

Elegance

Let's assume that you can now write clear, coherent, and appropriately emphatic prose. That in itself would constitute a style of such singular distinction that most of us would be satisfied to have achieved so much. But though we might prefer bald clarity to the turgidity of most institutional prose, the relentless simplicity of the plain style can finally become flat and dry, eventually arid. Its plainness invests prose with the virtuous blandness of unsalted meat and potatoes—honest fare to be sure, but hardly memorable and certainly without zest. Sometimes a touch of class, a flash of elegance, can mark the difference between forgettable Spartan prose and an idea so elegantly expressed that it fixes itself in the mind of your reader.

Now, I can't tell you how to be graceful and elegant in the same way I can tell you how to be clear and direct. What I *can* do is describe a few of the devices that some graceful writers use. But that advice is, finally, about as useful as listing the ingredients in the bouillabaisse of a great cook and then expecting anyone to make it. Knowing the ingredients and knowing how to use them is the difference between reading cookbooks and Cooking.

What follows describes a few ingredients of a modestly elegant style. How imaginatively and skillfully you use them is the difference between reading this book on writing, and Writing.

Balance and Symmetry

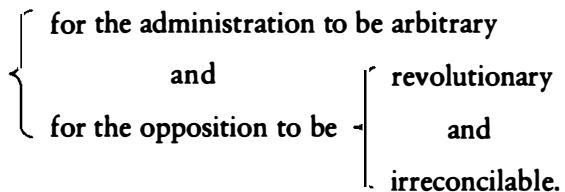
We've already described how you can use coordination to extend a sentence beyond a few words. Coordination itself will grace a sentence with a movement more rhythmic and satisfying than that of most noncoordinate sentences. Compare the styles of these two versions of Walter Lippmann's argument about the need for a balance of powers in a democratic society.

The national unity of a free people depends upon a sufficiently even balance of political power to make it impracticable for the administration to be arbitrary and for the opposition to be revolutionary and irreconcilable. Where that balance no longer exists, democracy perishes. For unless all the citizens of a state are forced by circumstances to compromise, unless they feel that they can affect policy but that no one can wholly dominate it, unless by habit and necessity they have to give and take, freedom cannot be maintained.

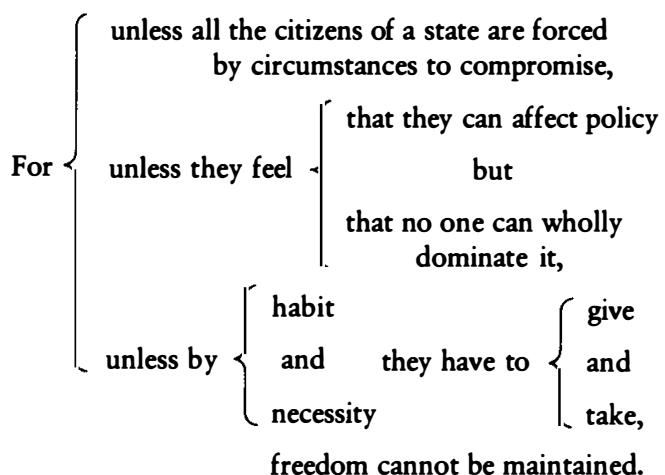
The national unity of a free people depends upon a sufficiently even balance of political power to make it impracticable for there to be an arbitrary administration against a revolutionary opposition that is irreconcilably opposed to it. Where that balance no longer exists, democracy perishes. For unless all the citizens of a state are habitually forced by necessary circumstances to compromise in a way that lets them affect policy with no one dominating it, freedom cannot be maintained.

In my version, the sentences just run on from one phrase to the next, from one clause to another. In his version, Lippmann balances phrase against phrase, clause against clause, creating an architectural symmetry that supports the whole passage. We can see more clearly how his sentences work if we break them out into their parts.

