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The Rhetoric of Listless Prose

by RODNEY STENNING EDGECOMBE

SINCE THE AIM OF rhetoric is to persuade, and since persuasion is better effected by vivacity than by listlessness, the ancient rhetors probably gave no thought at all to the pursuit of grayness and lassitude. When Quintilian asked “can there be any doubt that, wherever imaginative power and amplitude of diction are required, the orator has a specially important part to play?” (I, 11), his question was simply rhetorical. What end beyond those of “power” and “amplitude” could the tropes and figures otherwise serve? However, since context is everything, their abstract verbal designs have later proved as susceptible to different psychological constructions as the scribbles of a Rorschach Blot—many mimetic possibilities (even mutually exclusive possibilities) lie folded up within any one configuration of words. Thus, when prose style began to take on functions wider and more various than those dictated by court and classroom, and when above all it had become the medium of the novel, a hitherto unexploited expressiveness within the schemes and figures could at last be realized. From the moment of its inception, the novel sought to embrace the whole range of human experience, and its style had to be flexible and various enough to rise to any occasion and to reflect any cast of mind. When we talk about the persuasiveness of novelistic prose, therefore, we do not mean the extrinsic persuasiveness of classical rhetoric but rather a persuasiveness of verisimilitude—we think more in terms of credibility than of credence. In this article I wish to explore some of the rhetorical strategies behind a “drab” style: not the “drab style”—not the self-conscious humility of the genus tenue—but rather those instances of mimetic drabness that can support a characterization or define a theme. By listless prose, I mean a prose without syntactic variety, without any gradations of tone, an even, arbitrary continuum rather than a drama of preludes and resolutions—a prose, in short, without energy and commitment, which, if it were to proceed directly from the pen of the writer, might seem to indicate an indifference to style, but which, once placed in the context of a play or novel, becomes a vehicle for meaning. Since even most natural effects in art have to be registered through artifice—Verdi, for example, conveys silence through drum taps or rolls—it will come as no surprise to find that listless prose (artistically listless prose, that is) strives for its effects of lassitude, and commandeers rhetorical figures for a purpose their systematizers never intended them to serve, and gives an expressive colorlessness to features of syntax and sentence structure that would otherwise seem
merely neutral. When something is deliberately put to wrong use the effect more often than not is parodic, but parody is itself an energetic enterprise. Its iconoclasm demonically subverts an established model which it evokes again and again the more to savor the displacements and distortions that are being thrust upon it. Listless prose lacks this dual vision. While it does indeed displace and derange the various effects assigned to figures and other stylistic procedures, it does so without the parodist’s demonic Schadenfreude. Its appropriations are made by stealth and adjusted out of sight.

Human exuberance has always tended to manifest itself in excess, and it might at first seem odd to start an essay on stinted prose textures with so obviously exuberant a figure as congeries, also known as synathrismos, coagmentatio, cumulatio, coacervatio and symphoresis (Sonnino 56). Puttenham indeed suggests that the “heaping figure” signals a state of mind the very reverse of listless: “Arte and good pollicie moves us many times to be earnest in our speach, and when we lay on such a load and so go to it by heapes as if we would winne the game by multitude of words & speaches, not all of one but of divers matter and sence, for which cause the / Latines called it Congeries and we the heaping figure” (236). To work properly, these somewhat reckless accumulations need a momentum of excitement, a momentum best secured by a climactic arrangement of the items tumbling from the cornucopia. Heaping is a species of repetition, and, if you repeat without progression, you are more likely to create an image of circular futility. For example, because Polonius has no guiding climax and thus forfeits the energy such a climax can canalize, synathrismos in his hands becomes otiose and fussy. His enumeration of mixed kinds has the sterile exhaustiveness of pedantry, not the abundance of an energetic outpouring. Without a shaping gradient, such lists can offer only the arbitrary kind of sorites we find in “This is the house that Jack built”:

The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene undividable, or poem unlimited. (Hamlet, 259)

While there is too much fuss and self-importance here to suggest listlessness, the extract does at least show that, pace Puttenham, there is no de facto persuasiveness in figures of accumulation.

