
The Philosophy of Style

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PART I. CAUSES OF FORCE IN LANGUAGE WHICH DEPEND UPON ECONOMY OF THE MENTAL ENERGIES.

i. The Principle of Economy.

1. Commenting on the seeming incongruity between his father's argumentative powers and his ignorance of formal logic, Tristram Shandy says:—"It was a matter of just wonder with my worthy tutor, and two or three fellows of that learned society, that a man who knew not so much as the names of his tools, should be able to work after that fashion with them." Sterne's intended implication that a knowledge of the principles of reasoning neither makes, nor is essential to, a good reasoner, is doubtless true. Thus, too, is it with grammar. As Dr. Latham, condemning the usual school-drill in Lindley Murray, rightly remarks: "Gross vulgarity is a fault to be prevented; but the proper prevention is to be got from habit—not rules." Similarly, there can be little question that good composition is far less dependent upon acquaintance with its laws, than upon practice and natural aptitude. A clear head, a quick imagination, and a sensitive ear, will go far towards making all rhetorical precepts needless. He who daily hears and reads well-framed sentences, will naturally more or less tend to use similar ones. And where there exists any mental idiosyncrasy—where there is a deficient verbal memory, or an inadequate sense of logical dependence, or but little perception of order, or a lack of constructive ingenuity; no amount of instruction will remedy the defect.

Nevertheless, some practical result may be expected from a familiarity with the principles of style. The endeavour to conform to laws may tell, though slowly. And if in no other way, yet, as facilitating revision, a knowledge of the thing to be achieved—a clear idea of what constitutes a beauty, and what a blemish—cannot fail to be of service.

2. No general theory of expression seems yet to have been enunciated. The maxims contained in works on composition and rhetoric, are presented in an unorganized form. Standing as isolated dogmas—as empirical generalizations, they are neither so clearly apprehended, nor so much respected, as they would be were they deduced from some simple first principle. We are told that “brevity is the soul of wit.” We hear styles condemned as verbose or involved. Blair says that every needless part of a sentence “interrupts the description and clogs the image;” and again, that “long sentences fatigue the reader's attention.” It is remarked by Lord Kaimes, that “to give the utmost force to a period, it ought, if possible, to be closed with that word which makes the greatest figure.” That parentheses should be avoided and that Saxon words should be used in preference to those of Latin origin, are established precepts. But, however influential the truths thus dogmatically embodied, they would be much more influential if reduced to something like scientific ordination. In this, as in other cases, conviction will be greatly strengthened when we understand the why. And we may be sure that a comprehension of the general principle from which the rules of composition result, will not only bring them home to us with greater force, but will discover to us other rules of like origin,

3. On seeking for some clue to the law underlying these current maxims, we may see shadowed forth in many of them, the importance of economizing the reader's or hearer's attention. To so present ideas that they may be apprehended with the least possible mental effort, is the desideratum towards which most of the rules above quoted point. When we condemn writing that is wordy, or confused, or intricate—when we praise this style as easy, and blame that as fatiguing, we consciously or unconsciously assume this desideratum as our standard of judgment. Regarding language as an apparatus of symbols for the conveyance of thought, we may say that, as in a mechanical apparatus, the more simple and the better arranged its parts, the greater will be the effect produced. In either case, whatever force is absorbed by the machine is deducted from the result. A reader or listener has at each moment but a limited amount of mental power available. To recognize and interpret the symbols presented to him, requires part of this power; to arrange and combine the images suggested requires a further part; and only that part which remains can be used for realizing the thought conveyed. Hence, the more time and attention it takes to receive and understand each sentence, the less time and attention can be given to the contained idea; and the less vividly will that idea be conceived.

4. How truly language must be regarded as a hindrance to thought, though the necessary instrument of it, we shall clearly perceive on remembering the comparative force with which simple ideas are communicated by signs. To say, “Leave the room,” is less expressive than to point to the door. Placing a finger on the lips is more forcible than whispering, “Do not speak.” A beck of the hand is better than, “Come here.” No phrase can convey the idea of surprise so vividly as opening the eyes and raising the eyebrows. A shrug of the shoulders would lose much by translation into words. Again, it may be remarked that when oral language is employed, the strongest effects are produced by interjections, which condense entire sentences into syllables. And in other cases, where custom allows us to express thoughts by single words, as in *Beware, Heigho, Fudge*, much force would be lost by expanding them into specific propositions. Hence, carrying out the metaphor that language is the vehicle of thought, there seems reason to think that in all cases the friction and inertia of the vehicle deduct from its efficiency; and that in composition, the chief, if not the sole thing to be done, is, to reduce this friction and inertia to the smallest possible amount. Let us then inquire whether economy of the recipient's attention is not the secret of effect, alike in the right choice and collocation of words, in the best arrangement of clauses in a sentence, in the proper order of its principal and subordinate propositions, in the judicious use of simile, metaphor, and other figures of speech, and even in the rhythmical sequence of syllables.

ii. Economy in the Use of Words.

5. The greater forcibleness of Saxon English, or rather non-Latin English, first claims our attention. The several special reasons assignable for this may all be reduced to the general reason—economy. The most important of them is early association. A child's vocabulary is almost wholly Saxon. He says, *I have*, not *I possess*—*I wish*, not *I desire*; *he does not reflect, he thinks*; *he does not beg for amusement, but for play*; *he calls things nice or nasty, not pleasant or disagreeable*. The synonyms which he learns in after years, never become so

closely, so organically connected with the ideas signified, as do these original words used in childhood; and hence the association remains less strong. But in what does a strong association between a word and an idea differ from a weak one? Simply in the greater ease and rapidity of the suggestive action. It can be in nothing else. Both of two words, if they be strictly synonymous, eventually call up the same image. The expression—It is acid, must in the end give rise to the same thought as—It is sour; but because the term acid was learnt later in life, and has not been so often followed by the thought symbolized, it does not so readily arouse that thought as the term sour. If we remember how slowly and with what labour the appropriate ideas follow unfamiliar words in another language, and how increasing familiarity with such words brings greater rapidity and ease of comprehension; and if we consider that the same process must have gone on with the words of our mother tongue from childhood upwards, we shall clearly see that the earliest learnt and oftenest used words, will, other things equal, call up images with less loss of time and energy than their later learnt synonyms.