The national unity of a free people depends upon a sufficiently even balance of political power to make it impracticable

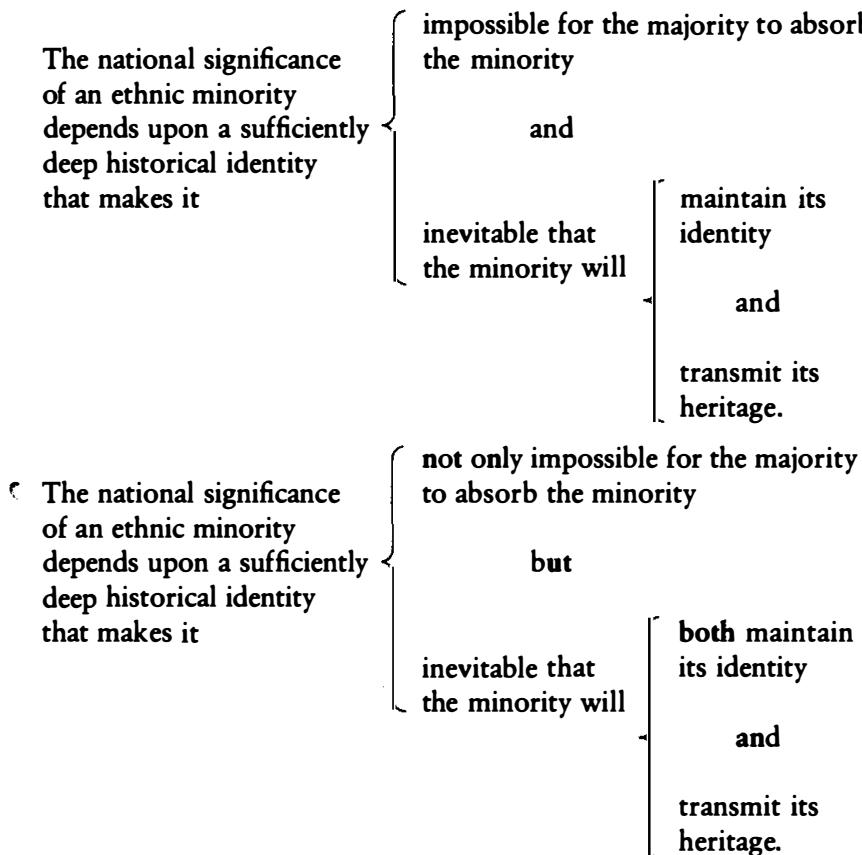


Where that balance no longer exists, democracy perishes.



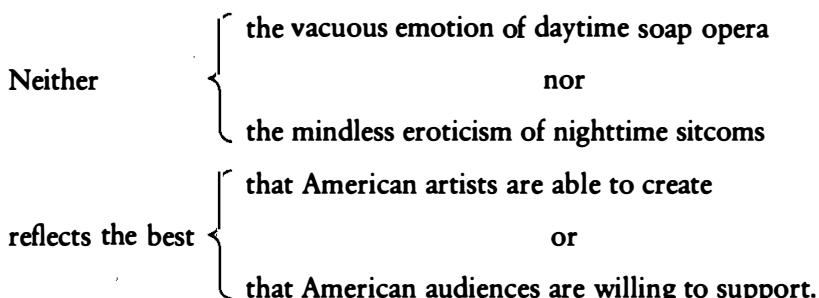
We can enhance the rhythm and grace of coordination if we keep in mind a few simple principles. First, a coordinate series will move more gracefully if each succeeding coordinate element is longer than the one before it. So if you coordinate within a coordination, do it in the last branch of the main coordination.

We can use correlative conjunctions such as *both X and Y, not only X but also Y, neither X nor Y* to signify a balanced coordination and give it emphasis. Compare these:



The second is stronger than the first.

You can make these coordinate patterns more rhetorically elegant if you consciously balance parts of phrases and clauses against each other:



The richest kind of balance and parallelism counterpoints both grammar and meaning: here *vacuous* is balanced against *mindless*, *emotion* against *eroticism*, *daytime* against *nighttime*, *soap opera* against *sitcoms*, *artists* against *audiences*, *able* against *willing*, and *create* against *support*.

You can achieve the same effect when you balance parts of sentences that are not coordinated. Here is a subject balanced against an object. (The square brackets signal a balanced but not coordinate pair.)

