

Chapter One

The (Il)Logic of Excess: The Test Case of "God is Love"

My God, my God, thou art a direct God, may I not say a literal God, a God that wouldst be understood literally and according to the plain sense of all that thou sayest? but thou art also (Lord I intend it to thy glory, and let no profane misinterpreter abuse it to thy diminution), thou art a figurative, a metaphorical God too; a God in whose words there is such a height of figures, such voyages, such peregrinations to fetch remote and precious metaphors, such extensions, such spreadings, such curtains of allegories, such third heavens of hyperboles, so harmonious elocutions, so retired and so reserved expressions, so commanding persuasions, so persuading commandments, such sinews even in thy milk, and such things in thy words, as all profane Authors seem of the seed of the serpent that creepes, thou art the Dove that flies.

—John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*

Nothing less than the infinite and the miraculous is necessary, and man does well not to be contented with anything less, and not to feel at home as long as he has not acquired it.

—Vincent Van Gogh, Letter to Theo

In a now classic article, "Metaphor and Religion: The Test Case of Christian Texts," David Tracy applies the most recent theories of metaphor to both the parables of

Jesus and the Johannine claim that "God is love."¹ Borrowing from Stephen Pepper's notion of a root metaphor, Paul Tillich's method of correlating Christian claims with analyses of general human experience, and Paul Ricoeur's work on the hidden mechanism of metaphor, Tracy elaborates a systematic reading of the configuration of Christianity's most basic teaching. I want to broaden the rhetorical turn in theology to which Tracy has contributed so much by suggesting that this analysis could also be accomplished from the perspective of hyperbole. My argument should contribute both to a better understanding of hyperbole, a much neglected trope, and to the figural dimension of religious claims. Briefly stated, "God is love" is not merely the synthesis of two disparate discourses, the fusion typical of metaphor; it can also be understood as an excessive claim, made with the extravagant resources of hyperbole.

According to Tracy, a root metaphor provides the core around which a cluster or network of other images and arguments are sustained and organized. In religion, these centrally grounded branches of discourse sustain a fundamental claim about the need for and promise of salvation. "These networks describe the enigma and promise of the human situation and prescribe certain remedies for that situation" (89). The primary layer of religious meaning, then, does not reside with theological claims and contentions but with a poetic insight which is only indirectly articulated by the second-order language of theology. Tracy finds the clue to Christianity's poetic basis in the parables of Jesus. Drawing heavily from Paul Ricoeur, Tracy argues that the sayings which take the form of "The Kingdom of God is like..." are a conjunction of metaphor and narrative in which the logic of everyday language is suspended in order to bring together the extraordinary (the Kingdom of God) with the ordinary. In these portraits of the Kingdom, there is a clash between the realism of the narrative and the extravagance of its conclusions, and in this tension lies the power of metaphor.

A metaphor violates the usual logic of predication by identifying two subjects that normally lie far apart. The parables are extended metaphors: through a process of intensification, the ordinary is connected to the unexpected to make a distinctive and concrete image of what hitherto seemed impossible. Extravagant actions like a father's celebration of a returning prodigal son (to which I will return in the last chapter) or an employer's equal payment for workers hired late in the day serve—like all good metaphors—to disorient the reader. This initial shock is followed by a reorientation, which is the recognition that a new mode of being has been disclosed, a way of living based on the pure, unbounded love of God. The parables refer, then, to a Christian style of life based on fundamental trust and agapic love.

At the root of these parables is the simple message that takes the metaphoric form "God is love" (1 John 4:7). This statement is set in the genre of a letter, not the narrative of a parable, and thus it is part of a second-order conceptual and reflective discourse. Nevertheless, it is a metaphor that expresses the message of the parables in the most compact way. "God is love" contains a logic of superabundance that cannot easily be summarized or paraphrased. Tracy is aware, of course, that this metaphor does not convey the whole truth of Christianity. In fact, the metaphor engenders two kinds of interrogations, one based on love and the other on God. Theologians have long debated what love best expresses God's relationship toward us. Here questions about the interconnections among agape, eros, and caritas have been crucial. This metaphor, then, does not answer the question of what kind of love God is but rather serves as the basis for that question. Moreover, this metaphor cannot be isolated from other biblical images of God. It must be understood "in the context of the wide spectrum of alternative metaphors for 'God' employed in the Old and New Testaments: from king, shepherd, rock, lord to light, truth and wisdom" (102). Tracy even argues that the

image of the wrath of God serves as an essential qualification to this metaphor; otherwise, God's love could easily be sentimentalized.