This is especially true of Beckett’s use of congeries, which devitalizes the figure into a gray ghost of itself. Since the Absurd posits an absence of design, the greater the weight of the material accumulated by the lists, the more disjunct the accumulation becomes, and the more obviously unteleological the principle behind it—as witness this excerpt from Waiting for Godot:

VLADIMIR: We could do our exercises.
ESTRAGON: Our movements.
VLADIMIR: Our elevations.
ESTRAGON: Our relaxations.
VLADIMIR: Our elongations.
ESTRAGON: Our relaxations.
VLADIMIR: To warm us up.
ESTRAGON: To calm us down. (76)
Several factors contribute here to a lowering of rhetorical energy. Firstly, as in Polonius' catalog, there is no graph of ascending importance to take the spirit of the audience with it. Secondly, the stichomythic distribution of the items has the effect of regulating the pulse as if by the clipped swing of a metronome, especially when the prepositions of "To warm us up" and "To calm us down" neutralize each other and stall the momentum. Thirdly, Vladimir's obsessive repetition of "relaxations" turns the list back upon itself, and, finally, the semantic twist of "elongations" (it better describes the involuntary extension of the human form upon a rack than a phase of calisthenics) puts the other more conventional items in a bizarre light, while itself taking over their conventionality. Further homogenization is effected by the deadpan, equable movement of the lines. Before we leave this congeries, we can also note that Beckett has not only turned the heaping device into a vehicle for uninflected joylessness but has also wrought the same havoc with anaphora ("Our movements. Our elevations. Our relaxations")—and that in spite of its psalmic heritage of exultation and praise.

Muriel Spark adopts a similar rhetorical ploy in the most Absurd of all her novels, The Hothouse by the East River, and also reduces the exuberance of synathrismos to a spiritless instrument of defeat:

"The hell with her shadow," says Annie. "Haven't we got enough serious problems in this city? We already have the youth problem, the racist problem, the distribution problem, the political problem, the economic problem, the crime problem, the matrimonial problem, the ecological problem, the divorce problem, the domiciliary problem, the consumer problem, the birth-rate problem, the middle-age problem, the health problem, the sex problem, the incarceration problem, the educational problem, the fiscal problem, the unemployment problem, the physiopsychodynamics problem, the homosexual problem, the traffic problem, the heterossexual problem, the obesity problem, the garbage problem, the gyno-emancipation problem, the rent-controls problem, the identity problem, the bi-sexual problem, the uxoricidal problem, the superannuation problem, the alcoholics problem, the capital gains problem, the anthropo-egalitarian problem, the tri-sexual problem, the drug problem, the civic culture and entertainments problem which is something else again, the—"[1] (129-30)

It is no doubt part of Spark's Catholic program to dispirit the secular humanists with the full range of the social crises confronting them, and the aposiopesis that breaks off the catalog on a definite article works like a da capo sign, referring us back to the start of the dreary list and forward to its endless repetition. This list has also been trivialized (rather as Beckett trivializes his list with an "unmeaning" entry like "elongations") with non-entries like the "physiopsychodynamics problem" and the "tri-sexual problem," hinting by these nonce formulations that the same secular humanists have created some of their own problems by their jargon. Like Beckett, too, Spark presents her material as an undynamic chaos not because she shares his belief in a futile, valueless universe—far from it—but because she is trying to embody (and ultimately to judge) its godlessness in a kind of parody.

The aposiopesis (or breaking off) at the end of Annie's speech is something we find in other efforts at projecting nerveless vision in nerveless prose. Like synathrismos, the figure undergoes a crucial change, since listlessness formed no part of its original purpose. Indeed, Quintilian describes praecisio as a vehicle for strong emotion:
Aposiopesis, which Cicero calls reticentia, Celsus obticentia, and some interruptio, is used to indicate passion or anger, as in the line:

"Whom I—
But better first these billows to assuage."

Or it may serve to give an impression of anxiety and scruple.[1] (III, 407)

It seems, however, that some eighteenth-century fops put praecisio to an entirely different use.

In Swift's Tatler essays for 26 September 1710, we learn that some exquisites used the figure to project an aristocratic air of languor:

But instead of giving you a List of the late Refinements crept into our Language, I here send you the Copy of a Letter I received some Time ago from a most accomplished Person in this Way of Writing, upon which I shall make some Remarks. It is in these Terms.

