Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 7 (1994)

Artikel: Repetition and emphasis in rhetoric : theory and practice
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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99900

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Repetition and Emphasis in Rhetoric: Theory and Practice

Brian Vickers

"What I tell you three times is true."
Alice in Wonderland

To begin with a statement of principle, I take language to be a human resource of multiple application. It is the instrument by which we come to know the world, the people around us, ourselves. As the tool of interpersonal communication language makes society possible, fulfils all its needs, peaceful and violent, generous and exploitative, educative, erotic, entertaining . . . . Language is concerned with much more than transmitting information. It expresses our identity as social beings, permits and monitors our relationship to other social beings, fulfils irreducibly personal, subject-generated and subject-orientated goals. Since speech, and writing, are social acts, they serve a range of purposes that need to be understood in terms of intention, desire, involvement, the living out of roles. The convergence of linguistics and the philosophy of language in the last forty years or so – speech-act theory, pragmatics, sociolinguistics – has made us more than ever conscious of the limitations of all approaches to language as a self-contained system, detached from considerations of user, context, and purpose.

I

Rhetoric falls naturally into this new perspective. Conceived as the art of persuasion, or, in Aristotle's more meticulous formulation, as the "faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (*Rhetoric*, 1355b 27), it is essentially concerned with face-to-face human

contact. Originally, in the largely oral culture of ancient Greece, every qualified citizen who took part in politics or legal disputes did so in his own person, not via some elected or paid intermediary (as was already the case in Rome). In the 2,300 years since then rhetoric has developed into a complex system of communication, which has had enormous influence on other arts and sciences (painting, sculpture, architecture, music, opera, economics, physics, to name a few).[1] Yet its whole rationale remains what it always has been, an art embodying a systematization of nature. According to many theorists, early and late, rhetoric simply observed common speech practices, verbal formulations actually used by people who were excited, indignant, or angry with each other; who were engaged in placating, requesting, congratulating, or whatever other speech act concerned. Rhetoric observed and codified those practices in a form to which it then attached a name. The fullest count lists some 30 tropes and over 200 figures. (A trope "turns" the meaning or application of a word in some unexpected direction, as in metaphor, irony, allegory. A figure concerns not the meaning but the shape or sound of a word, and its repetition.) The names involved are occasionally a source of difficulty to modern students, but the enormous rise of technical terms in our own age offers just as much (or as little) difficulty: if you can say "Moog synthesizer" or "floppy disk drive" you can say *cacosyntheton*; we regularly use words like dialysis, diastole, hyperbola, parabola – all terms originally from rhetoric – when talking about medicine or geometry.

That the classification of the tropes and figures grew to an excess, or "taxonomania," can be admitted, and it is true that such technicalities can be cumbersome; but the fact remains that rhetoric originated in the observation and codification of real-life speech acts. We all wish to convince the person we are talking to of the truth or credibility of what we say, and we readily use emphasis, exaggeration, or resort to metaphor, simile, hyperbole. Quintilian, summarizing this argument, wrote that

> It was, then, nature that created speech, and observation that originated the art of speaking. Just as men discovered the art of medicine by observing that some things were healthy and some the reverse, so they observed that some things

[1] For the wider influence of rhetoric see Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric*, especially ch. 7, "Rhetoric and the Sister Arts" (304-374), and "Epilogue: the Future of Rhetoric" (453-479).

> were useful and some useless in speaking, and noted them for imitation or avoidance, while they added certain other precepts according as their nature suggested. These observations were confirmed by experience and each man proceeded to teach what he knew. (3.2.3)

Aristotle declared rhetoric to be the counterpart of dialectic, since

> Both are concerned with such things as come, more or less, within the general ken of all men and belong to no definite science. Accordingly all men make use . . . of both; for to a certain extent all men attempt to discuss statements and to maintain them, to defend themselves and to attack others. Ordinary people do this either at random or through practice and from acquired habit. (1354a 1-7)

It is perfectly common in normal life for people to become confused, bringing out what they want to say in the wrong order: rhetoricians classified various types of syntactic disorder (*hysteron proteron*, or "the cart before the horse," *hyperbaton*, *cacosyntheton*). In anger or pain human beings will cry out, appeal to some stander-by, or to God, to bear witness to their sufferings: this reaction came to be known as *apostrophe*, or *exclamatio*. In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle observed that *hyperboles*

> are for young men to use; they show vehemence of character; and this is why angry people use them more than other people. (1413a 28ff.)

In the *Poetics* he advised the tragedian to render the conflict in the play's action in "patterns [of speech]" also. In Aristotle's words, "those who are in the grip of the emotions are most persuasive because they speak to the same natural tendencies in us, and it is the character who rages or expresses dejection in the most natural way who stirs us to anger or dejection" (1455a 29-33). That passage typifies the two-way movement of rhetoric, from imitation to emulation (or better, "inflammation"). A proper *mimesis* of emotion in real life will produce the same emotion in the listeners or spectators, or at any rate help them to appreciate that a disturbance in the personality of a represented character can be conveyed through the dislocation of the normal conventions of syntax.

The legitimacy of the orator or writer using tropes and figures, then, was grounded on an argument from life, and human nature. Accordingly, Cicero advised the orator using the plain style to be sparing with verbal ornament, with the exception of metaphor, which he may "employ more

frequently because it is of the commonest occurrence in the language of townsman and rustic alike. The rustics, for example, say that the vines are 'bejewelled' [with buds], the fields 'thirsty,' the crops 'happy,' the grain 'luxuriant'" (*Orator* 24.81). Quintilian similarly described metaphor as "so natural a turn of speech that it is often employed unconsciously or by uneducated persons" (8.6.4), and noted that "allegory is often used by men of little ability and in the conversation of everyday life" (8.6.51), as are *emphasis* (8.3.86), and even *synecdoche* (8.6.21). The motives behind such uses are revealed in his comment on *hyperbole*, that it is a resource "employed even by peasants and uneducated persons, for the good reason that everybody has an innate passion for exaggeration or attenuation of actual facts, and no one is ever contented with the simple truth" (8.6.75). As M. L. Clarke (who dismisses the figures as "tedious and unprofitable") aptly observed, "everyday speech does not consist in the main of plain, straightforward, unimpassioned speech," and Roman orators were aware that the expressive devices they used "had their roots in popular speech" (39-40). The crucial point, which Quintilian never tired of repeating, was that in every branch of rhetoric it is nature that gives the rules: "the mind is always readiest to accept what it recognizes to be true to nature" (8.3.71).

