ISSA Proceedings 2002 – Rhetoric And Dialectic In Martin Luther King's 'Letter From Birmingham Jail'

1. Rhetoric, Dialectic, and Appeals to Credibility

As the field of argumentation has moved from a formal to an informal or dialectical perspective, it has also, often without conscious recognition, adopted some of the interests traditionally associated with rhetoric. So long as arguments were conceived on the formal deductive model, social and contextual considerations were regarded as irrelevant. An argument was to be judged on the content and formal relationship of the propositions it contained and appeals to such contextual matters as the credibility of the arguer were regarded as fallacies. With the rise of informal logic, however, the essentialism of the formal deductive model gave way to a more practical conception of argumentation that recognized argument as a social practice and that encompassed consideration of the persons who engaged in it and the circumstances surrounding its conduct. Appeals to context that were once categorically dismissed as fallacies have been reconceived as strategies or schemes that can have legitimate uses, and informal logic (or dialectic as some have called the new approach) has addressed matters that fall squarely within the traditional domain of rhetoric, since circumstances such as time, place, occasion, persons, and the like have always been regarded as proper, if not necessary, considerations in rhetorical studies.

In order to illustrate this engagement with matters rhetorical (and its limits), I want to refer to a recent paper by Trudy Govier (1999) that treats the problem of credibility from the perspective of current thought in informal logic. The paper deals with the *tu quoque* version of *ad hominem* argument, and Govier attempts to demonstrate that, as opposed to the view presented in the "standard logical treatment," the tu quoque appeal is not always fallacious. She begins with the premise that an argument is something more than collections of premises and conclusions, because it is always also a social activity involving an arguer and an

audience. Consequently, the relationship between arguer and audience is relevant to an assessment of the quality of an argument. If the audience is to treat the arguer's argument seriously, it must regard the arguer as credible, and Govier maintains that at least two dimensions enter into an assessment of credibility – an epistemic dimension (Does the arguer have sufficient knowledge about the issue in question?) and an ethical dimension (Is the arguer non-deceptive and "genuinely doing what he or she appears to be doing"?). The tu quoque allegation, on Govier's account, raises a relevant question about the ethical dimension, for if someone speaks inconsistently or speaks one way and acts another, the audience has reason to believe that he or she does not really believe the propositions asserted in the argument and, as a consequence, has reason to doubt whether the arguer is sincere or is even genuinely engaged in the process of argument. Tu quoque allegations then, are not inherently fallacious, because, while they have "no bearing on the propositional content of the original argument," they do bear "on its social presuppositions" and "are relevant to the force of the argument on an audience…. Obviously, to say this is to insist that the force of an argument for a given audience depends quite properly on more than its propositional content" (1999: 14-20).

The word rhetoric never appears in this essay, but most rhetoricians, I believe, would find it interesting and relevant to their concerns, since the basic themes refer to such standard items in rhetorical lore as the credibility of the arguer, the role of the audience, the social relationship between arguer and audience, and the force of argument in relation to an audience. Thus, Govier's essay reveals an affinity between informal logic, as it is now conceived, and traditional rhetoric even when that relationship is not explicitly recognized. At the same time, however, once this affinity is noted, we can also consider points at which two approaches diverge, and this exercise should serve as a useful guide to the work of translation between them.

In the first place, Govier displays a more focused and restricted interest in credibility than do rhetoricians. She limits her attention to the role credibility plays in logically justified inference and stresses the negative side of the issue; she does not consider credibility as an argumentative resource but as a limitation on the force of an argument; her concern is to determine when it is reasonable for an audience to disregard an argument because of the arguer's inconsistency. The rhetorician takes a different view, one that emphasizes credibility as a

