UNRELATED WORDS IN MODERN ENGLISH

(By E. V. Gatenby)

In *Modern English Usage*, under the article on Participles, Fowler ridicules the modern journalistic habit of piling up the description before coming to the thing described: "If newspaper editors, in the interest of their readers, maintain any discipline over the gentlemen who provide inch-long paragraphs to stop gaps, they should take measures against a particular form that, by a survival of the unfittest, bids fair to swallow up all others. In these paragraphs, before we are allowed to enter, we are challenged by the sentry, being a participle or some equivalent posted in advance to secure that our interview with the C. O. (or subject of the sentence) shall not take place without due ceremony. The fussiness of this is probably entertaining while it is quite fresh; one cannot tell, because it is no longer fresh to anyone". He quotes: "Described as disciples of Tolstoi, two Frenchmen..."; "Composed of the 3 rd Royal Fusiliers, the Scottish Horse..."; "Winner of many rowing trophies, Mr Dugdale..."; "Aged seventy-nine, the Rev. F. T. Wethered...", etc.

Fowler was fighting a losing battle. The initial participle, and noun in apposition, have established themselves. Any description of a man, in newspaper paragraph or official biography, will begin in some such way as, "Born at Bedale in 1867, the son of a prosperous tradesman, and educated at the local grammar school, John Smith rose to fame..." Elizabeth Bowen, for example (*English Novelists*, p. 39), has three consecutive sentences of this type:

"*Grandson of the great bishop of that same name, he, on leaving Cambridge, renounced the intention of taking holy orders and went out to New Zealand, to sheep-farm. Successful in this, he also began to write. Returning to London he took up painting, and exhibited at the Royal Academy*".

We have become accustomed to the string of preceding qualifying phrases, as monotonous as the parallel clauses in Hooker, and few raise their voices against them. If nothing but a change in style had been involved, we might have accepted the prevalence of the structure as marking a natural development of the language. Unfortunately, with the new habit has come a tendency to ignore grammatical relationship, and we are concerned now not with Fowler's struggle to preserve good taste, but a more serious one to preserve syntax. As soon as one begins to read a sentence opening with a chain of qualifying phrases — "Magnificent in the hour of victory, patient in peace,

wise in statecraft, and understanding the common man" — a nervous foreboding arises that they will be linked either to the wrong noun or no noun at all.

The use of "dangling participles", as they have been called, and other unrelated words, has become so common that they pass without remark, and proof-readers ignore them. In *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*, Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, ungentle critics of much that is taking root in modern English, have little comment to make on these spreading weeds. They were not common before the middle of the nineteenth century, but the English of Forster (*Life of Dickens*) and Charles Darwin (*Voyage of the Beagle*) is full of them. A classification, with examples, may be of service in helping to decide whether every such use is indefensible or not from the points of view of formal grammar, clarity, and good taste.

(a) *Linked with a Possessive Noun or Adjective.* The most frequent instance of the isolated phrase is one in which a relation, entirely ungrammatical, is perhaps unconsciously felt by the writer between a noun or participle on the one hand, and a Possessive Adjective or a Noun in the Possessive Case on the other.

"As my secretary, and having been known to be a follower of the Beverleys, your absence was considered strange,..."

(*Children of the New Forest.* Capt. Marryat. Ch. 23).

Here the *you* element of *your* may be looked upon by the writer or speaker as sufficient for *secretary* to be in apposition with it, and for the compound Participle *having been known* to be associated with it adjectivally. Similarly, in the following quotations, an Adjective, or a Noun in the Possessive Case, is called upon for whatever association of meaning it can give to preserve a preceding phrase from total isolation.

As Chief of Staff appointed just before the offensive was launched, this calamity is directly Tojo's responsibility.

(*Observer.* 23. 7. 44. p. 5. col. 5.).

Worn and emaciated, racked by a continual cough, vomiting blood, and in continual pain, Lady Hester's magnificent spirits never deserted her.

(*Lady Hester Stanhope.* Joan Haslip. p. 215. Penguin).

As the authorized biographer of his friend Colonel T. E. Lawrence, his work *Lawrence and the Arabian Adventure* is the most definitive chronicle of the career of the man who...

Able, and with a wide and varied experience of public affairs... Sackville's life was clouded by the findings of a court-martial...

