Analysis of Style as Persuasion in the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" by Richard P. Fulkerson

'n the previous chapter, we looked at the arrangement of Martin Luther King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail." Here Richard P. Fulkerson analyzes the style of hat letter. Earlier in the article from which this excerpt was taken, Fulkerson nalyzed the structure and the arguments of the letter. In this section, he points ut some salient features of the style and shows how the style contributes to King's ersuasive intent. The text of the letter begins on p. 342. (From Richard P. Fulk-rson, "The Public Letter as a Rhetorical Form: Structure, Logic, and Style in King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail.'" Quarterly Journal of Speech 65 *(April 979): 121–136. This excerpt occupied pp. 130–135. Reprinted with the permis-on of the Speech Communication Association and the author.)*

'he positive ethical image does not result only from the chosen audience onceptualization and refutative strategies discussed above, however. It also esults from the essay's style. Although this is not the place for a complete escriptive analysis of King's stylistic versatility in "Letter from Birming-am Jail," I would like to highlight some of its more striking stylistic fea-ıres and to speculate on the ways they reinforce the total persuasive effort. 'he essay's style is supple and sophisticated yet readable. An audience is kely to be favorably impressed, without being overwhelmed. The stylistic ıanipulations both create an image of competence and sincerity and operate ı the reader's emotions.

Like all rhetorical choices, stylistic decisions have multiple effects. But to arify the relation between stylistic choice and persuasion, it may be useful assert that an effective stylistic choice will work in one or more of the fol-wing three ways. It may adapt the style in order to carry meaning more ef-ctively to the audience as fictionalized by the rhetor, such as a decision to e a simpler synonym in place of a more elaborate equivalent. This is the *'aptive* dimension of style. Or the choice may operate on the reader's emo-ons in a less than obvious way, such as in a decision to use words that allit-ate. This is the *affective* dimension of style, as I hope to clarify below. Fi-ılly, the stylistic choice may be effective primarily because it helps enhance e rhetor's image and thus the rhetor's credibility. This is the *ethical* dimen-on of style. These three varieties of stylistic impact correspond closely to e three classical modes of persuasion; the adaptive choice is a rational tech-que (*logos*), the affective choice works on the emotions (*pathos*), and the hical choice is a technique for enhancing *ethos*.

To illustrate these three persuasive dimensions of King's style, it may be ell to start with an obvious and relatively simple feature of the essay. A ader can scarcely help noticing how often King refers to other famous men hom he expects his readers to recognize. These allusions are directly effec-'e in their adaptive and affective appeals to both the limited and broader diences and indirectly effective in the image of him they help create.

King unabashedly puts himself into a great tradition of protest beginning with Socrates, referred to three times, and extending down through primarily Christian history, from the early prophets to Christ himself, to Paul, to Aquinas, Augustine, Martin Luther, and Bunyan. In addition to such historical allusions, King also buttresses his argument by quoting or paraphrasing Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Buber, and Paul Tillich, leading modern spokesmen from both Christian and Jewish faiths and thus presumably adaptive references for all of the eight clergymen at one time or another as well as to virtually all of King's broader audience. He even manages to quote an unidentified justice of the United States Supreme Court and T. S. Eliot. This man, who is potentially suspect as an outsider, a rabble-rouser, even a criminal, reveals himself to be educated, wise, and widely read. At least that is the impression such allusions make in discourse. They have multiplicative ethical impact, since an auditor assumes they are a carefully chosen sample drawn from a much larger store of information.

King's style in the essay is also marked by the extensive use of metaphors drawn from contemporary technology. Two archetypal patterns are dominant, that of depth versus height and dark versus light. The present system and segregation are repeatedly characterized as being *down* and *dark*, while the hope for the future involves rising and coming into the *light*. The Negroes live in a "dark shadow" and must "rise from the dark depths." They are "plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair." Policy must be lifted from "quicksand" to "rock," and "we have fallen below our environment"; Negroes are in a "dark dungeon"; in the emphatic and optimistic final paragraph (quoted below), America now suffers under the "dark clouds of racial prejudice" in a "deep fog of misunderstanding," but "tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine."

As Osborn has argued, "Because of their strong positive and negative associations with survival and developmental motives, such metaphors express intense value judgments and may thus be expected to elicit significant value responses." Such "argument by archetype" also appeals to an audience's desire for simplification through its built-in, two-valued orientation.

