

Elegant Writing in the Clandestine Services

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In which it appears things aren't getting any better

Richard T. Puderbaugh

How I came to be designated CWH/WW (Chief Word Watcher, Western Hemisphere) was that a certain Senior Officer called me into his office the other day and showed me a paper from one of the stations, which spoke of giving an operation "short shift."* My God, he said, who ever heard of a short shift? I knew what he meant, so I didn't make the mistake of mentioning Volkswagens, 1970 petticoats or the Redskins. The Senior Officer went on with his denunciation, and ended up by asking me "Don't they know what 'shrift' means?"

It is a good question. How many people do know? It is one of those terms everybody knows about and thinks he can define, and one which should really lead people inexorably to the dictionary. But it doesn't, not even those people who know how to spell it. I didn't say these things to the Senior Officer, because he is more senior than I am, and has a quick temper.

Anyway, in that conversation, the Senior Officer appointed me Official Word Watcher for the Division, by I don't know what authority, and charged me with the following duties:

To collect from all CS communications outstanding examples of elegant writing, and to report upon my research at opportune times so that our writers may be edified and instructed thereby.

As soon as my appointment became known, I had a great deal of help 'from other headquarters personnel, but I will acknowledge that help specifically only if the danger of lynching becomes clear, and I need help (or company).

Here, then, is my first report. I should like to begin it by listing some of the most elegant words we have in our correspondence, words which I urge one and all to use at every opportunity. I should like to see the day when not a single page of our prose escapes the use of at least one of these words. I especially urge our writers to try new uses for all these words, and not be bound by such things as tense, gender, number or mode. *Caveat*, for example, is in the Latin imperative mode, but that is much too restrictive, and we have quite properly used this word as a noun for some time now. Imagine my delight when I observed recently the first attempt that I know of to use it, as is, in the present indicative. When you consider that we have long since expanded its original sense of "warning" to include the sense of "conditions" or "provisos," you can understand why the word is so important to us. I can right here remark that I should caveat some of the remarks I am about to make in this essay, and you will not have the slightest idea what I mean, but it sounds distinguished and important, and that is what matters.

Here is the list:

- caveat
- rationale
- thrust
- interface (used as a noun and a verb)
- dichotomy
- lacuna^{*}
- forthcoming (in the sense of "candid")
- profile (can be either high or low)
- silhouette (can be either high or low)
- options
- life-style
- posture
- rapport

Rapport is an especially fine word, but so far we have used it only as a noun. Perhaps we should offer a prize to the officer who first devises a successful sentence using rapport as a verb, although we may have been beaten to the punch on this one by the folk-rock expression "to rap." Even employing "rapport" as a noun, nevertheless, we can do great things. Note the following excerpt from a field report:

"We hope it does not reach the extreme where the agent fails to establish a working rapport, or worse, and thus destroys ..."

The mind boggles at the thought of anything being worse than a working rapport, and yet here is an officer who does *not* want the agent to *fail* to establish exactly that. Like the character in the play who suddenly discovered that he had been speaking prose all his life, this writer is probably unaware that he has constructed a litotes there. A litotes affirms something by denying the contrary, as in "he is not without charm." The device can also be stretched to refute something by negating the denial of the contrary, as in "he denied that he was not unwilling to go," ... and so on, into total opacity. It is one way to make a reader really study your prose, Still with me?

Try this one:

"Subject: Refutal of rumors regarding a coup."

To take words from other languages or disciplines, and use them in new and clever ways to confound the pedestrian mind, is a noble thing, but how much more magnificent it is to take a legitimate word from our own language and by the change of one phoneme devise a new word, which nobody ever heard of before, but whose meaning everybody will immediately perceive! The roots of this particular treasure seem to be in the words *refuse* and *refute*, but I noted that the inventor did not arrange a reciprocal loan of suffixes and speak of such things as "Hanoi's *refusation* to make peace." There is something not quite right about that one. Sort of low class, perhaps. It is possible, of course, that the word

rebut was bobbing around in the crucible which produced *refutal*, but in that direction lies paranoia, and we will venture no farther.

