

VERBOSITY is perhaps the most objectionable form of redundancy, because it is the most difficult to cure. Verbosity pervades a sentence or a paragraph so thoroughly that no excision of words or clauses will avail: the only remedy is to recast the sentence or the paragraph.

One form of verbosity appears in *paraphrases* of texts of Scripture and popular proverbs. Sometimes a paraphrase brings out the meaning of a pithy saying; but usually, like the cramp-fish or torpedo, it "benumbs what it touches."

Dr. Campbell cites from Dr. Clarke a paraphrase of the following text:—

"Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock:

"And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell not; for it was founded upon a rock."¹

"Now," says Dr. Campbell, "let us hear the paraphrast: 'Wherefore he that shall not only *hear* and *receive* these my instructions, but also *remember*, and *consider*, and *practise*, and *live according to* them, such a man may be compared to one that builds his house upon a rock; for as a house founded upon a rock stands *unshaken* and *firm* against all the assaults of rains, and floods, and storms, so the man who, in his life and conversation, *actually practises* and *obeys* my instructions, will *firmly* resist all the temptations of the devil, the allurements of pleasure, and the terrors of persecution, and shall be able to stand in the day of judgment, and be rewarded of God.'"²

"I remember," says Matthew Arnold, "the relief with which, after long feeling the sway of Franklin's imperturbable common-sense, I came upon a project of his for a new version of the Book of Job, to replace the old version, the style of which, says Franklin,

¹ Matthew vii. 24, 25.

² Campbell: *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, book iii. chap. ii. sect. ii.

has become obsolete, and thence less agreeable. 'I give,' he continues, 'a few verses, which may serve as a sample of the kind of version I would recommend.' We all recollect the famous verse in our translation: 'Then Satan answered the Lord and said: "Doth Job fear God for nought?"' Franklin makes this: 'Does Your Majesty imagine that Job's good conduct is the effect of mere personal attachment and affection?' I well remember how when first I read that, I drew a deep breath of relief, and said to myself: 'After all, there is a stretch of humanity beyond Franklin's victorious good sense!'"¹

Such paraphrases are common in religious verse. Read, for example, a passage quoted by Wordsworth from Dr. Johnson:—

"Turn on the prudent Ant thy heedless eyes,
Observe her labours, Sluggard, and be wise;
No stern command, no monitory voice,
Prescribes her duties, or directs her choice;
Yet, timely provident, she hastes away
To snatch the blessings of a plenteous day;
When fruitful Summer loads the teeming plain,
She crops the harvest, and she stores the grain.
How long shall sloth usurp thy useless hours,
Unnerve thy vigour, and enchain thy powers?
While artful shades thy downy couch enclose,
And soft solicitation courts repose,
Amidst the drowsy charms of dull delight,
Year chases year with unremitting flight,
Till Want now following, fraudulent and slow,
Shall spring to seize thee, like an ambush'd foe."²

"From this hubbub of words," says Wordsworth, "pass to the original. 'Go to the Ant, thou Sluggard, consider her ways, and

¹ Matthew Arnold: *Culture and Anarchy*, chap. i. The whole of this remarkable translation, which served as part of a political squib and was classed by its author among "bagatelles," may be found in Franklin's Works, vol. ii. p. 166 (Sparks's edition). It may be questioned whether Franklin regarded the language he used as an improvement on the old version. Mr. Arnold takes Franklin very seriously.

² Johnson: *Paraphrase of Proverbs* vi. 6-11.

be wise : which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest. How long wilt thou sleep, O Sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep. So shall thy poverty come as one that travel- leth, and thy want as an armed man.'"¹

Another example may be taken from Thomson : —

“Observe the rising lily’s snowy grace,
Observe the various vegetable race;
They neither toil, nor spin, but careless grow,
Yet see how warm they blush! how bright they glow!
What regal vestments can with them compare!
What king so shining! or what queen so fair!”²

Paraphrases of this character are, it is to be hoped, less frequent nowadays than they were a century ago; but they are still in favor with a certain class of preachers, clerical and lay, whether writing in prose or in verse.

