

The Literary Rhetoric of Commoratio

Textual analysis of Stefan Sundströms "Sabina 1" og Halldis Moren Vesaas' "Ord over grind"

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Introduction

The language of literature is often claimed to be much richer and more ambiguous than everyday language and the language of science. The claim is made both by Anglo-American new critics and French structuralists. In this essay I would like to demonstrate two examples of a seemingly opposite quality of literary language, namely its compulsion to repeat itself. Repetition often, but not always, produces a linguistic surface too large compared to the concept it is reducible to. As the linguistic surface becomes too large, language, according to the Roman rhetorician Quintilian, runs the risk of turning barbaric¹ or solecistic.² Quintilian singles out four major forms of barbarisms and solecisms. All of them are characterized by ornamentation gone astray, that is, ornamentation no longer serving the function of eloquence and clarity. The four categories are characterized as follows:

¹ Barbarism is defined as "an offence occurring in connexion with single words" (*Institutio Oratoria*, Book I. v. 6, i *The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian with an english translation by H.E. Butler M.A., I*, The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1969, s. 81).

² Solecism is defined as "faults [...] concerned with more words than one" (*Institutio Oratoria*, Book I. v. 34, s. 95).

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- Erroneous or inappropriate addition. The linguistic surface is too large compared to the concept it is reducible to. Pleonasm is the basic form.
- Erroneous or inappropriate omission. The linguistic surface is too small compared to the concept it is reducible to. Ellipsis is the basic form.
- Erroneous or inappropriate redistribution of words. Anastrophe is the basic form.
- Erroneous or inappropriate choice of images and substitute words. Metaphor is the basic form.

The barbaric and solecistic functions of language are used in order to attract attention to important aspects of a text, and they are associated with provocation, renewal, transgression and upheaval. According to the early rhetoricians the arena of barbarisms and solecisms is, first of all, the language of poetry:

Some teachers however, to display their learning, are in the habit of picking out examples of *barbarism* from the poets and attacking the authors whom they are expounding for using such words. A boy should however realize that in poets such peculiarities are pardonable or even praiseworthy, and should therefore be taught less common instances.¹

In the following two textual analyses I shall demonstrate two examples of poems repeating themselves. Whether the poems analysed may be said to have a linguistic surface too large compared to the concept it is reducible to, and therefore constitutes examples of the pleonastic barbarism or solecism, is a matter of opinion, and will be discussed towards the end of the essay. According to Alvhild Dvergsdal this "fault" tends to produce a "flourishing" or "baroque" style, like the style of Adam Oehlenschläger's poetry which is loaded with "various

¹ *Institutio Oratoria*, Book I. v. 11, s. 83.

kinds of repetitions, paraphrases of the same concept, epithets and tautologies".¹ The two poems I am going to analyse, certainly make use of repetitions, but without producing an impression of "flourishing" or "baroque" style. On the contrary, the repetitions of "Sabina 1" and "Ord over grind" seem to form symmetrical patterns in both poems. In order to expose the symmetries of the two poems I will do a composition analysis – that is, I will divide the poems into consecutive semantic elements on several hierarchical levels.

The analyses

"Sabina 1" is written by the Swedish rock musician Stefan Sundström, and was published as part of his CD-record "Happy hour viser" in 1991.² It is one of his many songs about Sabina. It is hardly the best rock song imaginable, it's not even Sundström's best song, but it suffices to demonstrate an example of the kind of linguistic practice we are talking about. It is actually somewhat more complex than Halldis Moren Vesaas' poem "Ord over grind", even if both poems use almost identical principles of composition and express comparable themes.

I turn to "Sabina 1" first:

- a Jag är inte den som tror på fåglar i bur
- b Eller vingklippta dresserade djur
- c Fast det flaxar både hökar och duvor i mitt bröst
- d När Sabina står i min tambur
- e Och hon tar av sig kappan
- f sparkar av sig sina skor
- g och fäller ut sitt hår som faller svart
- h Men hon tar aldrig av sig sin hatt

¹ Alvhild Dvergsdal: "Romantisk ornamentikk", *NLÅ*, Det Norske Samlaget, 1995, p. 35.

² "Sabina 1" is quoted from Stefan Sundström & Apache: "Happy hour viser", Musiknätet Waxholm AB 1991.