The revival of rhetoric in the European Renaissance, and its enthusiastic adoption in all the vernaculars, meant that every age and clime rediscovered for itself the fundamental truths about the art. The goal of rhetoric was persuasion, to convince the hearers of the validity of the speaker's case, even – or especially – if this meant them changing their minds. As Francis Bacon defined it, "the duty and office of rhetoric is to apply reason to imagination for the better moving of the will" (Vol. 3, 409). Connected to the imagination were the passions, and it was universally understood that the orator's greatest chance of securing conviction was in working on the passions. In La Rochefoucauld's pregnant maxim, "les passions sont les seuls orateurs qui persuadent toujours" (quoted in France 164). Rhetorical theory sometimes invented a historical or mythical rationale to account for rhetoric's emotional effect. As Dryden suggested in his *Apology for Heroic Poetry and Poetic License* (1677), the first poets showed how to raise the passions by drawing directly from life, before conventions were formalized: "from hence have sprung the tropes and figures for which they wanted a name who first practised them, and succeeded in them." Hence "those things which delight all ages must have been an imitation of nature," and "therefore is rhetoric made an art;

therefore the names of so many tropes and figures were invented: because it was observed they had such an effect upon the audience" (Vol. 1, 200-201). Dryden outlines the occasions on which the "bolder" or more forceful figures may be used – but not flaunted – in order to

> work their effect upon the mind without discovering [revealing] the art which caused it. And therefore they are principally to be used in passion; when we speak more warmly, and with more precipitation, than at other times: for then, *si vis me flere, dolendum est primum ipsi tibi*; the poet must put on the passion he endeavours to represent: a man in such an occasion is not cool enough, either to reason rightly, or to talk calmly. Aggravations are then in their proper places; interrogations, exclamations, hyperbata, or a disordered connection of discourse, are graceful there because they are natural. (Vol. 1, 203)

With that quotation from Horace's *Ars poetica* ("if you wish me to grieve you must first grieve yourself") Dryden reveals the continuity of a tradition extending back to Aristotle two thousand years before him: language reveals the inner man, especially when in the grip of emotions.

The link between rhetoric and real life in the representation of feeling remained unquestioned until the 1800s at least. Writing in 1730, Du Marsais began his *Traité des Tropes* by disagreeing with the traditional definition of rhetorical figures as forms of speech deviating from the norm: "D'ailleurs, bien loin que les figures soient des manières de parler éloignées de celles qui sont naturelles et ordinaires, il n'y a rien de si naturel, de si ordinaire et de si commun que les figures dans le langage des hommes." He quotes Abbé de Bretteville's *Eloquence de la chaire et du barreau* (1689), which states that the figures are both easy and natural: "'J'ai pris souvent plaisir,' dit-il, 'à entendre des paysans s'entretenir avec des figures de discours si variées, si vives, si éloignées du vulgaire, que j'avais honte d'avoir pendant si longtemps étudié l'éloquence, puisque je voyais en eux une certaine rhétorique de nature beaucoup plus persuasive et plus éloquente que toutes nos rhétoriques artificielles'." Du Marsais' comment is an elaboration of this:

> En effet, je suis persuadé qu'il se fait plus de figures un seul jour de marché à la halle, qu'il ne s'en fait en plusieurs jours d'assemblées académiques. Ainsi, bien loin que les figures s'éloignent du langage ordinaire des hommes, ce serait au contraire les façons de parler sans figures, qui s'en éloigneraient, s'il était possible de faire un discours où il n'y eût que des expressions non figurées. (8)

Thus Du Marsais turns the old theory round: it would be more unnatural to do without figures.

In the English eighteenth century the same reciprocal link between rhetoric and natural feelings was accepted by theorists of rhetoric – and now, of poetry.[2] In his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783) Hugh Blair could simply remark: "Let nature and passion always speak their own language, and they will suggest figures in abundance" (quoted in Stone 167, note 22). Robert Lowth accounted for the "great force and efficacy" of rhetorical figures on the grounds that "they in some degree imitate or represent the present habit and state of the soul" (quoted in Stone 66). In the second half of the eighteenth century, as Peter Stone's authoritative survey has shown, it is still "widely held that figurative language occurs spontaneously to the mind in a state of emotion" (62). So Joseph Priestley writes in 1777:

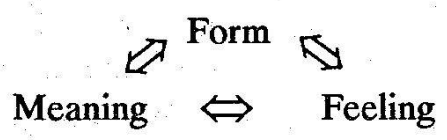
> Figurative speech . . . is indicative of a person's real feelings and state of mind, not by means of the words it consists of, considered as signs of separate ideas . . . but as circumstances naturally attending those feelings which compose any state of mind. Those figurative expressions, therefore, are scarcely considered and attended to as words, but are viewed in the same light as attitudes, gestures, and looks, which are infinitely more expressive of sentiments and feelings than words can possibly be. (quoted in Stone 66)

II

Given that the function of rhetorical figures is to represent, and so arouse the passions, a key resource in this process is repetition. As rhetoric followed that shift in Greco-Roman society from an oral to an increasingly written culture, rhetoric-books became more conscious of style, and the related issue of decorum, the need to integrate the part to the whole. Such considerations are of course much more relevant when reading a written speech or other text than when just hearing it. This is the period, also, in which many of the extant orations were actually written to be read, not

[2] See the admirable study by Peter W. K. Stone, *The Art of Poetry 1750-1820: Theories of Poetic Composition and Style in the late Neo-Classic and early Romantic Periods*.