It seems to me that *refutal* deserves at least as high a place in our lexicon as *normalcy*, which, as you may know, was invented by Warren G. Harding, who didn't realize he was inventing anything. He would have made a good operations officer. Indeed, I think that the authenticity of these inventions has to be based to a great extent upon the fact that when they are first uttered their inventors are unconscious of bringing something new into the world.

I don't know whether the innocence of the inventors has any bearing on the acceptability of words to modern dictionaries. I doubt it. Modern dictionaries will accept anything anybody says, because if somebody says something it becomes usage, and usage is king! There is one grumpy headquarters officer who dislikes this modern trend, and says that the Oxford of 1912 is the only authoritative dictionary of the English language. He is a troublemaker, who will one day be dealt with by Division Authorities. He is the one who brought to me the following:

"Subject: Easement of the Threat of a Coup."

I had to point out to him that Webster's New World Dictionary says there *is* such a meaning to easement, in addition to the legal use pertaining to land titles, so that settles that. He also has to accept the fact, for instance, that *chaise longue* has now become *chaise lounge* in this country, by authority of Sears, Roebuck and Company, and that *lingerie* means ladies' drawers and shifts and things of that, nature, and if he and the French don't like it then they can damn well lump it.

What should we do about the shall/will problem? My own inclination is to let it lie, because the shall/will rule was an artificial thing, anyway, set up in a very elegant epoch of the English language, to tone up the speech of His Majesty's subjects. It is a difficult thing to master, and I think we are doing well enough without it, although you have to admit that nothing dresses up a sentence quite so much as an unexpected "shall" where a "will" really belongs. That is to say that we should pay no attention to the rule, but should just put in a shall at any time a sentence needs to be toned up a bit.

Another problem which I'm inclined to de-emphasize is the one which the *New Yorker* calls "The Omnipotent Whom." There is no doubt about it, *whom* sounds much more literate and polished than plain old everyday *who*, but I think we have this factor under good control. In fact, I have ceased collecting samples, after nearly filling a notebook, because everyone is doing so well. I shall cite just two fairly typical examples:

"ZPDRUM, whom we note is currently in Paris ..."

"Forward the document to whomever may have an interest in the matter."

If there is anything that dresses up our prose even more than the shall/will or who/whom pilasters, it is the mixed metaphor. If your metaphor gives a clear picture, you should be ashamed of yourself. We don't do as well as we should on metaphors, in fact, and we must work on them a bit harder. We have much to learn from the State Department in this respect, as witness the following sample from State traffic:

"If the government of Graustark does not box itself in by wrapping the national flag around the training area ..."

Try to construct a mental picture from the Ozymandian blueprint, and despair! The same State Department expert also spoke of "a certain rustling of sabers," which shows that he is made of championship material. I would quarrel mildly in one sense, however. If the sabers are, in truth, made of something that rustles, he should correct and extend his borrowing from Poe, and make the rustling uncertain, as well as sad, and perhaps silken. Unless, of course, the writer meant to imply that there was a kind of military Bad Bart who was going around stealing great numbers of sabers from the corrals of nice folks in white hats.

But a fig for the State Department! We have our own experts, and I defy any other agency to produce anything to equal the following:

"The result of the medical checkup was that the agent has diabetes."

"His bank allottee is forwarded under separate cover."

"The negative reaction to this device was its (attaboy!) lack of sufficient range. It was tested singularly and in pairs."

"He is not temperamentally geared to write in subtilities, but does produce good hardhitting yellow journalism in the style of a poor man's Westbrook Pegler."

The last sentence may be one of the best of the decade. I don't say that because of his reference to "hardhitting" journalism, either, even though that term does limn a picture of an energetic, up-and-at-'em CIA officer playing Wagnerian themes on the mighty Wurlitzer he has constructed from his local (sob) *stable of assets*. It's good, but you can't give very high marks for it, because when you come right down to it, our operations have never to my knowledge produced a single paragraph that *wasn't* hardhitting. Where that sentence achieves greatness is in calling attention to one of the characteristics of the late columnist which has been too long overlooked — that is, the fact that only the rich could afford the real Westbrook Pegler.

But there is more. If one lifts the phrase "temperamentally geared" out of the stream and contemplates it carefully, one cannot help but be impressed with the subtlety of the thing. I know a number of people in this agency who I think are temperamentally geared. I steer clear of them. They can't do you any good.