- a Jag är inte den som tror på ringar av guld
- b Monument eller löften från din mun
- c Jag vet att det kommer att göra så ont
- d Det slår mig just i salighetens stund
- e Och hon drar av sig sina strumpor
- f Som fåglar flyr dom iväg
- g Två korpar som jagar ikapp
- h Hon tar aldrig av sig sin hatt

- a Jag är ingen macho, jag har koll på min best
- b Mina bitmärken försvinner dan därpå
- c En salt smak i munnen och en hunger efter mer
- d Det är allt som jag har kvar när hon gått
- e Och hon tar av sig blusen och knäpper upp sin kjol
- f Trosorna är redan på trekvart
- g Hon tar aldrig av sig sin hatt¹

The erotic situation described in "Sabina 1" is similar to the one described in Joe Cocker's hit "You Can Leave Your Hat On". The female striptease plays a predominant role in both songs, and in both cases the woman leaves her hat on. Both are simple stories, but Sundström's text still has a certain degree of complexity to it. Some of the complexity stems from the fact that "Sabina 1" describes not one, but two courses of events.

¹ An approximate translation goes like this:

I don't believe in caged birds/Or performing creatures with clipped wings/Though both hawks and doves flutter in my chest/As Sabina enters my room/And she removes her coat/Flicks off her shoes/Loosens her hair which falls black/But she never takes off her hat.

I don't believe in rings of gold/Monuments or promises from your mouth/I know it will be painful/It hits me in the moment of bliss/And she removes her stockings/Like birds they fly away/Two ravens hunting together/She never takes off her hat.

I'm not a macho, I'm in control of my beast/My bitemarks disappear the next day/a salt taste in my mouth and a hunger for more/Are all I have left when she's gone/And she removes her blouse and opens her skirt/Her panties are already almost down/She never takes of her hat.

The first four verses in each stanza are devoted to one course of events, while the final verses of each stanza describes another. The lyrical I is the main character of the first course of events, that describes three phases in the I's interaction with Sabina:

Stanza 1: Sabina arrives in the main characters apartment ("Sabina står i min tambur")

Stanza 2: The main character makes love to Sabina ("i salighetens stund")

Stanza 3: Sabina has left the apartment ("...när hon gått")

Sabina is the main character of the other course of events, that describes three phases in the process of undressing:

Stanza 1: Sabina takes off her outdoor clothes (coat and shoes)

Stanza 2: Sabina takes off her stockings

Stanza 3: Sabina takes off her inside clothes and underwear (blouse, skirt and panties)

Both courses of events have a beginning-middle-end - structure, but only the first one has a traditional peripety in the middle. The other course of events (Sabina's striptease) belongs, temporally speaking, *after* Sabina's arrival in the apartment, but *before* the lovemaking. In other words, the events in stanza 1 are told in their proper order, while the ecstasy ("salighetens stund") i stanza 2 and the departure in stanza 3 logically ought to have been told after the completion of the striptease. The narrator has obviously chosen not to organize his narration according to chronology, and the reason why seems to be a wish to create a massive system of repetitions.

The outline of this system is visible already by the first reading: The three stanzas of the poem alternates systematically between the I-story and the Sabina-story (see

appendix 1, level 2). Both stories are constructed around a small set of basic and repeated components: The I-story repeats in all three stanzas the description of the I ("Jag är..."), and the Sabina-story repeats in all three stanzas the act of undressing. But the system of composition is indeed more consistent than that. The two stories not only repeats their own set of components, but, as it appears on a certain level of abstraction, also a *common* set of semantic elements.

This structure is most obvious in the striptease sequence, where the act of undressing in all three stanzas ends with an element of contrast: "Hon tar aldrig av sig sin hatt". Three times in a row Sabina expresses, through her actions, ambivalent feelings towards giving herself to: She takes off all her clothes, but keeps her hat on. Sabina devotes her body to the delights of the flesh, but maintains at the same time a rational distance to it all. Thematically speaking, this relation of contrast may be expressed in terms of the well known opposition between sense and sensibility.