Another form of verbosity is the *circumlocu- tion* (or *periphrasis*)³.

Usually circumlocutions are circuitous ways of saying what might better be said directly. They sometimes arise from an effort to avoid the repetition of a word, sometimes from would-be wit, and sometimes from an attempt to elevate the style.⁴

The lamp of day, the fair sex, patrons of husbandry, the morning meal, the dental organs, are weak ways of designating “the sun,” “woman,” “farmers,” “breakfast,” “teeth.”

“At the time of the Irish Famine, no clergyman could bring himself to say the word ‘potato’ in the pulpit. Preachers called it ‘that root, upon which so many thousands of God’s creatures depended for support, and which in His wise purposes had for a time ceased to flourish;’ or spoke of ‘that esculent succulent, the loss

¹ Wordsworth: Prose Works; Of Poetic Diction.

² James Thomson: A Paraphrase on the latter part of the Sixth Chapter of St. Matthew.

³ From *περί*, around, and *φράσειν*, to speak. ⁴ See pages 102–104.

of which had deprived so many hungry sinners of their daily sus- tenance;’ but no one said ‘potato.’”¹

One of Homer’s simplest lines is translated by F. W. Newman as follows : —

“Thus they reciprocally held betwixt themselves discourses.”²

“Instead of stabbing,” writes Lowell, “he [Dryden] ‘with steel invades the life.’ The consequence was that by and by we have Dr. Johnson’s poet, Savage, telling us, —

‘In front, a parlor meets my entering view,
Opposed a room to sweet refection due;’

. . . and Mr. Bruce, in a Danish war-song, calling on the vikings to ‘assume their oars.’”³

Wordsworth, disdaining to call a sore throat by its name, says : —

“The winds of March, smiting insidiously,
Raised in the tender passage of the throat
Viewless obstruction.”⁴

Cowper, unwilling to say “gun,” says : —

“Such is the clamour of rooks, daws, and kites,
Th’ explosion of the *levell’d tube* excites.”⁵

Dr. Grainger, unwilling to say “rats” or “mice,” says, accord- ing to Boswell⁶ : —

“Nor with less waste *the whiskered vermin race*,
A countless clan, despoiled the lowland cane.”

Other examples of weak circumlocutions are : —

. . . “the solitary sound of one o’clock had long since resounded on the ebon ear of night, and the next signal of the advance of time was close approaching.”⁷

¹ C. H. Grundy: Dull Sermons. Macmillan’s Magazine, July, 1876, p. 265. Rufus Choate is said to have talked to a jury about “that deli- cious esculent of the tropics, — the squash.”

² *Ὡς οἱ μὲν τοιαῦτα πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἀγόρευον.* — Homer: The Iliad, v. 274.

³ Lowell: Literary Essays; Dryden.

⁴ Wordsworth: The Excursion, book vii.

⁵ Cowper: Hope.

⁶ James Boswell: The Life of Samuel Johnson.

⁷ Scott: Guy Mannering, vol. ii. chap. xx.

"The Dominie, . . . unable to stifle his emotions, ran away to empty the feelings of his heart at his eyes."¹

"But he had scarcely achieved the utterance of these words, when he received a manual compliment on the head."²

"Clifford . . . now looked up for a moment, and then, turning round and presenting the dorsal part of his body to long Ned, muttered, 'Pish'!"³

. . . "no one, ignorant of the fact, would suppose, that the gentleman who was now seated at the hospitable board of Colonel Howard, directing, with so much discretion, the energies of his masticators to the delicacies of the feast, could read, in his careless air and smiling visage, that those foragers of nature had been so recently condemned, for four long hours, to the mortification of discussing the barren subject of his own sword-hilt."⁴

