

*The Nation*  
April 27, 1921

*A Short View of Gamalielese*

IN the first sentence of the historic address from the east front of the Capitol, glowing there like a gem, was that piquant miscegenation of pronouns the *one-he* combination, for years a favorite of bad newspaper reporters and the inferior clergy. In the fourth sentence of the first message to Congress is *illy*, the passion of rural grammar teachers and professors of rhetoric in one-building universities. We are, as they say, getting warm. The next great state paper—who knows?—may caress and enchant us with “*Whom can deny?*” And the next with “*I would have had to have had.*” And the next with “*between you and I.*” And the next, going the whole hog, with *alright*, to date the gaudiest, loveliest, darndest flower of the American language, which God preserve!

Hog: flower? Perhaps the distemper is contagious. But certainly not uninteresting to study and snuffle over—certainly no dull thing to the specialist in morbid philology. In the style of the late Woodrow there was nothing, after all, very remarkable, despite the orgiastic praises of Adolph Ochs, the Hon. Josephus Daniels, and other such fanatics. It was simply the style of a somewhat literary and sentimental curate, with borrowings from Moody and Sankey and Dr. Berthold Baer. Its phrases lisped and cooed; there was a velvety and funereal gurgling in them; they were made to be intoned between the second and third lessons by fashionable rectors; aided by fifes and drums, or even by cost-plus contracts, they were competent to vamp the intellect. But intrinsically they were hollow. No heart’s blood was in them; no gobs of raw flesh. There was no passion there, hot, exigent, and challenging. They could not make one puff and pant. . . . One had to wait for Dr. Harding for that. In his style there is pressure, ardency, effortcy, gasping, a high grunting, Cheyne-Stokes breathing. It is a style that rolls and groans, struggles and complains. It is the style of a rhinoceros liberating himself by main strength from a lake of boiling molasses.

In the doctrine that it is obscure I take no stock whatever. Not a single sentence in the two great papers is incomprehensible to me, even after I have dined. I exhume a sample strophe from the canto on the budget system in the message: “It will be a very great satisfaction to know of its early enactment, so it may be employed in establishing the economies and business methods so necessary in the minimum of expenditure.” This is awful stuff, I grant you, but is it actually unintelligible? Surely not. Read it slowly and critically, and it may boggle you, but read it at one flash, and the meaning will be clear enough. Its method is that of *pointillisme*. The blotches of color are violent, and, seen too closely they appear insane, but stand off a bit and a quite simple and even austere design is at once discerned. “I hope it is adopted soon, so that we may employ the economies and business methods needed to hold down expenses”: this is the kernel. What else is there is the style. It is the style of what the text-books of rhetoric call “elevated” discourse. Its aim is to lend force to a simple hope or plea or asseveration by giving it the dynamic whoop and hoopla of a revival sermon, an auction sale, or a college yell. The nuclear thought is not

smothered in the process, as Democratic aesthetes argue, nor is it true that there is sometimes no nuclear thought at all. It is always present, and nine times out of ten it is simple, obvious, and highly respectable. But it lacks punch; it is devoid of any capacity to startle and scorch. To give it the vigor and dignity that a great occasion demands it is carefully encased in those swathings of sonorous polysyllables, and then, the charge being rammed home, it is discharged point-blank into the ears and cerebrums of Christendom.

Such is the Gamalian manner, the secret of the Gamalian style. That style had its origin under circumstances that are surely not unknown to experts in politico-agrarian oratory. It came to birth on the rustic stump, it developed to full growth among the chautauquas, and it got its final polishing in a small-town newspaper office. In brief, it reflects admirably the tastes and traditions of the sort of audience at which it was first aimed, to wit, the yokelry of the hinterland, naive, agape, thirsty for the prodigious, and eager to yell. Such an audience has no fancy for a well-knit and succinct argument, packed with ideas. Of all ideas, indeed, it is suspicious, but it will at least tolerate those that it knows by long hearing, those that have come to the estate of platitudes, those that fall readily into gallant and highfalutin phrases. Above all, it distrusts perspicuity, for perspicuity is challenging and forces one to think, and hence lays a burden on the mind. What it likes most of all is the roll of incomprehensible polysyllables—the more incomprehensible the better. It wants to be bombarded, bawled at, overwhelmed by mad gusts of the parts of speech. It wants to be entertained by orators who are manifestly superior—fellows whose discourse is so all-fired learned and unintelligible, so brilliant with hard words and trombone phrases, that it leaves them gasping. Let the thunder sound, and it takes all else on trust. If a sentence ends with a roar, it does not stop to inquire how it began. If a phrase has punch, it does not ask that it also have a meaning. If a word stings, that is enough.

