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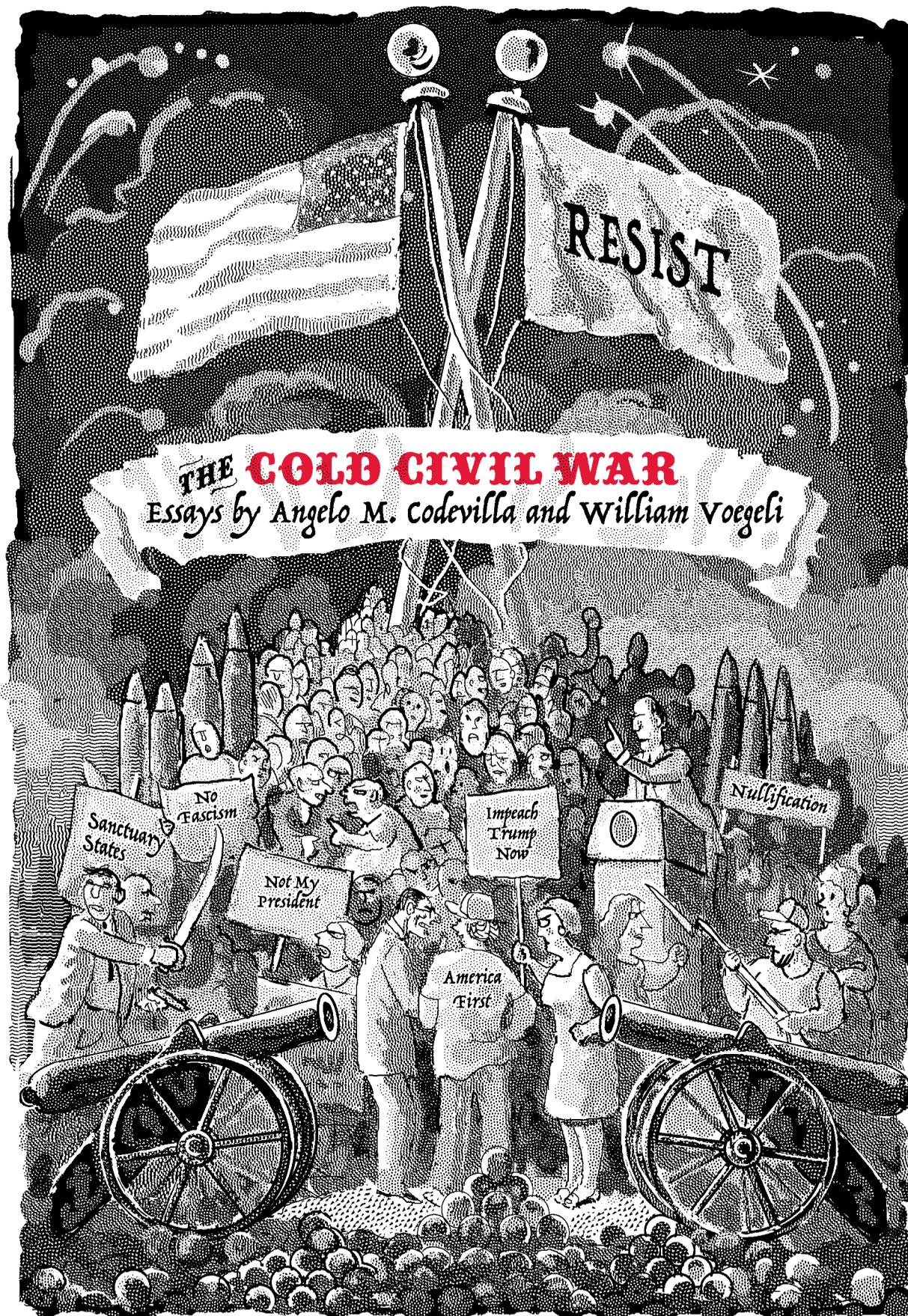
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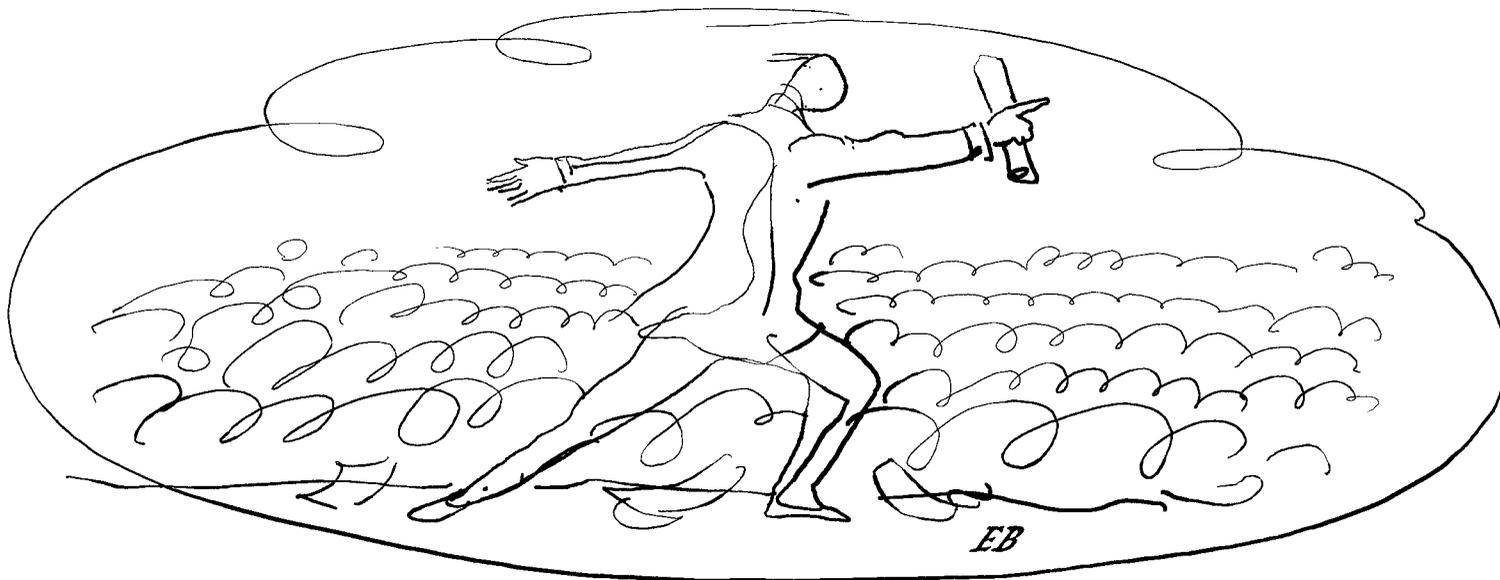