(*Times Lit. Suppt.* 11. 9. 48. p. 514).

Products for the most part of the British public schools and universities, their vagabond intelligences seasoned their lyrical eloquence with a new and characteristic blend of bitterness and pity. (1948).

A young man when Caedmon died in 680, his name is connected with English poetry.

(*English Literature.* Stopford Brooke. p. 15. Macmillan).

A delicate, sensitive boy, much bullied at school, and with a lifelong stammer, his best companion was his grandfather, Isaac Lyte, who still wore a dagger in the style of an Elizabethan gentleman...

(*Times Lit. Suppt.* 11. 12. 48. p. 696).

Organized entirely by Oxford undergraduates, its main purpose was to break down the spiritual and intellectual barrier which... (The reference is to a students' conference).

(*Times Lit. Suppt.* 17. 4. 48. p. 222).

Soldier in the French wars, secret service agent in Flanders and elsewhere; employed, upon three occasions at least, on embassies to Italy - where he almost certainly met with Petrarch,and more than probably with Dante; Customs-house (*sic*) official in London, where - poet though he was — he detected a conspiracy to smuggle wool out of the country, and received a bonus from the sale of the confiscated fleeces; Chaucer's rich experience of life everywhere finds expression in his verse.

(*New English Review.* Nov. 1947. "The English Tradition in Poetry", by Kenneth Hare. p. 443).

As members of the community, and as men concerned for principles of local government, their warnings should be pondered.

(*Times Educ. Suppt.* 16. 1. 43. p. 31).

Young in years and experience, his actions were those of a veteran.

(*Times Weekly Edn.* 28. 2. 45. p. 2. col. 3).

Of narrow education and principles, his good manners, honourable conduct and generous disposition had won him the esteem of all who knew him. (*The Years of Victory, 1802-12.* Arthur Bryant).

Young, and with vivid imagination, a man's first novel will be a thing of violent contrasts.

Of medium height, with rather thin features - not what one would really term hatchet - faced, but, nevertheless, with a decided hawkish appearence - his grey eyes were set wide apart under prominent brows,...

(*The Madison Murder*. Leo Grex. p. 56).

An adept at cooking, his chief virtue was as a maker of cigarettes.

Frequently in action, their casualties in killed and missing amounted to nearly 4000.

(*The Battle of the Atlantic*. Official account of the fight against the U-boats).

Loath to surface for fear of air attack, their slow underwater speed made it very difficult for them to mass and...

(*Idem* p. 50).

As a comparatively newly married housewife, the fat ration is about the most important feature of my daily life.

(Letter in *Times Weekly Edn.* 18.2.48).

The first postage stamps to be issued by any British Colony, their centenary fell actually in September of last year, ...

(*Times Weekly Edn.* p. 14. 5.5.48).

Primarily a man of action, his thoughts are as often as not shown as...

(*Times Lit. Suppt.* p. 302. 29. 5. 48).

The absurdity of such linking with a Possessive is seen ifwe supply a following relationship, as in such a sentence as "In Mr Attlee's speech, the present Prime Minister, there were several references to the economic situation". But that English is not altogether averse to such relationships may be seen in the now obsolete usage of the following:

I had not told posterity this, but for their *ignorance,* who *chose that circumstance to commend their friend by, wherein he most faulted.*

(Ben Jonson on Shakespeare, in *Discoveries*).

(b) *Linked with a distant Noun or Pronoun.* — As a general rule of sentence structure, related words should be near enough together to establish the relationship immediately and without effort to reader or listener. If other words, which may from their position claim relationship, intervene, the result is certainly confusion and often nonsense.

A dilettante of the arts and sciences, museums and picture galleries do not detain him,...

It may be pointed out with justice that a museum or a picture gallery cannot be a dilettante, and that the only possible connection for *dilettante* is *him*. But to the ear or eye, the association is "museums and picture galleries", and this has to be cancelled as the sentence goes on to reveal more. Such style has nothing to excuse it.

More of a Latinist than a Hellenist, of all the arguments he offers to justify the study of Greek, the best is, that, since the Renaissance, Greek has always been taught.

(Trans. of Compayré's *History of Pedagogy*. p. 244).

Covering the 75 miles course in 3 hrs. 29 mins. 47.4 secs., the race was won by Jean Baldassari.

(*Times Weekly Edn.* 25.6.47).

