Chiastic Structures in Literature:
Some Forms and Functions

Max Nänny

According to the OED, a *chiasmus* is a "grammatical figure by which the order of words in one of two parallel clauses is inverted in order." It seems that around 1870 this term, whose etymology derives from the Greek letter "chi" (χ), began to enter the English language and in time to replace the rhetorical term *antimetabole*, which the OED defines as a "figure in which the same words or ideas are repeated in inverse order" and which the Renaissance rhetorician Richard Puttenham aptly called "counterchange" in his *The Arte of English Poesie* of 1589. In modern critical parlance, hence, the expression *chiasmus* is generally applied to a "balancing pattern in verse or prose, where the main elements are reversed."[1]

The term "elements" in this definition indicates that the chiastic patterning *abba* may occur not just on the sentence level but on *all* levels of a literary text: on the level of sounds (including rhymes and rhythm), words, sentences, lines, stanzas, narrative elements (plot, character) and concepts. It goes without saying that chiasmus may be combined with other rhetorical figures such as parallelism, antithesis (dialectical chiasmus), polyptoton, anadiplosis, etc.

Now, what holds for linguistic signs generally, whose signifiers may be identical and yet relate to various signifieds (think, for instance, of the multiple meanings of the signifier "to get"), is equally true for the chiastic pattern *abba* as a pattern – for it may also acquire several meanings depending on the semantic context. Apart from its use as a mnemonic aid in oral literature or as a clever mannerism of style, the various possible interpretations of the uniform structural pattern *abba* make chiasmus available for various mimetic or iconic ends.

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[1] J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 113.

Thus the chiastic series *abba* may be seen as a dynamic or temporal sequence that reverses its movement or inverts its development. Hence, chiasmus may be used as an "emblem" or icon of reversal or inversion generally. Furthermore, the return to the initial element *a* at the end of a chiastic sequence may, on a somewhat more metaphorical level, suggest circularity and, ultimately, a certain form of closure or non-progressive stasis.

But the same chiastic pattern *abba* may also be considered statically or spatially as a symmetrical arrangement of elements which stand in a relationship of balance, opposition, reciprocity or mirroring. However, the first and last elements *a* of the chiasmus *abba* may as well be looked upon as framing, centring or enclosing the inner elements *bb*.

All these possible interpretations of chiasmus may reinforce, reflect or be parallel to the semantically indicated meaning of a literary passage or text.

Before concentrating on my main task, namely on the analysis of functional, that is, imitative (iconic) or "emblematic" uses of chiasmus in some English and American literary texts, I shall first consider chiasmus as a mnemonic and compositional aid in oral literature and then look at a few examples of its later, largely gratuitous use as a kind of oral or rhetorical residue which has dwindled to a mere mannerism of style or a decorative device.

Mnemonic Uses

Let me start with the earliest literary use of chiasmus, namely its use as a primarily mnemonic aid that has little semantic function. For chiastic framing by balanced similarity and antithesis can be found in oral literature where it is helpful as a compositional device. The oral singer of tales has recourse to chiastic or annular composition in order to help memorization and the organization of narrative material without the help of writing.

Thus Cedric H. Whitman has persuasively shown "Homer's habit of returning to things previously mentioned in reverse order,"[2] his technique of "ring-composition" or his pervasive use (observed ever since Cicero) of the rhetorical figure of *hysteron proteron*. Analysing Homer's *Iliad*, Whitman writes:

[2] *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 254.

Not only are certain books of the poem arranged in self-reversing, or balancing, designs, but the poem as a whole, in a way, an enormous hysteron proteron, in which books balance books and scenes balance scenes by similarity or antithesis, with the most amazing virtuosity.[3]

Devoting a long chapter to Homer's manifold framing devices,[4] Whitman demonstrates book by book the annular or chiastic pattern of the *Iliad*. To take merely two examples: he shows how the day groupings of the first book and the last book (Book XXIV) reverse each other neatly:[5]

Book I   Book XXIV

1 – 9 – 1 – 12 – 1 – 1 – 1 – 1 –   EMBASSY   – 1 – 1 – 1 – 1 – 12 – 1 – 9 – 1

Fight | Burial | Wall | Interrupted Battle   night [Doloneia?]   Great Battle | Fight | Burial | Games

Or Whitman also establishes that the principal scenes of Book I are chiastically reversed in Book XXIV:[6]

    Plague and funerals
      Quarrel and seizure
        Thetis and Achilles — appeal to Zeus
          Journey to Chrysa   **Book I**
            Thetis and Zeus — adoption of hero's cause
              Quarrel on Olympus

              Quarrel on Olympus
            Thetis and Zeus — modification of hero's cause
          Thetis and Achilles — message from Zeus   **Book XXIV**
        Priam's journey
      Reconciliation and restitution of Hector's body
    Funeral of Hector

Whitman suggests that the chiastic device had not only the mnemonic purpose of assisting the singer to keep in mind what he said before but that it was an artistic device "to give shape and clarity to the sections of his work, which, composed paratactically and with almost equal detail

[3] *Homer and the Heroic Tradition*, p. 255.
[4] Ibid., pp. 249–284.
[5] Ibid., p. 25.
[6] Ibid., p. 260.

and emphasis in every part, might otherwise fall into an intolerably unarticulated series."[7]

The fact that Homer's general use of chiasmus in his poetic composition must have failed to reach the level of full consciousness is commented on by Whitman as follows:

> The very serious question arises ... as to whether the audience, listening to an oral presentation of the poem, could possibly have caught the signs of such 'fearful symmetry', or whether it would have meant anything to them if they did. Granted that the procedure *abba* is useful in small compass to a singer, and perceptible as a structural unit to the audience, such can hardly be the case when *ba* is separated from *ab* by many thousand lines. Yet two things may be said regarding this point. The human mind is a strange organ, and one which perceives many things without conscious or articulate knowledge of them, and responds to them with emotions necessarily and appropriately vague. An audience hence might feel more symmetry than it could possibly analyze or describe. The second point is that poets sometimes perform feats of virtuosity for their own sakes and without much hope of understanding from their audiences, for one of the minor joys of artistic creation is the secret which the artist buries in his work..."[8]