SIR,
I 'cou 'dn 't get the Things you sent for all about Town. . . . I thot to ha' come down my self, and then I 'd ha' brout 'um; but I han 't don't, and I believe I can 't do 't, that's Pozz. . . . Tom begins to gi'mself Airs because he 's going with the Plenipo's . . .

*** *

This Letter is in every Point an admirable Pattern of the present polite Way of Writing; nor is it less of an Authority for being an Epistle . . . The first Thing that strikes your Eye is the Breaks at the End of almost every Sentence; of which I know not the Use, only as it is a Refinement, and very frequently practised. (Quoted in Freeborn, 181)

I shall not question the legitimacy of this exercise (where a transcript of spoken language is passed off as a familiar letter), but rather focus on the reason for the "Breaks at the End of almost every Sentence." Although Swift affects to be baffled by these, they clearly constitute a praecisio of languor, and represent the decadence of sprezzatura. What in Renaissance aesthetics had been the effortless concealment of effort has become a failure of effort. The eighteenth century's horror of enthusiasm in its irrational sense also extended in some degree to the enthusiasm of commitment. Not to finish the construction of a sentence is (perhaps) to advertise contempt for "misdirected" energy, the energy of the stockroom and the counting house which insists "i"s be dotted and "t"s crossed. Whereas the original function of praecisio (as Quintilian makes plain) was to fuse the circuit of the sentence by overloading it with feeling, here the circuit cannot function because feeling has been insolently switched off.

Dickens takes this sort of linguistic droit du seigneur one step further in Bleak House, where a Dedlock cousin's tongue is too "well-bred" to bother with the full shapes of words. As a result, almost everything he says is syncopated or recast in an aphetic form:

A languid cousin with a moustache, in a state of extreme debility, now observes from his couch, that—man told him ya' as' dy that Tulkinghorn had done done t' that iron place t' give a legal opinion 'bout something; and that contest being over t' day, 'twould be high jawly thing if Tulkinghorn should 'pear with news that Coodle man was floored. (568)

The cousin's languor does not prevent him from finishing his sentences (as it does the exquisites in the Age of Anne), but he saves energy in other ways,
notably by omitting articles: “man told him”; “that Coodle man” (where the conjunctive “that” gets swallowed up by the deictic “that” simply because he is too listless to say the same word twice). That lost conjunction highlights another aspect of the cousin’s nerveless speech, viz. Dickens’ systematic use of oratio obliqua.

As its Latin name implies, indirect speech approaches its material sideways on, and the living inflections of a human voice mediated and evened by the deific distance of the (often) omniscient author. The following letter by Cardinal Newman perfectly illustrates the flattening, regulatory effect of indirect speech. He is reporting to the Birmingham Oratory how in 1854, on a visit to Waterford, he was asked to address an assembly of seventy schoolgirls

all dressed in blue, with medals on, some green, some red; and how he found he had to make them a speech, and how he puzzled and fussed himself what on earth he should say impromptu to a parcel of school girls—and how in his distress he did make what he considered his best speech—and how, when it was ended, the Mother Schoolmistress did not know that he had made it, or even begun it, and still asked for his speech. And how he would not, because he could not make a second speech; and how to make it up he asked for a holiday for the girls, and how the Mother Schoolmistress flatly refused him, by reason (as he verily believes) because she would not recognise and accept his speech, and wanted another, and thought she had dressed up her girls for nothing—and how he nevertheless drank herrisberry’s vinegar, which much resembles a nun’s anger, being a sweet acid ... [.] (Quoted in Ker, 406-07)

Of course this is much too funny (and energetic) to qualify as listless prose, but its comedy springs in part from the way in which the reportage has reduced a tense little encounter into a tabular narrative. Newman’s third person recollection of first person experience muffles the acoustic, and so too do the even, anaphoraic “and hows” that chop and control the tempo. Yet the flat narration tends in a strange way to heighten the drama, and by indirections we find directions out. Voices rise emphatically even behind the frosted glass of the oratio obliqua: “he did make what he considered his best speech”; “the Mother Schoolmistress flatly refused him.”