Striding along the path in front of the coolies, a lizard hurtled across not two feet in front of him.

(*Tibetan Trek*. R. Kaulback. p. 288).

Chasing its fellows in the sun, and catching flies, the sand ran through the glass, and, at the mogréb, when the last quavering 'Allah' died away, only the lizard, in its joy of life, did not give thanks to God.

(Quoted from R. B. Cunninghame Graham's *Progress* by Frank Swinnerton in *The Georgian Literary Scene*. p. 102. Everyman).

As Antony's grandson, the place had a melancholy fascination for him.

(*I Claudius*. Robert Graves).

An exceptionally able foreman, I relied on him a good deal to teach new workers.

(*I Chose Freedom*. Victor Kravchenko. p. 210).

A lover of literature all his life, of the public men who have been Presidents of the English Association none was more happily invited to fill that office than Lord Baldwin.

(*English*. Vol. VII. No. 37).

Walking thus, a lonely speck on the dreary flat, the isolation of the dwellings in front came to him sharply...

(*The Lonely Plough*. Constance Holme. p. 31. World's Classics).

Blond, high-coloured, vacant apparently, you couldn't tell what in the world he was thinking of.

(*Some Do Not*. Ford Madox Ford. p. 23. Penguin).

An uprooted Spaniard, derived incongruously enough from the most rootedly Catholic of Spanish cities, Avila, we find him living...

(*Books in Britain*. No. 16).

However, God was pleased to remove their anxieties because, after being bled three times, the fever left him in a week.

(*Portuguese Voyages. Tragic History of the Sea*. A modern translation. p. 262. Everyman).

The composer of the two best idylls of his age in *L'Allegro* and *Penseroso*, of its best masque in *Comus*, and its best threnodies in *Areopagitica*, it only remained for him to become the author of the supreme epic of the race.

(*New English Review*, Nov. 1947. "The English Tradition in Poetry." Kenneth Hare. p. 443).

Ever courteous and accessible to individual members, the parties, when occasion offered, vied in their grateful tributes to him.

(*Times*. 4.3.43. p. 7).

A man of clear intellect, given to historical research, this collection awakened in him a train of thought.

(*The Long Shadow*. Anthony Gilbert.).

Young, beautiful, and good, God in his mercy numbered her among his angels at the early age of seventeen.

(Dickens: epitaph of Mary Hogarth, his sister-in-law. *Charles Dickens*. Una Pope-Hennessy. p. 68).

Founded by Duvergier de Hauranne (1581 - 1643), better known as St. Cyran from the abbey over which he presided, the work of the schools and the spread of their educational doctrines were due ...

(*Text-book in the History of Education*. Monroe. p. 430).

(c) *The Absolute Participle.* In their *Grammar of the English Language*, Vol. III. (Syntax) p. 330, Curme and Kurath point out that "where the reference is general or indefinite, the present participle is often used absolutely, i. e. without an expressed subject," and they give such examples as "Strictly speaking (i. e. if one must speak in a strict sense) that is not true"; "Setting aside the t 10,000, it did not appear that she was at all Harriet's superior"; "Judging from the traces of their work, it had once held a large colony of beavers." Similarly *looking at, granting, admitting, considering, assuming, supposing*, all of indefinite reference, have established themselves in English structure as words which, although not joined on to a noun or pronoun, give clear meaning. In some cases they have become idiomatic "The vote of condolence was passed *standing*." "*Talking* of fruit, what price are apples now?" "There are ten of us in the house, not *counting* the servants." Fowler, writing on *Unattached Participles* in *M. E. U.*, says of participles such as the above, which have been converted into absolute phrases — "a clear acknowledgment of their legitimacy should strengthen rather than weaken the necessary protest against the slovenly uses now to be illustrated." And he gives such examples as: "Whilst *placing* little hope in the present dynasty, it is always possible in the East for some official to rise to power..."

Curme and Kurath (*op. cit.* p. 160) consider that in older English the dangling participle was more widely used than today, and they quote from John Lyly's *Euphues and His England* (1580) — "In their meals there is great silence and gravity, *using* wine rather to ease the stomach than to load it". Even here some connection may have been felt with *their* as in (a) above. Certainly a reading of modern English in newspaper or book reveals that the ungrammatical usage has become much more common than in Elizabethan or any other times.