The important point is that "God is love" "is not simply a descriptive account of an observed empirical reality" (103), and thus, like any good metaphor, it cannot be reduced to conceptual clarification, although such clarification might be helpful. This metaphor provides a productive and tensive account of the relationship between a comparatively unknown (God) and a known (love), which creates an image whose surplus of meaning, though it cannot be replaced, can produce second-order discourse and debates. Theology does not replace but helps us to understand the religious meaning of this metaphor: religiously speaking, the metaphor both enables and commands Christians to love as they have been loved; the indicative entails and discloses an imperative.

Although Tracy uses the language of hyperbole throughout this text—excess and extravagance more than synthesis and fusion mark the statement "God is love"—he limits his tropical analysis to metaphor.² This is understandable: hyperbole is the poor relation of the tropes family, treated like a distant relative whose family ties are questionable at best. It is an illegitimate trope, rarely analyzed and utilized like metaphor or the equally popular trope of irony. After all, Aristotle argued that the effective use of metaphor is a sign of genius, but it is assumed that anyone can hyperbolize. Moreover, hyperbole is morally suspect because it is thought to be a sly and yet easily discernible attempt to say more than what the situation allows. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the earliest and still one of the most sustained and comprehensive attacks on excess ever written, Aristotle's connection of virtue and moderation leads him to condemn hyperbole as nothing more than deception.

To come to the point; in regard to truth, let us call the man in the middle position truthful and the

mean truthfulness. Pretense in the form of exaggeration is boastfulness and its possessor boastful, while pretense in the form of understatement is self-deprecation and its possessor a self-deprecator.³

Self control and tact not only define correct behavior but also the pursuit of truth, in addition to the propriety of style.

Hyperbole is thus condemned both for its boldness and its transparency, in other words, its immaturity. Aristotle explains the prejudice: "Hyperboles are for young men to use; they show vehemence of character" (*Rhetoric*, 1413a29-30). As this quotation suggests, hyperbole is often associated with polemical discourse (diatribe and denunciation, a wanton disregard for caution and collegiality) as well as with childish talk (children probably learn it first among the tropes by being warned against it). It is also associated with fanaticism (a stubborn refusal to qualify or modify grandiose statements) and insincere flattery. Recall, for example, the beginning of *King Lear* in which Cordelia's sisters, at the King's encouragement, exaggerate their love for Lear while Cordelia, sickened by the deceit of this spectacle, chooses to understate her own feelings. This unnatural trope breaks the boundary of the ordinary decorum of language and so is mistrusted by definition. Yet, as Lear understood but Cordelia refused to admit, there is something attractive, even seductive about exaggeration. Extreme claims, extravagant assertions, excessive visions all have a power over us that is at least as strong as our desire to deny it.

Even though this lesser trope is not considered as dignified as metaphor, the rhetorical tradition has given it sufficient treatment to establish a coherent pattern of approaches and analyses. One of the most moving and sustained discussions of hyperbole is contained in Longinus's *On the Sublime (Peri Hupsous)*.⁴ Here elevated language is praised as an irresistible power that articulates a noble passion and transports

the audience into transformative states of the imagination: "For I would make bold to say that nothing contributes to greatness as much as noble passion in the right place; it breathes the frenzied spirit of its inspiration upon the words and makes them, as it were, prophetic" (11). This apparent affirmation of extravagance is betrayed by the key phrase, "in the right place." Indeed, Longinus's own exaggerations of the wonders of the sublime ironically end in tight restrictions on this discourse. For Longinus, the sublime is an event in history, usually related to the heroic, which poetic language must try to capture or reflect.⁵ Thus, sublime discourse cannot be indiscriminate; it must be measured by the reality which it is trying to describe. "To clothe petty matters in big and solemn words is like putting a big tragic mask on the face of an infant" (41). To invest the mundane with great emotion would be ridiculous, not sublime.