delivered. A text reflecting these changes is the manual *On Style* by Demetrius (ca. 270 BC), who distinguishes four styles (the plain, the grand, the elegant, and the forceful), and says that we "must assign to each style the figures that are appropriate to it" (quoted in Grube 76). Repetition is one of the most useful devices, Demetrius informs his readers, citing a speech by Ctesisas, where it gives both vividness and a "passionate tone" (quoted in Grube 109-110). Demetrius in fact distinguishes a whole category of "forceful figures," including *anaphora* (repeating a word at the beginning of subsequent clauses), *anadiplosis* (repeating a word from the end of one clause to the beginning of the next), and *gradatio* or *climax* (Greek for "ladder"), where *anadiplosis* is continued over several interlinked clauses. Demetrius is not categorical in defining the states of emotion that can be produced through syntax and word-repetition, for he knows that a variety of effects is possible from one figure. A modern editor has noted with some puzzlement that Demetrius gives three separate examples of the figure *anaphora* (or initial repetition) and attributes three quite different results to them. The first (borrowed in fact from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, 1413b 33-1414a 7) is from the famous catalogue of ships in the *Iliad* (2.671-4), where by repeating the name Nireus at the beginning of three consecutive lines Homer makes the act of leading only three ships to Troy (Nireus is never heard of again) seem impressive – more so perhaps than it was (Grube 76). Secondly, a poem by Sappho to the evening star opens with a list of its influences: "all things you bring; you bring the sheep, you bring the goat, you bring the child to its mother," the repetition being said to produce an effect of charm (Grube 95). The charm lies in the meaning, of course, but the echoing structure certainly underlines it. The last example is from the speech of Aeschines against Demosthenes, an impassioned accusatory repetition (Grube 121) which communicates great intensity. For G. M. A. Grube "the fact that these effects are so different may raise doubts as to the soundness of Demetrius' basic categories" (27), but it is a sign, rather, of Demetrius' recognition of what I would call the polysemous nature of rhetorical figures. That is, in considering any figure we must attend to a three-way relationship:



The form is fixed, in the rhetoricians' classification of verbal devices – the breaking-off of a sentence is always the same thing, formally – but both meaning and feeling are infinitely flexible, as resourceful in expressive potential as language itself. The poly-functional nature of the figures is attested to by many rhetoricians.

Roman rhetoric, which took so much from the Greeks, was also aware of the emotional function of rhetorical figures, and the value of repetition. The anonymous author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (ca. 85 BC) sums up the difference between *colon*, the brief clause which needs another to complete the sense, and *articulus* (or *brachylogia*), where the discourse is cut up by the force of expression (in his example: "You have destroyed your enemies by jealousy, injuries, influence, perfidy"):

> the former moves upon its object more slowly and less often, the latter strikes more quickly and frequently. Accordingly in the first figure it seems that the arm draws back and the hand whirls about to bring the sword to the adversary's body, while in the second his body is as it were pierced with quick and repeated thrusts. (4.19.26)

That image is repeated with variation in describing *conduplicatio* (or *ploke*), "the repetition of one or more words for the purpose of Amplification or Appeal to Pity": "The reiteration of the same word makes a deep impression upon the hearer and inflicts a major wound upon the opposition – as if a weapon should repeatedly pierce the same part of the body" (4.28.38). Though a simple explanation, it does bring out the combative effect of the figure.

Repetition is not merely a case of repeating words as semantic units without variation. The author of *Ad Herennium* makes an acute comment on a figure which became very popular with Renaissance writers, *correctio* (*epanorthosis*), which "retracts what has been said and replaces it with what seems more suitable" (as in the famous instance from Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*: "O eyes – no eyes, but fountains fraught with tears"), writing that "This figure makes an impression upon the hearer, for the idea when expressed by an ordinary word seems rather feebly stated, but after the speaker's own amendment it is made more striking by means of the more appropriate expression" (4.26.36). The effect of the figure, we might put it, is to make the reader or listener re-experience through the speaker's own mental – also emotional, and ethical – discovery that the first word

chosen wasn't really appropriate. Samuel Beckett makes repeated, but increasingly negative use of this effect, as we will see.

In a passage quoted above, Priestley equated rhetorical figures with "attitudes, gestures, and looks," continuing an ancient tradition of seeing the figures in three-dimensional physical terms, embodying human emotion. Quintilian's extensive discussion of figures takes over the Greek term *schemata*, "postures" or "attitudes," an etymology that Cicero had emphasized (*Brutus* 17.69; 79.275), describing them as "attitudes, or I might say gestures of language" (9.1.13). The great justification of figural language is, as ever, its emotional power:

> Further, there is no more effective method of exciting the emotions than an apt use of figures. For if the expression of brow, eyes and hands has a powerful effect in stirring the passions, how much more effective must be the aspect of our style itself when composed to produce the result at which we aim? (9.1.21)

Repetition, he begins his discussion, is to be used "to fix one point in the minds of the audience" (9.2.4), that being its elemental function. Quintilian then divides the figures of speech into four types, one containing "modes of iteration", such as *anaphora*, which repeats the same word at the beginning of successive clauses, sentences, or lines of poetry, and is used to produce "force and emphasis" (9.3.30). In this category also come *ploke*, repeating a word with other words intervening, *epizeuxis*, repeating a word with no others intervening, and *polyptoton*, repeating a word while varying its form. The origin of these figures of repetition, he writes, "is one and the same, namely that they make our utterances more vigorous and emphatic and produce an impression of vehemence such as might spring from repeated outbursts of emotion" (9.3.50, 54). Quintilian's awareness of the polysemous or multi-functional nature of rhetorical devices applies equally to the class of figures which involve repetition, such as the doubling of words in *epizeuxis*, either "with a view to amplification, as in 'I have slain, I have slain, not Spurius Maelius' (where the first *I have slain* states what has been done, while the second emphasizes it), or to excite pity, as in 'Ah! Corydon, Corydon!'" (Virgil, *Eclogues* 2.69). Yet, Quintilian notes, "the same figure may also sometimes be employed ironically, with a view to disparagement" (9.3.28-29).

As rhetoric spread through Europe, from the Middle Ages to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the importance of repetition as a

means of expressing passion was widely recognized. In his *Art de parler* (1675) Bernard Lamy described repetition as "une figure fort ordinaire dans le discours de ceux qui parlent avec chaleur" (quoted in France 93-94). Omer Talon, associate of Ramus, said that the figures of repetition affect the soul, while Sainct-Fleur, writing in 1569, recommended that *epizeuxis* (repeating a word with no other words intervening: "Howl, howl, howl, howl, howl") should be used "pour produire un effet de véhémence" (quoted in Gordon 109-110). The German Ramist Johann Heinrich Alstedt wrote in his *Encyclopaedia* (1630) that the figures of repetition should be used "in affectu vehementioris amoris, admirationis, odii, irae, doloris" (quoted in Dyck 81-84). Meyfart's *Teutsche Rhetorica* (1634) described *epizeuxis* as "eine heffige und gewaltige Figur," and likened *anadiplosis* to a sword striking twice on the same place (quoted in Dyck 85-86).