The use of the chiastic framing device can also be observed in the popular ballad which generally favours not only binary and trinary patterns, parallelism, balance and antithesis but also annular structures on the levels of character, mimesis and diegesis as well as narrative. David Buchan, who devotes a long chapter of his *The Ballad and the Folk* to chiastic structuring, makes the following comment:

> At its most pronounced, framing becomes chiastic structuring. Chiasmus ... is used frequently by the oral mind where the literate mind, with its different habits, would use a straightforward linear arrangement. (...) Chiasmus is intrinsic to oral creation because of the basic, structural-mnemonic function of annular organization. Frames, however, serve a variety of functions: they enable the maker to break down his narrative into constituent units and impose a tight control on these units; to link and integrate these units; to express contemporaneous action; and, finally they enable him to keep to his narrative line while the binary and trinary rhythms allow him to expand dramatically. Annular structuring, especially in its chiastic form, shows how the oral mind operates spatially.[9]

As an example, Buchan analyses stanzas 4–12 of the ballad "Willie O Douglas Dale" (Child, 101A) which are organized by means of three superimposed chiastic frames:[10]

[7] Ibid., p. 252.
[8] Ibid., pp. 255–256.
[9] *The Ballad and the Folk* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 100.
[10] See *The Ballad and the Folk*, p. 101 (H=He, S=She, n=narration, sp=speech).

a	4 He looted him low, by her did go,
	    Wi his hat intill his hand:
	'O what's your will wi me, Sir Knight?
	    I pray keep your hat on.'
		H + S	n + sp	Meeting of
				H + S

b	5 'O I am not a knight Madam,
	    Nor ever thinks to be;
	For I am Willy o Douglassdale,
	    An I serve for meat and fee.'
		H	sp	H introduces
				himself to S

c	6 'O I'll gang to my bowr,' she says,
	    'An sigh baith even an moru
	That ever I saw your face, Willy,
	    Or that ever ye was born.
				S expresses
				her attract-
				ion

	7 'O I'll gang to my bowr,' she says,
	    'An I'll pray baith night an day,
	To keep me frae your tempting looks,
	    An frae your great beauty.'
		S	sp	to H

d	8 O in a little after that
	    He keepit Dame Oliphant's bowr,
	An the love that passd between this twa,
	    It was like paramour.
		H + S	n	Act of love

c	9 'O narrow, narrow's my gown, Willy,
	    That wont to be see wide;
	An short, short is my coats, Willy,
	    That wont to be sae side;
	An gane is a' my fair colour,
	    An low laid is my pride.
				S laments her
				pregnancy

	10 'But an my father get word of this,
	    He'll never drink again;
	An gin my nother get word of this,
	    In her ain bowr she'll go brain;
	An gin my bold brothers get word o this
	    I fear, Willy, you 'll be slain.'
		S	sp	to H

b	11 'O will you leave your father's court,
	    An go along wi me?
	I'll carry you unto fair Scotland,
	    And mak you a lady free.'
		H	sp	H proposes
				elopement to
				S

a	12 She pat her han in her pocket
	    An gae him five bunder poun:
	'An take you that now, Squire Willy,
	    Till awa that we do won.'
		H + S	n + sp	Elopement
				of H + S

Ornamental and Playful Uses

In a large number of literary texts chiasmus (especially on the sentence level) has no specific semantic function as a structure. In many of these texts chiasmus may be seen as a sort of oral or rhetorical residue whose original mnemonic or compositional task has become redundant.

Thus Pope's verse contains a number of frequently gratuitous chiastic patterns, as E. L. Epstein has demonstrated.[11] And in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* Joyce uses chiastic phrases which Hugh Kenner has described as stylistic showpieces of "a young man's copybook page" that leave "after-vibrations of sententiousness..."[12]

Two more recent poets have also used chiastic patterns for purely decorative or playful purposes. In his four-page "Author's Prologue" to the *Collected Poems 1934–1952* Dylan Thomas rhymes the first line with the last line (line 102), the second with the second last and so on until a couplet marks the exact middle.[13] This almost imperceptible chiastic rhyme-scheme[14] seems to have no other function than to make a show of Thomas's poetic virtuosity.

In his dramatic monologue "A Professor's Song" John Berryman makes a grammatically deviational use of chiasmus in order to reflect the puckish playfulness of young Mozart, who loved language-games, especially inverting word order or writing words backwards ("arschlings" he called it), for instance, signing his name backwards as "Gnagflow Trazom" (letter of 21 August, 1773) – a mannerism that may be due to the influence of musical composition in which chiastic sequences of notes are frequent:

A Professor's Song

(...rabid or dog-dull.) Let me tell *you* how
The Eighteenth Century couplet ended. Now
Tell me. Troll me the sources of that Song –
Assigned last week – by Blake. Come, come along.
Gentlemen. (Fidget and huddle, do. Squint soon.)
I want to end these fellows all by noon.

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[11] "The Self-Reflexive Artifact: The Function of Mimesis in an Approach to a Theory of Value for Literature," *Style and Structure in Literature*, ed. Roger Fowler (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell, 1975), pp. 40–78.

[12] *Ulysses* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1980), p. 7.

[13] *Collected Poems 1934–1952* (London: Dent, 1952), pp. ix–xii.

[14] The reversed numbering of lines from line 52 onwards and the identity of rhyme words ("now," "end", "sun") in the first three and last three lines are the only clues to the chiastic pattern.

'That deep romantic chasm' – an early use,
The word is from the French, by our abuse
Fished out a bit. (Red all your eyes. O when?)
'A poet is a man speaking to men':
But I am then a poet, am I not? –
Ha ha. The radiator, please. Well, what?

Alive now – no – Blake would have written prose.
But movement following movement crisply flows,
So much the better, better the much so,
As burbleth Mozart. Twelve. The class can go.
Until I meet you, then, in Upper Hell
Convulsed, foaming immortal blood: farewell.[15]

Berryman's chiastic "So much the better, better the much so" of line 15 is an accurate translation of Mozart's "Desto besser, besser desto" which he used twice in a letter to Bäsle (5 November, 1777).