Other metaphors come from modern technology. The nations of Africa are moving forward with "jet-like speed" while we go at "a horse and buggy pace"; and the church stands "as a tail light behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice." The church is now merely a "thermometer" recording popular opinion instead of what it once was, "a thermostat that transformed the mores of society."

Specifically medical metaphors unite the technological imagery with the archetypal metaphor of disease and health. Segregation is a disease and later a boil that must be exposed to the healing sun. The liberal argument to wait has "been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration." Some whites have sensed the need for "antidotes" to segregation, but others have

remained silent "behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows." All told, I count seventy-two metaphors, including both explicit and suppressed forms. Almost none are presented through clichés (common verbal formulas). They share several stylistic functions. On the adaptive level they are memorable for their ingenuity, and they help make an abstract philosophical argument vividly concrete. On the affective level, the archetypal metaphors speak to fundamental urges in us all and thus enhance the message indirectly. Finally, like all rhetorical choices, the stylistic decision to use metaphors also affects King's image. The archetypal references create the image of a sincere man of deep feeling who is fundamentally like the reader and who has confidence both in his own moral judgment and in the inevitability of a better tomorrow. The technological images help build an identification between King and his readers; both speaker and listener inhabit the same world of jet planes, thermometers, and wonder drugs, a world of rapid change in which only one element—the status of blacks—has not kept up.

This same identity of rhetor and reader is also enhanced by a series of stylistic choices which, taken together, constitute the conciliatory tone that characterizes the essay and serves to unite a variety of other tones. From the salutation onward, King is not out to criticize or belittle, but merely to explain patiently and sadly to those who do not (yet) see the light of the truth. Throughout the essay, King may be righteous, hurt, disappointed, ironic, sorry that he must say some unavoidable critical things, but neither angry nor despairing. He has "almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negroes' great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens' 'Councilor' or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate": almost but not quite. And he has paid his clerical audience the compliment of having listened carefully to their views. His essay thus fulfills Carl Rogers' demand that one must first hear a position and be able to repeat it with understanding and clarify before real communication can occur. Throughout the essay, King shows his respect for his reader. He knows that his clerical audience is composed of sincere and devout men, men who share his basic religious values and whom he can call "My dear Fellow Clergymen" and "My Christian brothers." King even praises some by name for their own (limited) efforts to move toward integration. He can criticize such men only with regret. Echoing through the essay are phrases such as "I must say" and "I feel impelled to mention." Such a stylistic stance flatters him as well as his addressees. It serves the positive image he wants; this writer is not a shouting, belligerent, trouble-maker, but a sincere and understanding human being whose views are forced out of him by his concern for their misguided positions.

The identification with the audience and the conciliatory tone are further created by one of the most subtle stylistic elements in the "Letter," the use of personal pronouns. Since the "Letter" is a deeply personal apologia, it is not surprising that *I* occurs regularly—139 times to be exact, 100 times as the subject of a main clause. Similarly, King often addresses his ostensible audience directly: in rephrasing their arguments ("you stated"), in asking for understanding ("I hope that you can see"), in direct address ("Each of you has taken some significant stands"), and in personal appeal ("I beg you to forgive me." "I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith."). There are forty uses of *you* to refer to the clergymen, not to mention other generic uses of the word, which also carry personal overtones. The net effect is an impression of informality as well as personal commitment on the part of the the *I*.

More subtle still is King's manipulation of ambiguous first-person plural pronouns. Often *we* and *our* and *us* in the essay refer clearly to some or all of the Birmingham protesters: "Several months ago our local affiliate here . . . invited us to be on call. . . . We readily consented." In other places, the *we* is more general, as in "Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea." Yet frequently a *we, our,* or *us* seems to refer to the protesters but may also include the audience, in effect reinforcing the frequent direct addresses by gathering King and his opponents into a unit sharing a single outlook. Consider this sentence: "I have tried to stand between these two forces saying that we need not follow the 'do-nothingism' of the complacent or the hatred and despair of the black nationalist." *We* here at first seems to mean "we the moderate protesters," but it may equally well mean "we who recognize the problem and want to see it solved." We, all of us, you clergymen as well as my followers, may take this middle road. The union is subtle, but is at least subconsciously forced on the reader by King's choice of pronouns.