The functional nature of the rhetorical figures was particularly well appreciated in Renaissance England, where writers of rhetoric books produced several thoughtful discussions of the proper ways of using repetition. Henry Peacham published his compilation *The Garden of Eloquence* first in 1577, and then with extensive revisions in 1593. In 1577 he had described the effect of *anaphora* in the rather vague terms used in the *Ad Herennium*: "when with much comelynesse one word is repeated in diuers clauses. . ." (Sig.Hiiii^{v}). But in 1593 he brings out its function: "The use hereof is chiefly to repeate a word of importance and effectual signification," adding the cautions that the figure must not be used too often, nor tautologically, and that writers should ensure "that the word which is least worthie or most weake be not taken to make the repetition, for that were very absurd" (41-42). As an example of the correct use of *anaphora* he quotes Psalm 29: "The Lord sitteth above the water floods. The Lord remaineth a King for ever. The Lord shall give strength unto his people. The Lord shall give his people the blessing of Peace."

In many of these figures of repetition Peacham insists that the writer fit sound and structure to sense, centring the figure around "a word of importance" in the text. For the figure *epistrophe*, "which endeth diverse members or clauses still with one and the same word," he adds an awareness of the audience and the persuasive intent of rhetoric reminiscent of Quintilian: "The use of this figure . . . it serveth to leave a word of importance in the end of a sentence, that it may the longer hold the sound in the mind of the hearer" (43). Again, for *diaphora* (or *ploke*), the

repetition of a word, Peacham urges that it should serve "both to the pleasure of the eare and sense of the mind," and that the word repeated be the most meaningful one (45). *Epanalepsis*, he maintains, should place "a word of importance in the beginning of a sentence to be considered, and in the end to be remembered" (46). *Paragmenon* – his name for *polyptoton* – ("a figure which of the word going before deriveth the word following") is used "to delight the eare by the derived sound, and to move the mind with a consideration of the nigh affinitie and concord of the matter." His example is St. Paul's account of the relationship between Adam and Christ (1 Cor. 15:45): "The first man was of the earth earthly, the second man was the Lord from Heaven heavenly" (55).

Sir Philip Sidney, in his *Apology for Poetry* (ca. 1582), a work representative of the general interpenetration between poetics and rhetoric throughout the period 1400 to 1750 (see Vickers "Rhetoric and Poetics"), is also sensitive to the properly functional use of rhetorical figures. He attacks the misuse of repetition, often made mechanically and without regard to context, illustrating his point by reference to the famous opening of Cicero's first speech *In Catilinam*:

> Tully, when he was to drive out Catiline, as it were with a thunderbolt of eloquence, often used that figure of repetition, *Vivit. Vivit? Imo vero etiam in senatum venit, & c.* Indeed, inflamed with a well-grounded rage, he would have his words (as it were) double out of his mouth, and so do that artificially which we see men do in choler naturally. And we, having noted the grace of those words, hale them in sometime to a familiar epistle, when it were too much collar to be choleric. (138)

By his scornful concluding *paronomasia*, which juxtaposes words having a similar sound but different meaning ("collar . . . choleric"), as by his allusion to the figure *conduplicatio* in "double out of his mouth" (*ploke* is called by Puttenham "the doubler"), Sidney revives the technique so memorably used by Longinus of describing a rhetorical figure by imitating its effect. And, like his predecessors in classical antiquity, he connects rhetoric to its natural sources in human emotion: "so do that artificially [skilfully] which we see men do in choler naturally." In an earlier passage in the *Apology*, arguing that every art "delivered to mankind . . . hath the works of Nature for his principal object," Sidney (perhaps echoing Aristotle) concisely indicated the proper relationship between nature and art: "the rhetorician and logician, considering what in Nature will soonest

prove and persuade, thereon give artificial rules", that is – in no pejorative sense – rules made by art (99-100).

Sidney, as poet and writer of a major prose romance, was taken as the acknowledged model of expressive language in a work marked by great psychological penetration, *Directions for Speech and Style* (ca. 1599) by John Hoskins, who in this might be called the English Longinus. Hoskins derives much of his doctrine from that popular continental manual, the *Epitome troporum ac Schematum* (1541) of Joannes Susenbrotus, and takes all his illustrations from Sidney's *Arcadia*, adding his own intelligent observations. So in discussing figures of repetition he makes the perceptive suggestion that "as no man is sick in thought upon one thing but for some vehemency or distress, so in speech there is no repetition without importance" (12). This psychological justification for a figure, relating it to an obsessive emotional state, is quite in the tradition of Demetrius and Longinus. Elsewhere Hoskins combines artistic and more utilitarian ends, as did Quintilian and Peacham (105) before him: through the figure *anaphora* a writer or orator "beats upon one thing to cause the quicker feeling in the audience, and to awake a sleepy or dull person" (13). Like Quintilian, Hoskins insists on figures being tied to sense and structure: "let discretion [i.e., decorum] be the greatest and general figure of figures" (15); and again, the use of a figure should "come from some choice and not from barrenness" (17). He underlines the needs of the artistic moment: "In these two sorts of amplifying you may insert all figures as *the passion of the matter shall serve*" (21; my italics), and he has a good sense of the varying effects possible from any one device. So *polyptoton* "is a good figure, and may be used *with or without passion*" (17; my italics).

Hoskins was one of the sources of *The Mysterie of Rhetorique Unvail'd* (1657), by John Smith, which had ten editions by 1721. This ongoing tradition is still aware of the functionality of rhetorical figures in representing, and so arousing the emotions. In *ploke*, for instance, "a word is by way of Emphasis so repeated that it denotes not only the thing signified, but the quality of the thing" (109), the emotions associated with it. *Ecphonesis* (or *exclamatio*) "is a pathetical figure, whereby as the Orator or speaker expresses the vehement affection and passion of his own mind, so he also excites and stirs up the minds and affections of those to whom he speaks" (140). Even *pleonasmus*, which other writers or periods would see as a vice of style, is described in the affect-oriented seventeenth century as "a figure whereby some superfluous word is added in a sentence

to signifie emphatically the vehemency and earnestnesse of the speaker, and the certainty of the matter spoken." Having quoted several biblical instances of this figure, Smith insists that "these Pleonastical inculcations are not vain, but serve to work things the better upon our hard hearts" (186-187).

