
Christopher D. Johnson’s impressive, expansive Hyperboles marks an important contribution to the study of the Baroque as a literary phenomenon. Johnson accomplishes this by deliberately and fruitfully sidestepping the thornier questions of what is meant by the term “Baroque.” Johnson defines the term broadly, as “at once a literary style, a period concept, and a fundamental Weltanschauung that describes the transitional period in European culture from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment” (2). Rather than engaging the extensive critical debate surrounding the appropriate terminology, Johnson aims to trace the development of the hyperbole from the classical period through the twentieth century via Cavell and Wittgenstein’s writings on the sublime. His goal, using this approach, is to provide a “voluminous, wide-ranging defense” of the “most infamous of tropes” (1), one that has frequently been—unjustly, in Johnson’s opinion—maligned as the epitome of bad taste. Johnson is not alone in this venture; recent work on the monstrous or grotesque—David Castillo’s Baroque Horrors comes to mind—shows that the defense and celebration of some of the literary Baroque’s more unsavory aspects is fast becoming a defensible critical position.

Hyperboles is divided into five rough sections. The first section, which consists of the first three chapters, discusses the origins of the major theories of hyperbole in the classical period, the Renaissance, and the historical Baroque. The second section, chapters four through eight, analyzes how the theories of the first section are interpreted in the Spanish Baroque, with particular attention to the Petrarchan influence on Góngora, Quevedo and Sor Juana. The third section, chapters nine through eleven, considers hyperbolic speech and hyperbolic silences in King Lear. Next, in chapters twelve through fifteen, Johnson closely reads the hyperbolic rhetoric of Descartes and Pascal. Finally, the last chapter considers Wittgenstein and Cavell’s rejections of hyperbole as expressed in the Kantian sublime.

Throughout the book, Johnson seeks to expand our understanding of hyperbole. Rather than viewing it as a mere rhetorical trope—as one trick among many available to the skilled rhetorician—he argues for its recognition as “a sophisticated, discursive figure of thought” (44), or, following Kenneth Burke, a “master trope” (52) that makes use of other tropes in the
service of expressing “a mode of thought, a way of being” (4). In the first section, his analysis of Quintilian’s lasting influence convincingly supports this thesis. For Quintilian, hyperbole is acceptable for describing extraordinary circumstances or an incredible state of emotion because ordinary modes of expression become insufficient. Unlike Aristotle and Longinus, whose opinions on hyperbole are difficult to pin down or circuitously self-justifying, Quintilian provides a clear defense and treatment of hyperbole’s uses that many Renaissance and Baroque theorists and writers drew on. In particular, Johnson reads Erasmus’ De Copia as an affirmation of Quintilian’s influence on Renaissance rhetoricians over Ciceronian styles. Johnson’s discussion of medieval theories of hyperbole is perhaps understandably brief; relying on E. R. Curtius’s work on the Überbietung or “outbidding” topos, he quickly highlights the importance of bearing in mind the “philologic and stylistic genealogies” (73) of each instance of the topos. (Johnson cites the competitive milieu of troubadours.) Although I am hesitant to suggest any increases to the book’s already substantial breadth, more attention to this topic would be welcome; it seems relevant especially in the competitive context of the Spanish baroque poets and dramatists.

The second section, focusing primarily on the Spanish Baroque, begins with a chapter on the Plus ultra topos. Spanish hyperbolists of the period, poetic overreachers, critique imperial ambition in a number of ways. In Gracián, for example, the “extreme, conceited rhetoric against imperial overreaching” serves “as the moral counterpart to the ideology of the Plus ultra” (137). Johnson sets up a schema of four worldviews that characterize the Spanish hyperbolists that he discusses in the three subsequent chapters: [T]he Icarean, or the desire to soar toward the celestial sphere, a desire often accompanied by the Platonic urge for eternal wisdom and beauty; the Atlantean, or the need to look down upon humanity and the world thereby achieving distant or novel perspectives; the Faustian, or the thirst for profane power and knowledge; and the Columbian, or the hunger for terrestrial domination via seafaring and conquest. (141)

Wisely, Johnson does not rely exclusively on these categories to determine his close readings of Góngora, Quevedo and Sor Juana. Instead, they inform his erudite interpretations of the Soledades, Quevedo’s satirical poetry, and the Primero sueño. Although these categories are not Johnson’s primary focus, they may prove useful to students of Baroque literature. Johnson’s readings of Góngora, Quevedo and Sor Juana strike a careful balance of close reading and grounding in their specific historical contexts. In all of their hyperbolic writings, Johnson finds evidence of aesthetic and ethical questions that are larger than those produced by a simple rhetorical trope.