After this introductory consideration of primarily non-functional cases of chiastic patterning let me proceed to diverse literary uses of chiasmus in which the chiastic structure becomes part and parcel of the total meaning of a text. In other words, I shall now turn to examples of chiastic ordering of textual elements that are more functional by being of an iconic, mimetic or "emblematic" nature.

Reversal or Inversion

Seen in terms of a dynamic sequence, chiasmus reverses or inverts the order of its elements. Hence, the use of chiasmus as an iconic reinforcement of reversal or inversion is rather frequent in literary texts.

Laurence Sterne's famous "Ask my pen, – it governs me, – I govern not it." (*Tristram Shandy*, 6.6.416) expresses such a reversal chiastically and reinforces it by negation. The use of the rhetorical figure of antimetabole in this ironic phrase denies formally what it asserts semantically – a further element of opposition – for it demonstrates that the author is fully in command of his pen.

In "Autumn: The Third Pastoral" (ll.49–50) Alexander Pope suggests the reversal ("rebounds") or echoing of sounds by a chiasmus of nouns.

Thro' Rocks and Caves the Name of *Delia* sounds,
Delia, each Cave and ecchoing Rock rebounds.

15 *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 896 (my italics).

Of course, echoes do not repeat in reverse but they are repetitions that return to their sources.

A reversal is also mimed in two chiastic lines – buttressed by antonyms – from William Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence" (ll.24–25):

> As high as we have mounted in delight
> In our dejection do we sink as low...

Emily Dickinson uses chiasmus as an icon of reversal twice in poem 712:

> Because I could not stop for Death –
> He kindly stopped for me – (ll.1–2)

This initial chiasmus of reversal is strengthened by a further chiastic reversal in the very middle of the poem, a reversal that is further emphasized by the stanza-division between the two lines:

> We passed the Setting Sun –
>
> Or rather – He passed Us –[16]

At the very beginning of *Great Expectations* we are told that the protagonist's name is "Philip Pirrip", which is abbreviated to "Pip". Now both the family name "Pirrip" and the nickname "Pip" are palindromes, that is, names whose letters are chiastically arranged and, hence, sound the same when read backwards. In other words, the very same name may be read in two opposite ways, the normal reading being identical with its inversion. In my view, these two names are a "mise en abyme" of the plot: they are emblems of two possible "readings" of Pip's situation. For this is not due to the generous support of a gentlewoman, as he wrongly assumes, but of a criminal.

This reversal of Pip's "great expectations" is also foreshadowed in a passage at the begining of the novel. This passage shows the originator of the reversal first perform it physically and symbolically on Pip by turning him upside down, a passage, furthermore, which is itself chiastically structured:

> The man, after looking at me for a moment, turned me upside down, and emptied my pockets. There was nothing in them but a piece of bread. When the church came to itself – for he was so sudden and strong that he made it go head over heels before me, and I saw the steeple under my feet – when the

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[16] *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber, 1970), p. 350.

church came to itself, I say, I was seated on a high tombstone, trembling, while he ate the bread ravenously.[17]

The chiastic sequence in this passage, partly hidden by synonymous expressions, is the following: "bread" – "When the church came to itself" – "he made it go head over heels" – "before me" = "I saw" – "the steeple under my feet" – "when the church came to itself" – "bread".

In "The Masque of the Red Death" E. A. Poe uses chiasmus to render not only the to and fro movement of the dancing dreams in the *seven* chambers of Prince Prospero's abbey but also to mime how the dance and the music come to a sudden stop at the striking of the ebony clock and how they begin again when the echoes of the chime die away:

> | *To and fro* in the seven chambers there stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams. | And these – the dreams – *writhed* in and about, taking hue from the rooms, and causing the wild *music* of the orchestra to seem as the *echo* of their steps. | And, anon, there strikes the ebony *clock* which stands in the hall of the velvet. || And then, for a moment, *all* is *still,* and *all* is silent save the voice of the *clock.* || The dreams are stiff-frozen as they stand. | But the *echoes* of the chime die away – they have endured but an instant – and a light, half-subdued laughter floats after them as they depart. | And now again the *music* swells, and the dreams live, and *writhe to and fro* more merrily than ever, taking hue from the many-tinted windows through which stream the rays from the tripods. |[18]

In terms of its repeated key words this passage of *seven* sentences chiastically centres around the fourth or middle sentence which itself has its fulcrum in "all" – "still" – "all". Thus we get the following chiastic pattern of expressions: "To and fro" – "writhed" – "music" – "echo" – "clock" – "all" – "still" – "all" – "clock" – "echoes" – "music" – "writhe" – "to and fro." In addition, both sides of this chiastic symmetry are buttressed by four pairs of identical terms and one pair of synonyms (though not in perfect chiastic order): "dreams" (twice), "taking hue from", "stand(s)" and "a moment/an instant".

Ralf Norrman has convincingly and brilliantly demonstrated that chiastic inversion is the one pattern that permeates the entire fictional world of Henry James and dominates his thinking completely. "Chias-

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[17] *Great Expectations,* ed. Angus Calder (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 36; it is noteworthy that the very title of this novel of inversions on the level of plot and character-relationships contains a chiastic sequence of sounds:
[greit ekspekteiʃnz]
  ab c   c ba

[18] *The Portable Poe,* ed. Philip van Doren Stern (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 284 (my italics).

mus in James," Norrman writes, "is not only decorative or ornamental. It influences not only *how* James writes, but *what* he writes. Furthermore, it influences what he *thinks*, and even what he *perceives*."[19]

Thus the "hour-glass shape" (E. M. Forster) of *The Ambassadors* is due to a chiastic inversion of the narrative which also characterizes the story "The Real Thing," to name just two examples. However, James not only made a pervasive use of chiastic plotting but also of the inversion of sexual roles and of chiasmus on the sentence level. In short, Henry James was a habitual and compulsive chiasticist in his thought and fiction.

Circularity

The return of the chiastic sequence to its beginning may also be used as an emblem of circularity or a circular movement such as a dance.