6. The further superiority possessed by Saxon English in its comparative brevity, obviously comes under the same generalization. If it be an advantage to express an idea in the smallest number of words, then will it be an advantage to express it in the smallest number of syllables. If circuitous phrases and needless expletives distract the attention and diminish the strength of the impression produced, then do surplus articulations do so. A certain effort, though commonly an inappreciable one, must be required to recognize every vowel and consonant. If, as all know, it is tiresome to listen to an indistinct speaker, or read a badly-written manuscript; and if, as we cannot doubt, the fatigue is a cumulative result of the attention needed to catch successive syllables; it follows that attention is in such cases absorbed by each syllable. And if this be true when the syllables are difficult of recognition, it will also be true, though in a less degree, when the recognition of them is easy. Hence, the shortness of Saxon words becomes a reason for their greater force. One qualification, however, must not be overlooked. A word which in itself embodies the most important part of the idea to be conveyed, especially when that idea is an emotional one, may often with advantage be a polysyllabic word. Thus it seems more forcible to say, "It is *magnificent*," than "It is *grand*." The word *vast* is not so powerful a one as *stupendous*. Calling a thing *nasty* is not so effective as calling it *disgusting*.

7. There seem to be several causes for this exceptional superiority of certain long words. We may ascribe it partly to the fact that a voluminous, mouth-filling epithet is, by its very size, suggestive of largeness or strength; witness the immense pomposity of sesquipedalian verbiage: and when great power or intensity has to be suggested, this association of ideas aids the effect. A further cause may be that a word of several syllables admits of more emphatic articulation; and as emphatic articulation is a sign of emotion, the unusual impressiveness of the thing named is implied by it. Yet another cause is that a long word (of which the latter syllables are generally inferred as soon as the first are spoken) allows the hearer's consciousness a longer time to dwell upon the quality predicated; and where, as in the above cases, it is to this predicated quality that the entire attention is called, an advantage results from keeping it before the mind for an appreciable time. The reasons which we have given for preferring short words evidently do not hold here. So that to make our generalization quite correct we must say, that while in certain sentences expressing strong feeling, the word which more especially implies that feeling may often with advantage be a many-syllabled or Latin one; in the immense majority of cases, each word serving but as a step to the idea embodied by the whole sentence, should, if possible, be a one-syllabled or Saxon one.

8. Once more, that frequent cause of strength in Saxon and other primitive words—their imitative character may be similarly resolved into the more general cause. Both those directly imitative, as *splash, bang, whiz, roar, &c.*, and those analogically imitative, as *rough, smooth, keen, blunt, thin, hard, crag, &c.*, have a greater or less likeness to the things symbolized; and by making on the senses impressions allied to the ideas to be called up, they save part of the effort needed to call up such ideas, and leave more attention for the ideas themselves.

9. The economy of the recipient's mental energy, into which are thus resolvable the several causes of the strength of Saxon English, may equally be traced in the superiority of specific over generic words. That concrete terms produce more vivid impressions than abstract ones, and should, when possible, be used instead, is a thorough maxim of composition. As Dr. Campbell says, "The more general the terms are, the picture is the fainter; the more special they are, 'tis the brighter." We should avoid such a sentence as:—"In proportion as the manners, customs, and amusements of a nation are cruel and barbarous, the regulations of their penal code will be severe." And in place of it we should write:—"In proportion as men delight in battles, bull-fights, and combats of gladiators, will they punish by hanging, burning, and the rack."

10. This superiority of specific expressions is clearly due to a saving of the effort required to translate words into thoughts. As we do not think in generals but in particulars—as, whenever any class of things is referred to, we represent it to ourselves by calling to mind individual members of it; it follows that when an abstract word is used, the bearer or reader has to choose from his stock of images, one or more, by which he may figure to himself the genus mentioned. In doing this, some delay must arise some force be expended; and if, by employing a specific term, an appropriate image can be at once suggested, an economy is achieved, and a more vivid impression produced.

iii. The Principle of Economy applied to Sentences.

11. Turning now from the choice of words to their sequence, we shall find the same general principle hold good. We have *a priori* reasons for believing that in every sentence there is some one order of words more effective than any other; and that this order is the one which presents the elements of the proposition in the succession in which they may be most readily put together. As in a narrative, the events should be stated in such sequence that the mind may not have to go backwards and forwards in order to rightly connect them; as in a group of sentences, the arrangement should be such, that each of them may be understood as it comes, without waiting for subsequent ones; so in every sentence, the sequence of words should be that which suggests the constituents of the thought in the order most convenient for the building up that thought. Duly to enforce this truth, and to prepare the way for applications of it, we must briefly inquire into the mental act by which the meaning of a series of words is apprehended.

12. We cannot more simply do this than by considering the proper collocation of the substantive and adjective. Is it better to place the adjective before the substantive, or the substantive before the adjective? Ought we to say with the French—*un cheval noir*; or to say as we do—*a black horse*? Probably, most persons of culture would decide that one order is as good as the other. Alive to the bias produced by habit, they would ascribe to that the preference they feel for our own form of expression. They would expect those educated in the use of the opposite form to have an equal preference for that. And thus they would conclude that neither of these instinctive judgments is of any worth. There is, however, a philosophical ground for deciding in favour of the English custom. If “a horse black” be the arrangement, immediately on the utterance of the word “horse,” there arises, or tends to arise, in the mind, a picture answering to that word; and as there has, been nothing to indicate what kind of horse, any image of a horse suggests itself. Very likely, however, the image will be that of a brown horse, brown horses being the most familiar. The result is that when the word “black” is added, a check is given to the process of thought. Either the picture of a brown horse already present to the imagination has to be suppressed, and the picture of a black one summoned in its place; or else, if the picture of a brown horse be yet unformed, the tendency to form it has to be stopped. Whichever is the case, a certain amount of hindrance results. But if, on the other hand, “a black horse” be the expression used, no such mistake can be made. The word “black,” indicating an abstract quality, arouses no definite idea. It simply prepares the mind for conceiving some object of that colour; and the attention is kept suspended until that object is known. If, then, by the precedence of the adjective, the idea is conveyed without liability to error. whereas the precedence of the substantive is apt to produce a misconception, it follows that the one gives the mind less trouble than the other, and is therefore more forcible.