In the chapters on Shakespearean hyperbole, Johnson mines Cavell’s anachronistic reading of Cartesian subjectivity in King Lear to discover “how ordinary language might be extraordinary” (280). Johnson traces the influence of stoic thought and Senecan tragedy on readings of Shakespeare, including T. S. Eliot’s, arguing that hyperbole gave Shakespeare the freedom to pursue the
possibility of self-knowledge, while for Seneca it proved a limiting rhetorical device. In chapter eleven, Johnson examines the excesses in King Lear in terms of plot and rhetoric, employing Quintilian’s characterization of hyperbole as “lies told without mendacity” (346). For Johnson, Lear’s final expressions of woe serve as mirrors for Cordelia’s decision to “Love, and be silent.” This points toward an admittedly somewhat reductive schema Johnson lays out at the beginning of the book:

silence —> litote —> verisimilitude —> hyperbole —> silence (8)

In Lear, we move toward silence as the end of hyperbole, toward inexpressibility and “ontological disappearance” (358). Drawing on one of the most controversial theories of Baroque aesthetics, Johnson suggests that the characters of Lear might be read as Benjaminian “failed allegories” (363). This could be the reason for the play’s enduring relevance and importance: it cannot be reduced to “a mere idea” (364); it always exceeds the limits imposed upon it.

The chapters on Descartes explore the possibility that the author of the Meditations may, against Quintilian’s strictures, tell lies with a good deal of mendacity. Johnson argues that Descartes’ hyperbolic doubt is “both heuristic and structural” (366), and that his willingness to abandon hyperbolic thinking once his basic principles are established signals that his use of it is at least somewhat disingenuous, and therefore distinct from the ludic, telescopic suspensions of disbelief in authors like Shakespeare and Góngora. The comparative parallels Johnson draws in these chapters are compelling and provide a sense of cohesion to what could have been an unwieldy project. For example, Johnson links Descartes’ hyperbolic posing to both Don Quixote and to Lear’s Kent—who, like Descartes, “doth affect a saucy roughness” (381). The other half of this section of the work dwells on Pascal. Johnson arrives at an understanding of Pascal’s hyperbolism via Cavell’s ordinary language philosophy and Derrida’s supplément. In contrast to Descartes, Pascal’s hyperbolic writing is not simply a rhetorical strategy to be abandoned once a more suitable mode has been found. Instead, Pascal uses hyperbole to “astonish us into rethinking conventional truths” (419) and to move readers toward “transcendence” (441). The extensive analysis of Pascal’s contemporaries and interpreters illuminates the cultural context and shows how widely opinions on hyperbole continued to differ.

Finally, in the last chapter, Johnson offers “a critique of hyperbolic reason” (487), analyzing Wittgenstein and Cavell’s rejections of the Kantian sublime. Johnson argues that Kant’s hyperbolic rhetoric recalls the solipsism of Descartes more clearly than the hyperbolism of Pascal. His unconventional reading of Wittgenstein’s Investigations finds hyperbole—which Wittgenstein does not explicitly discuss—in the gaps inherent in language games. In arguing this position, Johnson furthers his goal of defining hyperbole beyond the narrow boundaries of a literary trope.

The drawbacks of the book are primarily a result of its ambition. First, the inconsistent translation practices make it an occasionally difficult read even
for experts. Longer citations in other languages are usually but not always translated; shorter citations within paragraphs often are not. Any reader whose background is not as broadly comparative as Johnson’s may be compelled to skip over certain sections. Second, a work following the development of a single idea must necessarily leave something out. While Johnson focuses on the most important writers and thinkers, he is restricted to considering a very limited number of their works, and the importance of hyperbole and hyperbolic thinking on an entire oeuvre remains unclear. Finally, the closing paragraphs of the book, which draw rich, complex connections between many of the works discussed, feel hasty and inconclusive; an afterword might have been a more appropriate setting to pursue some of those connections more thoroughly.

None of these quibbles, however, should detract from the incredible ambition and achievement of this book. Johnson’s meticulous reading, sourcing and thinking will doubtless inform future work on the authors he analyzes. And, although Johnson does not discuss the Neobaroque, his conclusions about many authors should prove useful in understanding how these ideas were later reinterpreted. Johnson’s book distinguishes itself for its breadth, its careful argumentation, and the wealth of possibilities that it opens for future research. It is indispensible reading for scholars and students of Baroque literature—however broadly that might be defined.

*The Johns Hopkins University*

**AMY SHEERAN**


Can we compare the mass murders of the Holocaust, the Rwanda massacres, and Latin American “desaparecidos,” the missing bodies of the detained in the seventies? These genocidal practices might be difficult to compare, but considering how contemporary society erects multiple monuments, concrete and abstract, to histories of violence signals the need to have communal memory sites. Forgetting the dead is, for many, the equivalent of a double homicide, a crucial part of the agenda of dictatorial regimes that want to exterminate the political, racial or social other by erasing the traces not only of their bodies, but also of their names, their memories. What can Sophocles’, Sade’s and Mario Vargas Llosa’s literary visions tell us about how throughout history the elimination of the political enemy, and its “double killing,” unites a community of equals? Moira Fradinger’s *Binding Violence, Literary Visions of Political Origins,* brilliantly traces the origins of the Western democratic imagination and the violent politics of membership in three historical, political