Scientists who tear down established views of universe invariably
challenge
those of us who have built all our visions of reality on those views.

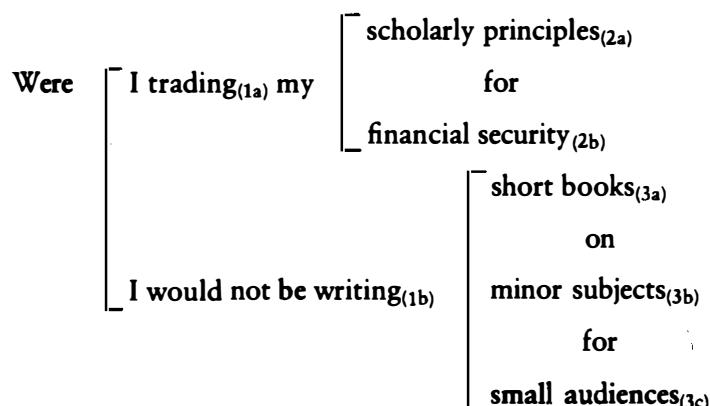
Here, the predicate of a relative clause in a subject is balanced against the predicate of the whole sentence.

A government that is unwilling to
listen to the moderate voices of its citizenry
must eventually answer to the harsh justice of its revolutionaries.

A direct object balanced against the object of a preposition:

Those of us who are vitally concerned about our failing school systems are not quite ready to sacrifice
the intellectual growth of our innocent children
to
the social daydreaming of irresponsible bureaucrats.

Here is an introductory subordinate clause (1a) balanced against a main clause (1b), the object of that subordinate clause (2a) balanced against the object in a following prepositional phrase (2b), and the object of the main clause (3a) balanced against the objects in two following prepositional phrases (3b–c).



None of these are coordinated, but they are all consciously balanced. Like every other artful device, these balanced phrases and clauses can eventually become self-defeating—or at least monotonously arch. But if you use them unobtrusively when you want to emphasize an important point or conclude the line of an argument, you can give your prose a shape and a cadence that most ordinary writing lacks.

Emphasis and Rhythm

As we have seen, emphasis is largely a matter of controlling the way a sentence ends. When we maneuver our most important information into that stressed position, the natural emphasis we hear in our mind's ear underscores the rhetorical emphasis of a significant idea. But the sentence will still seem weak and anti-climactic if it ends with lightweight words.

Different parts of speech carry different weights. Prepositions are very light—one reason why we sometimes avoid leaving a preposition at the end. Sentences should move toward strength; a preposition can dilute that strength. Compare:

The intellectual differences among races is a subject that only the most politically indifferent scientist *is willing to look into*.

The intellectual differences among races is a subject that only the most politically indifferent scientist *is willing to explore*.

Adjectives and adverbs are heavier than prepositions, but lighter than verbs and nouns. The heaviest, the most emphatic words are nominalizations, those abstract nouns that in Chapter 2 we worked so hard to eliminate. But we worked hard to eliminate them mostly at the beginnings of sentences, where you want to get off to a brisk start. When you end a sentence with a nominalization, you create a different effect. You bring the sentence to an end with a climactic thump.

Compare these two versions of Winston Churchill's "Finest Hour" speech, in which Churchill, always an elegant and emphatic writer, ends with the elegant parallelism emphasized by the pair of nominalizations:

‘ . . . until in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.

He could have written more simply, more directly, and much more banally:

. . . until in God's good time, the powerful New World steps forth to liberate the old.

In this next passage, E. B. White was writing about a rather less dramatic event, the death of a favorite pig. But White wanted to elevate the scene to one approaching mock tragedy, so he drew on the same stylistic resources that Churchill used:

I have written this account { { in penitence
and
in grief
as a man who failed to raise his pig
and
to explain my deviation from the
classic course of so many raised pigs.

{ { The grave in the woods is unmarked,
but
Fred [his dog] can direct the mourner to it { unerringly
and
with immense good will,
I know he and I shall often revisit it,
{ { singly
and
together,
in seasons of { reflection
and
despair,
on flagless memorial days of our own choosing.