Like the Sabina-story, the I-story also breaks down into two contrasted elements. In the first stanza the general description of the lyrical subject in verses a and b is contrasted with the description of the particular situation arising as Sabina enters the apartment. That is, normally the lyrical subject doesn't believe in caging birds, but in this particular instance both hawks and doves flutter inside his own chest. The second stanza is similar. The first two verses offer a general description of a lyrical subect who doesn't believe in vows of eternal fidelity ("ringar av guld" and "løften från din mund"), while the following two verses express the pain felt (in the moment of ecstasy) by not being able to demand eternal fidelity on this particular occasion. The same structure is evident in the third and last stanza, although not, perhaps, quite as clearly. In 3a-b we find the description of a lyrical subject who normally doesn't "eat" his "victims", while the same subject expresses his "hunger efter mer" in the following two verses. Like Sabina,

then, the lyrical subject is in conflict with himself. His fundamental and rational points of view (about owning his beloved) are systematically challenged by his concrete and passionate experiences during sexual intercourse with his beloved Sabina. The thematic contrast between sense and sensibility rules the I-sequence as well as the Sabina-sequence.

As a whole all the repeated alternations between sense and sensibility constitute a perfectly symmetrical system, where the sense-elements form the boundaries and the sensibility-elements the center of the system (see appendix 1, level 3). A closer look at the center reveals that it contains not only one, but two allusions to sexual ecstasy. The euphemism "salighetens stund" in the I-sequence is mirrored by the metaphor "två korpar som jagar ikapp" in the Sabina-sequence. The reason why Sabina undresses only one piece of clothing, her stockings, in the second stanza, seems consequently to be the narrators wish to clear the way for a metaphorical description of the sexual intercourse.

To sum up, then, "Sabina 1" appears to have a certain macrotextual complexity. According to the compositional analysis the upper two levels (levels 1 and 2) are dominated by two alternating courses of events. The third level of the analysis, however, demonstrates that whatever complexity there is, is integrated into a symmetrical and thoroughly redundant system of thematic oppositions. The rhetorical device dominating the structure of the poem has a certain likeness to that of *commotio*. The narrator dwells, by way of repetition and permutation, on the same thought or, in this particular instance, the same thematic opposition, throughout the whole poem.

Halldis Moren Vesaas' well known poem "Ord over grind" was published in the book "I ein annan skog" in 1955.¹ "Ord over grind" goes like this:

¹ "Ord over grind" is quoted from Halldis Moren Vesaas: *Utvalde dikt*, Aschehoug, Oslo, 1974.

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- a Du går fram til mi inste grind
 - b og eg går òg fram til di.
 - c Innanfor den er kvar av oss einsam,
 - d og det skal vi alltid bli.
-
- a Aldri trenge seg lenger fram,
 - b var lova som galdt oss to.
 - c Anten vi møttes titt eller sjeldan
 - d var møtet tillit og ro.
-
- a Står du der ikkje ein dag eg kjem
 - b fell det meg lett å snu
 - c når eg har stått litt og sett mot huset
 - d og tenkt på at der bur du.
-
- a Så lenge eg veit du vil koma iblant
 - b som no over knastrande grus
 - c og smile glad når du ser meg stå her,
 - d skal eg ha ein heim i mitt hus.¹

While "Sabina 1" makes use of a few metaphors, like "fåglar i bur", "duvor i mitt bröst" and "korpar som jagar ikapp", there is almost no imagery at all in "Ord over grind". The poem as a whole is, however, obviously to be read allegorically, the house and the gate symbolizing respectively the inner being of the subject and the border between it and the surrounding world. And while "Sabina 1" offers a description of a bodily-erotic relationship between man and woman, it seems more

¹ An approximate translation goes like this:

You go up to my innermost gate/I go up to yours./Inside it each of us is lonely/and always will be.

Never force oneself further/was the law for us two./Whether we met often or seldom/the meeting was trust and calm.

If you are not there one day when I arrive/it is easy to turn around/after I have stood a while watching the house/and thought: you live there.

As long as I know you will come again/like now across rustling gravel/and smile happily when you see me stand there/I will have a home in my house.

appropriate to characterize the relationship between the two unidentified characters in "Ord over grind" as platonic. A third difference is the fact that plot-structure in "Sabina 1" (in the I-sequence) is replaced by argumentative or rhetorical structure in "Ord over grind". This becomes obvious as we divide the poem into phases or segments.