constructive element in argumentation, as a mode of arguing (*ethos*) coordinate with logical proof. From this rhetorical perspective, the dimensions of credibility are more numerous and complex than the two that Govier lists and finds sufficient for her purposes. As Alan Brinton has observed, the conception of ethos includes at the least the following elements: "competence in the subject-matter at hand, good intentions, shared values and interests and assumptions with the audience, truthfulness, and trustworthiness." This list includes Govier's criteria but moves far beyond them in respect to positive features of character. What the rhetorician wants is an arguer who, as Brinton says, embodies "the general *ethos* (character) of the society. This is someone "we can trust to express our shared values, to think in terms of our common assumptions, to exercise good judgment, and to speak for us" (1985:55). Rhetorical ethos, then, eventuates in the embodiment of cultural values, and this goal indicates an interest toward character that is not recognized in logic or dialectic.

Secondly, consistent with the orientation of informal logic, Govier studies credibility in relation to justified belief. By contrast, deliberative rhetoric, the genre where character plays the most prominent role, frequently adopts action rather belief as its end (Brinton 1986: 248-251). This teleological shift complicates the argumentative task since it adds important social and volitional dimensions to the task. Deliberative rhetors often must negotiate the ambiguity and tension between the principles an audience accepts and its perception of the circumstances of a particular case. The standard topics of deliberative rhetoric, the honorable and the expedient, suggest this tension, and in responding to it, the rhetor must be able to "size up" the audience and demonstrate a capacity (a form of *phronesis* or *prudentia*) that makes it possible to balance situated particulars and more durable principles. This capacity does not correspond to a fixed, abstract standard, but manifests itself as it is deployed and so it is expressed in the action of deliberative performance. Thus, insofar as the rhetor performs well as a deliberator, he or she enacts the kind of character appropriate for deliberative judgment, and enactment emerges as an important aspect of rhetorical ethos.

Deliberative rhetoric also typically engages problems that occur when belief and volition are misaligned, when an audience accepts certain principles but fails to act on them. Here, in a situation that reverses the direction of the dialectical *ad hominem*, the audience, and not the arguer, is called to account for inconsistency.

Normally, argumentation of this kind is delicate and difficult because audiences do not readily acknowledge inconsistencies, and if the arguer is to make this discrepancy apparent and salient to the audience, and he or she must effect a general reframing of the situation. The rhetor, that is, must evoke a new perspective that brings to light suppressed or undetected inconsistencies, and opens ground for new argumentative possibilities. Evocation, then, is another distinctive aspect of rhetoric.

By using Govier's essay as a point of reference, I have located three features – embodiment, enactment, and evocation – that distinguish a rhetorical approach to argumentation from the approach used in contemporary informal logic and dialectic.

I now want to explain these dimensions of argumentation so as to make the rhetorical sensibility and its apparatus more accessible to other students of argumentation, but to achieve this end, I will present a detailed case study rather than a direct exposition. This strategy is consistent with the rhetorical perspective, and to explain why it is, I will refer one last time to Govier's essay and mark another difference of tendency between rhetoricians and informal logicians.

Govier's account of tu quoque sustains a general, abstract perspective. She is, of course, committed to understanding social context, and she is sensitive to particular cases and uses them as a source of evidence and as a test for her analysis. Nevertheless, she consistently deals with tu quoque as an abstract type of argumentative inference, and she is much less concerned about the context of any particular argument than with the contextual features that generally enter into the production of argument. In the rhetorical context, analysis remains much more closely connected with specific acts of arguing and the contexts in which they appear. Since rhetorical arguments are grounded in and directed toward the particular case, the force of an argument can hardly be understood or evaluated without reference to the case. As Brinton has noted: "It is characteristic of the rhetorical, in contrast with the logical, that it requires attention to the particular" (1985:56).

