



Christopher D. Johnson. *Hyperboles: The Rhetoric of Excess in Baroque Literature and Thought*

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Christopher D. Johnson. *Hyperboles: The Rhetoric of Excess in Baroque Literature and Thought*.

Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 52. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. 695 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$45. ISBN: 978-0674-05331-1.

Like Terence Cave's *Recognitions* (1988), Johnson's *Hyperboles* probes a literary embarrassment. For Cave, the embarrassment concerns the poetics of plot. When the action of a play or novel revolves around characters whose identities are shrouded in mystery, the dénouement takes the form of a recognition scene in which we finally learn who everyone really is. The problem is how to achieve a satisfying close without resorting to clumsy devices like the infamous *deus ex machina* or the discovery of long-lost twins or identifying birthmarks or scars. Yet, as commentators have noted since antiquity, despite the difficulty, recognition scenes regularly occur, earning, moreover, Aristotle's praise as producing the most beautiful kind of plot. This in turn suggests that recognition scenes play a deeper role than mere technical considerations of plot-management would indicate. The embarrassment and, on the evidence of the persistence of recognition scenes from ancient times down to our post-Freudian present, our seeming inability to avoid them, thus raise fundamental questions about the nature of reading, plot, and identity in general, transforming a crude want of art into a symptomatic key to a great deal of real and lasting interest and importance. By contrast, the embarrassment Johnson addresses is rhetorical. As he documents at luxurious yet unfailingly informative length, hyperbole has always been perceived to be a problem. Because it achieves its effects by overstating the truth, amplifying statement to the *n*th degree, hyperbole is not only a lie but a transparent — even a baldfaced — lie. Worse, in stretching the truth in pursuit of the superlatives alone capable of giving an idea of how overwhelmingly great, grand, noble, massive, fearsome, or horrible its referents are imagined to be, hyperbole is fundamentally artless. It is not just that it is dogged by the inescapable risk of bombast, provoking scornful laughter where it seeks awestruck wonder. By pushing language beyond its ordinary limits, hyperbole devalues it, reducing speech to a shockheaded, arm-waving extremity from which no true, let alone clear, idea emerges.

Nevertheless, like recognition scenes, hyperbole is always with us. For the limits of language are not the limits of truth. In order to convey not simply an accurate but a just notion of, say, the might of a seastorm, the sublimity of the divine, the majesty of a monarch, the vastness of the universe, the violence of loss, or the passionate ardor of love, words have to be stretched to the breaking-point, far beyond their normal or natural range. In addition to being a persistent problem, hyperbole is thus an ongoing puzzle — and all the more so in eras like the baroque where, for a variety of reasons, the moral and intellectual as well as rhetorical and aesthetic standards underwriting the sense of language's "normal" and "natural" limits are thrown into a state of flux. The result of Johnson's exploration of his topic is to make us aware that what is fundamentally at stake in hyperbole is not merely the uses and fortunes of a particular figure of speech but the nature of language, of imaginative conception, and so of thought as a whole.

Following a fascinating introduction in which he defines the methodological and philosophical stakes, Johnson tracks his quarry through sixteen chapters that may be roughly sorted into four parts. The first part explores the theory of hyperbole in classical times (chapter 1), the Renaissance (chapter 2), and the baroque (chapter 3). The central theme of these chapters is how baroque theorists find in favor of hyperbole precisely on the grounds of its excess. Drawing especially on the role hyperbole plays in Gracián's theory of the conceit, Johnson shows how the daring with which hyperbolic figuration violates the carefully responsible norms of reason, proportion, and verisimilitude is exactly what privileges it for seventeenth-century commentators and poets. Hyperbole becomes indeed the figure of all figural thought as such in that what great poetry aims at is to stretch our powers of imagination and conception alike in such a way as to transform rather than tamely imitate the world as we perceive it in ordinary experience. It aims to transform experience itself, producing in particular the altered states of mind required to see the metaphysical potential of even the basest data of sublunary life.