At first, all four stanzas seem to tell the same story – about a lyrical subject reflecting over meetings by the gate. The first two stanzas are, however, different from the last two; the two first and last stanzas stress what we may call different aspects of the meetings. The first two stanzas emphasize the aspect of loneliness and reservation. Stanza 1 says that "Innanfor den [grinda] er kvar av oss einsam,/og det skal vi alltid bli", and stanza 2 "Aldri trengje seg lenger fram,/var lova som galdt oss to". The third and fourth stanzas are devoted to the same meetings between the same characters, but they emphasize the feeling of togetherness and interdependence. The third stanza makes it clear that the feeling of togetherness endures even if one of the two occasionally fails to turn up. In the fourth stanza the lyrical subject still finds herself alone on her side of the gate, but the feeling of loneliness from stanza 1 has turned into a sense of belonging: "eg [skal] ha ein heim i mitt hus". "Ord over grind" divides, then, into two segments or elements on the first level of the analysis (see appendix 2, level 1), and the segments are tied together by at least three relations: repetition, causality and opposition. The motif of the meeting is repeated, and the two aspects – the feeling of loneliness vs the feeling of togetherness – are opposed to each other. The relation of causality characterizes the development from a sense of loneliness to a sense of belonging, and is underlined by the uses of temporal markers in the poem. The third and fourth stanzas suggest, by their uses of future and present tenses, that the present and future sense of belonging is due to common practice in the past, described in the two first stanzas (held in past and present tenses). To sum up, the analysis of the

macrocomposition suggests that the poem is characterized by the narrators desire to emphasize a strong point by demonstrating its validity both in past, future and present contexts.

The temporal aspects are even more essential to the second level analysis (see appendix 2, level 2). The first stanza differs from the second mainly by way of grammatical tense. The first stanza describes the present, while the second refers to the past. The same goes for the last two stanzas: The third stanza refers to the future, while the last one describes the present situation. The first and the last stanzas are however not thoroughly homogenous when it comes to tense. The first three verses of the first stanza refers to the present, while the fourth actually points to the future. The mixture of the same two tenses is evident also in the last stanza.

It has been mentioned that all four stanzas seem to tell the same story. The third level analysis indeed shows this to be true. The analytical challenge on this level consists in segmenting each of the four stanzas, and it seems to me that all four of them divide into two contrastive segments. That is, each of the four stanzas is founded on the semantic opposition between meeting and separation. The opposition is prefigured already in the title of the poem, "ord" implying communication or meeting and "grind" symbolizing separation.

The system is operative from the very first stanza (see appendix 2, level 3), where the verses a and b describe two people approaching each other, while the following two verses remind us that they nevertheless are separated from each other, and besides also lonely. The sequence of the elements is reversed in the second stanza. The first two verses stress the feeling of separateness ("aldri trengje seg lenger fram"), while the following two dwell on the meeting ("var møtet tillit og ro"). The third stanza repeats the system of the second, the first two verses focusing on separateness ("står du der ikkje") and the following two thematizing the meeting again. It must be

observed, though, that the meeting described in the third stanza, verses c and d, is different from the meetings of the first and second stanzas as it takes place only in the mind of the lyrical subject. The fourth stanza reproduces the sequence of elements as found in the first stanza, but the distribution of verses is slightly different. Here the three first verses are devoted to the description of the meeting, while the last verse again reminds us that the two characters are separated from each other. This very last segment, manifested by the poem's last verse ("skal eg ha ein heim i mitt hus"), is worth a closer look. On the one hand, this verse indeed emphasizes the motif of separateness – it explicitly states that the lyrical subject is situated alone in her own house. On the other hand, being separated does not mean being lonely, as was the case in the last two verses of the first stanza. On the contrary, being separated in this case means being at one with one self and the other.

This last verse is important not only because it completes the compositional structure of the poem; it also completes the thematic structure. While the first stanza of the poem says loneliness may arise even in the company of others, the last stanza states the possibility of experiencing togetherness even when alone. Paradoxically, the poem suggests that the sense of belonging presupposes the experience of being alone. Being alone is not being lonely, at least not as long as somebody you love is there – right outside the gate protecting your inner room.

The composition analysis of "Ord over grind" shows that the poem, like "Sabina 1", is constructed according to a symmetrical and rather redundant system of semantic elements. In both cases the third level analysis exposes ample use of the rhetorical device of commoratio. In addition, it is worth noticing that the binary oppositions systematically repeated and permuted within each stanza, in both poems express the main theme of the poems. The theme is usually abstracted from the actual sequence of the literary text, but in

these cases it may be observed that the sequence of the poems on a certain level is based on repetitions and permutations of one and the same thematic binary opposition.