"This Shelley biography," writes Mark Twain, "is a literary cake-walk. The ordinary forms of speech are absent from it. All the pages, all the paragraphs, walk by sedately, elegantly, not to say mincingly, in their Sunday-best, shiny and sleek, perfumed, and with *boutonnieres* in their buttonholes; it is rare to find even a chance sentence that has forgotten to dress. If the book wishes to tell us that Mary Godwin, child of sixteen, had known afflictions, the fact saunters forth in this nobby outfit: 'Mary was herself not unlearned in the lore of pain.'⁵

"Take my advise, honorable sir," writes Mr. Yellowplush, "listen to a humble footmin: it's generally best in poetry to understand puffickly what you mean yourself, and to ingspress your meaning clearly afterwoods — in the simpler words the better, praps. You may, for instans, call a coronet a coronal (an 'ancestral coronal,') if you like, as you might call a hat a 'swart sombrero,' 'a glossy four-and-nine,' 'a silken helm, to storm impermeable, and lightsome as the breezy gossamer;' but, in the long run, it's as well to call it a hat. It is a hat; and that name is quite as poetticle as another. I think it's Playto, or els

¹ Scott: Guy Mannering, vol. ii. chap. xxvi.

² Dickens: Martin Chuzzlewit, chap. ix.

³ Bulwer (Lytton): Paul Clifford, chap. xvi.

⁴ Cooper: The Pilot, chap. xxvi.

⁵ Mark Twain: In Defence of Harriet Shelley. North American Review, July, 1894, p. 109.

Harrystottle, who observes that what we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. Confess, now, dear Barnet, don't you long to call it a Polyanthus?"¹

Sometimes a circumlocution serves a useful purpose. Tennyson's designation of King Arthur's moustache as "the knightly growth that fringed his lips"² Useful circumlocutions. dignifies it; Addison's designation of a fan as "that little modish machine"³ suggests its deliberate use as a weapon in the warfare of polite society; Swift's parenthetical allusion to Defoe ("the fellow that was pilloried, I have forgot his name"⁴) is a skilful attack on an enemy; Cicero's assertion, not that Milo's servants killed Clodius, but that they "did that which every one would have wished his servants to do in a similar case,"⁵ is an argument; and Landor might plead several reasons for his manner of saying that some critics resemble monkeys: —

"There is hardly a young author who does not make his first attempt in some review; showing his teeth, hanging by his tail, pleased and pleasing by the volubility of his chatter, and doing his best to get a penny for his exhibitor and a nut for his own pouch, by the facetiousness of the tricks he performs upon our heads and shoulders."⁶

Another form of verbosity is *prolixity*, — the mention of things not worth mentioning. A writer Prolixity. who is trying to convince his readers of what he believes to be the truth will succeed but ill if he forces them to follow every step of a long logical process.

¹ Thackeray: The Memoirs of Mr. C. J. Yellowplush; Epistles to the Literati, Mr. Yellowplush to Sir Edward Lytton Bulwer.

² Tennyson: Morte d' Arthur.

³ The Spectator, No. 102.

⁴ Swift: A Letter concerning the Sacramental Test.

⁵ Fecerunt id servi Milonis . . . quod suos quisque servos in tali re facere voluisset. — Cicero: Oratio pro Milone, x.

⁶ Landor: Conversations, Third Series; Southey and Porson.

A story-teller who gives the same prominence to the subordinate or incidental as to the essential parts of his narrative, exhausts his readers long before they reach the end of the story. An historical writer who pays no attention to perspective is a mere chronicler of events.

The second of the following sentences tells a person of average intelligence all that is said in the first:—

“On receiving this message, he arose from his chair, put on his coat and hat, took his umbrella, went downstairs, walked to the railway station, bought a ticket for Plymouth, and started in the eleven o'clock train.”

“On receiving this message, he started for Plymouth by the eleven o'clock train.”¹

It might be difficult to find in a reputable author a sentence (short enough to quote) so painfully prolix as that given above; but every one who has read aloud a novel by Dickens — not to speak of inferior writers — knows what prolixity is.

