Suggestion is but one principle of indeterminate development in the lyric. The other is repetition, which appears in the form of parataxis or catalogue. A complete paratactic structure is tripartite, comprising a generative passage (which may be as long as a stanza or as short as an opening phrase), a set of variations on the themes announced at the outset, and a closural passage like that described in the introduction to the preceding chapter.

The blason is the principal sixteenth-century lyric genre in which parataxis was the fundamental structure. A poem by François Sagon typifies the usage. The generating element appears in the opening verse: "Pied de façon à la main comparable." The next forty-two verses describe aspects of the foot with the following syntax:

Pied / relative (optional repeat)
prepositional phrase
adjectival or participal construction.

The elements may be rearranged in any order without affecting the poem's unity and any detail may be omitted or replaced by a synonym, also without important formal consequences, for example:

Pied amoureux de l'autre sans envie,
Pied qui peut bien sauver au corps la vie.
The poem closes with a shift of syntax, to the imperative mode, and a logical marker indicating the conclusion (which, by the way, does not follow): “Pied, suis donc l’ordre et triomphe du corps:”

Descriptive unity is only one poetic result of paratactic form, just as loose cataloguing is only one of its devices. Hugues Salel’s *blason* on *l’épingle* groups some of the catalogued details into analogous clusters differentiated only by the time of day:

Tu es au lever et coucher  
De ma maistresse, où approcher  
Je n’ose qu’une foys l’année  
Par toy est toute gouvernée  
La parure du corps joly,  
Premier le front ample et poly  
Quant tu le serres d’une toille  
Se monstre plus cler que l’estoille.  
Apres tu tiens le chaperon . . .

(The paradigm case of “pattern unity” and “temporal framing” in the paratactic lyric is, of course, Villon’s *Ballade des dames du temps jadis*. Here a single fact is repeated a dozen times in different ways: Like everything else beautiful, brave, or wise these women *must* disappear. Those in the first stanza belong to classical antiquity; those in the second and third to the immediate past. Within each time frame, however, the order is not rigorous: Héloïse, for example is mentioned before Charlemagne’s mother, Berthe au grand pied.)

A BILL OF PARTICULARS

The first parataxis, a spirited satire by Charles Timoléon de Beauxoncles, seigneur de Sigogne, presents a dense, if relatively uncomplicated, version of the form.

Cette petite Dame au visage de cire,  
Ce manche de cousteau propre à nous faire rire,  
Qui a l’œil et le port d’un antique rebécq.  
Merite un coup de becq.
Elle a la bouche et l'œil d'une châte malade,
L'Auguste majesté d'une vieille salade;
Sa petite personne et son corps de brochet
Rsemble un trebuchet.

La voyant pasle et triste en sa blancheur coiffée,
Les Dieux de nos ruisseaux l'estiment une Fée,
Les autres un lapin revenu d'un bouillon
Ou bien un papillon.

Le moindre petit vent, pour soulager sa peine,
Comme vent de lutins la porate à la fonteine,
Car elle poise moins, la Nymphe du Jardin,
Que son vertugadin.

Je consacre en ces vers sa teste de linotte,
Afin que tous les fols en facent leur marotte
Et veux que de son corps, mistement Damoiseau,
On en face un fuzeau.

In the first stanza the speaker furnishes a basis for the catalogue and the closural passage. His procedure is to indicate or imply, through more or less transparent metaphors, aspects of the victim's physical and mental state as a prelude to suggesting what she deserves for being so repugnant. From the beginning he establishes a hostile tone: use of the demonstrative Cette isolates and objectifies her, and the term Dame is so ironic in context as to suggest the speaker's unmitigated scorn. The first flaw that he cites is her diminutive stature; the second, her unctuous complexion, which is also pale white or pale yellow. He then repeats the idea of puniness with a variation: it is linked with other défauts pendables: slenderness, flatness, and hollowness—even rigidity. The judgment clinching the second verse affirms the woman's status as the poet's butt, and ideally the reader's. In the curious verse to follow, he attributes to her the naturally rigid manner or port, as well as the œil of an old rebec. Does he mean something akin to the human visual organ, or the rebec's total appearance, or its état d'esprit? All three are possible in the French of the early seventeenth century. If the first, then he certainly refers to the pegs that extend laterally from the end of the instrument's fingerboard, in which case he also implies facial misalignment and even exophthalmos, a pathological bulge. (The latter would be quite ironic, of course, since the only convexity
The Knot of Artifice