The transgression of hyperbole, then, is valid only if it recreates the emotions that are the due of great events. From Longinus's perspective, hyperbole should not attract attention to itself, but should modestly point to the experience which it conveys. Indeed, this conviction lies at the heart of Longinus's theory of poetry: "The best use of a figure is when the very fact that it is a figure goes unnoticed" (29). More specifically: "The best hyperboles are sometimes those which are not noticed to be hyperboles at all" (50). The most perfect art should be the most natural art; the condensation of experience into a pure form is the second nature of poetry, a nature that should be natural, transparent, allowing the audience to see through it to the sublime event itself. "For art at its best is mistaken for nature, and nature is successful when it contains hidden art" (33). The iconoclasm of hyperbole is redeemed by sacrificing itself to the subject matter, thus becoming incognito. An exaggeration named as such would be a failure.

The hyperbolist, by implication, must shape the exaggerated discourse to fit the experiences and expect-

tations of the audience. "One must know, therefore, how far one can go in each case, for to go too far spoils the hyperbole's effect which, when overstrained, is weakened and may, on occasion, turn into its opposite" (49). Hyperbole should reproduce a shared event, conjuring emotions that are plausible and morally uplifting; if it is too shocking, too excessive, too unexpected, then it will alienate and provoke the audience, thus forsaking that unity of experience which is the precondition for the sublime. Nevertheless, Longinus is aware that excessive discourse is not so easily contained. "Great writing does not persuade," he admits, "it takes the reader out of himself...Greatness appears suddenly; like a thunderbolt it carries all before it and reveals the writer's full power in a flash" (4). However, Longinus eagerly laments the fact that it is too easy to go too far in trying to achieve startling effects; tawdriness and affectation are the result of hyperbole that does not aim at the proper objects and with the proper tone. Such excess, cunning and contrived, will appear artificial, selfishly detracting from the heroic situation and its moral message and focusing instead on itself, a style shorn of substance.

For the most part, the Greco-Roman tradition displays a unanimity on this trope, although it is not always as eloquently expressed as in Longinus. The *Ars poetica* of Horace, written between 23 and 13 B.C.E., reflects the common classical theme of prudence and appropriateness in speaking and writing, urging the avoidance of extremes in poetry. The poet should choose a theme equal to the poet's strength and should know how to say the right thing at the right time. New and strange words should be used only in moderation; words and actions should fit both the speaker or character and the audience's expectations. Although this treatise does not explicitly address hyperbole, it clearly leaves no place for the trope of excess in its warnings against transgressing the boundaries of the expected.

The pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium*

provides the most explicit and influential Latin definition: "Hyperbole [*superlatio*] is a manner of speech exaggerating the truth, whether for the sake of magnifying or minifying something."⁶ On first view, this definition, which couples hyperbole with understatement (*litotes*), seems to align this trope with the truth. However, on a closer reading it is clear that hyperbole does not create a truth, but rather magnifies something that is already true. Indeed, the author of this text also classifies hyperbole as a form of emphasis (*significatio*) and notes that metaphor too is used to magnify or minify. The truth, then, is independent of the workings of this trope.

Hyperbole is thus portrayed as more like simile, which points out a previously known similarity, than metaphor, which creates new meaning through a unique fusion of seemingly incompatible elements. Simile works on the basis of resemblance, articulating a likeness which is already present for all to see; similarly, hyperbole merely magnifies, calling attention to something that can be seen clearly without the occasionally helpful aid of emphasis. This connection is unfortunate for the history of hyperbole: an exaggeration of something already known would hardly be a remarkable figurative feat; instead, it would be a useful tool in some situations but, if taken too far, it would become a nuisance, perhaps an irrelevant irritation, at best an amusing diversion. I want to argue that the connection that needs to be drawn is between hyperbole and metaphor, not simile. Although poor hyperbole might function like simile, good hyperbole does not emphasize the truth but says something true through the exaggeration, a truth that could not be grasped in a nonfigurative form. Good hyperbole, like good metaphor, has a staying power that cannot be resisted with paraphrase and summation. The excess of hyperbole is essential to the truth that hyperbole speaks.