Thus John Milton reinforces the circular dance of the angels, planets and stars in *Paradise Lost* (V,ll.618–624) by a chiastic antithesis that harmoniously combines regularity with irregularity itself:

> That day, as other solemn days, they spent
> In song and dance about the sacred hill,
> Mystical dance, which yonder starry sphere
> Of planets and of fixed in all her wheels
> Resembles nearest, mazes intricate,
> Eccentric, intervolved, yet <u>regular</u>
> Then <u>most,</u> when <u>most irregular</u> they seem...[20]

In a similar way Wordsworth strengthens the wheeling movement of skating by a chiasmus in his *Prelude* (1805; I, ll.455–458):

> I heeded not the summons: <u>happy time</u>
> <u>It was</u> indeed <u>for all of us</u> – <u>to me</u>
> <u>It was</u> a <u>time</u> of <u>rapture!</u> Clear and loud
> The village clock tolled six, – I wheeled about...[21]

[19] *The Insecure World of Henry James's Fiction. Intensity and Ambiguity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), p. 185. See especially chapter 5, "Chiastic Inversion, Antithesis and Oxymoron," pp. 137–184.

[20] *The Poems of John Milton,* ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London: Longmans, 1968), p. 715. It is interesting to note that Book 3, which centres on the debate between God Father and his Son, "has more antimetabole than any other book" (Brian Vickers, *Classical Rhetoric in English Poetry,* London: Macmillan, 1970, p. 153).

[21] *William Wordsworth. The Prelude. A Parallel Text,* ed. J. C. Maxwell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 58.

The two similarly spelt phrases "I heeded" and "I wheeled" form the beginning and end of the chiastic sequence "happy" – "time" – "It was" – "for all of us" = "to me" – "It was" – "time" – "rapture", a sequence which syntactically indicates circularity.

Circularity is also expressed chiastically in George Herbert's "A Wreath":

A Wreath.

> Wreathed garland of deserved praise,
> Of praise deserved, unto thee I give,
> I give to thee, who knowest all my wayes,
> My crooked winding wayes, wherein I live,
> Wherein I die, not live: for life is straight,
> Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee,
> To thee, who art more farre above deceit,
> Then deceit seems above simplicitie.
> Give me simplicitie, that I may live,
> So live and like, that I may know, thy wayes,
> Know them and practise them: then shall I give
> For this poore wreath, give thee a crown of praise.[22]

By means of a "circular rhyme pattern" in the first and last four lines ("praise" – "give" – "wayes" – "live" = "live" – "wayes" – "give" – "praise"), the chiastic anadiplosis "of deserved praise/ Of praise deserved" (ll.1–2) and the use of "wreathed" in the first and of "wreath" in the last line, Herbert's poem offers a "formal hieroglyph" (Joseph H. Summers) of its circular subject.[23]

Non-Progression, Stasis, Deadlock

A chiastic sequence that leads back to its beginning may also suggest coming full circle or, more metaphorically, non-progression, stasis or a deadlock.

In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (Part II,ll.107–108) S. T. Co-

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[22] *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 185

[23] Mary Ellen Rickey, *Utmost Art: Complexity in the Verse of George Herbert* (University of Kentucky Press, 1966), p. 122; see also Joseph H. Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1954), pp. 135–145. The banding of the text into quatrains and the frequent use of *anadiplosis*, which makes the lines weave in and out, overlap and intertwine, reinforce the hieroglyphic form of this poem on a wreath (see also Brian Vickers, op.cit., p. 165).

leridge seems to have reinforced the idea of a total lull – marginal note:
"The ship hath been suddenly becalmed" – by the use of two chiastic
patterns in sequence:

> Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,
> 'Twas sad as sad could be...

The two expressions "the breeze" and "the sails" are synonyms in a
metonymic relationship, whereas "'Twas" and "could be" are two con-
jugated forms of the verb "to be".

Ernest Hemingway also made repeated use of chiasmus in order to
mirror or reinforce by means of narrative structure a deadlock or im-
passe in a person's situation from which there is no escape.

Thus in "The Killers" the ex-champion Ole Andreson, who is visited
by Nick to warn him but remains lying on his bed and waits for the
killers to get him, is tightly encapsulated by a series of chiastically
arranged actions and conversations that seem to centre around the paral-
lelism:

> 'Maybe it was just a bluff.'
> 'No. It ain't just a bluff."

The chiastic pattern of "The Killers" may be represented as follows:

[Inside Henry's lunch-room where Nick and George talk about the threat to Ole Andreson]

"Nick walked the street beside the car-tracks and turned at the next arc-light down a side-street." (p. 286)

"Three houses up the street was Hirsch's rooming-house. Nick walked up the two steps and pushed the bell. A woman came to the door." (p. 286)

"'Is Ole Andreson here?'" (p. 286)

"Nick followed the woman up a flight of stairs." (p. 286)

"Nick opened the door and went into the room, Ole Andreson was lying on the bed
with all his clothes. He did not look at Nick." (p. 287)

"'Come in!'" (p. 287)

"'There isn't anything I can do about it.'" (p. 287)

"'There ain't anything to do.'" (p. 287)

"'Maybe it was just a bluff.'"

"'No. It ain't just a bluff.'" (p. 287)

"'There ain't anything to do now.'" (p. 288)

"'There ain't anything to do.'" (p. 288)

"'Thanks for coming around.'" (p. 288)

"Nick went out. As he shut the door he saw Ole Andreson with all his clothes on,
lying on the bed looking at the wall." (p. 288)

"'He's been in his room all day,' the landlady said down-stairs." (p. 288)

"'I said to him: "Mr. Andreson, you ought to go out."'" (p. 288)

"They stood talking just inside the street door... 'Well, good-night, Mrs Hirsch,' Nick said. 'I'm not Mrs. Hirsch,' the woman said...I'm Mrs Bell.'" (p. 288)

"Nick walked up the dark street to the corner under the arc-light, and then along the car-tracks to Henry's eating house." (p. 288)

[Inside Henry's lunch room Nick and George talk about the threat to Ole Andreson.][24]

It is noteworthy that the introduction of the woman's name, "I'm Mrs. Bell" (p. 288) chiastically corresponds to "Nick...pushed the bell" (p. 286). I suggest that Hemingway's choice of the name "Bell" is chiastically motivated – probably the only such name in American literature.

