

From Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Book Three, translated by W. Rhys Roberts (public domain)

We may, then, start from the observations there made, including the definition of style. Style to be good must be clear, as is proved by the fact that speech which fails to convey a plain meaning will fail to do just what speech has to do. It must also be appropriate, avoiding both meanness and undue elevation; poetical language is certainly free from meanness, but it is not appropriate to prose. Clearness is secured by using the words (nouns and verbs alike) that are current and ordinary. Freedom from meanness, and positive adornment too, are secured by using the other words mentioned in the Art of Poetry. Such variation from what is usual makes the language appear more stately. People do not feel towards strangers as they do towards their own countrymen, and the same thing is true of their feeling for language. It is therefore well to give to everyday speech an unfamiliar air: people like what strikes them, and are struck by what is out of the way. In verse such effects are common, and there they are fitting: the persons and things there spoken of are comparatively remote from ordinary life. In prose passages they are far less often fitting because the subject-matter is less exalted. Even in poetry, it is not quite appropriate that fine language should be used by a slave or a very young man, or about very trivial subjects: even in poetry the style, to be appropriate, must sometimes be toned down, though at other times heightened. We can now see that a writer must disguise his art and give the impression of speaking naturally and not artificially. Naturalness is persuasive, artificiality is the contrary; for our hearers are prejudiced and think we have some design against them, as if we were mixing their wines for them. It is like the difference between the quality of Theodorus' voice and the voices of all other actors: his really seems to be that of the character who is speaking, theirs do not. We can hide our purpose successfully by taking the single words of our composition from the speech of ordinary life. This is done in poetry by Euripides, who was the first to show the way to his successors. . . .

In the Art of Poetry . . . will be found definitions of these kinds of words; a classification of Metaphors; and mention of the fact that metaphor is of great value both in poetry and in prose. Prose-writers must, however, pay specially careful attention to metaphor, because their other resources are scantier than those of poets. Metaphor, moreover, gives style clearness, charm, and distinction as nothing else can: and it is not a thing whose use can be taught by one man to another. Metaphors, like epithets, must be fitting, which means that they must fairly correspond to the thing signified: failing this, their inappropriateness will be conspicuous: the want of harmony between two things is emphasized by their being placed side by side. It is like having to ask ourselves what dress will suit an old man; certainly not the crimson cloak that suits a young man. And if you wish to pay a compliment, you must take your metaphor from something better in the same line; if to disparage, from something worse. To illustrate my meaning: since opposites are in the same class, you do what I have suggested if you say that a man who begs "prays," and a man who prays "begs"; for praying and begging are both varieties of asking. So Iphicrates called Callias a "mendicant priest" instead of a "torch-bearer," and Callias replied that Iphicrates must be uninitiated or he would have called him not a "mendicant priest" but a "torch-bearer." Both are religious titles, but one is honourable and the other is not. Again, somebody calls actors "hangers-on of Dionysus," but they call themselves "artists": each of these terms is a metaphor, the one intended to throw dirt at the actor, the other to dignify him. And pirates now call themselves "purveyors." We can thus call a crime a mistake, or a mistake a crime. We can say that a thief "took" a thing, or that he "plundered" his victim. An expression like that of Euripides' Telephus,

King of the oar, on Mysia's coast he landed,

is inappropriate; the word “king” goes beyond the dignity of the subject, and so the art is not concealed. A metaphor may be amiss because the very syllables of the words conveying it fail to indicate sweetness of vocal utterance. Thus Dionysius the Brazen in his elegies calls poetry “Calliope’s screech.” Poetry and screeching are both, to be sure, vocal utterances. But the metaphor is bad, because the sounds of “screeching,” unlike those of poetry, are discordant and unmeaning. Further, in using metaphors to give names to nameless things, we must draw them not from remote but from kindred and similar things, so that the kinship is clearly perceived as soon as the words are said. Thus in the celebrated riddle

I marked how a man glued bronze with fire to another man’s body,

the process is nameless; but both it and gluing are a kind of application, and that is why the application of the cupping-glass is here called a “gluing.” Good riddles do, in general, provide us with satisfactory metaphors: for metaphors imply riddles, and therefore a good riddle can furnish a good metaphor. Further, the materials of metaphors must be beautiful; and the beauty, like the ugliness, of all words may, as Licymnius says, lie in their sound or in their meaning. Further, there is a third consideration -- one that upsets the fallacious argument of the sophist Bryon, that there is no such thing as foul language, because in whatever words you put a given thing your meaning is the same. This is untrue. One term may describe a thing more truly than another, may be more like it, and set it more intimately before our eyes. Besides, two different words will represent a thing in two different lights; so on this ground also one term must be held fairer or fouler than another. For both of two terms will indicate what is fair, or what is foul, but not simply their fairness or their foulness, or if so, at any rate not in an equal degree. The materials of metaphor must be beautiful to the ear, to the understanding, to the eye or some other physical sense. It is better, for instance, to say “rosy-fingered morn,” than “crimson-fingered” or, worse still, “red-fingered morn.”