Book Review by Richard A. Lanham

## RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

*Farnsworth's Classical English Rhetoric*, by Ward Farnsworth.  
David R. Godine, 256 pages, \$18.95

*Farnsworth's Classical English Metaphor*, by Ward Farnsworth.  
David R. Godine, 256 pages, \$27.95



IT WOULD BE HARD TO IMAGINE A TIME less propitious for the appearance of books about classical rhetoric. Not a day seems to pass, after all, when some newspaper, magazine, or talk show doesn't dismiss an opponent's stale lies as "mere rhetoric." You can learn a lot from these rebarbative jibes, but you will not be reminded of rhetoric, in the ancient way of thinking, as the art of persuasion.

Classical rhetoric was a protocol for resolving disagreement peacefully, through two-sided argument. It lasted as a basic component of Western education for about 25 centuries. Now, in the midst of a crisis in how we conduct our public conversation, a portion of the public—particularly in media and on college campuses—have decided to discard two-sided argument, the technique classical Athens cultivated in order to orchestrate dissent in a highly litigious society. Not only are viewpoints repudiated but today the art itself is denounced that has for these long millennia allowed opposite viewpoints to contend peacefully.

A special flourish of thanks, then, is owed to Ward Farnsworth for his two books about

rhetoric in the classic sense of the word: *Farnsworth's Classical English Rhetoric* (2011) and *Farnsworth's Classical English Metaphor* (2016).

RHETORIC EMERGED AS A TECHNIQUE for adversarial argument among politicians and lawyers, so it is not surprising that Farnsworth is dean of the Law School at the University of Texas. With courage and imagination, he has written richly illustrated introductions, for the popular but uncommon reader, to the rhetorical nomenclature—the "figures of speech."