He could have written,

As a man who failed to raise his pig, I have grieved as I have written this account in order to explain why I deviated from the classic course of so many raised pigs. Although the grave in the woods is unmarked, Fred can unerringly direct the mourner to it with good will. I know the two of us shall often revisit it, at those times when we are reflecting on things and when we are despairing, on flagless memorial days that we shall choose.

But without the elegant touches, without the parallelisms and the emphatic final nominalizations, the passage becomes merely silly.

Here is a passage by the political scientist and statesman, George Kennan. He describes Averell Harriman, an American diplomat working in the Soviet Union during World War II, a man of great intelligence and formal elegance. Following it is a version that excludes almost all nominalizations. Which better reflects Harriman's style is obvious:

Unique in his single-mindedness of purpose, it was his nature to pursue only one interest at a time. When we were associated with each other in Moscow this interest was, properly and commendably, the prospering of the American war effort and American diplomacy, as President Roosevelt viewed and understood it. To the accomplishment of his part in the furtherance of this objective he addressed himself with a dedication, a persistence, and an unflagging energy and attention that has no parallel in my experience. He recognized no interest outside his work. Personal interest did not exist for him. His physical frame, spare and sometimes ailing, seemed at best an unwelcome irrelevance; I had the impression that it was with an angry impatience that he took cognizance of the occasional reminders of its existence, dragged it with him on his daily rounds of duty, and forced it to support him where continuation without its support was not possible.

—George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925–1950*,¹²

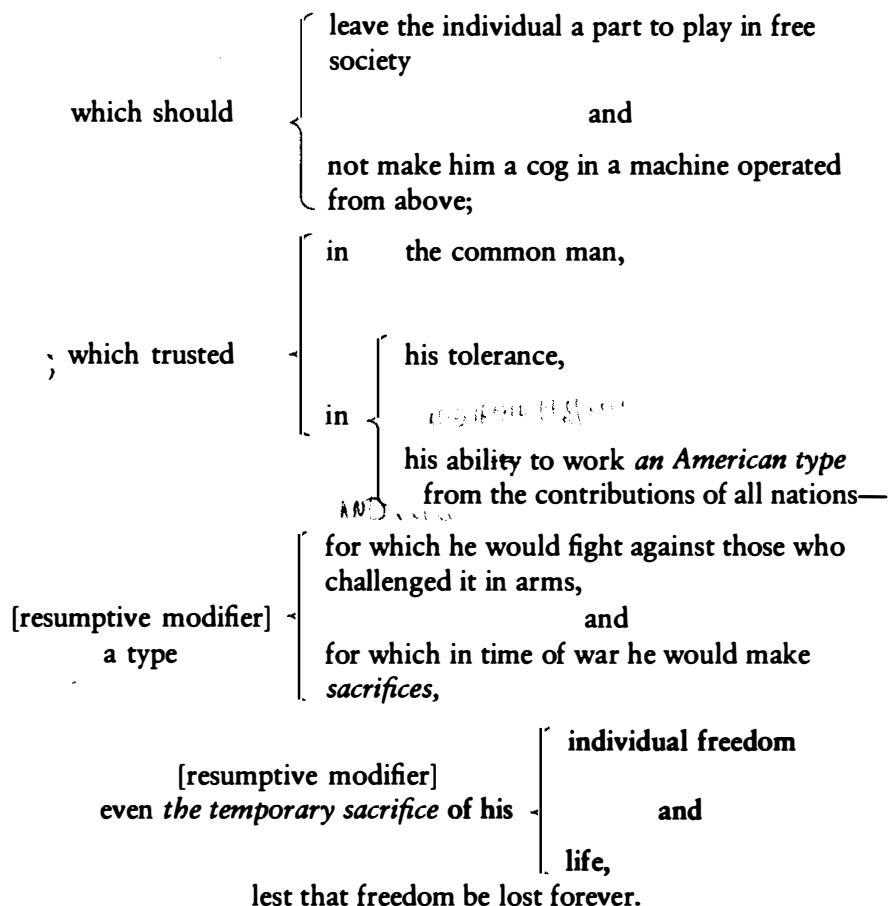
He was uniquely single-minded; by nature, he pursued only one interest at a time. When we were associated with each other in Moscow, he properly and commendably wanted only to help the American war effort and American diplomatic affairs as President Roosevelt viewed and understood them. To further this objective, he was persistent and dedicated. He had unflagging energy and was attentive to details in a way that parallels nothing I have experienced. He was not interested in anything personal. His physical frame, spare and sometimes ailing, seemed at best something unwelcome and irrelevant. It seemed to me that he was angry and impatient when he recognized those times that it reminded him it existed, when he dragged it with him on his daily round of duty and forced it to support him where he could not have continued without it.

