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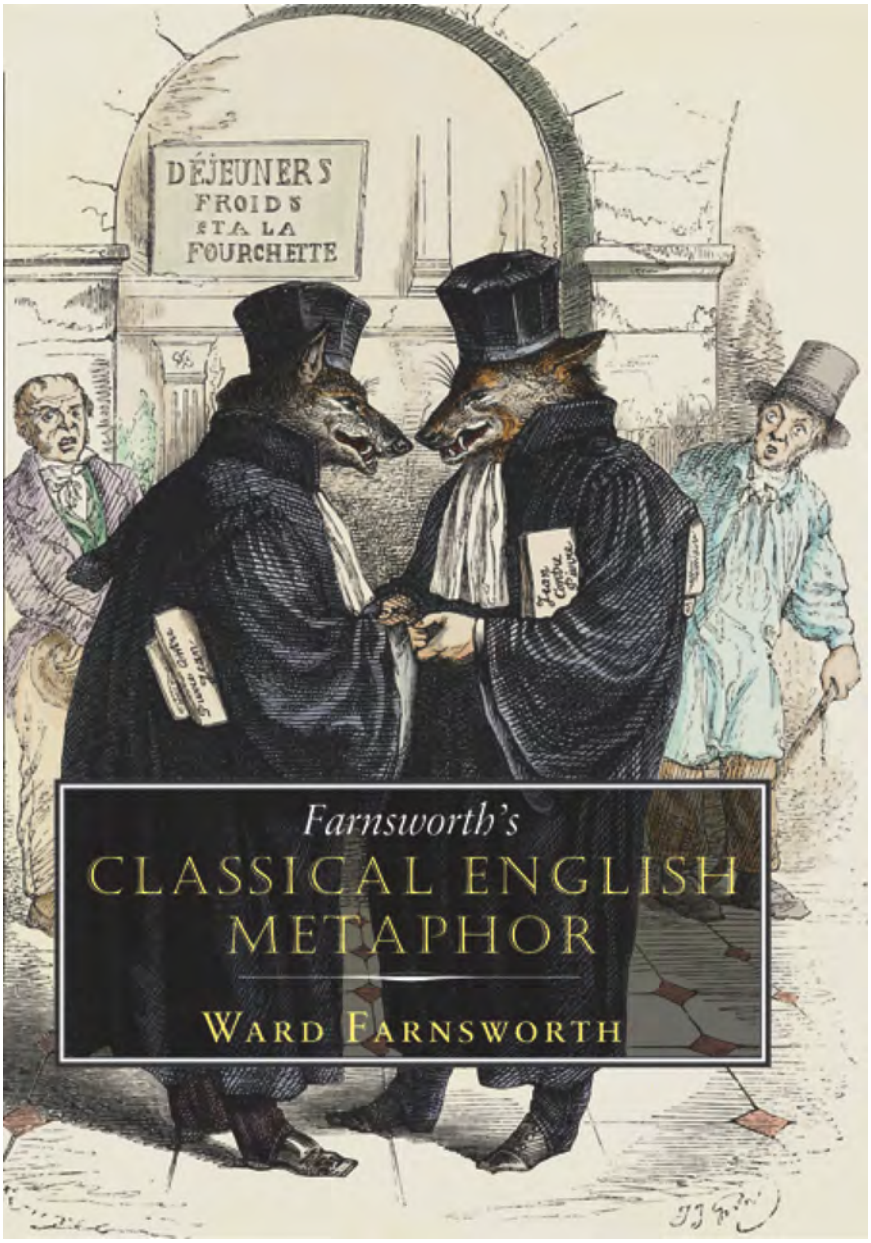


# WHAT DOES THIS REMIND YOU OF?
## A COMPENDIUM OF METAPHORS CAN HELP

Book Review by **Michael Dirda**

AS A WRITER, I have no flair for similes and metaphors: Nothing ever reminds me of anything else. Homer might compare a warrior on the battlefield to a roaring lion; Robert Burns might say his love is like a red, red rose. I just see a guy with a sword or a pretty girl.