. . . Metaphors like other things may be inappropriate. Some are so because they are ridiculous; they are indeed used by comic as well as tragic poets. Others are too grand and theatrical; and these, if they are far-fetched, may also be obscure. For instance, Gorgias talks of “events that are green and full of sap,” and says “foul was the deed you sowed and evil the harvest you reaped.” That is too much like poetry. Alcidas, again, called philosophy “a fortress that threatens the power of law,” and the Odyssey “a goodly looking-glass of human life,” talked about “offering no such toy to poetry”: all these expressions fail, for the reasons given, to carry the hearer with them. The address of Gorgias to the swallow, when she had let her droppings fall on him as she flew overhead, is in the best tragic manner. He said, “Nay, shame, O Philomela.” Considering her as a bird, you could not call her act shameful; considering her as a girl, you could; and so it was a good gibe to address her as what she was once and not as what she is.

The Simile also is a metaphor; the difference is but slight. When the poet says of Achilles that he

Leapt on the foe as a lion,

this is a simile; when he says of him “the lion leapt”, it is a metaphor -- here, since both are courageous, he has transferred to Achilles the name of “lion”. Similes are useful in prose as well as in verse; but not often, since they are of the nature of poetry. They are to be employed just as metaphors are employed, since they are really the same thing except for the difference mentioned.

The following are examples of similes. Androtion said of Idrieus that he was like a terrier let off the chain, that flies at you and bites you -- Idrieus too was savage now that he was let out of his chains. Theodamas compared Archidamus to an Euxenus who could not do geometry -- a

proportional simile, implying that Euxenus is an Archidamus who can do geometry. In Plato's Republic those who strip the dead are compared to curs which bite the stones thrown at them but do not touch the thrower, and there is the simile about the Athenian people, who are compared to a ship's captain who is strong but a little deaf; and the one about poets' verses, which are likened to persons who lack beauty but possess youthful freshness -- when the freshness has faded the charm perishes, and so with verses when broken up into prose. Pericles compared the Samians to children who take their pap but go on crying; and the Boeotians to holm-oaks, because they were ruining one another by civil wars just as one oak causes another oak's fall. Demosthenes said that the Athenian people were like sea-sick men on board ship. Again, Demosthenes compared the political orators to nurses who swallow the bit of food themselves and then smear the children's lips with the spittle. Antisthenes compared the lean Cephisodotus to frankincense, because it was his consumption that gave one pleasure. All these ideas may be expressed either as similes or as metaphors; those which succeed as metaphors will obviously do well also as similes, and similes, with the explanation omitted, will appear as metaphors. But the proportional metaphor must always apply reciprocally to either of its co-ordinate terms. For instance, if a drinking-bowl is the shield of Dionysus, a shield may fittingly be called the drinking-bowl of Ares.

. . . We all naturally find it agreeable to get hold of new ideas easily: words express ideas, and therefore those words are the most agreeable that enable us to get hold of new ideas. Now strange words simply puzzle us; ordinary words convey only what we know already; it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh. When the poet calls "old age a withered stalk," he conveys a new idea, a new fact, to us by means of the general notion of bloom, which is common to both things. The similes of the poets do the same, and therefore, if they are good similes, give an effect of brilliance. The simile, as has been said before, is a metaphor, differing from it only in the way it is put; and just because it is longer it is less attractive. Besides, it does not say outright that "this" is "that," and therefore the hearer is less interested in the idea. We see, then, that both speech and reasoning are lively in proportion as they make us seize a new idea promptly. For this reason people are not much taken either by obvious arguments (using the word "obvious" to mean what is plain to everybody and needs no investigation), nor by those which puzzle us when we hear them stated, but only by those which convey their information to us as soon as we hear them, provided we had not the information already; or which the mind only just fails to keep up with. These two kinds do convey to us a sort of information: but the obvious and the obscure kinds convey nothing, either at once or later on. It is these qualities, then, that, so far as the meaning of what is said is concerned, make an argument acceptable. So far as the style is concerned, it is the antithetical form that appeals to us, e.g. "judging that the peace common to all the rest was a war upon their own private interests," where there is an antithesis between war and peace. It is also good to use metaphorical words; but the metaphors must not be far-fetched, or they will be difficult to grasp, nor obvious, or they will have no effect. . . .