As a man sees more for himself in a moment than he can learn from pages of description, so an expression that suggests a scene or a thought is not less clear than a statement in detail, and is far more forcible. One well-arranged sentence may say more than a paragraph, one well-chosen word more than a sentence. Even a dash may be eloquent:—

“If you should transfer the amount of your reading day by day from the newspaper to the standard authors — But who dare speak of such a thing?”²

¹ Quintilian has illustrated this point in a similar way: “*solet enim quaedam esse partium brevitatis, quae longam tamen efficit summam. ‘in portum veni, navem prospexi, quanti veheret interrogavi, de pretio convenit, conscendi, sublatae sunt ancorae, solvimus oram, profecti sumus.’ nihil horum dici celerius potest, sed sufficit dicere: ‘e portu navigavi.’ et, quotiens exitus rei satis ostendit priora, debemus hoc esse contenti, quo reliqua intelliguntur.*” — *Inst. Orator. iv. ii. xli.* See also J. Q. Adams: *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory, lect. xviii.*

² Emerson: *Society and Solitude; Books.*

“Richter says, in the Island of Sumatra there is a kind of ‘Light-chafers,’ large Fire-flies, which people stick upon spits, and illuminate the ways with at night. Persons of condition can thus travel with a pleasant radiance, which they much admire. Great honour to the Fire-flies! But —!”¹

“Generations of monkeys had been scared into good behaviour by the stories their elders told them of Kaa, the night-thief, who could slip along the branches as quietly as moss grows, and steal away the strongest monkey that ever lived; of old Kaa, who could make himself look so like a dead branch or a rotten stump that the wisest were deceived till the branch caught them, and then —”²

By a suggestive style is meant a style that is suggestive to the person addressed. The assertion that “the fox looked out from the windows”³ of Balclutha would not represent desolation to one who knew nothing about foxes. Byron’s “Niobe of Nations” would tell nothing about Rome to one who had never heard the story of Niobe. The word “Athens” says much more to one man than could be learned by another from an epitome of Grecian History.

The success of a suggestive style depends upon the skilful selection of those particulars which bring the whole to mind inevitably and at once. A circumstance which, though trivial in itself, stands for other circumstances more important, may tell more than could be told by pages of detail.

“In his [Burke’s] illustrations no less than in the body of his work, few things are more remarkable than his exquisite instinct of *selection*, — an instinct which seems almost confined to the French and the English mind. It is the polar opposite of what is now sometimes called, by a false application of a mathematical

¹ Carlyle: *Heroes and Hero-worship; The Hero as Man of Letters.*

² Rudyard Kipling: *The Jungle Book; Kaa’s Hunting.*

³ Quoted from Ossian by Matthew Arnold in his essay “On the Study of Celtic Literature.”

term, *exhaustiveness*,—formerly much practised by the Germans, and consisting, to use the happy phrase of Goldsmith, in a certain manner of ‘writing the subject to the dregs;’ saying all that can be said on a given subject, without considering how far it is to the purpose; and valuing facts because they are true, rather than because they are significant.”¹

An apt quotation, at the same time that it gives to a thought the weight of authority and perhaps also the charm of association, suggests what many additional words would not fully express. Proverbs, as Emerson says, “give us pocket-editions of the most voluminous truths.”²

A suggestive style is of great value in writings addressed to the feelings or the imagination. Wordsworth’s “trampling waves,” for example, bring before us the sea in a storm:—

“And this huge Castle, standing here sublime,
I love to see the look with which it braves,
Cased in the unfeeling armour of old time,
The lightning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves.”³

In the following passage the words “an awful rose of dawn” show the early morning in all its grandeur:—

“I saw that every morning, far withdrawn
Beyond the darkness and the cataract,
God made Himself an awful rose of dawn,
Unheeded.”⁴

Browning at his best is a master of the suggestive style. In “My Last Duchess,” for example, how much is told in a few lines! Another example is:—

¹ E. J. Payne: Introduction to Burke’s “Select Works.”

² Emerson: Expression. The Atlantic Monthly, November, 1860.

³ Wordsworth: Elegiac Stanzas, suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm.

⁴ Tennyson: The Vision of Sin.

“Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,
And did he stop and speak to you?
And did you speak to him again?
How strange it seems, and new!