A similar chiastic ordering of narrative elements to indicate a deadlock can also be found in Hemingway's "Cat in the Rain".[25] The part of the story that deals with the American wife's futile attempt to save a cat

[24] *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Scribners, 1966), pp. 286–288.
[25] Ibid., pp. 167–170.

from the rain is bracketed by a multiple pattern of narrative chiasmus. Apart from reinforcing the complete futility of the wife's action on the story-level, on the symbolic level Hemingway's narrative chiasmus signals that her displaced wish for more attention, tenderness and fulfilment in caring motherhood (which centres around the word "cat" or "kitty" – a pun on "kiddy" in American English) will find no satisfaction. The chiastic pattern of "Cat in the Rain" may be analysed in the following way:

of Ariadne through the labyrinth of its mimetic world.[6] On the other hand, as Hillis Miller has noted, the line of Ariadne's thread, in retracing a labyrinth already there, becomes itself a second labyrinth; copy and origin mingle to form a "tangled hierarchy" difficult to untwine.[7]

A different type of labyrinth structure emerges in the case of *Melmoth the Wanderer*. According to Fletcher, the labyrinth has given Maturin "the plan for the narrative form as a whole, [which] consists of nested subnarratives deliberately coiling in upon themselves, so that the form of the book projects the disorientation of the hero and narrator" (Fletcher, p. 333, 343). The technique of "nesting" produces a structure quite different from that of *Tristram Shandy*, and, for the reader, quite a different experience of disorientation. The proliferation of events is here combined with the multiplication of narrating instances, and the result is a complexity that may be read as a labyrinth by some but to others is evidence of sheer ineptitude.[8] Critical interest, then, must focus on the conditions under which what appears chaotic may in fact fall into a recognizable structure termed a labyrinth.
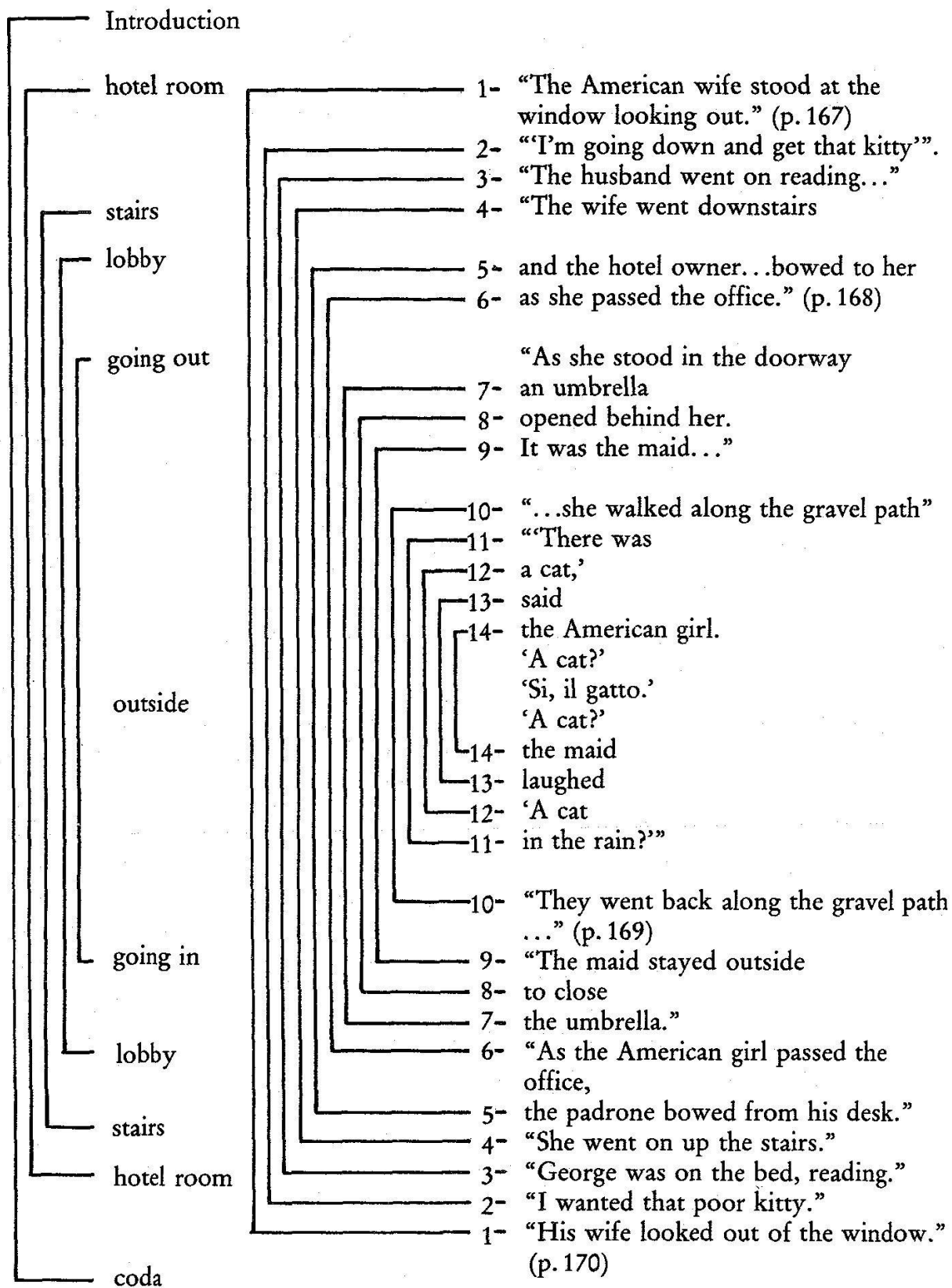
The experience of confusion and bafflement, basic as it is to the traveller moving horizontally in the literal labyrinth, cannot of course be a sufficient criterion. A sense of loss of direction necessarily provokes a state of mind, a conscious recognition, a "thinking into one's state of mind" (Fletcher, p. 330). This point is made neatly in W. H. Auden's poem "The Maze," which begins:

> Anthropos apteros for days
> Walked whistling round and round the maze,
> Relying happily upon
> His temperament for getting on.