granted to the victim is monstrously abnormal.) If he means overall appearance, he refers to the rebec's flatness, slenderness, hollowness, and rigidity. If, finally, he means état d'esprit, the speaker suggests a kind of stolid, mindless passivity already implicit in verse 2 and in the reference to the rebec's port. Such a constellation of deficiencies, he concludes, deserves punishment. But why a "coup de bec"? Not a gratuitous choice of metaphor, this translates the purely oral (or verbal) aggression of which the poem has consisted so far and will consist to the end of its final stanza.

With his scope and procedure established, the speaker now passes to the catalogue proper, which encompasses the next three stanzas. Each one presents a set of variations on one or more of the themes announced in verses 1-4. The order is random and the necessity for any detail minimal. In other words, displacement of any detail or substitution of a "similar" for it would not affect the poem's completeness, integration, or singleness of form.

The first two verses of the second stanza elaborate almost all of the preceding imagery. The speaker first describes the woman's eyes (cf. v. 3) and her mouth (cf. the poet's own, implied in v. 4). These resemble a sick cat's because both produce effluvia that recall viscous rivulets of melting wax. Meanwhile, the wilting ingredients of a "vieille salade" (v. 6) decompose into a similarly vile mess—unless, of course, the salade is a casque: round, thin, hollow, and metallically cold. More complex is the redundant third verse, which exhibits a literal repetition of the puniness theme found in verse 1, and like the corresponding verse of the first stanza, it presents a dazzling ambiguity. The brochet is certainly a pike, and thus both narrow and flat like a rebec or a manche de cousteau, but it may also be a faucet quill for a wine bottle, and as such both hollow and relatively stiff. (This would entail a brilliant and gratuitous reversal: for the weapon is to the manche de cousteau what the faucet quill is to the wine bottle. The relation of container to thing contained is turned upside down at the further expense of the speaker's victim.) At any rate, he analogizes her small body to a trébuchet, or bird trap, small and narrow like the rebec or the manche de cousteau, with the latter of which it shares another feature: being an enclosure with only one aperture.
The third stanza extends the themes found in the second. Her pallor and whiteness continue the wax image of verse 1, but her tristesse is mysterious, unless it refers to austerity, a probable variant of the rigidity alluded to in verses 1, 2, 3, and 8. That her blancheur is coiffée poses no problem if the familiar sense of the adjective, "besotted" or "stupid," is taken into account. The speaker has already suggested in verse 3 that his victim is mindless.) So described, the spectacle of the Dame convinces the guttersnipes burlesqued in verse 10 that she is a fée, an imaginary woman with magical powers. From the speaker's point of view this judgment is certainly half correct: if she is considered female at all, it can only be in the imagination. Others less fanciful see her for what she is: either like a rabbit returning waterlogged and insipid from a Bouillon or a butterfly, lightweight, fusiform, and hopelessly thin.

The woman's praeternatural lack of substance, belabored in verses 10 and 12 and indicated in the hollowness imagery of verses 2, 3, and 8 (and possibly 6), is the sole theme developed in the prefinal stanza. Departing radically from the poem's developmental norm (by allowing more than two verses to a theme and by elaborating only one theme in the stanza) the speaker foreshadows the poem's imminent closure. Noteworthy is the reference to her vertugadin, a kind of underskirt that serves to puff up a dress. By this image the speaker not only elaborates on his hyperbole but suggests that the woman engages in an unsuccessful effort to mask her néant.