Because indirect speech requires the reporter to hook a succession of noun clauses on to the verba dicendi, it can also project an image of spinelessness. The paratactic extension of “and hows” throughout Newman’s letter has the effect of denaturing the events, and subordinating their erratic movement to the regulation of a History primer. Syntactic dependence always awaits the masterful pleasure of the sentence maker, as Pip realizes when he contemplates the gravestone of his mother:

The shape of the letters on my father’s, gave me the odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, “Also Georgiana Wife of the Above,” I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. (Great Expectations, 1)

While the boy’s idea of a freckled complexion has almost certainly been prompted by mottled granite, his belief in his mother’s sickliness has a more subtle basis in style. Georgiana’s epitaph borrows its main verb from her husband’s, and leans back on it for support.
Indirect speech can seem similarly invertebrate, especially in circumstances where a writer relays the personal convictions of a character in the third person. Personality and conviction can often vanish in the process, as in this listlessly transmitted creed from Patrick White’s novel, *The Solid Mandala*:

“The main thing,” said Dad, sucking his sparrow-coloured moustache, “is to lead a decent, a life you, well, needn’t feel ashamed of.”

O Lord. Waldo had not been taught to pray, because, said Mother, everything depends on your own will, it would be foolishness to expect anything else; we can achieve what we want if we are determined, if we are confident that we are strong.

And here was George Brown knotting together the fingers which had learnt to handle the pound notes so skilfully. Who had nothing to feel ashamed of. Except perhaps his own will.

O Lord. The Barranugli train bellowed like a cow in pastures not her own. (78)

Waldo is a rationalist, and his twin, Arthur, a mystic. Much of *The Solid Mandala* takes the form of a vast antithesis that pits the sterility of the one vision against the illumination of the other. White therefore takes pains to flatten and debilitate the creed which underpins Waldo’s outlook. He does so, first of all, by cutting from dialogue to interior monologue, where the possibility of prayer (“O Lord”) is still-born as an irritated expletive. The shift from speech to silent mental response suggests cowardice, furthermore, and undercuts any claim to the inward strength that a forceful will might otherwise be assumed to ensure. And that will does indeed lack the potency with which Mrs. Brown has tried to invest it, or so White’s syntactic procedure would imply. Creeds generally hang their clauses on an opening verb of avowal—a *Credo* or “I believe.” As in indirect speech, this can open the door to a disconnected, perfunctory recitation. Because there is a danger that the force of the verb will not carry through the dependent statements, some of the greatest setters of the Nicene Credo (Beethoven, for example) have been careful to restate the *Credo*’s at crucial points of their musical design. An even greater danger of lassitude comes into being if the immediacy of the first-person declaratives is suppressed altogether, and the clauses relayed at second hand.

We see this in the extract above. Here we have to surmount not only the undynamically strung clauses so typical of creeds, but also the alienating remove of the third-person relay. Both factors are sufficient to sap the potency of the will in which Waldo has been invited to place his faith. Like Georgiana Pirrip’s epitaph, something putatively energetic has been registered in an invertebrate syntax. And just as Newman equalized the thrust and parry of a real-life incident in chopped-off lengths of clause, so here even the vigorous tone of hortation is muffled by the indirect speech, and revealed simply as manipulative use of the first-person plural: “we can achieve what we want if we are determined.” A similar effect is created by the piecemeal syntax in the paragraph that follows, where first the adjectival clause “Who had nothing to feel ashamed of” and then the concessive object of “ashamed of” “stand” by themselves. Such pseudo-sentences offer an apologetic approximation to strength and independence that the syntax undercuts in the very act of approximating.
In The Vivisector we find several credal statements formulated in a way which distances and muffles the affirmations the creed ought otherwise to embody. In the following excerpt we see a conditioned belief in family love trying to find purchase in the mind of an isolato. The second person, while it functions as a childish expression of generality, tends to objectify the speaker and separate being from believing. Conflicts thus figure at a remove, and the penitence that Hurtle theoretically ascribes to himself is shrugged off in the uninflected evenness of the prose:

Because you didn’t know what to answer, you went away. You didn’t love books all that much, but wouldn’t have known how to tell Pa you neither loved an “honest trade”. You loved—what? You wouldn’t have known, not to be asked.