Farnsworth's focus is on verbal style. Style is only one of the five basic elements of classical rhetoric (the others are invention, arrangement, memory, and delivery), but it has been the most discussed and taught. And, although there has always been keen debate about the types, or levels, of style (high, middle, low; grand, eloquent, forceful, etc.), the most extensive discussion has been about rhetorical figures.

What exactly are "the figures?" *Farnsworth's Classical English Rhetoric* describes them as verbal patterns which depart "from

simple and literal statement:" "repeating words, putting words into an unexpected order, leaving out words that might have been expected, asking questions and then answering them, and so forth." This descriptive nomenclature has suffered, for a modern reader, from two confusions. First, they were named by the Greeks and have kept the Greek terminology—*isocolon*, *anastrophe*, *polysyndeton*, etc. As with medical terms, the layman wonders whether these fancy words are really necessary. Second, as ever more specific verbal patterns were catalogued, they were given new names, so that the terminology metastasized; indeed, to scholars studying it they have sometimes seemed to breed in the night. Farnsworth has made two statesmanlike decisions, the most helpful that can be made for a modern reader. First, he has kept the traditional Greek terms because no better ones have yet been devised, but, second, he has condensed these into a few basic categories: "eighteen or so that, in my judgment, are of most practical value." Two basic categories, metaphor and simile, loomed so large that he has devoted a separate second book to them, *Farnsworth's Classical English Metaphor*.



Both books make the same basic decision: they teach by example. In *Classical English Rhetoric* there are more than a thousand illustrations “drawn from British, Irish, and American oratory and literature.” Let no one who has not tried to compile such a compendium underestimate the pertinacity and the perspicacity, the gusto and the humor, which has gone into finding these examples and putting them into their right bins.

SO LET’S GIVE SOME EXAMPLES. WE’LL start with a pattern so common as to be immediately recognized: *isocolon*. As with all the main terms, a definition is first given. “*Isocolon*...is the use of successive sentences, clauses, or phrases similar in length and parallel in structure.” One of the examples is taken from Samuel Johnson’s famous letter to the earl of Chesterfield with which later editions of Johnson’s *Dictionary* are prefaced: “The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labours, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and cannot enjoy it; till I am solitary, and cannot impart it; till I am known and do not want it.” The pattern of similar phrases is easy to see.

Pausing to examine this famous passage as exemplifying a particular rhetorical pattern invites us to read it in a particular way. Thus alerted, we notice first that the passage also exemplifies a figure called *anaphora*, which Farnsworth describes as the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of several clauses or sentences. So here with those “tills” and with “had it been” and “has been.” And there is a name for a similar ending, as well as one for a similar beginning, *epistrophe*, to which Farnsworth also devotes a section. So here: “cannot enjoy it / cannot impart it, / do not want it.” In the classical nomenclature there is also, of course, a word describing a middle pattern of repetition, which here can be seen in “indifferent, solitary, known” and “cannot, cannot, do not.” *Isocolon* often invites the eye into a vertical pattern which lines up “tills” in one column, the three adjectives, “indifferent, solitary, known” in another, and lists for the other two. You start seeing patterns of meaning as patterns of visual shapes. You start, that is, looking *at* rather than *through* the verbal surface. And, of course, back again. You soon learn how to sustain such an oscillation and this is the essential lesson these examples teach.

Once we start looking for patterns, we will see more than one and start to wonder how they relate. After all, our customary print convention of continuous text to end of line, return, next line, came a long time after the

Greeks, speaking in the Agora, invented the figures. They invented them to be accompanied by gestures, voice and gesture working together in real time and space. The rhetorical figures that we employ now—so deep are we in the age of print as almost to have come out the other side into a new kind of orality—form the background sense, as it were, of that very different time and place and manner of oral delivery.

AN EQUALLY FAMILIAR PATTERN, AND one that stands antithetical to *isocolon* is *chiasmus*. The term comes from the Greek letter “chi” and its name describes its “x” shape. Popular instances come readily to mind: “Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.” Or, my favorite, from an old cereal box: “The question isn’t whether Grape Nuts are good enough for you but whether you are good enough for Grape Nuts.”