Now, when a writer combines nominalizations with balanced and parallel constructions, when he draws on resumptive and summative modifiers to extend the line of a sentence, we know he is cranking up a style that aims at elegant complexity. This sentence by Frederick Jackson Turner, from his *The Frontier in*

American History, displays most of those devices, plus one more. If you seek an extravagantly elegant style, construct elaborately balanced units, sprinkle them with nominalizations, and then—this will sound odd—end clauses with phrases introduced by *of*: “This then is the heritage of pioneer experience.”

This then is the heritage of pioneer experience—a passionate belief that a democracy was possible which should leave the individual a part to play in free society and not make him a cog in a machine operated from above; which trusted in the common man, in his tolerance, his ability to adjust differences with good humor, and to work out an American type from the contributions of all nations—a type for which he would fight against those who challenged it in arms, and for which in time of war he would make sacrifices, even the temporary sacrifice of individual freedom and his life, lest that freedom be lost forever.

This then is the heritage of pioneer experience,—
[free modifier] a passionate belief that a democracy was possible



Length and Rhythm

In ordinary prose, the length of your sentences becomes an issue only if they are all about fifteen words long or if they are all much longer, over thirty or so. Though one eighteen-to-twenty-word sentence after another isn't the ideal goal, they will seem less monotonous than a series of sentences that are regularly longer or shorter.

In artful prose, on the other hand, length is more deliberately controlled. Some accomplished stylists can write one short sentence after another, perhaps to strike a note of urgency:

Toward noon Petrograd again became the field of military action; rifles and machine guns rang out everywhere. It was not easy to tell who was shooting or where. One thing was clear; the past and the future were exchanging shots. There was much casual firing; young boys were shooting off revolvers unexpectedly acquired. The arsenal was wrecked. . . . Shots rang out on both sides. But the board fence stood in the way, dividing the soldiers from the revolution. The attackers decided to break down the fence. They broke down part of it and set fire to the rest. About twenty barracks came into view. The bicyclists were concentrated in two or three of them. The empty barracks were set fire to at once.

—Leon Trotsky, *The Russian Revolution*, trans. Max Eastman

Or terse certainty:

The teacher or lecturer is a danger. He very seldom recognizes his nature or his position. The lecturer is a man who must talk for an hour. France may possibly have acquired the intellectual leadership of Europe when their academic period was cut down to forty minutes. I also have lectured. The lecturer's first problem is to have enough words to fill forty or sixty minutes. The professor is paid for his time, his results are almost impossible to estimate. . . . No teacher has ever failed from ignorance. That is empiric professional knowledge. Teachers fail because they cannot "handle the class." Real education must ultimately be limited to men who insist on knowing, the rest is mere sheep-herding.

—Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*

Or fire:

Let us look at this American artist first. How did he ever get to America, to start with? Why isn't he a European still, like his father before him?

Now listen to me, don't listen to him. He'll tell you the lie you expect. Which is partly your fault for expecting it.

He didn't come in search of freedom of worship. England had more freedom of worship in the year 1700 than America had. Won by Englishmen who wanted freedom and so stopped at home and fought for it. And got it. Freedom of worship? Read the history of New England during the first century of its existence.

Freedom anyhow? The land of the free! This the land of the free! Why, if I say anything that displeases them, the free mob will lynch me, and that's my freedom. Free? Why I have never been in any country where the individual has such an abject fear of his fellow countrymen. Because, as I say, they are free to lynch him the moment he shows he is not one of them. . . .