“But you were living before that,
And you are living after,
And the memory I started at—
My starting moves your laughter!

“I crossed a moor with a name of its own
And a use in the world no doubt,
Yet a hand’s-breadth of it shines alone
’Mid the blank miles round about.

“For there I picked up on the heather
And there I put inside my breast
A moulted feather, an eagle feather—
Well, I forget the rest.”¹

Akin to a suggestive style is that kind of writing which convinces the reader that the author knows and feels much more than he has expressed,—that, instead of “letting himself go,” he is holding himself back for fear that he may overstep the bounds of truth in substance or of temperance in language.

A story told of the great orator, John Bright, will show how moderation in expression may indicate power held in reserve.

“He [John Bright] never spoke beyond his strength. The only effort—and this sometimes produced an immense impression—was, not to give the most intense and energetic expression to his passion, but to restrain it. However fierce were his denunciations of a great injustice his audience felt that behind the terrible and fiery words there were the fires of a fiercer wrath which he was struggling hard to subdue. This reserve, which was akin to the austerity of his personal character, gave elevation to his speeches. He always retained his self-command. . . . This restraint was not apparent merely, it was real. He was speaking in Birmingham

¹ Browning: Memorabilia.

just after the appearance of the famous 'Bath letter' of Mr. Disraeli, in which the Conservative leader said that for nearly five years Mr. Gladstone had 'harassed every trade, worried every profession, and assailed or menaced every class, institution, and species of property in the country.' In his speech Mr. Bright referred to the Tories and to the letter of Mr. Disraeli in the following words: 'Without doubt, if they had been in the Wilderness they would have condemned the Ten Commandments as a harassing piece of legislation, though it does happen that we have the evidence of more than thirty centuries to the wisdom and usefulness of those commandments.' This was very effective. But the next morning I was travelling with Mr. Bright, and he told me the form in which the passage had first occurred to him; it was positively fierce, not to say savage. He added, 'I thought that I had better not put it so,' and I agreed with him."¹

Of this kind of force Mark Antony's speech in Shakspeare's "Julius Cæsar" and Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg are familiar examples. Noteworthy for studious moderation are the words with which Webster began his appeal on behalf of Dartmouth College, — "It is, sir, as I have said, a small college, and yet there are those who love it,"²—words that, delivered as Webster delivered them, strongly affected every one in the court-room, including Chief Justice Marshall and his associates on the bench.

Other examples of the force of reserve are:—

"What, then, did the College do to justify our speaking of the war now? She sent a few gentlemen into the field, who died there becomingly. I know of nothing more. The great forces which insured the North success would have been at work even if those men had been absent. Our means of raising money and troops would not have been less, I dare say. The great qualities of the race, too, would still have been there. The greatest qualities, after

¹ R. W. Dale: Mr. Bright. *The Contemporary Review*, May, 1889.

² Daniel Webster: *The Dartmouth College Case*, March 10, 1818.

all, are those of a man, not those of a gentleman, and neither North nor South needed colleges to learn them. And yet—and yet I think we all feel that to us at least the war would seem less beautiful and inspiring if those few gentlemen had not died as they did. Look at yonder portrait¹ and yonder bust,¹ and tell me if stories such as they commemorate do not add a glory to the bare fact that the strongest legions prevailed. So it has been since wars began. After history has done its best to fix men's thoughts upon strategy and finance, their eyes have turned and rested on some single romantic figure,—some Sidney, some Falkland, some Wolfe, some Montcalm, some Shaw. This is that little touch of the superfluous which is necessary. Necessary as art is necessary, and knowledge which serves no mechanical end. Superfluous only as glory is superfluous, or a bit of red ribbon that a man would die to win."²

"We took two rails from a neighboring fence, and formed a bier by laying across some boards from the bottom of the boat. And thus we bore Zenobia homeward. Six hours before, how beautiful! At midnight, what a horror!"³

"At the usual evening hour the chapel bell began to toll, and Thomas Newcome's hands outside the bed feebly beat time. And just as the last bell struck, a peculiar sweet smile shone over his face, and he lifted up his head a little, and quickly said, 'Adsum!' and fell back. It was the word we used at school, when names were called; and lo, he, whose heart was as that of a little child, had answered to his name, and stood in the presence of The Master."⁴

"Twenty years had passed since Joey ran down the brae to play. Jess, his mother, shook her staff fondly at him. A cart rumbled by, the driver nodding on the shaft. It rounded the corner and stopped suddenly, and then a woman screamed. A handful of men carried Joey's dead body to his mother, and that was the tragedy of Jess's life.