The final strophe of this poem is strongly closural. Continuing like its predecessor, to deviate from the norm, the last four lines contain several formal and stylistic novelties: the speaker refers to himself as well as his discourse in verse 17, and the syntax becomes complex, twice admitting use of the subjunctive (vv. 18 and 20). There are, moreover, two markers of finality: the reference to the poem's ultimate purposes and to a double, irreversible metamorphosis. The transformations have an unmistakable air of the contrapasso about them: they seem to punish in the very image of the alleged crime. The speaker has twice suggested that she is mindless and passive (vv. 3 and 9); he now reiterates his charge by referring to her giddiness or "teste de linotte" (v. 17). Accordingly, he intends that her head become the top piece of a traditional fool's scepter, thus the literally blockheaded
symbol of mental insufficiency—to be universally recognized and derided as such. Her body falls short of the speaker’s ideal of feminine corpulence; but neither does it seem masculine. Instead it is “mistement Damoiscau” (v. 19), or quite like that of an effeminate youth. Being not wholly one or the other, it deserves to be neither; thus the transformation of her fusiform trunk into a fuseau is a brilliantly efficient means of desexing an inflexible victim. These wishes, so vehemently expressed, are, of course, the ultimate coup de bec.

It is clear from the foregoing that the lyric attains descriptive unity: each of its elements presents an aspect of a substance or its characteristic state. The contrapasso does not alter this conclusion. Though it presents a punitive reiteration of that characteristic state, the reiteration is optative, not factual, and in any case it is subsumed under the rubric of “just deserts,” which the poet clearly regards as an integral part of the state itself (cf. v. 4).

As with certain consecutive lyrics disrupted in their progress from beginning through middle to end, the satire of Sigogne contains a submerged figurative component that tightens its unity even further.

The speaker’s reflections on the petite Dame turn on two themes: the concept of the human and, as a corollary, the notion of role, or usefulness. For the speaker, humanitas consists of plenitude, vitality, wholesomeness (including formal perfection), as well as consciousness and freedom from nonhuman traits. Only these qualities permit performance of a specifically human function and so justify a specifically human existence.

In the opening stanza the speaker’s metaphorical pyrotechnics suggest that none of these norms is even remotely approximated. Instead of plenitude there is the hollowness appropriate to sheath and rebec; wholesomeness is replaced by the pale cast associated with candle wax in addition to the protrusion and uneven alignment necessary in the rebec’s system of tuning pegs. The lady’s capacity to play a human role is thus diminished to zero, whereas, ironically, each of the objects and substances to which he compares her is not only useful but indispensable to the comfort or safety, pleasure or instruction normally linked with civilized existence. This tension is crucial to what follows, especially in the closural stanza.
In the first two verses of the second stanza, he again compares her with aspects of nonhuman substances that, despite their ravaged or peccant states, once had (and—in the cat’s case—may again possess) greater utility than the little lady can ever hope for, at least in her present form. He returns to the “double-bind” procedure of stanza 1 when, in verses 7 and 8, he discounts her for formal similarity to direct and indirect sources of amusement and food.

If, in the rabbit metaphor of the third stanza, he repeats the argumentative procedure of stanza one and the last two verses of stanza two, the same cannot be said of the references to fairy and butterfly. In the first instance he likens the victim to a creature that only seems real and to which tradition has granted the power of transforming others for better or worse; in the second case he draws an analogy between the lady and a creature so attenuated in body as to symbolize the soul, and above all, a being subject to metamorphosis. In both cases there is denial of humanity and substantiality (repeating the symbolism of void and absence in blancheur); but there is more importantly a foreshadowing of the victim’s closural transformation.

The fourth stanza is, as I intimated earlier, the weakest of the entire poem, but despite its repetition, it does complete a set of four associated but subordinate water images. Just as the brochet originates in water, the guttersnipes live in or around it, and the rabbit is brought back from it, so too the nymphe du jardin (a cousin of the fée) may be taken for solace or even regeneration à la fontaine. In other words, what falls short of humanity, what may not adequately perform any specifically human roles (physical, moral, or psychological) may be associated with the virtual, the unformed, and the undifferentiated mass.