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[6] An original recent attempt to do justice to the "intricate structure" of *Tristram Shandy* as a work of narrative fiction that has "many open endings" but "a closed form" is Fritz Gysin's *Model as Motif in 'Tristram Shandy'* (Berne: Francke, 1983) p. 18.

[7] Cf. Fletcher, op. cit., p. 341; Linda Hutcheon remarks, in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (London: Methuen, 1984), that "no matter how diegetic, metafictions remain mimetic" insofar as they imitate their own fiction-making process (p. 47).

[8] See e. g. Douglas Grant, ed. *Melmoth the Wanderer* (London: OUP, 1968), p. x. The significance of the labyrinth for the gothic novel has been analysed by Jerrold E. Hogle in "The Restless Labyrinth: Cryptonymy in the Gothic Novel," *Arizona Quarterly*, 36 (1980), 330–358 (I owe this as well as many other useful references to my colleague Gustav Ungerer).

Introduction

hotel room

1- "The American wife stood at the window looking out." (p. 167)

2- "'I'm going down and get that kitty'".

3- "The husband went on reading..."

4- "The wife went downstairs

stairs

lobby

5- and the hotel owner...bowed to her

6- as she passed the office." (p. 168)

going out

"As she stood in the doorway

7- an umbrella

8- opened behind her.

9- It was the maid..."

10- "...she walked along the gravel path"

11- "'There was

12- a cat,'

13- said

14- the American girl.
'A cat?'
'Si, il gatto.'
'A cat?'

14- the maid

13- laughed

12- 'A cat

11- in the rain?'"

outside

10- "They went back along the gravel path ..." (p. 169)

going in

9- "The maid stayed outside

8- to close

7- the umbrella."

6- "As the American girl passed the office,

lobby

5- the padrone bowed from his desk."

4- "She went on up the stairs."

stairs

3- "George was on the bed, reading."

hotel room

2- "I wanted that poor kitty."

1- "His wife looked out of the window." (p. 170)

coda

It should be noted that the chiastic structuring even extends to the syntactical level. Thus the passage "...an <u>umbrella opened</u> behind her. It was <u>the maid</u>" (p. 168) is chiastically reversed by "<u>The maid</u> stayed outside <u>to close the umbrella</u>" (p. 169). The same holds for "...and <u>the hotel owner... bowed</u> to her <u>as she passed the office</u>" (p. 168) which is reversed by "<u>As the American girl passed the office, the padrone bowed</u> from his desk" (p. 169).

Symmetry

Seen in more spatial terms a chiastic arrangement of textual elements is an ideal emblem to indicate balance, symmetry or equality.

Thus I see the chiasmus of sounds and stresses [(1)ǽ ə úː   ɪ úː ə ǽ] in the first line of S. T. Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" ("Khan" rhymes with "ran" and "man" of lines 3 and 4)

> In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
> A stately pleasure dome decree

as an emblem of the perfect symmetry of the "stately pleasure-dome."

In John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" the chiasmus of the famous phrase "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'" (l.49) may be also meant to mirror the perfect symmetry of the urn's "Attic shape" (l.41). But assuming that the Grecian urn is a burial urn, it may also function as an icon of enclosure: the beautifully shaped and decorated urn enclosing the truth that life and love ("for ever warm," l.26) turns to ashes preserved in a "Cold Pastoral" (l.45) of marble.

In her poem "Before I got my eye put out" (327) Emily Dickinson attempts to render the symmetrical arrangement of two eyes by a chiastic patterning of elements in the poem's text:

> Before I got my eye put out
> I liked as well to see –
> As <u>other Creatures</u>, that have <u>Eyes</u>
> And know no other way –
>
> But were it told to me – Today –
> That I might have the sky
> <u>For mine</u> – I tell you that my Heart
> Would split, for size of me –

The Meadows – mine –
The Mountains – mine –
All Forests – Stintless Stars –
As much of Noon as I could take
Between my finite eyes –

The Motions of the Dipping Birds –
The Morning's Amber Road –
For mine – to look at when I liked –
The News would strike me dead –

So safer – guess – with just my soul
Upon the Window pane –
Where other Creatures put their eyes –
Incautious – of the Sun –[26]

It is noteworthy that both the expression for midday, "Noon", and the phrase "Between my finite eyes" stand in mid-position in the text.

Symmetry was a key concept in E. A. Poe's poetics and cosmology. As he writes in *Eureka:*

> And, in fact, the sense of the symmetrical is an instinct which may be depended on with an almost blindfold reliance. It is the poetical essence of the Universe – *of the Universe* which, in the supremeness of its symmetry, is but the most sublime of poems. Now symmetry and consistency are convertible terms: – thus Poetry and Truth are one. A thing is consistent in the ratio of its truth – true in the ratio of its consistency…[27]

Apart from using a chiasmus in this very text about the importance of symmetry and its convertibility with consistency – "A thing is consistent in the ratio of its truth – true in the ratio of its consistency" – Poe's use of chiastic patterns to indicate symmetry of action or scene (e. g. mirroring, doubling) is pervasive in his work.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher," for instance, he uses chiasmus several times. Thus he uses it in his description of the mirroring of the House of Usher and of its bleak environs in the dark tarn:

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[26] *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, p. 155.
[27] *The Science Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Harold Beaver (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 300.

"I looked upon the scene before me –
upon the mere house...
upon the vacant eye-like windows –
upon a few rank sedges – and upon a few white trunks of
decayed trees –
with an utter depression of soul..." (p. 245)

"I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and
lurid tarn...and gazed down –
but with a shudder even more thrilling than before –
upon the remodelled and inverted images of the gray sedge,
and the ghastly tree-stems,
and the vacant and eye-like windows" (p. 245)
"Nevertheless, in this mansion of gloom..." (p. 246)[28]