Quintilian (35 C.E. to sometime after 95) continues and strengthens the Ciceronian attempt to connect rhetoric and ethics in a plea for honesty and sincerity.

His extremely influential *De Institutione Oratoria* describes, in twelve books, the lifelong education of the orator. This education is a process which, without any hard rules, teaches public speaking as a way of life, and thus the book touches on many subjects in addition to rhetoric. When Quintilian writes about style, for instance, his concern is to establish the trustworthiness of the speaker, and so he emphasizes a natural and plain vividness that leaves no room for hyperbole. In fact, he laments the decline of Ciceronian moderation:

Straightforward language, naturally expressed, seems to some of us to have nothing of genius; but whatever departs, in any way, from the common cause, we admire as something exquisite; as, with some persons, more regard is shown for figures that are distorted and in any respect monstrous, than for such as have lost none of the advantages of ordinary conformation.⁷

Indeed, echoing Aristotle's comment about the youthfulness of hyperbole's vehemence, Quintilian notes, "For clarity is the chief virtue of eloquence, and the less ability a man has, the more he tries to raise and swell himself out, as those of short stature exalt themselves on tiptoe, and the weak use most threats."⁸ Distorting the common definition of figures of speech as compensations for deficiencies in language, Quintilian suggests that excess is quite literally a substitution for personal—physical and moral—faults and weaknesses.

When he was not so concerned about the moral integrity of his orator, Quintilian could offer a wonderful definition of hyperbole as "an elegant straining of the truth."⁹ He could also write, in what is perhaps the most paradoxical definition of this trope, "It is enough to say that hyperbole lies, though without any intention to deceive."¹⁰ This baffling statement surely says more than it intends; by displaying hyperbole's ambiguous relation to deception, it nudges—strains—toward the

question of truth. It is possible that Quintilian knew, and was echoing, Seneca's *On Benefits*, which provides the most positive and constructive definition of hyperbole in the ancient world:

We overstate some rules in order that in the end they may reach their true value...The set purpose of all hyperbole is to arrive at the truth by falsehood. And so when the poet [Virgil] said: "Whose witness shamed the snow, their speed the winds," he stated what could not possibly be true in order to give credence to all that could be true...Hyperbole never expects to attain all that it ventures, but asserts the incredible in order to arrive at the credible.¹¹

Quintilian, however, must assert the priority of an ethics of moderation over Seneca's more straightforward concern with rhetorical truth. "For although every hyperbole involves the incredible, it must not go too far in this direction, which provides the easiest road to extravagant affectation."¹² Hyperbole is a dangerous and slippery slope in which one can slide upward into unrestrained and foolish passion and self-indulgence.

In theology, this cautious attitude toward excess has continued as an inheritance from the classical Greek and Latin rhetorical traditions, as is clear in Augustine's Ciceronian comments about preaching in *On Christian Doctrine*.¹³ Here he warns against the use of the "grand style" for any prolonged length of time. The subdued manner is better for teaching, and even for praising and condemning the moderate manner is often better than the grand. Only when discourse is "forceful with emotions of the spirit" (150) is the grand style appropriate. Within the confines of theological reflection, however, such emotions are ordinarily out of place. Other theologians would concur. For example, Calvin once wrote, "But we do not read of anyone being blamed for drinking too deeply of the fountain of living water."¹⁴ He means that it is impossible to exaggerate

the significance of the Bible or to write too much or say too much about it. However, his own rather severely circumscribed prose, as opposed for example to Luther's often reckless style, is enough to show that Calvin did not take his own advice literally.