Having selected the entrants, has the three years of University life no substantial formative influence on students barely out of the adolescent stage?

(*Teachers World.* 22.12.48. p. 2).

Sitting in the ruined theatre of Ephesus, this scene came to life again.

(*In the Steps of St. Paul.* H. V. Morton. p. 336).

Coming upon it suddenly, after long leave in London, it seemed like a picture in an old book of travels.

(*Trials in Burma.* Maurice Collis. p. 14. Penguin).

Leaving aside, however, this aspect of the question, despite its evident interest, our mother tongue still remains a singular case in our linguistic experience.

Having arrived on the mound at half-past six, a halt is called for breakfast at eight-thirty.

(*Come, Tell Me How You Live.* Agatha Christie. p. 79).

Returning to the unhappy story of the wreck, the two decks which were caught on the rocks were immediately broken up,...

(*Portuguese Voyages* p. 270. Everyman).

While not forgetting English in the modern schools, which was Mr Buckley's subject, there is some urgency in the argument by Mr Harry Rae in another letter, that...

(*Times Educ. Suppt.* 6.12.47. p. 649).

Having effected our landing, these men fled into the bush.

(*Portuguese Voyages.* p. 18. Everyman).

Following it again, it is seen to join a throng of others, each laden like itself.

(*Naturalist in Nicaragua.* Thomas Belt. p. 58).

Approaching the question from another angle, it is sometimes valuable to develop services relating to...

Making all due allowance for the magnification of prejudice these priests cannot be supposed in the course of their studies...

(*Evolution of Educational Theory.* John Adams. p. 123).

Reviewing the course of events during those years, there is every reason to think that...

(*Under Five Sultans.* Patrick. p. 290).

Being a foreigner, this was not attended with any inconvenience to me.

(Baron Munchausen. Ch. XVI. Nelson Classics p. 80. The date of the original is 1785).

Having arrived in England once more, the greatest rejoicings were made for my return.

(*Idem* p. 195).

Excluding Egypt and Abyssinia, and recognizing the ephemeral results of Roman occupation of North Africa, modern Africa owes its written literature almost entirely to missionary effort...

(*Journal of Education.* Nov. 1948. p. 626).

The last example might have passed muster, with *excluding* a preposition doing duty for *except for* and linking "Egypt and Abyssinia" grammatically with "modern Africa"; but the writer places himself beyond salvation with a second floating participle in *recognizing.*

d) *Confusion with Nominative Absolute.* - The Nominative Absolute having been in English literature since Anglo-Saxon times, (when it was a Dative, imitating the Latin Ablative), it is natural that this structure, in spite of its having no syntactic connection with other parts of the sentence, should sound normal in English ears, and that an omitted Nominative pronoun might be taken for granted, as in

... and having run thirty-five miles in that direction, our soundings again gradually diminished to twenty-two fathom, and we at last, about midnight, got sight of the main land of China...

(Anson's *Voyage Round the World.* p. 185. Penguin).

The writer would not think of omitting *we* before the Finite Verb, but the reader is expected to supply it mentally before *having.* Similarly in

Having passed the line, three or four degrees to the south of it, some winds blew up which...

(*Portuguese Voyages.* P. 263. Everyman.)

(e) *Omission of some such phrase as "We see that..."* - The grammar would often be saved by the insertion of a short main clause, as in

Comparing the academic year 1947 - 1948 in the grammar schools, whereas the total number on rolls has increased by more than 12,000, this increase is by no means evenly divided between the "moderns" and the "classics".

(*Journal of Education.* Nov. 1948. p. 624).

where "we see that" before "whereas" makes all correct and, what is more important, clear. Several of the examples in (c) could be likewise rectified by the addition of "I think", as could the following:

Speaking as a nón-medical man, their health seems excellent.

(*Journal of Education.* June 1948. p. 334).

(f) *Utter isolation.* — In these examples the un related phrase cannot by any device be fitted into the sentence as it stands. Recasting of one or the other is essential in order to avoid nonsense.

Ever ón the outlook (*sic*) for cheap victories Greece was the next victim chosen. (The reference is to Mussolini.)

(*Times Weekly Edn.* 2.5. 45. p. 13).

A variation on the confidence trick, the victims would have reasón for prótesting. (The reference is tó something in the preceding sentence.)