All right then, what did they come for? For lots of reasons. Perhaps least of all in search of freedom of any sort: positive freedom, that is.

—D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*

In this last example, Lawrence invests his discourse with even more urgency by breaking sentences into fragments and what could be longer paragraphs into abrupt snatches of discourse.

Equally accomplished writers write one long sentence after another to suggest a mind exploring an idea in the act of writing the sentence:

In any event, up at the front of this March, in the first line, back of that hollow square of monitors, Mailer and Lowell walked in this barrage of cameras, helicopters, TV cars, monitors, loudspeakers, and wavering buckling twisting line of notables, arms linked (line twisting so much that at times the movement was in file, one arm locked ahead, one behind, then the line would undulate about and the other arm would be ahead) speeding up a few steps, slowing down while a great happiness came back into the day as if finally one stood under some mythical arch in the great vault of history, helicopters buzzing about, chop-chop, and the sense of America divided on this day now liberated some undiscovered patriotism in Mailer so that he felt a sharp searing love for his country in this moment and on this day, crossing some divide in his own mind wider than the Potomac, a love so lacerated he felt as if a marriage were being torn and children lost—never does one love so much as then, obviously, then—and an odor of wood smoke, from where you knew not, was also in the air, a smoke of dignity and some calm heroism, not unlike the sense of freedom which also comes when a marriage is burst—Mailer knew for the

first time why men in the front line of battle are almost always ready to die; there is a promise of some swift transit. . . .
 —Norman Mailer, *Armies of the Night*

This single sentence goes on for several hundred more words.

Metaphor

Clarity, vigor, symmetry, rhythm—prose so graced would more than satisfy most of us. And yet, if it offered no virtues other than these, such prose would excite an admiration only for our craft, not for the reach of our imagination. This next passage displays all the stylistic graces we've described, but it goes beyond mere craft. It reveals a truth about pleasure through a figure of speech embedded in a comparison that is itself almost metaphorical.

- The secret of the enjoyment of pleasure is to know when to stop. . . . We do this every time we listen to music. We do not seize hold of a particular chord or phrase and shout at the orchestra to go on playing it for the rest of the evening; on the contrary, however much we may like that particular moment of music, we know that its perpetuation would interrupt and kill the movement of the melody. We understand that the beauty of a symphony is less in these musical moments than in the whole movement from beginning to end. If the symphony tries to go on too long, if at a certain point the composer exhausts his creative ability and tries to carry on just for the sake of filling in the required space of time, then we begin to fidget in our chairs, feeling that he has denied the natural rhythm, has broken the smooth curve from birth to death, and that though a pretense of life is being made, it is in fact a living death.

—Alan W. Watts, *The Meaning of Happiness*

Watts could have written this:

. . . however much we may like that particular moment of music, we know that its perpetuation would interrupt and spoil the movement of the melody . . . we begin to fidget in our chairs, feeling that he has denied the natural rhythm, has interrupted the regular movement from beginning to end, and that though a pretense of wholeness is being made, it is in fact a repeated end.

The two passages are equally clear and graceful. But the first illuminates music—and pleasure—in a way that the second does

not. The metaphor of birth and the smooth, unbroken curve of life into death startles us with a flash of unexpected truth.

Of metaphor, Aristotle wrote,

By far the greatest thing is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learned from others. It is a sign of genius, for a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of similarity among dissimilars.

A metaphor invites us to look at two things in a new way. Similes do the same, but less intensely, the *like* or *as* moderating the force of the comparison.

Compare these:

‘ The schoolmaster is the person who takes the children off the parents’ hands for a consideration. That is to say, he establishes a child prison, engages a number of employee schoolmasters as turnkeys, and covers up the essential cruelty and unnaturalness of the situation by torturing the children if they do not learn, and calling this process, which is within the capacity of any fool or blackguard, by the sacred name of Teaching.

—G. B. Shaw, *Sham Education*

. . . he establishes something like a child prison, engages a number of employee schoolmasters to act like turnkeys, covers up the essential cruelty and unnaturalness of the situation by doing things to the children that are like torture if they do not learn . . . calling this process, which is within the capacity of any fool or blackguard, by the sacred name of Teaching.