The last rhetorician I shall cite is George Puttenham, whose book *The Arte of English Poesie* (printed 1589, but written anything up to twenty years earlier) is the most eloquent fusion of rhetoric and poetics in the English Renaissance. Puttenham declares rhetoric to be essential to poetry, as he explains in the first chapter of the third book, "Of Ornament": "the chief prayse and cunning of our Poet is in the discreet using of his figures . . . with a delectable varietie, by all measure and just proportion, and in places most aptly to be bestowed" (138): decorum must rule. All speakers, but especially poets, must strive to speak "cunningly and eloquently, which can not be without the use of figures" (138-139). But each figure must create an organic relation between form, content, and feeling, a point which Puttenham brings out in his caustic comment on a poet guilty of such a clumsy repetition as

> "To love him and love him, as sinners should doo." These repetitions be not figurative but phantastical, *for a figure is ever used to a purpose, either of beautie or of efficacie*: and these last recited be to no purpose, for neither can ye say that it urges affection [passion], nor that it beautifieth or enforceth the sence, nor hath any other subtilitie in it, and therefore is a very foolish impertinency of speech, and not a figure. (202; my italics)

III

In the rhetorical theory of the figures the main associations of repetition are with emphasis, emotional intensity. But such theory, however detailed, can never be completely descriptive of rhetorical practice. The creative energies of thousands of writers were nourished on rhetoric, but not limited by it. They were free to invent within given guidelines, and to extend them. Quintilian observed that the repetition of a word or name could also be used for disparaging effects. Everyone will recall Shakespeare's Antony, repeatedly describing the assassins of Julius Caesar as "honourable men," until that epithet takes on a distinctly ironic tone, *ironia* being when you say one thing but mean the opposite. As that

example confirms, repetition of a word or phrase, if done properly, changes the listener: he is not the same person afterwards. Repetition can be emotionally overwhelming, like a series of body blows. But it also changes not just the person but the words themselves. Repetition can induce a sustained scrutiny of a word or idea, often for exegetical or hermeneutical purposes. It is one of the techniques often used by Lancelot Andrewes in his sermons, closely focussing on a word from the biblical text around which the sermon is constructed. In T. S. Eliot's famous description, Andrewes "takes a word and derives the world from it; squeezing and squeezing the word until it yields a full juice of meaning which we should never have supposed any word to possess" (347-348). As Andrewes concluded one of these passages of controlled exegesis (in the famous sermon preached on Christmas Day 1622, which provided the inspiration for Eliot's *The Journey of the Magi*), on the word *venimus* in the biblical text, "we have seene His starre in the East, and are come to worship him": "All considered, there is more in *Venimus* than shewes at the first sight" (110).

It seems safe to say that no theory could ever embrace all the types of repetition used in rhetoric, in literary or in other texts. By way of illustration of the great range of possible effects, I should like to take three contrasting examples: a speech from *Richard III* (ca. 1593); the opening of Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853); and the opening of Samuel Beckett's novel *The Unnamable* (French, 1952; tr. Beckett, 1959).[3]

In my first example Queen Margaret, widow of King Henry VI, confronts Queen Elizabeth, widow of King Edward IV, mother of the two young Princes, who have just been murdered in the Tower by Richard III's order. Rather than offering any comfort, the vindictive Margaret gloatingly reviews the terrible situation that Elizabeth is now in. In an earlier scene Margaret had cursed Richard, then Duke of Gloucester, and expressed her pity for Elizabeth, calling her "Poor painted queen, vain flourish of my fortune", and prophesying that "the day will come that thou shalt wish for me / To help thee curse this poisonous bunch-back'd toad" (1.3.240). Now, at the climactic scene in Elizabeth's tragedy, she recognizes the truth of Margaret's prophecy:

[3] *Richard III* is quoted from the New Penguin edition by E. A. J. Honigmann; *Bleak House* from the New Oxford Illustrated Dickens edition; *The Unnamable* from Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

O, thou didst prophesy the time would come
80 That I should wish for thee to help me curse
That bottled spider, that foul bunch-backed toad!

QUEEN MARGARET

I called thee then vain flourish of my fortune;
I called thee then poor shadow, painted queen,
The presentation of but what I was,
85 The flattering index of a direful pageant,
One heaved a-high to be hurled down below,
A mother only mocked with two fair babes,
A dream of what thou wast, a garish flag
To be the aim of every dangerous shot;
90 A sign of dignity, a breath, a bubble,
A queen in jest, only to fill the scene.
Where is thy husband now? Where be thy brothers?
Where are thy two sons? Wherein dost thou joy?
Who sues and kneels and says, "God save the Queen"?
95 Where be the bending peers that flattered thee?
Where be the thronging troops that followed thee?
Decline all this, and see what now thou art:
For happy wife, a most distressèd widow;
For joyful mother, one that wails the name;
100 For one being sued to, one that humbly sues;
For queen, a very caitiff crowned with care;
For she that scorned at me, now scorned of me;
For she being feared of all, now fearing one;
For she commanding all, obeyed of none.
105 Thus hath the course of justice wheeled about
And left thee but a very prey to time,
Having no more but thought of what thou wast,
To torture thee the more, being what thou art.
Thou didst usurp my place, and dost thou not
110 Usurp the just proportion of my sorrow?
Now your proud neck bears half my burdened yoke,
From which even here I slip my weary head
And leave the burden of it all on thee.
Farewell, York's wife, and Queen of sad mischance!
115 These English woes shall make me smile in France.

That remarkable speech – more like an operatic aria – is an instance of what I should call situational rhetoric, in that all the figures and tropes are used to define the situation in which a character is placed. Here Elizabeth's situation is marked by what Aristotle termed *metabole*, the change of fortune which characterizes tragedy. Her situation being one of earlier happiness juxtaposed with present misery, the dominant figure, energizing the whole paragraph, is *antithesis*: "One heaved a-high to be hurled down below"; "For happy wife, a most distressèd widow"; "For she commanding all, obeyed of none."

Within that overall juxtaposition of then and now, Shakespeare uses many rhetorical devices that produce symmetrical structure, especially *isocolon* (equal length of clause or phrase), *parison* (equal or corresponding structure of clause, sentence, or verse-line). The combination of these two figures accounts for the high degree of patterning within the speech, its many symmetries: "I called thee then . . . I called thee then" (lines 82-83), "A mother . . ., / A dream . . ., a garish flag . . . / A sign of dignity, a breath, a bubble / A queen in jest . . ." (87-91). That series of nouns in apposition was given more symmetry by the figure *anaphora* repeating the same word ("A") at the beginning of each clause, an effect used with greater intensity for the series of rhetorical questions that follows: "Where is . . . Where be . . . Where are . . .?" (92-96). These questions nail Elizabeth down, confronting her inescapably with her miserable state, for each question has the same answer: "all dead, all gone." This sense of an inescapable change for the worse is made even stronger as Margaret uses the figure *epistrophe*, repeating the same word at the end of two successive lines:

> Where be the bending peers that flattered thee?
> Where be the thronging troops that followed thee?