* * * * *

He could do nothing about it, though. Not yet. He could only carry all of it in his head. Not talk about it. Because Mumma and Pa would not have understood. They talked about what was “right” and “honest”, and the price of things, but people looked down at their plates if you said something was “beautiful”. (17)

And:

He ought to love poor Mumma for looking at him like that. He did, too: nothing else was real. There was nothing wrong in imagining a thing or two about himself and Courtneys. (56)

And:

This was his family. He should have loved them. He did of course. . . . Ali this was family, which he loved, but should have loved better. (76)

The third person has here turned the speaker into a spectator of himself, and its equable detachment has laid the foundation for the entire course of The Vivisector, a novel in which the painter perceives life in aesthetic not in moral terms, and processes his relationships as so much raw material for his art. Even when he is moving towards his final visionary phase, in which his selfhood is broken open and exposed to the presence of the divine Other, the undemonstrativeness persists in White’s prose. A credal statement couched in subjunctives comes close to missing its mark of affirmation altogether:

Of course it was a miserable refuge too—oh God, yes, when he cared to admit it: he was an old man, turning his back and distorting truth to get an effect, which he did, he knew, better than anybody else—well, almost anybody. But there were the days when he himself was operated on, half-drunk sometimes, shitting himself with agony, when out of the tortures of knife and mind, he was suddenly carried, without choice, on the wings of his exhaustion and—dare he begin to say it—spiritual self-justification. (489)

“Dare he begin to say it” is as tentative and as reluctant to give up its rational self-sufficiency as an earlier formulation of Hurtle’s “love” for Nance: “It seemed to him he loved this woman he hardly knew as a person” (196). What gives the prose some degree of lift, however, is the way it attempts to mount toward a climax, and the parenthetic fumbling before the word “spiritual” actually helps to shape its graph. Compare the circular, undirected creed that Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson tries to annex to herself in Riders in the Chariot: “‘God is incorporeal,’ she read, ‘divine, supreme, infinite, Mind, Spirit, Soul, Principle, Life, Truth, Love’”
(292). We are back at a synathrismos in which bounty is disconnected into chaos, and flat declamation replaces the rising pitch of excitement the figure ought otherwise to supply. In this case asyndeton helps to throw the random principle of assembly into even starker relief.

Of course one of the most telling ways to convey negative color of unresponsiveness and detachment is to use a figure with a negative charge. This is E. M. Forster’s method for securing flatness at the start of *A Passage to India*:

Except for the Marabar Caves—and they are twenty miles off—the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary. Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges, it trails for a couple of miles along the bank, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely. There are no bathing steps on the river front, as the Ganges happens not to be holy here; indeed there is no river front, and the bazaars shut out the wide and shifting panorama of the stream. The streets are mean, the temples ineffective, and though a few fine houses exist they are hidden away in gardens or down alleys whose filth deters all but the invited guest. Chandrapore was never large or beautiful, but two hundred years ago it lay on the road between upper India, then imperial, and the sea, and the fine houses date from that period. (9)

And we can find similar tactics informing the description of the caves:

The caves are readily described. A tunnel eight feet long, five feet high, three feet wide, leads to a circular chamber about twenty feet in diameter. This arrangement occurs again and again throughout the group of hills, and this is all, this is a Marabar Cave. Having seen one such cave, having seen three, four, fourteen, twenty-four, the visitor returns to Chandrapore uncertain whether he has had an interesting experience or a dull one or any experience at all. He finds it difficult to discuss the caves, or to keep them apart in his mind, for the pattern never varies, and no carving, not even a bees’ nest or a bat, distinguishes one from another. Nothing, nothing attaches to them, and their reputation—for they have a reputation—does not depend upon human speech. (124)

It is important to observe that, once adapted to the purpose of implying the writer’s indifference, litotes undergoes the same sort of modifications that we have monitored in the other classical figures used for comparable effect. After all, as Puttenham points out, the original intention of “the Moderatour” is to build up emotional pressure by allowing it limited vantage in the style: “we temper our sense by wordes of such moderation, as in appearance it abateth it but not in deede” (184). Not so the description of Chandrapore, which by presenting the spectacle of “nothing extraordinary” lacks the crucial second negative that litotes must cancel in order to reinforce enthusiasm. As Christopher Ricks has said in another context, “you cannot employ the English language to say ‘nor winks the gold fin in the porphyry font’ without our glimpsing—through the interstices of the negative—the winking fin” (*Tennyson*, 201).