We might profit from pondering this pattern a bit. The verbal reversal, by borrowing a phrase and reversing it, creates new meaning. A *decoration* generates a new *argument*, drawing it out from the opponent’s words, a kind of verbal judo.

Here is how Farnsworth describes “the typical purposes of a good chiasmus”:

- a. The reversal of structure may reinforce the speaker’s claim that there is a reversal or reciprocity of substance.
- b. A chiasmus sounds convincing. It creates a closed loop that appears to leave no opening for dispute.
- c. The reversal of sounds in a chiasmus is attractive, memorable, and sometimes fascinating.

Start with “memorable.” In an oral culture such as prevailed in early classical Greece, cultural wisdom had to be memorized because there was no way, and no place, to put it down. That is why “memory theaters” arose to associate arguments with physical features the speaker could see, and why human memory itself was often so dazzlingly developed. The argument here is strengthened because it is easy to remember; the old oral trick still works.

What about “attractive” and “sometimes fascinating.” A good chiasmus is just fun to speak, and to read. It points to the endless world of chance verbal similarity and, as with a pun, draws from it a good joke. Grape Nuts were never the same.

Farnsworth has assembled a wonderful array of examples for the basic rhetorical figures, and they are accompanied by acute

comments on how they work, as here with chiasmus. They illustrate, throughout, the pleasure we are invited to take in the examples just as a collection of quotations. This seems to me a truly original and refreshing way to construct a book of quotations—not by subject or author but by similar shape. In the introduction to *Classical English Metaphor*, Farnsworth says that he has tried for something new. Here he has certainly succeeded. He has illustrated, for a modern reader, the way of reading that a rhetorical education has taught since its beginnings.

MOST OF TODAY’S COMMENTS ON prose style give a vague idea of the effect on the reader: clear, powerful, fast-moving, slow-moving, muddy, lame, full of official-style peanut butter. None of these comments describe the words, but only, and vaguely, their effect on us. Thus, like chemistry students without the periodic table, we lack a vocabulary to describe what we see when we read.

Ward Farnsworth has successfully anthologized a wide and deep range of possibilities, or miniature literary realities enshrined in example. He has shown that this is how rhetorical education has always operated, how it has generated new realities and has created a method for innovation—and not only of words. His field of examples shows us how rhetoric operates, not in theory but in practice. It shows us the opening to creativity we have discarded when we talk about “mere rhetoric.”

Eloquence creates innovation, it permits ideas to have sex—as science writer Matt Ridley has so raffishly put it—to mingle and create new ideas. Farnsworth explains:

Just as the eyes fasten themselves on some new spectacle, so the mind is always looking round for some fresh object of interest. If it is offered a monotonous succession of similarities, it very soon wearies and turns its attention elsewhere, and so everything gained by the speech is lost all at once. This disaster can easily be avoided by someone who has it at his fingertips to turn one idea into more shapes.

This protean metamorphosis is just what the sequel volume aims to chronicle. His first book, he tells us, “was about patterns for the arrangement of words; this one is mostly about patterns of thought.” The change in focus is rewarding but calls for a different kind of attention. Whereas in *Classical English Rhetoric*, one could see themes and resemblances on



the verbal surface of the illustrations, in *Classical English Metaphor* one also needs to look through the words to the comparative ideas they express. The “goal is not just to see what the authors said. It is to see what they saw.” This “see” / “saw” toggle is what we have been discussing; Farnsworth’s first volume emphasizes “seeing” and the metaphor volume “what is seen.” This makes for clarity of expression but not altogether of analysis. For, in every act of attention, both occur, first one, then the other. One dominates; the other lurks.

**T**HE SECOND BOOK TAKES AS ITS SUBJECT “the rhetorical uses of comparisons,” and deals with it in a series of categories: Sources and Uses, Use of Animals, Uses of Nature, Human Biology, Occupations and Institutions, and several others, ending with the Construction of Similes and Metaphors. Each quotation or group of them is introduced by an explanatory comment. The book “is devised for the wandering reader” so let’s wander a bit in this “golden age of rhetorical achievement.”

Here are three passages on cliché:

Wit, you know, is the unexpected copulation of ideas, the discovery of some occult relation between images in appearance remote from each other; an effusion of wit, therefore, presupposes an accumulation of knowledge; a memory stored with notions, which the imagination may cull out to compose new assemblages (Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, no. 194 [1752]).