And again, with even more force, "For she that scorned *at* me, now scorned *of* me," the words italicized showing how such terminal repetition shifts the stress back one beat. As if this were not sufficient confrontation with misery, Margaret now recapitulates the whole sequence, punning on a grammatical term – "Decline all this, and see what now thou art" (as if the aspects of Elizabeth's misery were verbs to be conned by heart) –

> For happy wife, a most distressèd widow;
> For joyful mother, one that wails the name . . .

and so on. Here Margaret accumulates seven antitheses in seven consecutive lines, a virtuoso feat that would be hard to parallel, even in Shakespeare. (Sonnet 66 ranks with it, if less intensely.)

In her parting words Margaret sums up Elizabeth's situation in slightly different terms – the rhetorical technique known as varying – again using the repetition of words and structural patterns to rub in the extent of her present desolation,

> a very prey to time,
> Having no more but thought of what thou wast,
> To torture thee the more, being what thou art.

In this sequence we also see how repetition, setting up a symmetrical structure, can make any additional details seem all the more prominent:

> *Thou didst usurp* my place, and *dost thou not*
> *Usurp* the just proportion of my sorrow?

After "usurp" in the A-clause the predicate followed, stated in two words; the corresponding sequence in the B-clause also has a two-word predicate, but now inserts the additional, all the more bitter-sounding qualifier, "*the just proportion* of my sorrow." Bitterness and gloating characterize Margaret throughout, entirely in tune with the mood of Shakespeare's "Civil War Plays" ("Histories" seems too anaemic a term), which represent a world without pity. Yet perhaps the rhetorical emphases in Margaret's speech arouse a more complex emotion, pity for the sufferer and – pity for the gloater, too.

The animus governing the opening paragraphs of *Bleak House* is directed not towards a person but an institution, the Court of Chancery, that ever-living symbol (I write in the year 1994!) for procrastination and delays that can ruin the lives of people dependent on them. Dickens chooses to begin with a scene-setting that fulfils all the functions that classical rhetoric ascribed to *descriptio*, that it should not only represent some part of the phenomenal world but also take up a distinct evaluative attitude to it. The striking stylistic effect, to start with, is the use of ellipsis to produce a series of snap-shots of England's capital city in winter, a

disjointed, apparently random list of impressions:

Chapter I : In Chancery

> LONDON. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snow-flakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

That series of elliptical noun-phrases, symmetrically placed at the beginning of the sentence – "London . . . Implacable November weather . . . Dogs . . . Horses . . . Foot passengers" – is continued in the second paragraph with a new term which, however, does not yield to others, so extending the series, but – so to speak – sticks, clings, impeding the inventory:

> Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.

In that remarkable sequence of *anaphora*, the word "fog" begins eleven successive sense-units, creating a growing sense of confusion or indecipherability, through the modifying prepositions ("up"/"down"/ "on". . ."on") or verbs ("creeping . . . lying . . . drooping . . . cruelly pinching"). And just when you think the anaphoric sequence is over, the last sentence of the paragraph brings you back to "a nether sky of fog, with fog all around them" (the figure *ploke*).

If this were a Greek or Shakespearian tragedy one might expect the sub-text to be, "nature is angry with mankind." As yet, we do not know where this *descriptio* is ultimately leading, but it next juxtaposes nature and human art, the gas-lights of Victorian London being an ineffectual counter to the natural gloom:

> Gas looming through the fog in divers places in the streets, much as the sun may, from the spongy fields, be seen to loom by husbandman and ploughboy. Most of the shops lighted two hours before their time – as the gas seems to know, for it has a haggard and unwilling look.

That brief *descriptio* marks the transition from outer to inner, from topographical or climatic phenomena to the human institution that we can now see as their counterpart:

> The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest, near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.

Here Dickens sets up three symmetrically structured clauses, using *isocolon*, *parison*, and *anaphora* ("the . . . and the . . . and the . . ."). Then he subjects the semantically crucial epithets to repetition-plus-transformation (the figure *polyptoton*): "raw . . . rawest," "dense . . . densest," "muddy . . . muddiest." And at the end of the paragraph, rhetorically speaking the most important part of a composition, comes the Lord High Chancellor, "at the very heart of the fog" – in his element, we might say. In case we have not grasped the significance of that correlation – natural phenomena hindering sight and movement :: the High Court of Chancery – Dickens repeats it, and by repeating it can tack on at the end, with greater emphasis, his uncompromising denunciation of this source,

not just of delay but of sin:

> Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds, this day, in the sight of heaven and earth.

All definitions, as we know, imply the co-ordinates of both time and space, and so Dickens must at some point move from the generalized existence of the court to its particular functioning "this day." But while doing so he exploits another rhetorical technique, similar to *epanorthosis*. That figure calls back some utterance just made, either to emphasize it or to substitute some more appropriate expression, as in the first paragraph, with London's pedestrians "slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke) . . . ." Dickens uses a variant whereby an expression in the conditional mode ("ought to be") is followed by the present tense ("is"), in order to juxtapose the institution's notional and actual functioning. Now, describing the officials of the Chancery Court, this device recurs in three successive sentences, which are given added internal symmetries by rhetorical figures of repetition, and are additionally linked by their repeated opening "On such an afternoon . . . ." To readers of Shakespeare, of whom Dickens was a great one, there is an ironic echo of the love-scene between Lorenzo and Jessica at Belmont:

> The moon shines bright. In such a night as this,
> When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees
> And they did make no noise, in such a night
> Troilus methinks mounted the Troyan walls . . .
> In such a night
> Did Thisbe fearfully o'ertrip the dew. . . .
> In such a night
> Stood Dido with a willow in her hand. . . . (*Merchant of Venice*, 5.1.1ff)

Now Dickens:

> On such an afternoon, if ever, the Lord High Chancellor ought to be sitting here – as here he is – with a foggy glory round his head, softly fenced in with crimson cloth and curtains, addressed by a large advocate with great whiskers, a little voice, and an interminable brief, and outwardly directing his attention to

> the lantern in the roof, where he can see nothing but fog. On such an afternoon, some score of members of the High Court of Chancery bar ought to be – as here they are – mistily engaged in one of the ten thousand stages of an endless cause, tripping one another up on slippery precedents, groping knee-deep in technicalities, running their goat-hair and horse-hair warded heads against walls of words, and making a pretence of equity with serious faces, as players might. On such an afternoon, the various solicitors in the cause, some two or three of whom have inherited it from their fathers, who made a fortune by it, ought to be – as are they not? – ranged in a line, in a long matted well (but you might look in vain for Truth at the bottom of it), between the registrar's red table and the silk gowns, with bills, cross-bills, answers, rejoinders, injunctions, affidavits, issues, references to masters, masters' reports, mountains of costly nonsense, piled before them.