In a curious way, then, Forster seems to rehearse the implicit enthusiasm of litotes in order the more forcibly to stress a despairing state of mind, and in the process does in fact approximate the double-take entailed by the figure. His other deletions, however, operate in the more conventional fashion Ricks has described, the absence of bathing steps necessarily invoking those of other river fronts, while the clumsy, unidiomatic formulation of “happens not to be holy there” reduces that holiness to an arbitrarily intermittent human edict.

Concessive elements in the syntax play a part analogous to the deleted positive of litotes. The Marabar caves seem at first to offer a mark of distinction
to Chandrapore, but this is revoked by the spatial wedge of the parenthesis which separates them from the city. So too the concession of "fine houses," which Forster invokes only to have them deleted from the cityscape, and to cue in an account of squalid thoroughfares. Something similar can be seen at work in the account of the caves themselves. The narrator seems at first eager to engage with his material, like a rhetor about to luxuriate in topographia: "The caves are readily described." We imagine at first that they are distinctive and vivid enough to make the task an easy one, but are disappointed when instead we are offered a dry set of measurements. The language of geometry is as uninflected a style as any one is likely to encounter. Like Chandrapore, furthermore, the caves are cut out like a paper profile from what they are not—"no carving, not even a bees’ nest"—and asyndeton ("three, four, fourteen, twenty-four") like that in the creed of Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson evokes the failure of a mind to find purchase on something alien to itself. This is most tellingly realized by the epizeuxis of "Nothing, nothing attaches to them" and the near epizeuxis of "this is all, this is a Marabar Cave." In the first instance we sense the mind’s skidding off the unattachable, and reasserting the attachment in an effort to steady itself; in the second, a surprised discovery at the moment of encompassment, that nothing has been encompassed even in spite of the inclusive "all." The "multiple choice" format of the epithets describing that experience likewise suggests a weariness about having to decide the undecidable.

While the writers I have cited in this essay are hardly representative—they, their themes and their characterizations could be multiplied ad infinitum, from the flat stoicism of some Existential prose to the hard, undifferentiated impersonality of the nouveau roman—the techniques I have examined are. Since rhetoric is a species of persuasion, its practitioners will always seek to persuade. Persuasive people are committed people, people with enough energy, and more besides, to convert others to their point of view. Almost all the rhetor’s figures accordingly presuppose the presence of a speaking voice, a range of acoustic inflections that will help steer a climax toward its fulfillment by modulating the dynamic level and grading the tempo; or with a carefully placed sob, or break in the voice, suggest that aposiopesis is indeed a breakdown of language, of language too frail to carry the speaker’s huge feeling. Take away the element of public delivery, or, in other words, turn off the voice, and rhetoric will develop strange mutations, just as written music, played by someone incapable of phrasing it, will seem alien and inert. What I have examined in this article is just that subtraction of voice and the failures of dynamic and phrasing that can accompany it. While I have taken many of my terms from classical rhetoric, I have drawn my materials from more recent sources, many of them twentieth-century. With one or two exceptions, stylistic magniloquence went out of fashion in 1918, and ham actors, if not dead, are a dying breed. Samuel Beckett’s Play directs the protagonists to speak their lines on a level, an extreme stylization of tendencies to be detected everywhere in the art of our century. When therefore an elaborate or exuberant verbal pattern is encountered out of the context for which it was fashioned, it is bound to seem flat—flat in the sense of being
dissonant, in failing to meet the required musical pitch; flat in the sense of being two-dimensional, in having no body of inflections to give it light and shade; and flat in the way that fizzy drinks turn flat when their animating gases abandon them. It is not so much that figures and syntactic modes have been modified; it is rather that they have been betrayed. C. S. Lewis accused Donne of “being perpetually excited and therefore perpetually cut off from the deeper more permanent springs of his own excitement” (128). In listless prose, the “perpetual excitement” has itself been cut off—a double mutilation. Most attempts at stylistic listlessness will thus employ rhetorical figures more usually concerned with frontal abundance and energy. Synathrismos that has lost its way issues in fatigue, personal convictions that have been skewed by the obliquity of indirect speech will lack conviction, and litotes that negates the positive to tantalize rather than to affirm will become the utterance of der Geist der stets verneint. Figures, like the chords of diatonic harmony, have no in-built effect, only a tendency toward one. That tendency can be checked and even subverted by transplantation into contexts they were never meant to serve.

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