(*Times Lit. Suppt*, 22.11.47. p. 605).

Born in Bayswater, his father, both grandfathers, and four great-grandfathers were all business men living in ór near London. (It is clear from the context, but not from the sentence, that it was not the ancestors who were born in Bayswater.)

(*British Journal of Educational Psychology.* Feb. 1947. p. 1).

Left largely to her own devices by a dull husband, with whom she temperately quarrelled, those devices were innocent and often gently intellectual; . . .

(*English Letter-Writers.* C. E. Vulliamy. p. 28).

Snow-bound in St. Moritz, the words took on an added meaning and with the thermometer at no degrees, sunny Italy called more than usual.

(*Life and Letters.* Editorial. Aug. 1948).

Originally composed of twelve bóoks, we only possess the three last which . . .

(*English Literature.* Stopford Brooke. p. 15).

On other evenings, sitting inside with lighted candles and with wide opened doors, great bats flap inside, make a round of the apartment, . . .

(*Naturalist in Nicaragua.* Thomas Belt. p. 81).

At first described as characteristic individuals, later announcements include the following and similar accusations:

(*Times Educ. Suppt.* 19. 6. 43. p. 291, Col. 1).

. . . but alighting on a large tree, and raising its head, I recovered my seat as before. (It was an eagle that alighted.)

(Baron Munchausen. Nelson Classics. p. 113).

For swooping low to watch a river-crossing, a Japanese ack-ack battery opened up and hit the plane in half-a-dozen places.

(*The Campaign in Burmah.* H. M. S. O. p. 144).

One day when out walking the sky became overcast.

(*Some Human Oddities.* E. J. Dingwall, p. 59).

Ably seconded by his wife, a daughter of the Duke of Perth, history had been made and unmade at informal parties at Chimneys.

(*The Secret of Chimneys.* Agatha Christie. Dell edn, p. 21).

The following passage will serve to show how insensitive the English ear has become to lack of grammatical connection. Merely to ignore the rules of language is one thing, but to hold them up as models of style is another. *In Recipe for Reading: A Letter To My Godsons,* the author, Herbert Van Thal, writes (p. 6) "The few books that I mention to you are masterpieces of their craft and you must take them as models. One thing you can count on: that they are magnificently readable . . . With Arthur Bryant (*English Saga 1840-1940*) you are reading a historian with Tory inclinations. Anywhere in this book you will be carried away by his prose. I quote you a passage at random:

Standing on the top of the Duke of York's column on an early summer day of 1842, the downward-glancing eye lighted on a jumble of old houses and red-tiled roofs mingling with the foliage and blossom of Spring Gardens . . . ."

It would seem that "The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling", had at last come to a stand on the top of the Duke of York's column.

(*g*) *Repentance.* — Occasionally a writer seems to wake up, as it were, to the fact that he is collecting materials to fit into a sentence that has no existence. Rather than waste his carefully-turned phrases, which sound so eloquent while there is hope of their signifying anything, he leaves them where they are, like an artificial ruin of the eighteenth century, and saves himself by putting a dash and making a plain

statement in sentence form. Grammar accepts the excuse, but the reader remains irritated.

> Poor, repulsively ugly, uncouth, with disgusting table-manners, surly, irascible, a bully, intolerant, dirty, slovenly and ridiculous in dress, eccentric, unhealthy, morbid and gloomy, haunted by a bad conscience, tormented by the fear of insanity and death — one would say it was the portrait of a sour misanthropist, doomed to avoid and to be avoided by his fellow-men.
>
> (*Dr Johnson and Company.* Robert Lynd, p. 14. Penguin).
>
> A wit, a scholar, a pyrotechnic conversationalist, a man of overflowing vitality who had read everything and forgotten nothing — a great many people felt the pain of loss when Algol died in November, 1939.
>
> (*London Evening News.* 15.8.45).

English has accepted the Nominative Absolute, parenthesis, and the device known as Apposition, in all of which words or phrases are used without syntactical links with the rest of the sentence. Whether anacoluthia, as in "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her". (*John* VIII. 7) is legitimate or not the grammars do not say. "Whatever is, is right". Absolute Participles, children of the Nominative Absolutes, are a growing family. But with these exceptions our language refuses to admit into its sentence patterns any expressions which resist affiliation.