Mentioning Luther's name should suggest that many theologians, including Augustine himself, have not always followed Augustine's advice. Indeed, these brief remarks are not intended to survey the complex history of the relationship between hyperbole and theology. Excess has always been an integral part of religious language, especially, for example, in the language of the mystics, but also in such varying discourses as prayer, polemics, and hagiography, as well as ritualized practices like religious festivals. Paul Ramsey has drawn the contrast between Greek and Christian thought precisely at the boundary between moderation and excess. "Yet the Christian ideal of character," he writes, "is not the same as the Greek, 'In nothing too much, and something of everything'; Aristotle's ethic of the 'mean' not the same as Jesus' 'ethic of the extreme.'"¹⁵ Ramsey argues that the one thing Aristotle is immoderate about is the pursuit of moderation, while Augustine's description of temperance restrains all impulses except one, "so that love might give itself entirely and *without restraint* to that which is loved... There can never be too much love for God, nor too little of the impulses which impede it."¹⁶ An excessive love for God organizes and orders all of our other loves; by allowing for hyperbole in one place Augustine puts moderation in its proper place.

During the Enlightenment,¹⁷ however, the current of Aristotelian reservations about extravagance that runs through much of theology settled into prejudices that became deeply embedded in popular as well as philosophical attitudes. Since the Enlightenment sets the stage for all modern theology, the effect for hyperbole was disastrous. As one historian explains, "'Enthusiasm' was a dirty word in the eighteenth century... Reasonable moder-

ate people agreed that enthusiasm was a bad thing."¹⁸ And another historian reinforces this view: "Civilized man, it was assumed, would be wise to adhere to his beliefs sedately and in a reasonable spirit... 'Enthusiasm' was equated with fanaticism, and was everywhere suspect."¹⁹ Indeed, the eighteenth-century French rhetorician Du Marsais (1676–1756) recommended that hyperboles be introduced with "so to speak" or "if one may say so," rhetorical precautions which discount this figure even before it is spoken.²⁰ Religion, after playing a significant role in a century and more of terrible strife, was put in its place. Everyone knew that the claims of religion could "get out of hand" and result in fanaticism. And yet, to say, "God is, so to speak, love," seems a high price to pay for the disciplining and correcting of the negative aspects of religious zeal.

The prolific and popular Joseph Priestley provides an excellent summation of Enlightenment attitudes toward hyperbole in *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* (1777).²¹ This text echoes, and sometimes simply repeats, many of the comments about excess and extravagance from classical authors. He defines hyperbole in terms of the same kind of transference that metaphor involves: "The advantage of using hyperbole is, that the idea of one object may be heightened and improved by ideas transferred from other objects, and associated with it" (241). Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference that sets hyperbole apart; it is a departure from the truth in which "the untruth lies in the affirmation itself, whereas in most other figures it is concealed in an epithet" (241). Thus, hyperbole's distortions are more direct and immodest than the other tropes.

Priestley does acknowledge that such directness can serve a useful function in discourse. To express really great magnitudes or numbers, hyperbole might be a necessary deception. However, hyperboles "must be condemned, as strained and unnatural, when the idea they excite in our minds really exceeds the idea that ought to be excited by the object described by them"

(243). When hyperbole goes further than the object that it represents, an object, of course, that Priestley admits it can never reach anyway, it has gone too far, and substitutes passions for the real thing. The expression should be molded by the idea of the object; it should not draw attention to itself as it tries to draw the reader or listener toward what cannot be literally understood. In the end, Priestley agrees, it is easy to abuse this trope, but not because of the nature of hyperbole itself but due to the tendency of human nature to deceive, "for what can be easier than to exceed the truth in description?" (244). The greedy logic of hyperbole is the shape of the desire to go further than the facts in the name of something else.

Contemporary writers are hardly more generous to the trope that lies. One of the most sustained and systematic treatments of hyperbole in recent literature can be found in the encyclopedic work by Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*. These authors analyze this trope as an adjunct and subordinate to a specific type of argument, which they call "unlimited development," a structure or pattern of persuasion which insists "on the possibility of always going further in a certain direction without being able to foresee a limit to this direction, and this progress is accompanied by a continuous increase of value" (287). This argument protracts a line of thought that is already approved and valued, thus intending to define certain purified notions or promote unattainable ideals. Although they admit that there is an enormous margin of liberty in the creation of good hyperboles, they tend to limit it to this one particular argumentative strategy, the structure of which is clearly explained. They thus undervalue the reckless and profuse side to this trope.