Both passages say the same thing about education, but the first with more intensity and immediacy.

You may think that metaphor is appropriate only to poetic writing, or reflective or polemical writing. But metaphor vivifies all kinds of prose. Historians rely on it:

‘ This is what may be called the common-sense view of history. History consists of a corpus of ascertained facts. The facts are available to the historian in documents, inscriptions, and so on, like fish on the fishmonger’s slab. The historian collects them, takes them home, and cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him. Acton, whose culinary tastes were austere, wanted them served plain. . . . Sir George Clark, critical as he was of Acton’s attitude, himself contrasts the “hard core of facts” in history

with the “surrounding pulp of disputable interpretation”—forgetting perhaps that the pulpy part of the fruit is more rewarding than the hard core.

—E. H. Carr, *What Is History?*

So do biologists:

Some of you may have been thinking that, instead of delivering a scientific address, I have been indulging in a flight of fancy. It is a flight, but not of mere fancy, nor is it just an individual indulgence. It is my small personal attempt to share in the flight of the mind into new realms of our cosmic environment. We have evolved wings for such flights, in the shape of the disciplined scientific imagination. Support for those wings is provided by the atmosphere of knowledge created by human science and learning: so far as this supporting atmosphere extends, so far can our wings take us in our exploration.

—Julian Huxley, “New Bottles for Old Wine,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*

And philosophers:

Quine has long professed his skepticism about the possibility of making any sense of the refractory idioms of intentionality, so he needs opacity only to provide a quarantine barrier protecting the healthy, extensional part of a sentence from the infected part.

—Daniel C. Dennett, “Beyond Belief”¹³

And when they are writing of new ideas for which there is yet no standard language, so do physicists:

Whereas the lepton pair has a positive rest mass when it is regarded as a single particle moving with a velocity equal to the vector sum of the motions of its two components, a photon always has zero rest mass. This difference can be glossed over, however, by treating the lepton pair as the offspring of the decay of a short-lived photonlike parent called a virtual photon.

—Leon M. Lederman, “The Upsilon Particle,” *Scientific American*

These metaphors serve different ends. Shaw used the prison metaphor to emphasize a point that he could have made without it. But prisons, turnkeys, and torture invest his argument with an emotional intensity that ordinary language could not communicate. Carr used fish and fruit both to emphasize and to illuminate. He could have expressed his ideas more prosaically, but the

literal statement would have been longer and weaker. Dennett and Lederman used their comparisons not to emphasize but entirely to explain; neither required any dramatically heightened emphasis.

But if metaphor can sometimes evidence a fresh imagination, it can also betray those of us whose imaginations fall short of its demands. Too often, we use metaphor to gloss over inexact thinking:

Societies give birth to new values through the differential osmotic flow of daily social interaction. Conflicts evolve when new values collide with the old, a process that frequently spawns yet a new set of values that synthesize the conflict into a reconciliation of opposites.

We get the picture, but through a cracked glass of careless metaphor. The birth metaphor suggests a traumatic event, but the new values, it is claimed, result from osmotic flow, a process constituted by a multitude of invisibly small events. Conflicts do not usually “evolve”; they more often occur in an instant, as suggested by the metaphor of collision. The spawning image picks up the metaphor of birth again, but by this time the image is, at best, collectively ludicrous.

Had the writer thought through his ideas carefully, he might have expressed them in clearer, nonfigurative language:

As we continuously interact with one another in small ways, we gradually create new social values. When one person behaves according to one of these new values and another according to an old value, the values may come into conflict, creating a new third value that reconciles the other two.

Less misleading, but more embarrassing, are those passages that confuse emphasis with extravagance. Huxley’s passage about the wings of inquiry flapping in an atmosphere of scientific knowledge comes perilously close.

Metaphors also invite trouble if we aren’t sensitive to the way their literal meanings can unexpectedly intrude. The following is not a concocted example; it actually appeared in a student paper.

The classic blitzkrieg relies on a tank-heavy offensive force, supported by ground-support aircraft, to destroy the defender’s ability to fight by running amuck [*sic*] in his undefended rear, after penetrating his forward defenses.