A similar movement from "I-you" to *we* operates in the closing paragraph of the essay in conjunction with extended archetypcal imagery:

> *I* hope this letter finds *you* strong in the faith. *I* also hope that circumstance will soon make it possible for *me* to meet each of *you*, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader, but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let *us* all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from *our* fear-drenched communities and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over *our* great nation with all their scintillating beauty [italics added].

In the first two sentences, the current separation between *I* and *you* is both stated and reinforced by the pronouns, but after the conciliatory "fellow clergyman," in the second sentence, both groups merge in a vision of future unity in "our communities" and "our great nation" under the scintillating beauty of the high, bright stars.

King's style in the "Letter," as Larson has pointed out, is primarily characterized by variety. It shows in the allusions and metaphors already discussed and in the range of tones united by the dominant conciliatory stance, but it is nowhere more obvious than in the essay's syntatic structures.

The original published text of King's "Letter" consisted of 48 paragraphs,

325 sentences, and 7,110 words, with a moderate average sentence of 22 words and an average paragraph of almost 7 sentences of 149 words. The average sentence, not so long as that of normal American intellectual prose, is consequently appropriate for King's extensive audience. But such statistics mask the variety of King's syntax. Of the 325 sentences, many are short: 62 have 10 or fewer words. Some are aphoristic, such as "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly." Thus parts of the essay are quite easy to read and eminently quotable. On the other hand, 18 sentences are more than 50 words long and 2 exceed 100 words. I know of no other modern public prose including sentences of such length. Although some readers are likely to stumble over such sentences, my impression is that overall, the style is clear and vivid and relatively easy to read but with no hint of condescension. The extreme variations in sentence length as well as similar variety in clausal construction and levels of formality seem primarily to work on the ethical level. That is, they dramatize for the readers a rhetor who is a master manipulator of language.

The one syntactic feature that emerges as common within the variation is elaborate parallelism. In it, as in the metaphors, it is easy to hear the cadences of the evangelist, another dimension of King's self-dramatization through style. Sometimes King's parallelism is tight and aphoristic as in "Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will," or "Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly." More often, however, it is spread out and rhythmic: "I say it as a minister of the gospel, who loves the Church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall length." Or,

> I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negroes' great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens' "Counciler" or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically feels that he can set the time-table for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season."

Frequently this extended parallelism continues through several sentences:

> They have left their secure congregations and walked the streets of Albany, Georgia, with us. They have gone through the highways of the South on torturous rides for freedom. Yes, they have gone to jail with us. Some have been kicked out of their churches and lost the support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have gone with the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.

In all, I count 15 instances of sustained parallelism, more involving as many as 6 sentences and one (discussed below) a single sentence of more than 300 words.

The effects of such parallelism must be largely conjectural, but it is difficult to imagine that they can lie in the adoptive domain. That is, there seems to be no reason to think that parallel syntax is any more clear or easy to follow than are other syntactic structures. On the other hand, the rhythms and balance created by parallelism, especially when a series of parallel constructions is used to build to a climax, probably have an affective impact, much as they would in oral discourse but to a lesser degree. The major effect is ethical, portraying the rhetor as a man who can balance various views and who has his ideas under complete control.

The "Letter's" most impressive stylistic feat is its longest sentence. Unique form serves to emphasize unique content since it is the one place in the essay where the evil of segregation, rather than the necessity of protest, is delineated. Because it contains in miniature so much that is syntactically and metaphorically characteristic of the essay, I quote it in full. It occurs within the refutation of the argument that now is not the proper time for protest. It opens, as do many of the sentences, with a conjunctive turn:

> But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; . . . [for the continuation of this long periodic sentence, see paragraph 14 of King's "Letter" as reproduced on p. 305 of this text] . . . then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

This most impressive periodic sentence of 331 words is highlighted through contrast with the preceeding sentence of 19 words and succeeding sentences of 33, 11, 13, and 6 words. Its nine major subordinate clauses are each addressed directly to the audience with "when you," and they comprise an elaborate catalogue, frequently with metaphor, of the injustices suffered daily by the Negro in America. The sentence builds to a climax after detail is piled on detail, only to end with the one main clause of magnificently understood direct address: "then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait." Here the pronouns create no union: *you* are distinctly not *we*. It is appropriate that this single indictment of American racism, the only point in the essay at which pathos is used as a major suasive mode, should be the longest sentence. But it is also appropriate that it not be dominant. For the subject of the essay is not racial injustice. That is, except here, a given.