An unlimited argument does not seek a certain destination, does not want to arrive anywhere; rather, it is driven by a telos always to go further, to say ever something more, to overstep itself. Such an argument is, by the very logic of *The New Rhetoric*, hardly an argument

any longer. It does not seek to persuade by establishing some common ground; indeed, the metaphor of common ground is particularly inappropriate for a trope that seeks not just higher but even unimaginable terrain. Moreover, the authors of *The New Rhetoric* tend to limit hyperbole to the establishment of absolute or perfect terms. I see no warrant for this claim. Hyperbole can push in many different directions, toward the ideal and the ridiculous, the beautiful and the ugly, the acceptable and the unacceptable. This point will become particularly significant when I look at Flannery O'Connor.

Another important recent evaluation also follows this strategy of containment by connecting hyperbole to the search for the ideal, or the sublime. This connection has a long tradition, dating back to Longinus but also found in Samuel Johnson.²² For Louis Wirth Marvick, the sublime is defined in terms of "the quality of an ideal which, despite [the artist's] best efforts, remains more or less aloof."²³ The language of the sublime is, therefore, both an exalting and bitter task; to speak about something that does not exist, or at best exists only ideally, something we desire but know we cannot obtain, is frustrating and demanding. Marvick argues that such language takes the form of hyperbole. Hyperbole not only believes in the sublime but also acts as an emotional discharge, channeling an enthusiasm that can become wild, fanatical, and dangerous. Indeed, Marvick suggests that hyperbole is intrinsically deceptive, passing off a lie "by injecting so heavy a dose of idealism into his [the reader's] fare, that the resistance of his faculties is overcome, and he gives himself up to the enjoyment of the illusion" (51). The metaphor here is illuminating: hyperbole is a numbing drug—an opiate for the masses?—that replaces one's sense of reality with a transitory hallucination.

According to Marvick, this deceptive strategy works, as in Longinus's analysis, only with the consent of the audience, without which hyperbole turns brutal

and ridiculous. Hyperbole is so passionate and naive that only an audience desperately desiring to be uplifted and overcome will submit to its frantic manipulations. Marvick has succeeded in portraying hyperbole as a part not of rhetoric but rather of psychology, as a key to the phenomenon of mass hallucination and irrational crowd behavior. Indeed, he argues that hyperbole must be cut with irony in order for it to seem palatable, let alone credible. I will focus on a more positive relationship between hyperbole and the sublime in the next chapter, where I will discuss Kierkegaard's notion of love. Although I have learned much from Marvick, he does leave unresolved the question of why anyone would want to use this trope, or why anyone would be fooled by it.

Indeed, the overwhelming verdict that rhetorical tradition passes on hyperbole raises a suspicious question: What is this trope, that it engenders such consistent, even excessive criticism and rejection? Although its wide scope and many manifestations will emerge only throughout the various chapters in this book, I want to try to better grasp, if not define, this trope in the present chapter. The problem is that historically hyperbole has rarely been given the honor of being defined as a trope at all. When it is not being discussed—from the viewpoint of nature, order, and reason—in terms of compensation, deception, and passion, it is assigned, in rhetorical terminology, to the second order of the tropes, along with such minor persuasive ploys as amplification, examples, and images.²⁴ Hyperbole is thus not a trope in itself but an intensifier; it can heighten any tropical gesture and so is dependent upon other configurations. It has no definite shape of its own but is felt when any trope goes too far. It exhibits a supplementary logic, adding to other linguistic forms without making its own mark. A supplement, however, is more than an addition; it also completes a lack or corrects an omission.²⁵ Even more, a supplement reveals an incompleteness, disclosing possibilities

that only a premature closure could preclude. Hyperbole is difficult to describe not only because it goes beyond ordinary discourse but also because it judges and indicts the ordinary from a vantage point that is always possible but rarely pursued.