Trained to the service of such connoisseurs. Dr. Harding carries over the style that they admire into his traffic with the Congress, the effete intelligentsia, and the powers and principalities of Europe. That style is based upon the simplest of principles. For every idea there is what may be called a maximum investiture—a garb of words beyond which it is a sheer impossibility to go in gaudiness. For every plain word there is a word four times as big. The problem is to think the thing out in terms of harmless banality, to arrange a series of obvious and familiar ideas in a logical sequence, and then to translate them, one by one, into nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and pronouns of the highest conceivable horse-power—to lift the whole discourse to the plane of artillery practice—to dignify the sense by all the arts of sorcery. Turn to the two immortal documents. The word citizen is plainly banal; even a Congressman can understand it. Very well, then let us make it *citizenship*—and citizenship it becomes every time. But even that is not enough. There comes a high point in the argument; a few more pounds of steam must be found. Citizen now undergoes a second proliferation; it becomes *factor in our citizenship*. “We must invite . . . every factor in our citizenship to join in the effort”—to restore normalcy. So with women. It is a word in common use, a vulgar word, a word unfit for the occasions of statecraft. Also, it becomes womanhood. Again, there is *reference*; it swells up a bit and becomes *referendum*. Yet again, *civil* becomes *civic*—more scholarly, more tasty, more nobby. Yet again, *interference* has a low smack; it suggests plow-horses that interfere. *En avant!* there is *intermediation!* And so with whole phrases. “The views of the world” gives way to “the expressed views of world opinion.” “Heedless of cost” becomes “in heedlessness of cost.” “Public conscience” becomes “the expressed conscience of progress.” The “uplift,” now ancient and a trifle obscene, is triumphantly reincarnated in “our manifestation of human interest.” “The Government’s duty to develop good citizens” shrieks upward like a rocket and bursts

magnificently into “the Government’s obligation affirmatively to encourage development of the highest and most efficient type of citizenship.” And so on and on.

Naturally enough, this style has its perils, no less hellish than war’s. A man, so blowing up the parts of speech, may have one burst in his face. I discern something of the sort, alas, in “Congress might speed the price readjustment to normal relationship, with helpfulness of both producer and consumer.” Here there has been an accident, just what I do not know. I suspect that “normal relationship” was substituted for normalcy, and that normalcy somehow got its revenge. Or maybe *helpfulness* came to its rescue and did the dirty work. Furthermore, the little word *of* has a suspicious look. I let the problem go. It is not one that a literary man engages with much gusto. He knows by harsh experience that words have a way of playing tricks—that they run amok at times, and toss him in the air, or stand him on his head—that fooling with them is like training leopards and panthers to leap through hoops and play the violoncello. There is, I have a notion, a foul conspiracy among words to pull Dr. Harding’s legs from under him. He has tortured them for years—on the stump, in the chautauquas, beside the felled and smoking ox, at the annual banquets of the Chamber of Commerce, the Knights of Pythias, the Rotary Club, the Moose; above all, on the floors of legislative halls and in the columns of the Marion Star. He has forced them into strange and abhorrent marriages. He has stretched them as if they were chewing-gum. He has introduced pipes into them and pumped them until they screamed. He has put them to cruel and unusual uses. He has shown them no mercy. . . . Now, at last, they have him before a crowd that loves mirth, and make ready to get their *revanche*. Now they prepare to put the skids under him.

(Source: UNZ.org: <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Nation-1921apr27-00621>)