There are many marvellous comic-ironic details in that passage, of course, independent of its rhetoric (or rather, framed by it), from the Lord High Chancellor crowned by "a foggy glory" – the word also means a halo – being "softly fenced in with crimson cloth and curtains" (echoing the description of smoke in the first paragraph, "a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it"), to the hilarious visual sequence of the lawyers "tripping one another up on slippery precedents, groping knee-deep in technicalities," where the usually abstract terminology or legal clichés suddenly come to life in images of tripping, groping, and colliding, running their wigs, or "goat-hair and horse-hair warded heads against walls of" – luckily nothing more substantial than – "words". That sequence reminds us that Dickens is also a master of the rhetorical tropes, especially metaphor.

But several fine effects in that passage do depend on repetition, especially repetition-with-variation. So the triple sequence of parentheses, modifying a conditional with a present tense, is artfully varied, beginning with the master of ceremonies: "On such an afternoon . . . the Lord High Chancellor *ought to be sitting here – as here he is* . . . ." (In reading, that phrase can either represent surprise – "indeed, here he is!" – or complete predictability – "as you'd expect. . . .") Then on to the lesser actors, the twenty or so barristers who "*ought to be – as here they are* – mistily engaged in one of the ten thousand stages of an endless cause. . . ." (Their lesser status may be symbolized by mist rather than fog.) Finally, those minions of the law who do not get to speak in court but are responsible for preparing all the documents, "the various solicitors in the cause . . . *ought to*

be – as are they not? – ranged in a line. . . ." There the concluding parenthesis is in the interrogative, not declarative form, creating a suddenly sour note, as if to say "what did you expect? Those scavengers are always here." Here the tone becomes more serious, as Dickens caps the list of all their types of documents – "bills, cross-bills, answers, rejoinders" and so forth – with the damning judgment: "mountains of costly nonsense."

Having shifted from outer to inner, from fog-bound London to the Chancery Court where the Chancellor sits, with his "foggy glory round his head," looking out of the roof-window "where he can see nothing but fog," Dickens repeats that transition, to emphasize the common elements that block sight and obstruct movement, in a more threatening tone, with heavy, insistent repetitions (*anaphora*, *parison*, *isocolon*):

> Well may the court be dim, with wasting candles here and there; well may the fog hang heavy in it, as if it would never get out; well may the stained glass windows lose their colour, and admit no light of day into the place; well may the uninitiated from the streets, who peep in through the glass panes in the door, be deterred from entrance by its owlish aspect, and by the drawl languidly echoing to the roof from the padded dais where the Lord High Chancellor looks into the lantern that has no light in it, and where the attendant wigs are all stuck in a fog-bank!

That pithy summing-up highlights the futility involved in the whole process, from the Chancellor looking into an unlit lantern (what is he doing?), to the lawyers, reduced by the trope *synecdoche*, placing part for the whole, to the status of "attendant wigs . . . all stuck in a fog-bank" (what are they doing?). The *descriptio* thus far has fulfilled all its intended functions of describing and evaluating, but Dickens now adds an application, a declarative sequence which moves from the Court to the effects it has on society, baleful effects, made all the more baleful by the anaphoric repetitions of "which" and "so," linking successive clauses:

> This is the Court of Chancery; which has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire; which has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse, and its dead in every churchyard; which has its ruined suitor, with his slipshod heels and threadbare dress, borrowing and begging through the round of every man's acquaintance; which gives to monied might, the means abundantly of wearying out the right; which so exhausts finances, patience, courage, hope; so overthrows the brain and breaks the heart; that there is not an honourable man

> among its practitioners who would not give – who does not often give – the warning, "Suffer any wrong that can be done you, rather than come here!"

That truly frightening denunciation ends with another parenthesis moving from the conditional to the present tense, there being no decent person "*who would not give – who does not often give* – the warning" to put up with any injustice rather than come here for redress, where again we see the effect of a repetition-plus-addition to highlight the word "often."

This closing sentence demonstrates the method Dickens uses throughout, which could be described as incremental, a building up of description and evaluation to be detonated at its crowning point, showing a mastery of the rhetorical climax. By contrast, the narrator of Beckett's novel *The Unnamable* is a genius in anti-climax, one who uses language not to affirm but to undermine, one who asks questions knowing that he cannot aswer them. His first words are:

> Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that.

As that first brief quotation already shows, this whole structure of uncertainty and undecidability is created by using the traditional rhetorical figures of repetition. The first three sentences use *parison* and *epistrophe* (repeating "now") to ask three questions, whose import is promptly negated by the elliptical self-description that follows: "Unquestioning. I, say I." This ingenious *epanalepsis* (the same word beginning and ending a unit) is also a *syllepsis* (using a word having two different meanings), for instead of the first "I" we can also hear "Aye." Whatever the nature of that statement, it too is negated by what follows: "Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that." But questions, in normal discourse, imply the possibility of answers, and hypotheses can be tested. In this curiously solipsistic discourse anything that is affirmed can be instantly denied, or retracted, in a self-cancelling effect. — But of course, since the qualification does not literally erase the initial statement, they are both left standing, side by side, each testifying to the superfluity of the other. Where traditionally *epanorthosis* was used to qualify or emphasize a statement, rather than negate it outright, Beckett's narrator rounds on himself in a series of frontal attacks which subject what he has just said to withering

denial. In order to clarify this process, I shall typographically violate Beckett's imperturbable indeterminacy by putting the negating phrase in italics:

> Keep going, going on, *call that going, call that on*. Can it be that one day, *off it goes on*, that one day I simply stayed in, *in where*, instead of going out, in the old way, out to spend day and night as far away as possible, *it wasn't far. Perhaps that is how it began*. You think you are simply resting, the better to act when the time comes, or for no reason, and you soon find yourself powerless ever to do anything again.