Whatever it is, hyperbole always seems to invite prodigal speculation; a discussion of this figure of speech inevitably expands to include broader and larger issues. Perhaps this means that hyperbole's structure, the logic of a supplement that claims for itself a certain necessity and integrity, can never be precisely pinpointed. It is not accurate or fair, however, to infer from this ambiguity the conclusion that hyperbole is a secondary and derivative feat of the linguistic imagination. In fact, it could be argued that hyperbole constitutes the ultimate shape of all of the tropes. The desire to magnify, enlarge, and intensify is the basic drive of all rhetorical formations. Hyperbole is thus the primary trope, the Ur-trope, not an aspect of but on the contrary the root of all rhetoric. It is the master trope, the one mad movement that the other tropes imitate, shape, and even minimize in their own particular ways. I will return to the question of comparing tropes in the last chapter, but even given this positive understanding of hyperbole the question of a definition is still exceedingly difficult. After all, hyperbole is impossible to measure. Just how it extends beyond normal discourse is not very easy to determine: how far must the "too far" go in order to be considered hyperbolic? Moreover, because discussions of hyperbole tend to expand beyond the boundaries of rhetoric, any attempt at a definition is complicated by the fact that the reference of hyperbole is not limited to specific statements; instead, the term can also cover—as will be seen in the chapter on Georges Bataille—a broad range of meanings, namely, the *hyperbolic*: a force, an attitude or posture, any person or event or even thing that is disproportionate to the ordinary and everyday.²⁶

For these reasons, it is best to begin simply. In very

practical terms, hyperbole seems to play a regular role in everyday discourse, and many hyperboles are easy to recognize. One of the most interesting facets of this trope is that it functions as both a species of language and action, and the interconnection between these two aspects is often not very clear. As a trope, hyperbole has been linked with "purple prose," a tendency toward flamboyance and extravagance, a willed excess that is often signified by an accumulation of words, proliferation of images, and extension of claims. As action, hyperbole breaks with the moderation that Aristotle found in all reasonable people by evincing an enthusiasm that the Enlightenment so thoroughly condemned. Hyperbole the trope is a strange feat of language, residing uneasily on the border of the sublime and the ridiculous; by going too far it can lose all sense of seriousness and purpose. Hyperbolic praxis can be located at the edge of an enthusiasm undefended against the temptation of fanaticism. In either case, as trope or praxis, hyperbole is usually suspect because, by definition, not only does it go too far but it is difficult, in the midst of good hyperboles, to say when the "too far" is "too much."

In fact, many definitions, like Perelman's and Marvick's, are limited not only because of their morally condemnatory (and condescending) tone, or because they connect hyperbole only to the ideal, an artificial constraint. These definitions fall short primarily because they make hyperbole an easy, transparent trope, an approach that does not account for its power and persistence. Hyperbole stubbornly insists that its violation of expectations be taken literally for good reason; as one writer explains, "Hyperbole is an exaggeration on the side of truth."²⁷ Indeed, hyperbole's literalness is its strength; because it aggressively wants to mean what it says, it cannot easily be reduced to a more tame equivalent. The more such power is taken seriously, the less definitions seem appropriate or even possible. To define is to limit, and in this arena of discourse only tentative boundaries can be constructed.

Among all the tropes, therefore, hyperbole is the most difficult to define because it is an inordinate movement and a violent impulsion—not a static formation or configuration—that breaks through ordinary limitations; hyperbole vertiginously suspends the logic of language, and therein lies the origin of its danger and power. A disruptive and visceral force, hyperbole cannot be measured because it opens up horizons to the infinite. Because its process of intensification is, in principle, unbounded, or so it would lead you to believe, hyperbole can only be understood relatively, in comparison to the ordinary discourse that it supersedes. However, it also denies the conventions which try to name it, the perspective of the ordinary from which it is recognized, analyzed, and explained. In a way, all good hyperboles resist explanation because they really mean what they say; a good hyperbole arrogantly sets a new standard of insight that rejects the logic of everyday discourse, refusing the very conditions from whence it arises. Hyperbole knows that it is not literally true, and yet it pursues its own logic of extremity in spite of this knowledge—for the sake of a different kind of truth.