The victim’s poetic dehumanization accomplished, the speaker wishes to see it confirmed in reality but will not pass up the opportunity to develop a final paradox. Thus the metamorphosis, by which the teste de linotte becomes not only a decorative device but a functional constituent of the fool’s scepter; and the intersex creature, a sexless object useful in the production of thread. Like the papillon she will metamorphose herself; like the fée she will metamorphose other substances or objects. In other words, the speaker proposes nothing less than a punish-
ment that will simultaneously rehabilitate the offender, not as a person but in the image of the poem's other nonhuman objects, which are subservient to the social or economic interests of those whom she offends, and to whom she is now useless except as a butt of sarcasm.

**APOCALYPSE NOW?**

The second example, Théophile de Viau's ode "'Un corbeau devant moy croasse," poses far less tractable difficulties of interpretation.

Un corbeau devant moy croasse,
Une ombre offusque mes regards,
Deux bellettes, et deux renards,
Traversent l'endroit ou je passe:

Les pieds faillent à mon cheval,
Mon laquay tombe du haut mal,
J'entends craqueter le tonnerre,
Un esprit se presente à moy
J'oy Charon qui m'apelle à soy,

Je voy le centre de la terre.

Ce ruisseau remonte en sa source,
Un boeuf gravit sur un clocher,
Le sang coule de ce rocher,
Un aspic s'accouple d'une ourse.

Sur le haut d'une vieille tour
Un serpent deschire un vautour,
Le feu brusle dedans la glace,
Le Soleil est devenu noir,

Je voy la Lune qui va cheoir,

Cet arbre est sorty de sa place.

What immediately strikes the formal analyst of this celebrated lyric is its extreme ambiguity. Just as a case can easily be made for or against the ode's classification as a failed parataxis, so too can one take either side of an argument about the obvious alternative: simultaneous composition. A promising solution resides in a compromise between the two extremes, but like most promising solutions, this one leaves major problems unsolved.

The grounds for regarding the ode as a headless, tailless parataxis are both simple and obvious. There is no generating passage: the catalogue begins immediately, with every unit (but two)
consisting of a single verse that expresses the speaker’s perception in the following syntax:

subject / verb / zero, or / adverbial
(with or without complement / objective
modifier) / infinitive
etc.

The exceptions are paired verses (3–4 and 15–16) which expand and embroider on the basic pattern, no doubt to counteract monotony by deviating from the strict syntactic norm. Théophile could have displaced them or replaced them with “similar[s].” The catalogue ends, as it began, without a marker. There is no closure; the series of spectacles merely stops.

This reading is obviously superficial. It disregards two salient features of the text: (1) a shift in the quality of images beginning with verse 9—from the literal (-seeming) to the mythic; (2) the implications of the term esprit in verse 8, which could mean, in this context, “vision” or “fancy.”

If indeed that is the sense of esprit, then the poem may be a simultaneous composition, not unlike Saint-Amant’s caprice, discussed above in chapter 2. In this case the events related in verses 1–7 so provoke the speaker’s sensibility that he reacts by hallucinating (vv. 8–20). It would then be the critic’s task to clarify the cause-effect, logical, or customary relationships existing between the specifics of the experience and those of the reaction. Appealing as this solution may be, it fails to account for the temporal-causal discontinuity of items in each segment of the poem; nor does it allow for the more likely meaning of esprit in this context, to wit: ghost.

To avoid these extremes, I suggest that the ode is paratactic—but also possesses temporal framing. It is, in other words, cognate with Villon’s Ballade des dames du temps jadis. This hypothesis draws strong support from the well-established view that Théophile employed traditional metaphor and iconology throughout the poem. Along with my observations on structure, therefore, I shall present certain obvious equivalencies from sources in Western European myth and folklore as well as the Bible.⁸