13. Possibly it will be objected that the adjective and substantive come so close together, that practically they may be considered as uttered at the same moment; and that on hearing the phrase, “a horse black,” there is not time to imagine a wrongly-coloured horse before the word “black” follows to prevent it. It must be owned that it is not easy to decide by introspection whether this is so or not. But there are facts collaterally implying that it is not. Our ability to anticipate the words yet unspoken is one of them. If the ideas of the hearer kept considerably behind the expressions of the speaker, as the objection assumes, he could hardly foresee the end of a sentence by the time it was half delivered: yet this constantly happens. Were the supposition true, the mind, instead of anticipating, would be continually falling more and more in arrear. If the meanings of words are not realized as fast as the words are uttered, then the loss of time over each word must entail such an accumulation of delays as to leave a hearer entirely behind. But whether the force of these replies be or be not admitted, it will scarcely be denied that the right formation of a picture will be facilitated by presenting its elements in the order in which they are wanted; even though the mind should do nothing until it has received them all.

18. In this case, were the first two clauses, up to the word “I practice “inclusive, which qualify the subject, to be placed at the end instead of the beginning, much of the force would be lost; as thus:—“The French idea of liberty is—the right of every man to be master of the rest; in practice at least, if not in theory.”

19. Similarly with respect to the conditions under which any fact is predicated. Observe in the following example the effect of putting them last:—“How immense would be the stimulus to progress, were the honour now given to wealth and title given exclusively to high achievements and intrinsic worth!”

20. And then observe the superior effect of putting them first:—“Were the honour now given to wealth and title given exclusively to high achievements and intrinsic worth, how immense would be the stimulus to progress!”

21. The effect of giving priority to the complement of the predicate, as well as the predicate itself, is finely displayed in the opening of ‘Hyperion’:

*“Deep in the shady sadness of a vale
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
Far from the fiery noon and eve’s one star
Sat gray-haired Saturn, quiet as a stone.”*

Here it will be observed, not only that the predicate “sat” precedes the subject “Saturn,” and that the three lines in italics, constituting the complement of the predicate, come before it; but that in the structure of that complement also, the same order is followed: each line being so arranged that the qualifying words are placed before the words suggesting concrete images.

22. The right succession of the principal and subordinate propositions in a sentence manifestly depends on the same law. Regard for economy of the recipient's attention, which, as we find, determines the best order for the subject, copula, predicate and their complements, dictates that the subordinate proposition shall precede the principal one when the sentence includes two. Containing, as the subordinate proposition does, some qualifying or explanatory idea, its priority prevents misconception of the principal one; and therefore saves the mental effort needed to correct such misconception. This will be seen in the annexed example: “The secrecy once maintained in respect to the parliamentary debates, is still thought needful in diplomacy; and in virtue of this secret diplomacy, England may any day be unawares betrayed by its ministers into a war costing a hundred thousand lives, and hundreds of millions of treasure: yet the English pique themselves on being a self-governed people.” The two subordinate propositions, ending with the semicolon and colon respectively, almost wholly determine the meaning of the principal proposition with which it concludes; and the effect would be lost were they placed last instead of first.

23. The general principle of right arrangement in sentences, which we have traced in its application to the leading divisions of them, equally determines the proper order of their minor divisions. In every sentence of any complexity the complement to the subject contains several clauses, and that to the predicate several others; and these may be arranged in greater or less conformity to the law of easy apprehension. Of course with these, as with the larger members, the succession should be from the less specific to the more specific—from the abstract to the concrete.

24. Now, however, we must notice a further condition to be fulfilled in the proper construction of a sentence; but still a condition dictated by the same general principle with the other: the condition, namely, that the words and expressions most nearly related in thought shall be brought the closest together. Evidently the single words, the minor clauses, and the leading divisions of every proposition, severally qualify each other. The longer the time that elapses between the mention of any qualifying member and the member qualified, the longer must the mind be exerted in carrying forward the qualifying member ready for use. And the more numerous the qualifications to be simultaneously remembered and rightly applied, the greater will be the mental power expended, and the smaller the effect produced. Hence, other things equal, force will be gained by so arranging the members of a sentence that these suspensions shall at any moment be the fewest in number; and shall also be of the shortest duration. The following is an instance of defective combination:—“A modern newspaper-statement, though probably true, would be laughed at if quoted in a book as testimony; but the letter of a court gossip is thought good historical evidence, if written some centuries ago.” A rearrangement of this, in accordance with the principle indicated above, will be

found to increase the effect. Thus:—"Though probably true, a modern newspaper-statement quoted in a book as testimony, would be laughed at; but the letter of a court gossip, if written some centuries ago, is thought good historical evidence."

25. By making this change, some of the suspensions are avoided and others shortened; while there is less liability to produce premature conceptions. The passage quoted below from 'Paradise Lost' affords a fine instance of a sentence well arranged; alike in the priority of the subordinate members, in the avoidance of long and numerous suspensions, and in the correspondence between the order of the clauses and the sequence of the phenomena described, which, by the way, is a further prerequisite to easy comprehension, and therefore to effect.

“As when a prowling wolf,
 Whom hunger drives to seek new haunt for prey,
 Watching where shepherds pen their flocks at eye,
 In hurdled cotes amid the field secure,
 Leaps o'er the fence with ease into the fold;
 Or as a thief, bent to unhoard the cash
 Of some rich burgher, whose substantial doors,
 Cross-barr'd, and bolted fast, fear no assault,
 In at the window climbs, or o'er the tiles;
 So clomb this first grand thief into God's fold;
 So since into his church lewd hirelings climb.”