From the theory of hyperbole Johnson proceeds to its practice in the lyric poetry of baroque Spain, successively highlighting the outlandish excess of meaning characteristic of Góngorist verse (chapter 5), Quevedo's "poetics of disillusion" and the proliferating ironies into which it plunges poet and reader alike (chapter 6), and the unbridled "exorbitance" of desire in Sor Juana's relation to a mystically carnalized as well as incarnate Christ (chapter 7). The focus then shifts to England with a discussion of the overreaching hubris of Bacon's claims for a new empirical science (chapter 8) and a luminously probing analysis of skepticism in Shakespearean drama, with particular emphasis on *King Lear*, read in tense dialogue with the philosopher Stanley Cavell (chapters 9–11). The author's grapplings with skepticism as he meets it in Shakespeare raises the curtain on four chapters devoted to baroque philosophy: two exploring the role of hyperbolic doubt in the properly "fabulous" and so literary text of Descartes's *Meditations* (chapter 12) and in the Cartesian doctrine of the will as the deep source of both metaphysical error and authentic metaphysical insight (chapter 13); and two on Pascalian apologetics, featuring what Johnson calls the "negative hyperbolics" of Pascal's apophatic demonstration of God's seat in the fundamentally counter-rational organ of the human heart (chapter 14) and Pascal's equally hyperbolic analysis of human "disproportion" in the fragment on humanity's precarious perch at the midpoint between the twin infinities of the immeasurable vastness of post-Copernican space and the infinitesimal minuteness of the inner reaches of matter exposed through Hooke's microscope (chapter 16). The book then concludes with a chapter on the Kantian sublime as the direct (if unconscious) successor to baroque hyperbolics and on the role hyperbole plays in what Johnson regards as the essentially melodramatic tenor of Cavell's thought and in the puzzled probings of the "unsayable" in the work of Cavell's chief philosophical interlocutor, Wittgenstein.

Johnson's method throughout combines richly inventive close reading with exceptionally well-informed wrestlings with the philosophical as well as critical and theoretical literature relevant to his theme. It is indeed a rare pleasure to see someone

as philosophically ambitious and sophisticated as Johnson plant his philosophical insights as deeply as he does in the texts he reads with such patient (and even exorbitant) care. It is not just, then, that he is moved by a contagious love for the idiosyncratic *materiality* of baroque-era lyric, drama, and philosophical writing; following the examples of commentators like Wittgenstein and Cavell and, alongside them, Derrida and Deleuze, he proves unfailingly alert to the properly philosophical as well as literary substance of that materiality. Unpacking the deliberately self-destructive ironies of Quevedo and Gracián or patiently explicating the points at which, for all his fierce rationality, Descartes loses control of the skeptical energies the *Meditations* set out to harness thus becomes at once aesthetic and intellectual experience of the highest order.

To be sure, Johnson's simultaneous commitment to close reading and metaphysics assumes at times the kind of quasi-autistic intensity he finds in Pascal's ruminations on the infinite silent void of intersideral space; and I would have appreciated a more circumstantial grounding in the historical moment than the dalliance with philosophers quite allows. The result is most apparent in Johnson's reading of Descartes. Like Descartes, and like Cavell as also, albeit in a different way, like Derrida, Johnson takes skepticism seriously. He does so, however, less as a natural fact of life than as a metaphysical condition. Descartes's reason for regarding it in this light is the fact that, in contrast to his chief adversaries, Montaigne, Hobbes, and Gassendi, he remains faithful to both medieval and Renaissance tradition in conceiving of knowledge as *scientia* — the total, absolute, and unshakably self-certifying mode of knowing whose model is the mind of God. While this helps explain the overreaching epistemological extravagance Johnson rightly follows Derrida in diagnosing in his work, it also explains how the notion of the evil genius occurred to him. Skepticism only becomes the nightmare Descartes is driven to dispel by such exorbitant means because the underlying picture of knowledge on which it depends is itself exorbitantly hyperbolic.

Yet this merely confirms what is so characteristically *baroque* in Descartes, as in Pascal, Quevedo, Gracián, or Shakespeare's Hamlet and Lear. Such minor quarrels as I have finally underscore the general rightness, and importance, of Johnson's book, which deserves as wide and enthusiastic a readership as hyperbolic praise can give it.

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