Because of the plainness of my own style, I am a sucker for sentences with any sort of zingy rhetorical flourish. *Farnsworth's Classical English Metaphor* collects hundreds of short passages from English prose to demonstrate how figurative analogies bring excitement, richness and increased clarity to a writer's thought. "A metaphor," explains Ward Farnsworth, "tries to create a little event in the mind of the reader—a mental picture, a surprise, a new idea, or all these at once." Most of this handsome book's examples are drawn from works written in the 18th and 19th century. Samuel Johnson, Herman Melville and, best of all, Charles Dickens are probably quoted most often. Given their extraordinary linguistic gusto, G.K. Chesterton, P.G. Wodehouse and H.L. Mencken are also included but no authors more modern.

Farnsworth, who obviously possesses a categorizing mind, organizes his book according to a metaphor's source. Thus chapters describe similitudes drawn from, for example, the animal kingdom, nature, human biology, occupations and mythology. Animals—think of ants, apes, rats and wasps—are often used to caricature people; gardens, whether weeded or well tended, can readily characterize human society. Even as lawyers have ever and always epitomized insincerity, so fire and passion have long been linked together. Yet because metaphors make the familiar strange and the strange familiar, the best ones refresh our perception of the world and everything in it. Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. once compared human existence to an unlikely vegetable: "I wax impatient sometimes to think of how much time it takes to do a little fragment of what one would like to do and dreams of. Life is like an artichoke; each day, week, month, year, gives you one little bit which you nibble off—but precious little compared to what you throw away."

To break up long strings of quotations, Farnsworth regularly offers brief comments of his own. As the author of *Farnsworth's Classical English Rhetoric*—a warmly received study of the patterns of prose—he reminds us that the strongest, most emphatic part of any sentence is its end. He stresses, too, how similes can often soften metaphors: "If one says that life is like a tale told by an idiot, the *like* provides a reassuring bit of insulation between the source and subject." In other words, without that "like," an affinity becomes

an identity, and a bleak one at that: Life really is a tale told by an idiot.

Although Farnsworth structures his book as a scholarly anatomy of metaphors, he recognizes that most people will find it a grab-bag of memorable quotations, an ideal browsing book for the night-stand. Discussing images of cold, he cites Robert Louis Stevenson on old age: "After a certain distance, every step we take in life we find the ice growing thinner below our feet, and all around us and behind us we see our contemporaries going through." Thoreau neatly uses water imagery to illuminate two forms of our interior selves: Most people "have no inclinations, no rapids, no cascades, but marshes, and alligators, and miasmas instead." The best metaphors are often short sharp shocks, such as this one from the semi-forgotten novelist Ouida: "Moralists say that a soul should resist passion. They might as well say that a house should resist an earthquake."

Farnsworth sadly recognizes that classical and biblical allusions aren't as available to writers as they once were. People might know the stories of Ulysses and Moses, but not those of Phalaris and Nehemiah. Still, even recondite material can add grace to a paragraph, albeit with an extra bit of care or explanation. In truth, though, younger 21st-century readers are likely to find these extracts somewhat demanding; this is prose you are meant to savor, not skim over. Consider this example from Dickens's *Little Dorrit,* in which sudden financial devastation is likened to a ship explosion at sea. A Bernard Madoff-like financier has embezzled and ruined his clients, then committed suicide:

> "With a precursory sound of hurried breath and hurried feet, Mr. Pancks rushed into Arthur Clenham's Counting-house. The Inquest was over, the letter was public, the Bank was broken, the other model structures of straw had taken fire and were turned to smoke. The admired piratical ship had blown up, in the midst of a vast fleet of ships of all rates, and boats of all sizes; and on the deep was nothing but ruin; nothing but burning hulls, bursting magazines, great guns self-exploded tearing friends and neighbours to pieces, drowning men clinging to unseaworthy spars and going down every minute, spent swimmers floating dead, and sharks."

Let me end with a glorious passage from H.L. Mencken in full throat as he destroys the prose of Warren G. Harding:

> "He writes the worst English that I have ever encountered. It

reminds me of a string of wet sponges; it reminds me of tattered washing on the line; it reminds me of stale bean soup, of college yells, of dogs barking idiotically through endless nights. It is so bad that a sort of grandeur creeps into it. It drags itself out of the dark abysm of pish, and crawls insanely up the topmost pinnacle of tosh. It is rumble and bumble. It is flap and doodle. It is balder and dash."

**Lord, what I'd give to be able to write like that!** 

**Michael Dirda** reviews each Thursday in Style and is the author, most recently, *Browsings: A Year of Reading, Collecting, and Living With Books.*

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