26. The habitual use of sentences in which all or most of the descriptive and limiting elements precede those described and limited, gives rise to what is called the inverted style: a title which is, however, by no means confined to this structure, but is often used where the order of the words is simply unusual. A more appropriate title would be the *direct style*, as contrasted with the other, or *indirect style*: the peculiarity of the one being, that it conveys each thought into the mind step by step with little liability to error; and of the other, that it gets the right thought conceived by a series of approximations.

27. The superiority of the direct over the indirect form of sentence, implied by the several conclusions that have been drawn, must not, however, be affirmed without reservation. Though, up to a certain point, it is well for the qualifying clauses of a period to precede those qualified; yet, as carrying forward each qualifying clause costs some mental effort, it follows that when the number of them and the time they are carried become great, we reach a limit beyond which more is lost than is gained. Other things equal, the arrangement should be such that no concrete image shall be suggested until the materials out of which it is to be made have been presented. And yet, as lately pointed out, other things equal, the fewer the materials to be held at once, and the shorter the distance they have to be borne, the better. Hence in some cases it becomes a question whether most mental effort will be entailed by the many and long suspensions, or by the correction of successive misconceptions.

28. This question may sometimes be decided by considering the capacity of the persons addressed. A greater grasp of mind is required for the ready comprehension of thoughts expressed in the direct manner, where the sentences are anywise intricate. To recollect a number of preliminaries stated in elucidation of a coming idea, and to apply them all to the formation of it when suggested, demands a good memory and considerable power of concentration. To one possessing these, the direct method will mostly seem the best; while to one deficient in them it will seem the worst. Just as it may cost a strong man less effort to carry a hundred-weight from place to place at once, than by a stone at a time; so, to an active mind it may be easier to bear along all the qualifications of an idea and at once rightly form it when named, than to first imperfectly conceive such idea and then carry back to it, one by one, the details and limitations afterwards mentioned. While conversely, as for a boy, the only possible mode of transferring a hundred-weight, is that of taking it in portions; so, for a weak mind, the only possible mode of forming a compound conception may be that of building it up by carrying separately its several parts.

29. That the indirect method—the method of conveying the meaning by a series of approximations—is best fitted for the uncultivated, may indeed be inferred from their habitual use of it. The form of expression adopted by the savage, as in “Water, give me,” is the simplest type of the approximate arrangement. In pleonasms, which are comparatively prevalent among the uneducated, the same essential structure is seen; as, for instance, in—“The men,

they were there.” Again, the old possessive case —“The king, his crown,” conforms to the like order of thought. Moreover, the fact that the indirect mode is called the natural one, implies that it is the one spontaneously employed by the common people: that is—the one easiest for undisciplined minds.

30. There are many cases, however, in which neither the direct nor the indirect structure is the best; but where an intermediate structure is preferable to both. When the number of circumstances and qualifications to be included in the sentence is great, the most judicious course is neither to enumerate them all before introducing the idea to which they belong, nor to put this idea first and let it be remodeled to agree with the particulars afterwards mentioned; but to do a little of each. Take a case. It is desirable to avoid so extremely indirect an arrangement as the following:—“We came to our journey's end, at last, with no small difficulty after much fatigue, through deep roads, and bad weather.” Yet to transform this into an entirely direct sentence would not produce a satisfactory effect; as witness:—“At last, with no small difficulty, after much fatigue, through deep roads, and bad weather, we came to our journey's end.”

31. Dr. Whately, from whom we quote the first of these two arrangements,' proposes this construction:—“At last, after much fatigue, through deep roads and bad weather, we came, with no small difficulty, to our journey's end.” Here it will be observed that by introducing the words “we came” a little earlier in the sentence, the labour of carrying forward so many particulars is diminished, and the subsequent qualification “with no small difficulty” entails an addition to the thought that is very easily made. But a further improvement may be produced by introducing the words “we came” still earlier; especially if at the same time the qualifications be rearranged in conformity with the principle already explained, that the more abstract elements of the thought should come before the more concrete. Observe the better effect obtained by making these two changes:—“At last, with no small difficulty, and after much fatigue, we came, through deep roads and bad weather, to our journey's end.” This reads with comparative smoothness; that is, with less hindrance from suspensions and reconstructions of thought—with less mental effort.

32. Before dismissing this branch of our subject, it should be further remarked, that even when addressing the most vigorous intellects, the direct style is unfit for communicating ideas of a complex or abstract character. So long as the mind has not much to do, it may be well able to grasp all the preparatory clauses of a sentence, and to use them effectively; but if some subtlety in the argument absorb the attention—if every faculty be strained in endeavouring to catch the speaker's or writer's drift, it may happen that the mind, unable to carry on both processes at once, will break down, and allow the elements of the thought to lapse into confusion.

iv. The Principle of Economy applied to Figures.

33. Turning now to consider figures of speech, we may equally discern the same general law of effect. Underlying all the rules given for the choice and right use of them, we shall find the same fundamental requirement—economy of attention. It is indeed chiefly because they so well subserve this requirement, that figures of speech are employed. To bring the mind more easily to the desired conception, is in many cases solely, and in all cases mainly, their object.

34. Let us begin with the figure called Synecdoche. The advantage sometimes gained by putting a part for the whole, is due to the more convenient, or more accurate, presentation of the idea. If, instead of saying “a fleet of ten ships,” we say “a fleet of *tensail*,” the picture of a group of vessels at sea is more readily suggested; and is so because the sails constitute the most conspicuous parts of vessels so circumstanced: whereas the word *ships* would very likely remind us of vessels in dock. Again, to say, “*All hands* to the pumps,” is better than to say, “*All men* to the pumps,” as it suggests the men in the special attitude intended, and so saves effort. Bringing “gray *hairs* with sorrow to the grave,” is another expression, the effect of which has the same cause.

35. The occasional increase of force produced by Metonymy may be similarly accounted for. “The low morality of *the bar*,” is a phrase both more brief and significant than the literal one it stands for. A belief in the ultimate supremacy of intelligence over brute force, is conveyed in a more concrete, and therefore more realizable form, if we substitute *the pen* and *the sword* for the two abstract terms. To say, “Beware of drinking!” is less effective than to say, “Beware of *the bottle!*” and is so, clearly because it calls up a less specific image.