"In view of the serious flap potential, which, if discovered by the host government, could have lead to a worsening of relations ..."

We need not dwell upon the construction which hypothesizes the damage that might be done if the government discovers the flap potential of an operation. We all know that, surely. Who among us would ever want a host government to find out how risky an operation he was mounting? We must always keep our host government reassured that our clandestine operations in their countries have also no flap potential at all. But let us press on to the rest of that sentence, whose enigmatic wording led my mind into an almost psychedelic whirl, with images of "some lead is red, and some reds are led," and when the machinery finally clanked to a halt, here is what came out of the printer:

Wherever your writing may lead, Sir,
You may rest assured I shall read, Sir;
But if, when I've read,
You insist I've been lead,
Then I surely shall sea read, indeed, Sir.

You can have that, if you want it.

Perhaps there is something about lead that attracts the man-Freudian associations with bullets or poison or pollution. It would not be the first time our prose implied more than it said. Notice the gothic scene evoked by the following:

"... we will continue to keep this asset tabled, and will call on him for spot reporting when necessary."

If all our Operations Officers were as skilled at writing as this man, the Green Beret case would never have hit the headlines. There is no "terminated with extreme prejudice" blooper here to provoke the news media into soaring flights of fancy. No, the untutored mind would receive that sentence as meaning that the matter was being held in abeyance, as in the parliamentary term "to table a motion," whereas those of us in the know immediately perceive that this officer is describing a bit of standard tradecraft, whereby we strap a man to a deal table and belabor him with interfaces and rapports and dichotomies until he by god comes up with a spot report.

"So successful was Fulano's re-immersion as a crusading journalist that ..."

A number of our stations have in the past produced or supported underground newspapers, but this must be the first one of record whose clandestine journalism was done under water. Eat your heart out, MI-6!

"Fulano appears to be in excellent financial straits." "Subject and his wife, Josephine, nee unknown ..."

"He did it in a fit of peak."*

"He easily loses his head."

"He attempted to illicit the information."

"The rightist candidate, who won a plurality of votes."

"The agent demonstrated an excellent operational posture."*

... like operating in a vacuum tube."

"The national liberation movement ..."

"Incendiary fires will be set."

"Several methods of modus operandi are being contemplated."

The author of that last sentence could have added immeasurably to its charm by pointing out that incendiary fires can be put out with wet. water; but he did at least clarify things a bit the following week by explaining "By large incendiary fires, the agent may be referring to one of the petroleum storage areas ..."

One of the prize words in my collection is the invention of a State Department officer, whom we really ought to try to identify and recruit. The word is fragile and beautiful, and it is with some hesitation that I offer it up on our rather brutal altar, for I fear that we will over-use it and cause it to wilt and fade before its time. I have no right to keep it, however, and present it herewith with a fervent exhortation to one and all to use it tenderly so that it will last for at least six months to a year. Here it is:

dichotomization

If that doesn't. bring a lump to your throat, nothing will. There is more, but I cannot go on. I trust you will all keep your passive voice active. It must never be allowed to be wondered why our communications are not being written with more thrust and rationale. Go forth and write, and may the Lord have rapport upon you.

Footnotes

*Author's Note: In this essay, examples of elegant writing have been taken from official CS communications. The names of originating stations and officers, as well as cryptonyms and other indicators, have been changed to protect the guilty.

* Plural is *lacunae*. This is really a keen word, which has only recently appeared. Used judiciously, it should be OK at least through 1973.

* Fit of peak is known to the medical profession as "Pike's Syndrome." In Asia, it is called "Norky's Complaint."

* The OK operational posture for 1970-72, in case you didn't know, is *forward-leaning*. We have in the past been through postures of defense, agonizing re-appraisal, benevolent neutrality and the like, but then came that luminous moment when an unknown genius suggested that we should all be forward-leaning. Thousands of our patriotic, conscientious headquarters staff members were thereupon transformed into human gnomons, who can be observed every morning shortly before 8:30, inclined dutifully in the direction of Langley, and at about 5:00 p.m. pointed just as dutifully toward home.

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