptic discourse, with its literally figural and figurally literal expressions, that is already widely explored in the field of rhetoric might be re-interpreted through hyperbole since this trope has a pension to exacerbate the tension between the literal and the figural, which is always a difficulty when examining apocalyptic rhetoric.

Hyperbole, theology, and religion all reveal the interesting interaction between the literal and the figural. Rhetorico-theologically, one might conceive of beliefs as literal manifestations of metaphysical absoluteness and faith as a figural disruption of onto-theological claims. Literal statements of belief may be rescued by *remedia*, but if not, theological work ceases at belief before it can move into figural faith statements of more theoretical complexity. Beyond theology, but just as “religious,” beliefs in political ideologies can be just as powerful. Nationalism is one such ideology that holds significant sway over humanity, and free market, neo-conservative ideology is a form of corporate, economic power relying almost entirely on the literal. Literally believing in and unquestioning state power is undoubtedly a failed hyperbole. Or is it?

Beliefs certainly offer lies on side of someone's truth, and they are impossible conceptions that lead to other possible ways of conceiving meaning and being in the world. These possibilities may be disastrous, but they are possibilities nonetheless. Exaggerated speeches, propaganda, treatises, and pamphlets buttress these ideologies. However, as I argued in chapter three, literal belief statements are often qualified with *remedia* as "but" statements so they do not fail as hyperboles, and this is still true. Propaganda, for example, offers no "but" statements. It reinforces the "is" of the literal through the figural, rather than disrupting this "is" and emphasizing the fluidity of figural hermeneutic truth(s) through the literal lie of hyperbole and, therefore, cannot be a hyperbole. A movement away from the figural is a movement away from hyperbole since hyperbole can only exist in a figural realm where its (il)logic of extremity can be effectively employed. Literalism leads to absolutism and not hyperbole. To pursue the literal is to deny hyperbole, and when hyperbole is denied or mis-apprehended, epistemological and ontological imagination is stifled.

The mythological/theological imagination, for example, becomes empty and meaningless when bereft of hyperbole and the figural because within mythic thought everything is meaningfully figural and governed by the mediation of oppositions, e.g., Mircea Eliade's "hierophany" as a "mysterious act" manifesting something of a different order and reality.<sup>5</sup> This movement through impossibility towards transformational possibilities simply cannot occur in the realm of the literal. As Roland Barthes suggests, "Myth is speech justified *in excess*,"<sup>6</sup> which "aims at an ultra-signification...and stretches

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<sup>5</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1959), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 130.

to the limit the link between signifier and signified.”<sup>7</sup> For Barthes, language itself is a mythological system of signification, and this system is justified in/by excess itself.

The literal does not stretch the limit between the signifier and signified but attempts to make a direct connection between a signifier and a particular signified. When the hyperbolic movement of disrupting this connection fails, then so do new imaginative possibilities and the act of “perpetual metamorphosis.”<sup>8</sup> For many, it is perhaps easier to simply proceed along the path of the normative and the familiar rather than struggle with the difficulty of remembering that the literal is the figural. When faced with destabilizing order and conventions, these movements may simply be too much for hyperbole to disrupt.

Examining the mythological/theological imagination from the perspective of hyperbole, a rhetorical theorist or critic might take up questions of the self, subjectivity, desire, and transgression through a discussion of asceticism. Rhetorico-theologically, asceticism can be viewed as the theological and rhetorical hyperbolic, hagiographic reinscribing of the self, i.e., a writing of the self in excess as both lack and abundance, and the self is the exigence of subjectivity guided by the curve of hyperbole that is the path of desire. The subject is a literal embodiment of hyperbole that is the figural enactment of desire within a decorum of bodily and psychological excess, i.e., a theological or a/theological re-orientation. The self becomes a spatio-temporal, phenomenological grid where intense *pathos* moves one psychologically towards epistemological and ontological transformation.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>8</sup> Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, 77.

Asceticism is not withdrawal from the world but a hyperbolic engagement with a normative, reified perspective with which one is dissatisfied. It is *kairotic* speech and a disorienting transforming of one's subjectivity and symbolic universe through a hyperbolic mode of existence. Thus, the ascetic can be viewed as a grotesque hyperbolic self-in-transition through transgression leading errantly towards an alternate way of life – a self watching itself transition towards an Other self. This mode of existence is guided by desire-as-hyperbole, and its heterological intent is nothing less than absolute transgression, paradox, and contradictory hybridity. Indeed, what I am offering in this paradoxical ascetic “work” as a hyperbolic expression of transgressive subjectivity traversing the errant path of desire is a hyperbole about hyperbole in epideictic, as well as grotesque, form.



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