36. The Simile is in many cases used chiefly with a view to ornament, but whenever it increases the *force* of a passage, it does so by being an economy. Here in an instance: “The illusion that great men and great events came oftener in early times than now, is partly due to historical perspective. As in a range of equidistant columns, the furthest off look the closest; so, the conspicuous objects of the past seem more thickly clustered the more remote they are.”

37. To construct by a process of literal explanation, the thought thus conveyed would take many sentences, and the first elements of the picture would become faint while the imagination was busy in adding the others. But by the help of a comparison all effort is saved; the picture is instantly realized, and its full effect produced.

38. Of the position of the Simile, it needs only to remark, that what has been said respecting the order of the adjective and substantive, predicate and subject, principal and subordinate propositions, &c., is applicable here. As whatever qualifies should precede whatever is qualified, force will generally be gained by placing the simile before the object to which it is applied. That this arrangement is the best, may be seen in the following passage from the 'Lady of the Lake':

“As wreath of snow, on mountain breast,
Slides from the rock that gave it rest,
Poor Ellen glided from her stay,
And at the monarch's feet she lay.”

Inverting these couplets will be found to diminish the effect considerably. There are cases, however, even where the simile is a simple one, in which it may with advantage be placed last, as in these lines from Alexander Smith's 'Life Drama':

“I see the future stretch
All dark and barren as a rainy sea.”

The reason for this seems to be, that so abstract an idea as that attaching to the word “future,” does not present itself to the mind in any definite form, and hence the subsequent arrival at the simile entails no reconstruction of the thought.

39. Such, however, are not the only cases in which this order is the most forcible. As the advantage of putting the simile before the object depends on its being carried forward in the mind to assist in forming an image of the object, it must happen that if, from length or complexity, it cannot be so carried forward, the advantage is not gained. The annexed sonnet, by Coleridge, is defective from this cause:

“As when a child, on some long winter's night,
Affrighted, clinging to its grandam's knees,
With eager wond'ring and perturb'd delight
Listens strange tales of fearful dark decrees,
Mutter'd to wretch by necromantic spell;
Or of those hags who at the witching time
Of murky midnight, ride the air sublime,
And mingle foul embrace with fiends of hell;
Cold horror drinks its blood! Anon the tear
More gentle starts, to hear the beldame tell
Of pretty babes, that lov'd each other dear,
Murder'd by cruel uncle's mandate fell:
Ev'n such the shiv'ring joys thy tones impart,
Ev'n so, thou, Siddons, meltest my sad heart.”

40. Here, from the lapse of time and accumulation of circumstances, the first part of the comparison is forgotten before its application is reached, and requires re-reading. Had the main idea been first mentioned, less effort would

themselves on this wondrous sea. No; from the older sailors nothing. Over all their speaking trumpets the gray sea and the loud winds answer, Not in us; not in Time.”

44. The division of the Simile from the Metaphor is by no means a definite one. Between the one extreme in which the two elements of the comparison are detailed at full length and the analogy pointed out, and the other extreme in which the comparison is implied instead of stated, come intermediate forms, in which the comparison is partly stated and partly implied. For instance:—“Astonished at the performances of the English plow, the Hindoos paint it, set it up, and worship it; thus turning a tool into an idol: linguists do the same with language.” There is an evident advantage in leaving the reader or hearer to complete the figure. And generally these intermediate forms are good in proportion as they do this; provided the mode of completing it be obvious.

45. Passing over much that may be said of like purport upon Hyperbole, Personification, Apostrophe, &c., let us close our remarks upon construction by a typical example. The general principle which has been enunciated is, that other things equal, the force of all verbal forms and arrangements is great, in proportion as the time and mental effort they demand from the recipient is small. The corollaries from this general principle have been severally illustrated; and it has been shown that the relative goodness of any two modes of expressing an idea, may be determined by observing which requires the shortest process of thought for its comprehension. But though conformity in particular points has been exemplified, no cases of complete conformity have yet been quoted. It is indeed difficult to find them; for the English idiom does not commonly permit the order which theory dictates. A few, however, occur in Ossian. Here is one:—“As autumn's dark storms pour from two echoing hills, so towards each other approached the heroes. As two dark streams from high rocks meet and mix, and roar on the plain: loud, rough, and dark in battle meet Lochlin and Inisfail. . .As the troubled noise of the ocean when roll the waves on high; as the last peal of the thunder of heaven; such is noise of the battle.”

46. Except in the position of the verb in the first two similes, the theoretically best arrangement is fully carried out in each of these sentences. The simile comes before the qualified image, the adjectives before the substantives, the predicate and copula before the subject, and their respective complements before them. That the passage is open to the charge of being bombastic proves nothing; or rather, proves our case. For what is bombast but a force of expression too great for the magnitude of the ideas embodied? All that may rightly be inferred is, that only in very rare cases, and then only to produce a climax, should all the conditions of effective expression be fulfilled.

v. Suggestion as a Means of Economy.

47. Passing on to a more complex application of the doctrine with which we set out, it must now be remarked, that not only in the structure of sentences, and the use of figures of speech, may economy of the recipient's mental energy be assigned as the cause of force; but that in the choice and arrangement of the minor images, out of which some large thought is to be built up, we may trace the same condition to effect. To select from the sentiment, scene, or event described those typical elements which carry many others along with them; and so, by saying a few things but suggesting

many, to abridge the description; is the secret of producing a vivid impression. An extract from Tennyson's 'Mariana' will well illustrate this:

“All day within the dreamy house,
The door upon the hinges creaked,
The blue fly sung i' the pane; the mouse
Behind the mouldering wainscot shrieked,
Or from the crevice peered about.”

48. The several circumstances here specified bring with them many appropriate associations. Our attention is rarely drawn by the buzzing of a fly in the window, save when everything is still. While the inmates are moving about the house, mice usually keep silence; and it is only when extreme quietness reigns that they peep from their retreats. Hence each of the facts mentioned, presupposing numerous others, calls up these with more or less distinctness; and revives the feeling of dull solitude with which they are connected in our experience. Were all these facts detailed

instead of suggested, the attention would be so frittered away that little impression of dreariness would be produced. Similarly in other cases. Whatever the nature of the thought to be conveyed, this skilful selection of a few particulars which imply the rest, is the key to success. In the choice of component ideas, as in the choice of expressions, the aim must be to convey the greatest quantity of thoughts with the smallest quantity of words.