The poem opens with a set of variations on the theme of mauvais augure. The cry of the perspicacious crow—which menacingly recalls the Latin cras (tomorrow)—is the very me-
dium of ill omen, and so generates all that follows. The catalogue serves to make the subject of the omen more precise. The blinding ombre symbolizes death, chaos, or the dominance of the irrational. This is echoed in the number two, associated with conflict, antagonism, or opposition and here attached to the ritually unclean weasels and the fraudulent foxes, which cross the innocent speaker’s path, thus contributing to an unstable union of opposites. Among its other functions, a horse is expected to give its master timely warning of danger; here, his stumbling may announce future disorder—unless it testifies to his possession by the same destructive forces that threaten the speaker or his world. The idea of disorder presaged is repeated but humanized in the lackey’s epileptic seizure. Finally, the repeated thunderclaps suggest divine wrath. Still unclear, however, is whether the foregoing images are actual omens, percepts that the speaker construes as omens, or pure imaginings.

It is at this point that the ambiguity of esprit becomes critically important. If the preceding catalogue presents actual omens, then the appearance of a ghost would mark a final and most alarming augury; if, on the other hand, the catalogue presents percepts subjectively construed as omens—or pure imaginings—then esprit may do double duty, denoting vision, which may, of course, entail the sighting of a ghost.

According to the manner in which the reader resolves the poem’s circumstantial and verbal ambiguities, the catalogue that follows relates the fulfillment of omens, the reactive fantasy of a terrified percipient, or the visionary’s continued apocalyptic imaginings. In any case, the second set of variations focuses on the dissolution of a world, presented as the inversion of norms. Verses 10 and 11, as Alvin Eustis has pointed out, clearly refer to an earthquake; as such they reflect the lackey’s convulsive seizure (v. 7). The stolid, earthbound ox’s deliberate climb up the church tower (v. 12) initiates a series of four fitting paradoxes. In the first of these, vital, bodily heat is emitted from an incongruously motionless and chilly source. There follows a denatured, and altogether futile, mélangé of cruelly destructive species—latent, no doubt, in the crossroads imagery of verse 4. In a second repetition of the dualism theme, the habitual victim of flying carnivores reverses roles with one of them; but if the vulture betokens prophecy and regeneration, its slaughter by an incarnation of death itself must mark the end of time. The
imagery of fire and ice, of course, recalls hell. The last three verses assure strong closure, not only by the domination of final, unending darkness (vv. 18 and 19, as prepared in v. 2), but also by an event announced in verse 5, the conclusive dislocation of traditionally stable objects: the moon from its orbit (v. 19) and the tree, symbolizing the world’s axis, from its accustomed place.

A final curiosity of this difficult text is that, despite its lack of formal clarity, its unity is apprehensible. Whatever the poem represents, its principle of singleness, completeness, and integration is descriptive. If the poem is “factual,” it presents the end of the world in two of its aspects: that of event foreseen and that of foresight fulfilled. If the speaker relates natural events construed as omens and then his reactive vision, the text describes two aspects of his own world: the apperceptive and the imagina­tive. If, finally, he relates mere visions, the unity of his spirit is at issue. But the ambiguity is inescapable, and with it, the shifting and uncertain grounds for effect.

Catalogue lyrics occur with great frequency in all the poetic œuvres of the period. Among the many rigorized by the devices discussed in this essay are Malherbe’s “Sus, debout, la merveille des belles,” Saint-Amant’s “Les Goinfres,” and Tristan L’Hermite’s “La Belle Esclave maure.”

2. All citations of the blasons are to Schmidt, Poètes du 16e siècle. The Sagon text appears on pp. 344–45.
5. If the eye is, as seems plausible, in the belly of the instrument, the register of the passage shifts from ironic extrusion back to vacuity or hollowness.
6. I am grateful for this detail to Mona Tobin Houston, “Levels of Meaning in Sigogne.”
7. Viau, Oeuvres poétiques, p. 164.
8. My source is Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, Dictionnaire des symboles. For an illuminating treatment of the poet’s use of inherited materials see Claire Gaudiani, The Cabaret Poetry of Théophile de Viau.
9. Alvin Eustis, “A Deciphering of Théophile’s ‘Un corbeau devant moy croasse.’”