Conclusion

The two brief analyses have been designed to demonstrate an example of repetition as a distinguishing structural feature of poems. In these particular analyses the system of repetitions proved to be significant especially within each stanza. That is, both poems have been shown to repeat or permute the same thematic oppositions throughout all its stanzas. From a rhetorical point of view, the linguistic surface in both poems may seem larger than the concept it is reducible to. In other words, if the poems were to be judged by the standards of argumentative speeches, they could with a certain right be considered "nagging". Using a term from the rhetoric of figures, the poems could be considered to make barbaric use of the thought figure commoratio.

Poems, however, shouldn't be judged by the standards of argumentative speeches. And what may seem barbaric from a rhetorical point of view, may very well be considered otherwise from a literary point of view. Commoratio, understood as the practice of dwelling, in different ways of expression and in different contexts, on the same idea or theme, could in fact be considered a model figure for literature. But only as long as commoratio does not serve the purpose of the *idée fixe*. If literary language makes use of commoratio in order to insist on one and the same idea, literature turns boring and redundant, and commoratio turns barbaric. If, however, literary language makes use of commoratio in order to investigate or test the qualities of an idea as perceived from different perspectives and in different contexts, literature turns literary, and the use of commoratio is no longer to be considered barbaric.

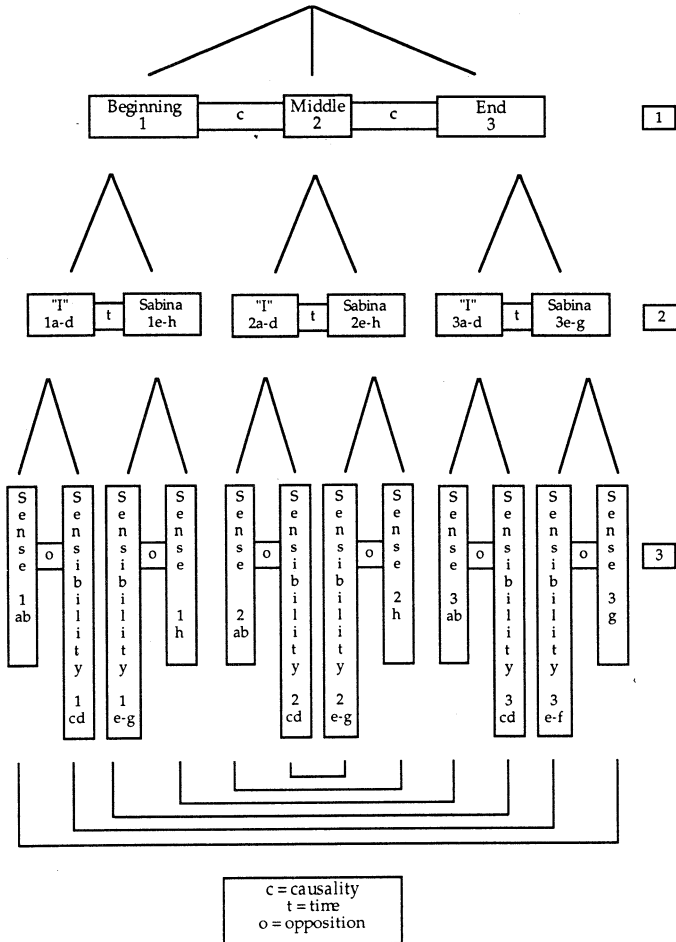
This is exactly what happens in our two poems. "Ord over grind" dwells on the opposition between meeting and separation in present, past and future. The same opposition investigated through changing times. The temporal variation makes visible different aspects or qualities of the opposition – separation proves not to be equivalent to loneliness and meeting does not always amount to a sense of belonging.

"Sabina 1" dwells on the opposition between sense and sensibility through changing gender perspectives and through different stages in the erotic interaction between two people, thereby making visible different aspects of its subject matter: Sensibility is the female joy of undressing before the beloved, but also the masculine pain by not being able to demand vows of eternal fidelity.

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Appendix 1:

The composition of "Sabina 1"



Appendix 2:
The composition in "Ord over grind"