49. The same principle may in some cases be advantageously carried yet further, by indirectly suggesting some entirely distinct thought in addition to the one expressed. Thus, if we say, "The head of a good classic is as full of ancient myths, as that of a servant-girl of ghost stories"; it is manifest that besides the fact asserted, there is an implied opinion respecting the small value of classical knowledge: and as this implied opinion is recognized much sooner than it can be put into words, there is gain in omitting it. In other cases, again, great effect is produced by an overt omission; provided the nature of the idea left out is obvious. A good instance of this occurs in 'Heroes and Heroworship.' After describing the way in which Burns was sacrificed to the idle curiosity of Lion-hunters—people who came not out of sympathy, but merely to see him—people who sought a little amusement, and who got their amusement while "the Hero's life went for it!" Carlyle suggests a parallel thus: "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—!—"

vi. The Effect of Poetry explained.

50. Before inquiring whether the law of effect, thus far traced, explains the superiority of poetry to prose, it will be needful to notice some supplementary causes of force in expression, that have not yet been mentioned. These are not, properly speaking, additional causes; but rather secondary ones, originating from those already specified reflex results of them. In the first place, then, we may remark that mental excitement spontaneously prompts the use of those forms of speech which have been pointed out as the most effective. "Out with him!" "Away with him!" are the natural utterances of angry citizens at a disturbed meeting. A voyager, describing a terrible storm he had witnessed, would rise to some such climax as—"Crack went the ropes and down came the mast." Astonishment may be heard expressed in the phrase—"Never was there such a sight!" All of which sentences are, it will be observed, constructed after the direct type. Again, every one knows that excited persons are given to figures of speech. The vituperation of the vulgar abounds with them: often, indeed, consists of little else. "Beast," "brute," "gallows rogue," "cut-throat villain," these, and other like metaphors and metaphorical epithets, at once call to mind a street quarrel. Further, it may be noticed that extreme brevity is another characteristic of passionate language. The sentences are generally incomplete; the particles are omitted; and frequently important words are left to be gathered from the context. Great admiration does not vent itself in a precise proposition, as—"It is beautiful"; but in the simple exclamation—"Beautiful!" He who, when reading a lawyer's letter, should say, "Vile rascal!" would be thought angry; while, "He is a vile rascal!" would imply comparative coolness. Thus we see that alike in the order of the words, in the frequent use of figures, and in extreme conciseness, the natural utterances of excitement conform to the theoretical conditions of forcible expression.

51. Hence, then, the higher forms of speech acquire a secondary strength from association. Having, in actual life, habitually heard them in connection with vivid mental impressions, and having been accustomed to meet with them in the most powerful writing, they come to have in themselves a species of force. The emotions that have from time to time been produced by the strong thoughts wrapped up in these forms, are partially aroused by the forms themselves. They create a certain degree of animation; they induce a preparatory sympathy, and when the striking ideas looked for are reached, they are the more vividly realized.

52. The continuous use of these modes of expression that are alike forcible in themselves and forcible from their associations, produces the peculiarly impressive species of composition which we call poetry. Poetry, we shall find, habitually adopts those symbols of thought, and those methods of using them, which instinct and analysis agree in choosing as most effective, and becomes poetry by virtue of doing this. On turning back to the various specimens that have been quoted, it will be seen that the direct or inverted form of sentence predominates in them; and that to a degree quite inadmissible in prose. And not only in the frequency, but in what is termed the violence of the inversions, will this distinction be remarked. In the abundant use of figures, again, we may recognize the same truth. Metaphors, similes, hyperboles, and personifications, are the poet's colours, which he has liberty to employ almost without limit. We characterize as "poetical" the prose which uses these appliances of language with any frequency,

and condemn it as “over florid” or “affected” long before they occur with the profusion allowed in verse. Further, let it be remarked that in brevity—the other requisite of forcible expression which theory points out, and emotion spontaneously fulfils—poetical phraseology similarly differs from ordinary phraseology. Imperfect periods are frequent; elisions are perpetual; and many of the minor words, which would be deemed essential in prose, are dispensed with.

53. Thus poetry, regarded as a vehicle of thought, is especially impressive partly because it obeys all the laws of effective speech, and partly because in so doing it imitates the natural utterances of excitement. While the matter embodied is idealized emotion, the vehicle is the idealized language of emotion. As the musical composer catches the cadences in which our feelings of joy and sympathy, grief and despair, vent themselves, and out of these germs evolves melodies suggesting higher phases of these feelings; I so, the poet develops from the typical expressions in which men utter passion and sentiment, those choice forms of verbal combination in which concentrated passion and sentiment may be fitly presented.

54. There is one peculiarity of poetry conducing much to its effect—the peculiarity which is indeed usually thought its characteristic one—still remaining to be considered: we mean its rhythmical structure. This, improbable though it seems, will be found to come under the same generalization with the others. Like each of them, it is an idealization of the natural language of strong emotion, which is known to be more or less metrical if the emotion be not too violent; and like each of them it is an economy of the reader's or hearer's attention. In the peculiar tone and manner we adopt in uttering versified language, may be discerned its relationship to the feelings; and the pleasure which its measured movement gives us, is ascribable to the comparative ease with which words metrically arranged can be recognized.

55. This last position will scarcely be at once admitted; but a little explanation will show its reasonableness. For if, as we have seen, there is an expenditure of mental energy in the mere act of listening to verbal articulations, or in that silent repetition of them which goes on in reading—if the perceptive faculties must be in active exercise to identify every syllable—then, any mode of so combining words as to present a regular recurrence of certain traits which the mind can anticipate, will diminish that strain upon the attention required by the total irregularity of prose. Just as the body, in receiving a series of varying concussions, must keep the muscles ready to meet the most violent of them, as not knowing when such may come; so, the mind in receiving unarranged articulations, must keep its perceptive active enough to recognize the least easily caught sounds. And as, if the concussions recur in a definite order, the body may husband its forces by adjusting the resistance needful for each concussion; so, if the syllables be rhythmically arranged, the mind may economize its energies by anticipating the attention required for each syllable.