He who loves music will know what the best men have done, and hence will have numberless passages from older writers floating at all times in his mind, like germs in the air, ready to hook themselves on to anything of an associated character. Some of these he will reject at once, as already too strongly wedded to associations of their own; some are tried and found not so suitable as was thought; some one, however, will probably soon assert itself as either suitable, or easily altered so as to become exactly what is wanted; if indeed, it is the right passage in the right man’s mind, it will have modified itself unbidden already (*Notebooks of Samuel Butler* [1912]).

Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print (George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language* [1946]).

**T**HESE ARE EXPLANATIONS OF HOW metaphors are born. The Johnson quotation, a famous one in the history of literary criticism, uses a sexual metaphor to describe the genesis of wit as “the unexpected copulation of ideas.” Here again ideas having sex to create innovation. Wit discovers a previously hidden relation between images, and creates a surprising metaphor. This explosion of new meaning depends on the accumulation of knowledge and trained memory which have always been part of classical rhetorical training. From accumulated past knowledge the imagination culls out new knowledge. We are bombarded today with demands for innovative thinking. Here is a nutshell description of how it works. The examples in this book, *obiter dicta* from all over the landscape, stimulate us to wonder and wander over our own landscape of associations.

So, too, with the Samuel Butler quotation. He is describing how the memory banks Johnson has described work, but he introduc-

Farnsworth seeks to  
redeem a body of writing  
more studied and  
ornamental than we  
are accustomed  
to today.

es a new metaphor to do so, musical passages floating like germs in the air, “ready to hook themselves on to anything of an associated character.” Again, a theory of creation described in a metaphor. How did Mozart get the idea for that theme? It just floated to him through the air, and he snatched it. Creation doesn’t work in a vacuum but through imitation in an air saturated with possibilities. The timbre of the time, but subject to revision. The same “idea” but so differently described as to become almost a different idea.

What of the Orwell example? Prepared as we have been by the previous two, we can see how clichéd his advice about clichés is. Deprived of daily expression in the journals of the world, we would be hard-pressed to say anything. Orwell would have us believe that we innovate out of thin air but we know, from Butler, what that thin air must contain.

Farnsworth not only gives us categories in which to think about metaphors but the examples which illustrate these categories

encourage us to pose all kinds of other questions. It is a book of stimulating quotations which stimulate us to ask questions beyond the categories presented: Is this so? Does this metaphor belong in this category? What kind of person would say something like this? Did Samuel Johnson always “talk for victory” even in his private conversation? Does metaphor always depend on witty surprise?

**S**OMETIMES THE SELECTION DELIGHTS us because both the selection and the text which it echoes are given, and this lends to both an added resonance. For example, a London broadcast that Winston Churchill gave in the dark days of 1940 echoes a familiar passage from the Gospel of John—“In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you” (14:2):

Let the great cities of Warsaw, of Prague, of Vienna banish despair even in the midst of their agony. Their liberation is sure. The day will come when the joy-bells will ring again throughout Europe, and when victorious nations, masters not only of their foes but of themselves, will plan and build in justice, in tradition, and in freedom a house of many mansions where there will be room for all.

Farnsworth comments: “Architectural images are used powerfully for other ends in scripture, and have then been borrowed for purposes of statesmanship later.” The pair of passages are placed clearly in the categorical framework. But, we are tempted to say, more is going on with Churchill. Look at how the tricolon patterns work: “Warsaw, Prague, Vienna”; “in justice, in tradition, and in freedom”; “banish, agony, liberation.” And how closely the two passages draw together in what they promise: “I go to prepare a place for you” and “The day will come.” The liberation is sure because “if it were not so, I would have told you.” And if you return to the Gospel of John, as some readers might be inclined to do, you will notice that the disciples there are not yet “masters of themselves” as Churchill suggests the Poles and the Czechs and the Viennese must learn to be before the deliverance comes.