Another aspect of this trope, the connection between figure and action, is not immediately evident and is the source of much confusion. Contrary to Marvick's insinuations, extravagant language does not necessarily lead to fanatical, or as the Enlightenment called it, "enthusiastic" behavior. The relationship between language and praxis in this case needs careful consideration. Some forms of hyperbolic discourse—say, the incitement to riot—do intend to create in reality what is said in language, yet other hyperboles are so obviously extreme and subtly sophisticated that they solicit reflection rather than invoke action, attract curiosity and suspicion, not enthusiasm. In this respect, it could be argued that good hyperboles contain within their own structure an ironic moment of hesitation and resistance. They both demand and warn, invite and refuse,

insist and demur. The point is not only that praxis is not always such a clear reflection of language but also that excess can enlarge as well as restrict one's horizon for reflection and range of action. Religious hyperboles, I will argue, do not narrow but widen the imagination, multiplying and not limiting possibilities for action.

In this same context of the practical impact of this trope, an odd connection can be drawn between hyperbole and understatement, or litotes. Indeed, many hyperboles are deflated by leading to no action at all, or are translated into their opposite, the understatement.²⁸ Because excess is sometimes relatively easy to recognize, it can be quickly dismissed—the balloon, too full of air, pops—and nothing happens, nothing changes. Moderate arguments persuade; exaggerations shock, and after the shock—which results, after all, from a demand that cannot be met, a claim that is incredible—everything stays the same. By calling attention to its own extremity, hyperbole ironically makes the litotes look all the more reasonable. The hyperbole can thus function as a discharge of energy that does not direct action but rather makes action seem impossible and irrelevant. The result can be twofold. As a beguiling exuberance, hyperbole can serve not to guide action but to derail thought. Or by granting a glimpse of the impossible, hyperbole can make reality seem all the more necessary.

One way to think of hyperbole is with this image: it is the view from a peak which does not exist. This encapsulates both the grandeur but also the instability of the hyperbolic claim. Hyperbole surveys the horizon from an incredible perspective, but it is a perspective which does not have a solid basis in reality, ordinarily conceived. To extend this metaphor, one could say that the climb of exaggeration can be both exhausting and exhilarating, dangerous and sublime. It is an ascent that does not easily end because it leads to a point that is precariously steep and unfixed. One could also say that hyperbole is consent to a perspective from which cer-

tain views would not otherwise exist. By going too far, hyperbole is just right; its excess is just enough. Hyperbole is thus not mere exaggeration; it transgresses the logic of everyday language with some nonsense precisely when nothing else would make sense. *Prima facie*, this definition must seem paradoxical: Can hyperbole be both excessive and appropriate, too much and just enough, a wild, unruly, purposeless explosion and instructive, useful, even true? Does hyperbole conform to a rule? This question will inform all of my investigations, but it will especially surface in the chapter on G. K. Chesterton.

Perhaps the importance of hyperbole for many forms of discourse is questionable and doubtful, but I want to argue that for the religious spirit hyperbole is not an optional movement, a dispensable perspective. Religious claims often sound false today because religious persons do not speak them clearly; we hesitate, and qualify as we enunciate. The Enlightenment has taught religious persons to mumble, not exaggerate.²⁹ On the other hand, our society has assigned to hyperbole such a low standing that to speak religion directly, to hyperbolate religiously, is *de facto* to appear the fool. This is the dilemma of religion in the modern period: how to restore religion's proper voice when that voice has been muted, its integrity disfigured, its density diluted, to the point where it sounds, when it is heard at all, like a distant echo. How can a language be spoken that has been defined, in an *a priori* manner, as an embarrassment, an irrelevant and useless nuisance? Above all, today we need a new way to exclaim the unbelievable, to express the absurd, to make the impossible seem plausible, even necessary, and what better place to start than with the simple phrase, "God is love."

As Tracy's analysis suggests, the language of hyperbole is an appropriate articulation of the various genres of discourse in the New Testament. As his work also suggests, however, the word hyperbole itself, and the benefit of reflection on this trope, is rarely used to describe