56. Far-fetched though this idea will perhaps be thought, a little introspection will countenance it. That we do take advantage of metrical language to adjust our perceptive faculties to the force of the expected articulations, is clear from the fact that we are balked by halting versification. Much as at the bottom of a flight of stairs, a step more or less than we counted upon gives us a shock; so, too, does a misplaced accent or a supernumerary syllable. In the one case, we *know* that there is an erroneous preadjustment; and we can scarcely doubt that there is one in the other. But if we habitually preadjust our perceptions to the measured movement of verse, the physical analogy above given renders it probable that by so doing we economize attention; and hence that metrical language is more effective than prose, because it enables us to do this.

57. Were there space, it might be worthwhile to inquire whether the pleasure we take in rhyme, and also that which we take in euphony, are not partly ascribable to the same general cause.

PART II. CAUSES OF FORCE IN LANGUAGE WHICH DEPEND UPON ECONOMY OF THE MENTAL SENSIBILITIES.

i. The Law of Mental Exhaustion and Repair.

58. A few paragraphs only, can be devoted to a second division of our subject that here presents itself. To pursue in detail the laws of effect, as applying to the larger features of composition, would carry us beyond our limits. But we

may briefly indicate a further aspect of the general principle hitherto traced out, and hint a few of its wider applications.

59. Thus far, then, we have considered only those causes of force in language which depend upon economy of the mental *energies*: we have now to glance at those which depend upon economy of the mental *sensibilities*. Questionable though this division may be as a psychological one, it will yet serve roughly to indicate the remaining field of investigation. It will suggest that besides considering the extent to which any faculty or group of faculties is tasked in receiving a form of words and realizing its contained idea, we have to consider the state in which this faculty or group of faculties is left; and how the reception of subsequent sentences and images will be influenced by that state. Without going at length into so wide a topic as the exercise of faculties and its reactive effects, it will be sufficient here to call to mind that every faculty (when in a state of normal activity) is most capable at the outset; and that the change in its condition, which ends in what we term exhaustion, begins simultaneously with its exercise. This generalization, with which we are all familiar in our bodily experiences, and which our daily language recognizes as true of the mind as a whole, is equally true of each mental power, from the simplest of the senses to the most complex of the sentiments. If we hold a flower to the nose for long, we become insensible to its scent. We say of a very brilliant flash of lightning that it blinds us; which means that our eyes have for a time lost their ability to appreciate light. After eating a quantity of honey, we are apt to think our tea is without sugar. The phrase "a deafening roar," implies that men find a very loud sound temporarily incapacitates them for hearing faint ones. To a hand which has for some time carried a heavy body, small bodies afterwards lifted seem to have lost their weight. Now, the truth at once recognized in these, its extreme manifestations, may be traced throughout. It may be shown that alike in the reflective faculties, in the imagination, in the perceptions of the beautiful, the ludicrous, the sublime, in the sentiments, the instincts, in all the mental powers, however we may classify them—action exhausts; and that in proportion as the action is violent, the subsequent prostration is great.

60. Equally, throughout the whole nature, may be traced the law that exercised faculties are ever tending to resume their original state. Not only after continued rest, do they regain their full power not only do brief cessations partially reinvigorate them; but even while they are in action, the resulting exhaustion is ever being neutralized. The two processes of waste and repair go on together. Hence with faculties habitually exercised—as the senses of all persons, or the muscles of any one who is strong—it happens that, during moderate activity, the repair is so nearly equal to the waste, that the diminution of power is scarcely appreciable; and it is only when the activity has been long continued, or has been very violent, that the repair becomes so far in arrear of the waste as to produce a perceptible prostration. In all cases, however, when, by the action of a faculty, waste has been incurred, *some* lapse of time must take place before full efficiency can be reacquired; and this time must be long in proportion as the waste has been great.

ii. Explanation of Climax, Antithesis, and Anticlimax.

61. Keeping in mind these general truths, we shall be in a condition to understand certain causes of effect in composition now to be considered. Every perception received, and every conception realized, entailing some amount of waste—or, as Liebig would say, some change of matter in the brain; and the efficiency of the faculties subject to this waste being thereby temporarily, though often but momentarily, diminished; the resulting partial inability must affect the acts of perception and conception that immediately succeed. And hence we may expect that the vividness with which images are realized will, in many cases, depend on the order of their presentation: even when one order is as convenient to the understanding as the other.

62. There are sundry facts which alike illustrate this, and are explained by it. Climax is one of them. The marked effect obtained by placing last the most striking of any series of images, and the weakness—often the ludicrous weakness—produced by reversing this arrangement, depends on the general law indicated. As immediately after looking at the sun we cannot perceive the light of a fire, while by looking at the fire first and the sun afterwards we can perceive both; so, after receiving a brilliant, or weighty, or terrible thought, we cannot appreciate a less brilliant, less weighty, or less terrible one, while, by reversing the order, we can appreciate each. In Antithesis, again, we may recognize the same general truth. The opposition of two thoughts that are the reverse of each other in some prominent trait, insures an impressive effect; and does this by giving a momentary relaxation to the faculties addressed. If, after a series of images of an ordinary character, appealing in a moderate degree to the sentiment of reverence, or approbation, or beauty, the mind has presented to it a very insignificant, a very unworthy, or a very

ugly image; the faculty of reverence, or approbation, or beauty, as the case may be, having for the time nothing to do, tends to resume its full power; and will immediately afterwards appreciate a vast, admirable, or beautiful image better than it would otherwise do. Conversely, where the idea of absurdity due to extreme insignificance is to be produced, it maybe greatly intensified by placing it after something highly impressive: especially if the form of phrase implies that something still more impressive is coming. A good illustration of the effect gained by thus presenting a petty idea to a consciousness that has not yet recovered from the shock of an exciting one, occurs in a sketch by Balzac. His hero writes to a mistress who has cooled towards him the following letter:

“Madame, Votre conduite m'etonne autant qu'elle m'afflige Non contente de me dechirer le coeur par vos dedains vous avez l'indelicatesse de me retenir une brosse a dents, que mes moyens ne me permettent pas de remplacer, mes proprietes etant grevees d'hypotheques

“Adieu, trop, belle et trop ingrate ainie! Pussions nous nous revoir dans un monde meilleur!