Reflections such as these, I am not suggesting, are intended by the compiler. The structure of the book prompts them. The illustrative passages, though placed in a clear categorical framework, jostle and rub against one another. This is how to read the book. Sometimes the clash is resonant, as

with Churchill and a Biblical source buried deep in his remarkable memory. But sometimes dissonant. Here is English jurist James Fitzjames Stephen on the death of a friend: "The death of a friend admits of no consolation at all. Its sting to the survivors lies in the hopeless separation which it produces, and in the destruction of a world of common interests, feelings, and recollections which nothing can replace." So he might have said as well about the death of a spouse. Wide is the range of the word "friendship." But not wide enough to spark a connection to the quotation from John Locke which follows immediately: "The mind has a different relish, as well as the palate; and you will as fruitlessly endeavor to delight all men with riches or glory...as you would to satisfy all men's hunger with cheese or lobsters."

LET'S LOOK NOW AT A CLUSTER OF PASSAGES on innovation, and then hazard a few observations about the book as a whole. In his *Discourses on Art*, the 18th-century English painter Joshua Reynolds writes, "The mind is but a Barren soil; is a soil soon exhausted, and will produce no crop, or only one, unless it be continually fertilized and enriched with foreign matter." What is suggested here? That creation does not occur in a lonely garret but in a neighborhood tavern? That it is a product of conversation? That wisdom is collective, grows up from the ground, not trickling down from the top? That it requires *foreign* matter but *domestic* preparation? So, a lesson here about immigration?

Now a passage from Thomas Carlyle's 1836 novel, *Sartor Resartus*: "What work nobler than transplanting foreign thought into the barren domestic soil? Except indeed planting thought of your own, which the fewest are privileged to do." Suppose we follow the literal line of the metaphor, which we are entitled, and indeed invited, to do, at least in this book. So we start to think about agricultural policy, and more especially about individual invention, "planting thought of your own" and so we come to Norman Borlaug and the invention of high-yield, disease-resistant wheat. We then look back to the previous quotation, where the metaphor flows in the opposite direction, having the invention becoming the "foreign matter." But then we are tempted to think about all the tariffs, declared or not, that today prevent ideas from moving from country to country. Then surely we start thinking about the internet, which nevertheless moves ideas from anywhere to everywhere and back again. So, the internet as a *soil*? What might follow from that?

NOW LET'S PONCE ON A WORD IN the next passage, a sentence from the elder Oliver Wendell Holmes's *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*: "Any new formula which suddenly emerges in our consciousness has its roots in long trains of thought; it is virtually old when it first makes its appearance among the recognized growths of our intellect." The word we pounce upon here is "formula." Our collective thought is full of them nowadays; we call them algorithms. They seem to crave being called original but most often emerge from previous calculations and imaginations. Here we come upon, stumble upon really, the problem of originality and intellectual property in a digital world. The training in formal rhetoric which we are so keen to discard was *built upon revision*, taking a set subject and creating a new version of it. It is all about revising a text, about finding those "long trains of thought" and rehearsing them in a revised form. So copyright then comes to mind, and its continual struggle to recognize new growth of intellect as "virtually old." We need to recognize these "long trains of thought" if we are to decide how new some thoughts really are. And when you try to trace the lineage of an *algorithm*, things can get very confusing. Passages like this sponsor such lucubrations.

Just when we need a counterstatement, one comes along, a confession from essayist Max Beerbohm's "A Relic":

Nightly I revisited the café, and sat there with an open mind—a mind wide-open to catch the idea that should drop into it like a ripe golden plum. The plum did not ripen. The mind remained wide-open for a week or more, but nothing except that phrase about the sea rustled to and fro in it.

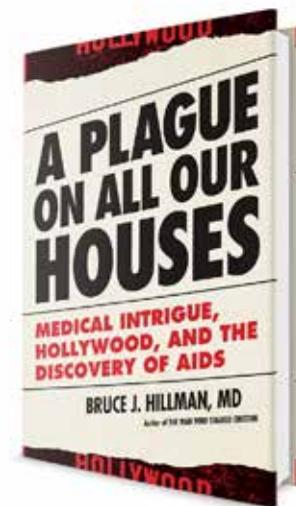
Sometimes, when you sit in on the cultural conversation, you come away empty-handed. The passage leaves you in the rustling sea. Critic William Hazlitt take us into the fire:

[T]here can be no improvement but from the free communication and comparing of ideas. Kings and nobles, for this reason receive little benefit from society—where all is submission on one side, and condescension on the other. The mind strikes out truth by collision, as steel strikes fire from the flint!