¹ The portrait referred to is that of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw; the bust, that of Brigadier-General Charles Russell Lowell.

² Oliver Wendell Holmes, Junior: *Harvard College in the War*; Answer to a toast at Harvard University Commencement, June 25, 1884.

³ Hawthorne: *The Blithedale Romance*, chap. xxvii.

⁴ Thackeray: *The Newcomes*, chap. lxxx.

"Twenty years ago, and still Jess sat at the window, and still she heard that woman scream."¹

"And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept: and as he went, thus he said, O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"²

In trying not to be prolix, one should beware of the opposite extreme, should avoid ellipses difficult to bridge, compression that takes the life out of language, laborious conciseness of every kind. These are the very faults into which a verbose writer is apt to fall; for when such a writer, impatient of his slow progress, tries to get on faster, he usually succeeds in omitting, not what his readers know, but what he knows best himself, and thus sacrifices clearness to misplaced brevity.

With a master of style, on the other hand, every word adds to the effect. Take a single example from Milton:—

"From morn
To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
A summer's day, and with the setting sun
Dropt from the zenith, like a falling star."³

"What art," says Webster, "is manifest in these few lines! The object is to express great distance, and great velocity, neither of which is capable of very easy suggestion to the human mind. We are told that the angel fell a day, a long summer's day; the day is broken into forenoon and afternoon, that the time may seem to be protracted. He does not reach the earth till sunset; and then, to represent the velocity, he 'drops,' one of the very best words in the language to signify sudden and rapid fall, and then comes a simile, 'like a falling star.'"⁴

¹ J. M. Barrie: *A Window in Thrums*, chap. vi.

² 2 Samuel xviii. 33.

³ Milton: *Paradise Lost*, book i. line 742.

⁴ Daniel Webster: *Private Correspondence*; To Rev. Mr. Brazer, Nov. 10, 1828.

SECTION III.

EASE.

In so far as EASE is affected by the number of words, it has more in common with clearness than with force; for it usually suffers from excessive conciseness rather than from redundancy. Authors noted for force—George Eliot, Browning, Emerson—leave gaps for their readers to supply: those noted for ease—Goldsmith, Irving, Cardinal Newman—are copious rather than compact.

From the point of view of ease, the shortest word, sentence, or paragraph is not necessarily the best. "Languor is," no doubt, "the cause or the effect of most disorders;"¹ but "it is silly to argue that we gain ground by shortening on all occasions the syllables of a sentence. Half a minute, if indeed so much is requisite, is well spent in clearness, in fulness, and pleasurable expression, and in engaging the ear to carry a message to the understanding."²

On the other hand, there is danger in making ease the primary consideration in determining the number of words. So long as a writer spends his time "in engaging the ear to

¹ Landor: *Conversations*, Third Series; Southey and Porson.

² *Ibid.*; Johnson and Horne (Tooke). Quintilian has a sentence to the same effect: "quod intellexerit, ut fortasse ubique, in narratione tamen praecipue media haec tenenda sit via dicendi, 'quantum opus est et quantum satis est.' quantum opus est autem non ita solum accipi volo, quantum ad indicandum sufficit, quia non inornata debet esse brevitatis, alioqui sit indocta; nam et fallit voluptas, et minus longa quae delectant videntur, ut amoenum ac molle iter, etiamsi est spatii amplioris, minus fatigat quam durum aridumque compendium."—*Inst. Orator.* iv. ii. xlv.