Where the narrator in Dickens uses rhetorical repetition to build up coherent sequences of meaning, detonated at their climax, Beckett's narrator empties out the possibility of meaning what he's just said:

> No matter how it happened. *It, say it, not knowing what*. Perhaps I simply assented at last to an old thing. *But I did nothing*. I seem to speak, *it is not I*, about me, *it is not about me*. These few general remarks to begin with.

It is easy – too easy, one suspects – to divide the narrator into two conflicting voices, as my italicization suggests. For what we read all comes from the same voice, making an innocent-seeming statement and then fiercely picking on one of its component words – "it" – "I" – "me" – to call it in question. Cumulatively, of course, and surprisingly quickly, this process of affirmation and denial undermines all certainties. If it is "not I" who is speaking, and "not about me," who is then talking, and about what? The reading experience leads one into a state of absurdity (as in "theatre of the absurd"), which is substantially heightened by the self-aware rhetorical structuring, as in that repetition of "it," or "I" (the figure *ploke*). Even more symmetrical is the sequence of questions that follows, which uses *anaphora* (on "what"), *parison* and *isocolon*, *epistrophe* ("do"), and then switches from those rhetorical figures of emphasis to their virtual opposite, the trope of *aporia* (leaving a question unanswered, or expressing a doubt):

> What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later? Generally speaking. There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. *But it is quite hopeless*.

The self-referentiality that Beckett develops gives here a marvellously accurate description of the language-game that his narrator is playing, proceeding "by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered. . . ." Still, this leaves us with the semantic puzzle, if the negations negate the affirmations but both are invalidated, what is left standing? – The answer is, everything – and nothing. Having undermined the whole communicative (or at least information-giving) possibility of language with the term aporia, the narrator now confides in us that

> I should mention before going any further, any further on, that I say aporia without knowing what it means. Can one be ephectic otherwise than unawares? I don't know.

Beckett's considerable philological skills produced there another remarkably appropriate word for what his narrator is doing, for the word *ephectic* comes from the Greek "*epekhein*, hold back, reserve (judgment)", referring to the Greek sceptics, who practised a "suspension of judgment" (*SOED*). But if they were philosophers they did this consciously, which makes the narrator's question "Can one be ephectic otherwise than unawares?" absurd, in the more common sense of the term. Once again knowledge is undermined by ignorance, certainty by doubt.

The narrator claims, at any rate, to know when to use yes and no, although he does not disclose on what basis. But as he becomes more assertive so he becomes more incoherent, his discourse faltering, breaking off, collapsing, surviving:

> With the yesses and noes it is different, they will come back to me as I go along and how, like a bird, to shit on them all without exception. The fact would seem to be, if in my situation one may speak of facts, not only that I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forget, no matter. And at the same time I am obliged to speak. I shall never be silent. Never.

It is keenly ironical that, immediately after invoking Wittgenstein's famous principle that "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen" (§ 7), the narrator himself should move from its denial, "I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak" (he doesn't tell us why: perhaps this is the human condition) to a series of verbal repetitions which

enact the disintegration of thought – "but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to" – culminating in break-down: "I forget, no matter." So ends the first paragraph of this novel.

The truth that this sequence confirms is that just as a climax is achieved by repetition, so is anti-climax. If there is no build-up there can be no collapse. We can imagine the narrator as one of the clowns in Shakespearian comedy (or *Waiting for Godot*), isolated on stage in an extended soliloquy that only serves to reveal their mental and verbal confusion. So this narrator's solipsistic self-cancellings reveal the clown's unwarranted confidence in his own abilities, the pride that always comes before a fall – a kind of linguistic prat-fall, with metaphysical overtones. While groping towards this perception, however, we must avoid the error of so many Beckett commentators, seizing the serious and ignoring the comic. Reading *The Unnamable* can be very amusing, a highly intellectual comedy in which the reader is forced to question his own motives for reading, whatever expectations he might have had, and whether or not they have been satisfied. Are we going to read 130 pages like this? And if so, why?

A full literary analysis, commenting on every reversal, every instance where the carpet is pulled from underneath too-confident feet, would be interminable, and pointless. Nor does Beckett's linear progress, through a thousand pitfalls/pratfalls, encourage us to attempt any generalizing summaries. Indeed, the very possibility of systematic description has been eliminated by the narrator:

> The thing to avoid, I don't know why, is the spirit of system.

(The "I don't know why" there undermines the assertion, yet leaves it legible.) All I should like to emphasize, by repetition, is that it is precisely repetition that emphasizes the frustration of non-emphasis in anti-climax. Yet anti-climax occurs so frequently in *The Unnamable* as to be itself emphasizing some sort of point. The narrator's self-correction, his use of repetition-with-cancellation – if I may employ the rhetorical figure *synoeciosis* or *oxymoron* (the combination of opposites) – creates a kind of substantial hollowness. A particularly apt example of his creating/-hollowing-out process is this sequence, which ends by identifying (incriminating) the art which makes the whole thing possible:

> All has proceeded, all this time, in the utmost calm, the most perfect order, apart from one or two manifestations the meaning of which escapes me. No, it is not that their meaning escapes me, my own escapes me just as much. Here all things, no, I shall not say it, being unable to . . . . And all these questions I ask myself. It is not in a spirit of curiosity. I cannot be silent. About myself I need know nothing. Here all is clear. No, all is not clear. But the discourse must go on. So one invents obscurities. Rhetoric.

Strange though it may at first seem, the same art that enabled the construction of Queen Margaret's bitter catalogue of her enemy's tragic change, and Dickens's fog-bound institution destroying the lives and hopes of those applying to it for justice, that same art gave Beckett the wherewithal to use language as the communication of meaning against itself, generating some 120,000 words of "affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later." As we read the conclusion, with its by now hypnotic, panic-stricken repetitions, as the narrator confronts death and silence, "it's the last words, the true last" (any quotation having to break into a sentence that stretches over several pages) we realize the force and infinite variability of repetition:

> . . . I don't know, perhaps it's a dream, all a dream, that would surprise me, I'll wake, in the silence, and never sleep again, it will be I, or dream, dream again, dream of a silence, a dream silence, full of murmurs, I don't know, that's all words, never wake, all words, there's nothing else, you must go on, that's all I know, they're going to stop, I know that well, I can feel it, they're going to abandon me, it will be the silence, for a moment, a good few moments, or it will be mine, the lasting one, that didn't last, that still lasts, it will be I, you must go on, I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.

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