The stages of the narrator's approach to the mansion at the beginning and of his flight from the foundering House of Usher at the end are also ordered in a chiastic manner.
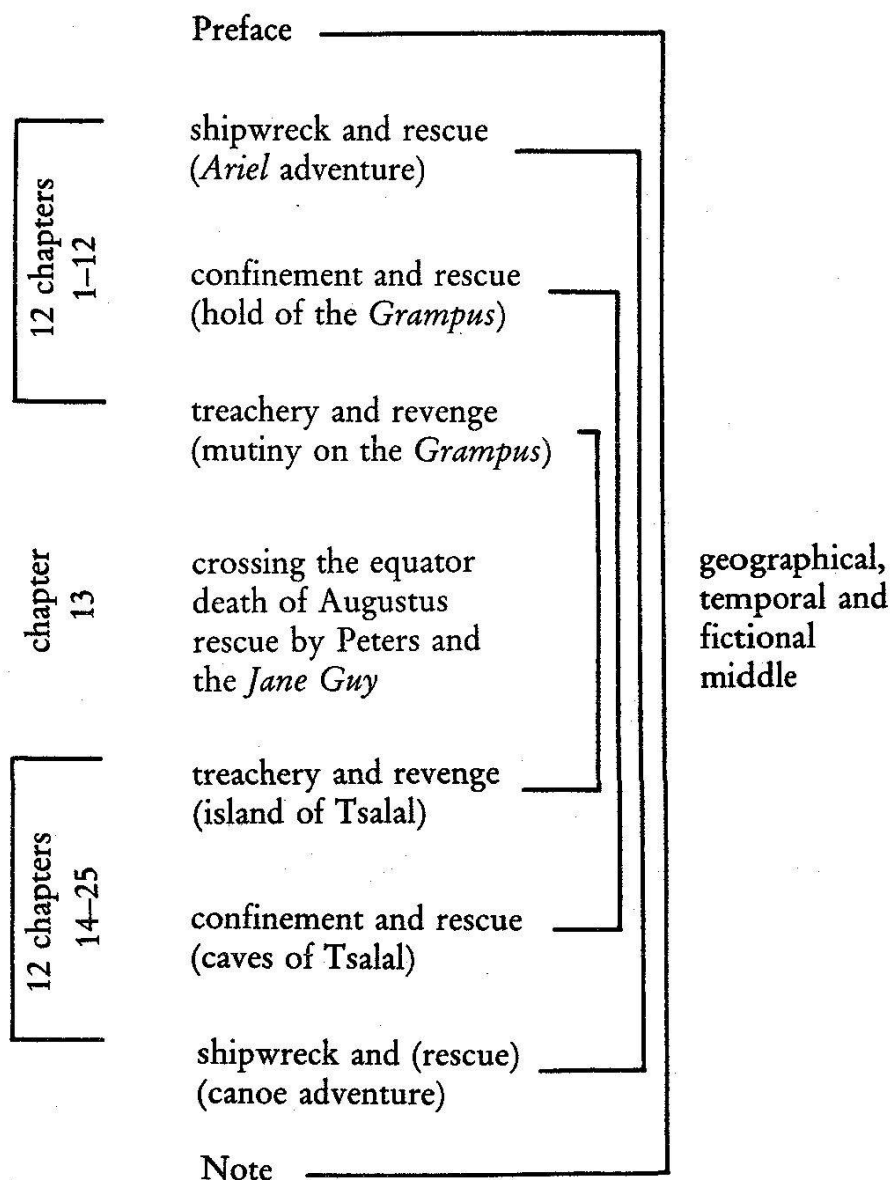
As has been pointed out by critics before, Poe makes the most radical use of a chiastic narrative pattern in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. As Charles O'Donnell writes:

> I think Poe meant to give a clue to his intention in the way he ordered the book, dividing it roughly in half, making all events lead up to and away from Pym's rescue by the *Jane Guy* at the end of the central chapter, each event in the first half paralleling an event in the second half. At the beginning, the characters set sail in a small boat; there is a wreck from which they are rescued; Pym is confined in the hold; there is treachery in the form of a mutiny; they escape by killing treacherous men; and they sail in a disabled ship toward the equator and are rescued. In the second half they sail away from the equator toward an island; there is treachery; they are confined in the hills; they escape by killing treacherous men; they set sail in a small boat toward the pole; and... there is a wreck from which they are rescued, thus allowing Pym to get home. The general impression of parallel events is reinforced by other similar details in the two halves (some of them seemingly without other purpose than to call our attention to the order in the book)...[29]

But what is especially noteworthy about *Arthur Gordon Pym* is not just the parallel arrangement of its episodes but their chiastic order as can be seen from the following scheme of the plot:

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[28] *The Portable Poe*, pp. 244–268.

[29] "From Earth to Ether: Poe's Flight into Space," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Poe's Tales*, ed. William C. Howarth (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1971), pp. 39–46; pp. 43–44.

Preface ──────────────────────────────┐

┌─── shipwreck and rescue ────────────┐
│   (*Ariel* adventure)   │
│   │
│   confinement and rescue ──────┐   │
12 chapters 1–12 (hold of the *Grampus*)   │   │
│   │   │
│   treachery and revenge ┐   │   │
└─── (mutiny on the *Grampus*) │   │   │
                              │   │   │
chapter 13   │   │   │   geographical,
     crossing the equator   │   │   │   temporal and
     death of Augustus   │   │   │   fictional
     rescue by Peters and   │   │   │   middle
     the *Jane Guy*   │   │   │
                              │   │   │
┌─── treachery and revenge ───┘   │   │
│   (island of Tsalal)   │   │
12 chapters 14–25   │   │
│   confinement and rescue ──────┘   │
│   (caves of Tsalal)   │
│   │
└─── shipwreck and (rescue) ──────────┘
     (canoe adventure)   │

Note ─────────────────────────────────┘

Framing, Centring and Enclosure

A chiastic pattern may also suggest framing, enclosure or centring, for the outer elements *a* frame, enclose or centre the inner elements *bb*.

James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* uses a chiastic framing device that was discovered by Hans Walter Gabler sixty years after the publication of the novel.[30] For the three episodes and diary of the last chapter (Chapter V) chiastically reverse the overture and three episodes of Chapter I. As Gabler writes:

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[30] "The Seven Lost Years of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*," *Approaches to Joyce's 'Portrait'*, eds. Thomas F. Staley and Bernard Benstock (University of Pittsburgh, 1976), pp. 25–60; the very first hint was given by Harry Levin, *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction* (1941; rpt. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1952), p. 53, who wrote that the novel is "symmetrically constructed."