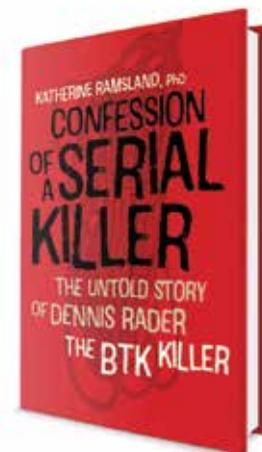
This hustles us to our current situation, when the mind of the modern student in the modern university is to be shielded from just such collisions. The fire is to be doused, by

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the administration if necessary, with the water of the previous passage. Our present youth, like the kings and nobles, are receiving little benefit from society, since there is submission from those in authority and condescension from the activists who crave it. But this from Hazlitt in 1821.

**F**ARNSWORTH CONCLUDES HIS BOOK with a chapter on “The Construction of Similes” and one on “The Construction of Metaphors.” Both are rich with intriguing examples. Here is an exemplary simile, with the descriptive comment. From Johnson’s *Rambler* no. 14:

A transition from an author’s book to his conversation is too often like an entrance into a large city, after a distant prospect. Remotely, we see nothing but spires of temples and turrets of palaces, and imagine it the residence of splendour, grandeur, and magnificence; but when we have passed the gates, we find it perplexed with narrow passages, disgraced with despicable cottages, embarrassed with obstructions, and clouded with smoke.

To which Farnsworth comments: “Sometimes explanation must be added not because obscure knowledge is needed to understand the comparison, but because the author has in mind an involved alignment that has to be established point by point.”

A suggestive “alignment” indeed. Aside from the pleasures of Johnson’s prose style (a large city in itself), it takes us a while to make our way from point to point, and in the process our knowledge expands. Our attention

has been enriched. “Johnson’s simile works because it is as good as familiar by the time he is done narrating it; the images are vivid enough to make the feelings about it easy to imagine even if never experienced firsthand.”

This passage exemplifies how the book works, how its citation and analysis establish a way of reading: think about a passage, then read it, then think again. Thus when we come to the passage, we read it as a metaphor, look *at* it, then get caught up in what it says, look *through* it. This toggle switch operates before the passage and after, but especially and repeatedly as we read. Thus the book teaches us a way of reading, an alternation of the pleasures of eloquence and the delights of understanding. Behind its formidable pedagogical apparatus, this is the kind of reading classical rhetoric has always tried to inculcate.

The concluding chapter, on the construction of metaphors, offers perhaps the book’s most masterly theoretical discussions, but a discussion of the discussions would spoil them, and I leave it to future readers—readers by this point trained in metaphorical analysis and thus able properly to relish the commentaries. I’ll conclude with one last excerpt from Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* (Farnsworth gives us four in a row) to show how they work:

His Lordship mentioned a charitable establishment in Wales, where people were maintained, and supplied with everything, upon the condition of their contributing the weekly produce of their labour; and he said they grew quite torpid for the want of property. *Johnson*: “They have no object for hope.

Their condition cannot be better. It is rowing without a port.”

“Rowing without a port.” The argument for communal property is condensed in, and disposed of, in a metaphor. Snapshot of an economy.

**T**AKEN TOGETHER, WARD FARNSWORTH’S *Classical English Rhetoric* and *Classical English Metaphor* seek to redeem a body of writing more studied and ornamental than we are accustomed to today, and to show us how to read it. They redeem also a way of reading, one that looks alternatively at and through a verbal surface. Thus Farnsworth leads us both outward and inward. Outward to a new way to apprehend the world words describe. Inward, to the words themselves, to the pleasures of reading for pattern, to the motives of eloquence. The movement from one to the other serves to reassure us of the dependable usefulness of language, rather than the radical undependability that recent literary theory has preached. The rhetoric in “mere rhetoric” turns out to move in the opposite direction, to heal the disconnection between knowledge of the world and the words which can describe it. And, if shared metaphors can persuade, perhaps they can lead to shared community, and can show us the way to a cultural conversation we can once again trust.

*Richard A. Lanham is professor emeritus of English at University of California, Los Angeles. His books on rhetoric include A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms: A Guide for Students of English Literature (University of California Press) and Analyzing Prose (Scribner).*

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