Of the four kinds of Metaphor the most taking is the proportional kind. Thus Pericles, for instance, said that the vanishing from their country of the young men who had fallen in the war was "as if the spring were taken out of the year." Leptines, speaking of the Lacedaemonians, said that he would not have the Athenians let Greece "lose one of her two eyes." When Chares was pressing for leave to be examined upon his share in the Olynthiac war, Cephisodotus was indignant, saying that he wanted his examination to take place "while he had his fingers upon the people's throat." The same speaker once urged the Athenians to march to Euboea, "with Miltiades' decree as their rations." Iphicrates, indignant at the truce made by the Athenians with Epidaurus and the neighbouring sea-board, said that they had stripped themselves of their travelling money for the journey of war. Peitholaus called the state-galley "the people's big stick," and Sestos "the corn-bin of the Peiraeus." . . . Polyuctus said of a paralytic man named Speusippus that he could not keep quiet, "though fortune had fastened him in the pillory of

disease." Cephisodotus called warships "painted millstones." Diogenes the Dog called taverns "the mess-rooms of Attica." Aesion said that the Athenians had "emptied" their town into Sicily: this is a graphic metaphor. "Till all Hellas shouted aloud" may be regarded as a metaphor, and a graphic one again. Cephisodotus bade the Athenians take care not to hold too many "parades." Isocrates used the same word of those who "parade at the national festivals." Another example occurs in the Funeral Speech: "It is fitting that Greece should cut off her hair beside the tomb of those who fell at Salamis, since her freedom and their valour are buried in the same grave." Even if the speaker here had only said that it was right to weep when valour was being buried in their grave, it would have been a metaphor, and a graphic one; but the coupling of "their valour" and "her freedom" presents a kind of antithesis as well. "The course of my words," said Iphicrates, "lies straight through the middle of Chares' deeds": this is a proportional metaphor, and the phrase "straight through the middle" makes it graphic. The expression "to call in one danger to rescue us from another" is a graphic metaphor. Lycoleon said, defending Chabrias, "They did not respect even that bronze statue of his that intercedes for him yonder." This was a metaphor for the moment, though it would not always apply; a vivid metaphor, however; Chabrias is in danger, and his statue intercedes for him -- that lifeless yet living thing which records his services to his country. "Practising in every way littleness of mind" is metaphorical, for practising a quality implies increasing it. So is "God kindled our reason to be a lamp within our soul," for both reason and light reveal things. So is "we are not putting an end to our wars, but only postponing them," for both literal postponement and the making of such a peace as this apply to future action. So is such a saying as "This treaty is a far nobler trophy than those we set up on fields of battle; they celebrate small gains and single successes; it celebrates our triumph in the war as a whole"; for both trophy and treaty are signs of victory. So is "A country pays a heavy reckoning in being condemned by the judgement of mankind," for a reckoning is damage deservedly incurred. . . .

Metaphors must be drawn, as has been said already, from things that are related to the original thing, and yet not obviously so related -- just as in philosophy also an acute mind will perceive resemblances even in things far apart. Thus Archytas said that an arbitrator and an altar were the same, since the injured fly to both for refuge. Or you might say that an anchor and an overhead hook were the same, since both are in a way the same, only the one secures things from below and the other from above. And to speak of states as "levelled" is to identify two widely different things, the equality of a physical surface and the equality of political powers.

Liveliness is specially conveyed by metaphor, and by the further power of surprising the hearer; because the hearer expected something different, his acquisition of the new idea impresses him all the more. His mind seems to say, "Yes, to be sure; I never thought of that." The liveliness of epigrammatic remarks is due to the meaning not being just what the words say: as in the saying of Stesichorus that "the cicadas will chirp to themselves on the ground." Well-constructed riddles are attractive for the same reason; a new idea is conveyed, and there is metaphorical expression. So with the "novelties" of Theodorus. In these the thought is startling, and, as Theodorus puts it, does not fit in with the ideas you already have. . . .

Successful similes also, as has been said above, are in a sense metaphors, since they always involve two relations like the proportional metaphor. Thus: a shield, we say, is the "drinking-bowl of Ares," and a bow is the "chordless lyre." This way of putting a metaphor is not "simple," as it would be if we called the bow a lyre or the shield a drinking-bowl. There are "simple" similes also: we may say that a flute-player is like a monkey, or that a short-sighted man's eyes are like a lamp-flame with water dropping on it, since both eyes and flame keep winking. A simile succeeds best when it is a converted metaphor, for it is possible to say that a shield is like the drinking-bowl of Ares, or that a ruin is like a house in rags . . . These are all similes; and that similes are metaphors has been stated often already.