...the fifth chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is the exact symmetrical counterpart to the first. The childhood overture and the two Clongowes episodes, separated by the Christmas dinner scene, are the mirror image of the two movements of Stephen's wanderings through Dublin, separated by the villanelle episode, and the diary finale.... Genetically, the novel's beginning and its end appear closely interdependent.

It seems that it was a decision to abandon the sequential or cyclic narrative by episodes as used in *Stephen Hero* in favor of a chiastic centre design that broke the impasse in which Joyce found himself over *A Portrait...*[31]

Now, a chiastic frame is perfectly adequate to a literary "portrait". But as Gabler further demonstrates, the chiastic ordering of Joyce's novel is even more pervasive, the two hell sermons of the religious retreat marking its literal, structural and narrative centre:

...the chiastic disposition of the novel's beginning and end alters the functional relationships in the sections of the work which they encompass. Chapters II and IV take on a centripetal and a centrifugal direction, and the religious retreat becomes, literally and structurally, the dead center of the novel...the two hell sermons...emphasize the chapter's midpoint position in the chiastic structure of the book. Within Chapter III, divided by Joyce's familiar asterisks into three parts, the beginning in Nighttown and the close in Church Street chapel stand in obvious symmetrical contrast. From the close of chapter II, the Nighttown opening leads naturally into the hell sermon center.[32]

The text's thoroughly chiastic or spatial structure is also emblematic of what the painterly metaphor of the title – which is unique among Joyce's titles – implies. For this title, as Hugh Kenner comments, imposes "a pictorial and spatial analogy, an expectation of static repose, on a book in which nothing else except the spiritual life of Dublin stands still, a book of fluid transitions in which the central figure is growing older by the page. The book is a becoming which the title tells us to apprehend as a being."[33]

In *Ash-Wednesdey*, (V, ll. 1–3) T. S. Eliot disguises three similar chiastic word-patterns which put "word/Word" at their centre:

> If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
> If the unheard, unspoken
> Word is unspoken, unheard;
> Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,

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[31] Ibid., pp. 49–50.

[32] Ibid., p. 51.

[33] "The Cubist Portrait," *Approaches to James Joyce's 'Portrait'*, op.cit., pp. 171–184; p. 171.

> The Word without a word, the Word within
> The world and for the world;
> And the light shone in darkness and
> Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
> About *the centre* of the silent Word.[34]

The chiastic patterns hidden in the first three lines can be rendered as follows:

line 1:   lost word lost
                               spent word spent
lines 2–3:   unheard unspoken Word unspoken unheard

Although somewhat camouflaged by Eliot's free verse lineation, the chiastic word-patterns of the first three lines (and to a lesser extent in the succeeding lines) centre the "word/Word" and actually perform on the textual level what the whole passage is about:

Another example of chiastic enclosure is offered by Philip Larkin's short poem "Wires":

> The widest prairies have electric fences,
> For though old cattle know they must not stray,
> Young steers are always scenting purer water
> Not here but anywhere. Beyond the wires
>
> Leads them to blunder up against the wires
> Whose muscle-shredding violence give no quarter.
> Young steers become old cattle from that day,
> Electric limits to their widest senses.[35]

In this carefully crafted animal fable two chiastic patterns are superimposed in order to suggest the steers' imprisonment: namely the chiastic rhyme-scheme *abcddcba* and the chiastic sequence of key words (the only repeated expressions) which have been underlined in the text. This double chiasmus serves the further function of miming the reversal of the young steers blundering up against electric wires whose "muscle-shredding violence" (l.6) turns them into old cattle.

An effect of claustrophobic enclosure is also achieved by E. A. Poe's chiastic patterning of his description of Madeline's temporary entomb-

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[34] *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1969), p. 96 (my italics).

[35] *The Less Deceived* (1955; London: The Marvell Press, 1973), p. 27. Some of the chiastic patterning has been described by David Timms, *Philip Larkin* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973), pp. 70–71 and Simon Petch, *The Art of Philip Larkin* (Sydney University Press, 1981), p. 45.

ment in "The Fall of the House of Usher" – apart from testifying to his symmetry-addiction. Thus the scene is enclosed by an inner frame the two symmetrical parts of which are contained in the two parts of a single sentence: "A striking *similitude* between *the brother* and *the sister* now first arrested *my attention;* ‖ and Usher, divining, perhaps, *my thoughts,* murmured out some few words from which I learned that *the diseased* [sister] and *himself* [brother] had been *twins*" (pp. 259–260).[36] And this inner frame is encapsulated by an outer frame in which the following corresponding (not necessarily identical) expressions stand in chiastic opposition: "portion," "building/house", "appartment(s)", "door", "iron", "(un)screwed", "lid", and "face" (pp. 259, 260).

Conclusion

By way of summary, let me conclude with the best-known chiastic phrase in English literature, namely with the witches' "Fair is foul and foul is fair" in the first scene of *Macbeth* (I,i,11). For the perfect chiastic pattern *abcdcba* of this phrase does several of the things I have pointed out so far.

First, it enacts a reversal. "The main theme of the reversal of values is given out simply and clearly in the first scene," L. C. Knights comments, "...and with it are associated premonitions of the conflict, disorder and moral darkness into which Macbeth will plunge himself."[37] By indicating a conflict between being and seeming, by creating doubt about categories, the witches' chiastic inversion reflects a world of semantic chaos. And this anarchy of the witches' chiastic line in turn reflects the social, political and emotional chaos depicted in the play.

But in its static, formulaic symmetry and circularity of pattern this chiastic phrase is further expressive of both the atemporality of magic and of the circular dance movements of the witches' ritual. It is interesting to note that there are quite a number of chiastic patterns in the witches' scenes generally, thus conveying a more strongly ritual character to these scenes. To give but three examples: The very first line of *Macbeth* starts out with a vocalic chiasmus:

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[36] *The Portable Poe,* op.cit., pp. 259–260 (my italics).

[37] "Some Contemporary Trends in Shakespeare Criticism," *Shakespeare: Macbeth. A. Casebook,* ed. John Wain (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 221–245; p. 227. See also Ralf Norrman's comment on this line in his *The Insecure World of Henry James's Fiction,* op.cit., p. 183.