“Charles Edouard”

63. Thus we see that the phenomena of Climax, Antithesis, and Anticlimax, alike result from this general principle. Improbable as these momentary variations in susceptibility may seem, we cannot doubt their occurrence when we contemplate the analogous variations in the susceptibility of the senses. Referring once more to phenomena of vision, every one knows that a patch of black on a white ground looks blacker, and a patch of white on a black ground looks whiter, than elsewhere. As the blackness and the whiteness must really be the same, the only assignable cause for this is a difference in their actions upon us, dependent upon the different states of our faculties. It is simply a visual antithesis.

iii. Need of Variety.

64. But this extension of the general principle of economy—this further condition to effective composition, that the sensitiveness of the faculties must be continuously husbanded—includes much more than has been yet hinted. It implies not only that certain arrangements and certain juxtapositions of connected ideas are best; but that some modes of dividing and presenting a subject will be more striking than others; and that, too, irrespective of its logical cohesion. It shows why we must progress from the less interesting to the more interesting; and why not only the composition as a whole, but each of its successive portions, should tend towards a climax. At the same time, it forbids long continuity of the same kind of thought, or repeated production of like effects. It warns us against the error committed both by Pope in his poems and by Bacon in his essays—the error, namely, of constantly employing forcible forms of expression: and it points out that as the easiest posture by and by becomes fatiguing, and is with pleasure exchanged for one less easy, so, the most perfectly-constructed sentences will soon weary, and relief will be given by using those of an inferior kind.

65. Further, we may infer from it not only that we should avoid generally combining our words in one manner, however good, or working out our figures and illustrations in one way, however telling; but that we should avoid anything like uniform adherence, even to the wider conditions of effect. We should not make every section of our subject progress in interest; we should not always rise to a climax. As we saw that, in single sentences, it is but rarely allowable to fulfill all the conditions to strength; so, in the larger sections of a composition we must not often conform entirely to the law indicated. We must subordinate the component effect to the total effect.

66. In deciding how practically to carry out the principles of artistic composition, we may derive help by bearing in mind a fact already pointed out—the fitness of certain verbal arrangements for certain kinds of thought. That constant variety in the mode of presenting ideas which the theory demands, will in a great degree result from a skilful adaptation of the form to the matter. We saw how the direct or inverted sentence is spontaneously used by excited people; and how their language is also characterized by figures of speech and by extreme brevity. Hence these may with advantage predominate in emotional passages; and may increase as the emotion rises. On the other hand, for complex ideas, the indirect sentence seems the best vehicle. In conversation, the excitement produced by the near approach to a desired conclusion, will often show itself in a series of short, sharp sentences; while, in impressing a view already enunciated, we generally make our periods voluminous by piling thought upon thought.

These natural modes of procedure may serve as guides in writing. Keen observation and skilful analysis would, in like manner, detect further peculiarities of expression produced by other attitudes of mind; and by paying due attention to all such traits, a writer possessed of sufficient versatility might make some approach to a completely-organized work.

iv. The Ideal Writer.

67. This species of composition which the law of effect points out as the perfect one, is the one which high genius tends naturally to produce. As we found that the kinds of sentences which are theoretically best, are those generally employed by superior minds, and by inferior minds when excitement has raised them; so, we shall find that the ideal form for a poem, essay, or fiction, is that which the ideal writer would evolve spontaneously. One in whom the powers of expression fully responded to the state of feeling, would unconsciously use that variety in the mode of presenting his thoughts, which Art demands. This constant employment of one species of phraseology, which all have now to strive against, implies an undeveloped faculty of language. To have a specific style is to be poor in speech. If we remember that, in the far past, men had only nouns and verbs to convey their ideas with, and that from then to now the growth has been towards a greater number of implements of thought, and consequently towards a greater complexity and variety in their combinations; we may infer that we are now, in our use of sentences, much what the primitive man was in his use of words; and that a continuance of the process that has hitherto gone on, must produce increasing heterogeneity in our modes of expression. As now, in a fine nature, the play of the features, the tones of the voice and its cadences, vary in harmony with every thought uttered; so, in one possessed of a fully developed power of speech, the mould in which each combination of words is cast will similarly vary with, and be appropriate to the sentiment.

68. That a perfectly endowed man must unconsciously write in all styles, we may infer from considering how styles originate. Why is Johnson pompous, Goldsmith simple? Why is one author abrupt, another rhythmical, another concise? Evidently in each case the habitual mode of utterance must depend upon the habitual balance of the nature. The predominant feelings have by use trained the intellect to represent them. But while long, though unconscious, discipline has made it do this efficiently, it remains from lack of practice, incapable of doing the same for the less active feelings; and when these are excited, the usual verbal forms undergo but slight modifications. Let the powers of speech be fully developed, however—let the ability of the intellect to utter the emotions be complete; and this fixity of style will disappear. The perfect writer will express himself as Junius, when in the Junius frame of mind; when he feels as Lamb felt, will use a like familiar speech; and will fall into the ruggedness of Carlyle when in a Carlylean mood. Now he will be rhythmical and now irregular; here his language will be plain and there ornate; sometimes his sentences will be balanced and at other times unsymmetrical; for a while there will be considerable sameness, and then again great variety. His mode of expression naturally responding to his state of feeling, there will flow from his pen a composition changing to the same degree that the aspects of his subject change. He will thus without effort conform to what we have seen to be the laws of effect. And while his work presents to the reader that variety needful to prevent continuous exertion of the same faculties, it will also answer to the description of all highly organized products, both of man and of nature: it will be not a series of like parts simply placed in juxtaposition, but one whole made up of unlike parts that are mutually dependent.