The dialecticians who are now consciously appropriating the techniques and perspectives of the rhetorical tradition are becoming increasingly sensitive to this point. As the work of Walton, Tindale, and others reveals, they are less satisfied with simple, textbook examples and more inclined to undertake detailed analyses of real cases. The most dramatic example of this development comes from van

Eemeren and Houtlosser, who present a thorough and careful reading of a classic Dutch text, William the Silent's *Apologia*, in order to support their inquiry into the rhetoric of argument. In what follows, I want to offer a counterpart to their study by considering a classic American text, Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

2. Letter From Birmingham Jail: Background

Early in January of 1963, the Southern Leadership Conference (SCLC), the civil rights organization headed by the Reverend Martin Luther King, targeted Birmingham, Alabama for a non-violent direct action campaign. Such campaigns had been occurring for several years in the southern part of the United States, and they involved rallies, marches, boycotts, sit-in demonstrations and other similar tactics for the purpose of protesting and eventually eliminating racial segregation and other forms of discrimination. Birmingham was an especially important target. It was not only one of the largest cities in the South, but it was also known as an entrenched center of opposition to racial integration. The city had a long and often brutal record of repressing its Black citizens, and the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist organizations had employed violence so often that the city was sometimes called "Bombingham." The Governor of Alabama, George Wallace, had won election on a platform of "segregation forever," and the city's Commissioner of Public Safety was Eugene "Bull" O'Connor, a man who personified obstinate and heavy-handed resistance to the civil rights movement. The movement itself had not scored a major victory in some time, and so the Birmingham campaign represented a critical test of whether it could regain momentum and succeed in overcoming one of the most powerful sources of opposition to it.

Matters were further complicated by the internal political situation in Birmingham. Anxious to repair the City's tattered image and to eliminate Bull Connor, a group of white moderates had succeeded in reforming the City's system of government, and a mayoral election was to be held in March. Connor was one of the candidate, and SCLC, fearing that a protest effort might create a backlash in Connor's favor, decided to withhold action until after the election. The results, however, proved indecisive. Bull Connor and the more moderate Albert Boutwell emerged as the two leading candidates, but neither won a majority, and so a second, run-off election had to be scheduled for April 2. Once again SCLC waited for the election. Boutwell won, and on April 3 SCLC launched its campaign of non-

violent direct action.

The campaign did not begin on an auspicious note. Contrary to King's expectations, only a handful of protestors joined in the demonstrations, and few were willing to go to jail. SCLC had planned to create a crisis by filling the jails beyond their capacity, but after eight days, fewer than 150 people had been arrested, and new volunteers were increasingly hard to find (Branch, 1988: 727-728). Press coverage also failed to meet expectations, and the reactions to the campaign were largely unfavorable. *The Washington Post* maintained that direct action should not have occurred until the Boutwell administration had a reasonable opportunity to establish itself, and it judged that the demonstrations were of doubtful utility. Attorney General Robert Kennedy thought that the effort was ill timed, and even the local Black newspaper dismissed it as "wasteful and worthless" (Branch, 1988: 737, Bass 2001: 104-105). As David Garrow has observed, there was "a feeling among several important constituencies – the black ministers, some of the professional people, the most sympathetic local whites, the Kennedy administration – that Boutwell's victory was a compelling reason to delay the protests. These groups shared the hope that once a moderate administration took office, both the merchants and the city government would grant some of the movement's requests without demonstrations being necessary" (1986:238).

Yet another problem developed when the city's attorneys obtained an injunction from the federal court forbidding King and others from sponsoring, encouraging, or participating in a demonstration unless they obtained a permit from the city. SCLC leaders generally had been reluctant to violate federal court orders, since they regarded the federal courts as a crucial ally. In this case, however, to accept the injunction was for all intents and purposes to bring the direct action campaign to an early halt, and King resolved to violate the injunction himself and submit to arrest in the hope that this "faith act" would the movement McWhorter 2001:355). For symbolic reasons, King waited until Good Friday (April 12, 1963), and on that day, he led a march through the city's streets and was arrested. Refusing to post bail until the 19th, King remained in jail for eight days (Branch 1988: 734-47, Garrow 1986: 241-246).

On the morning after his arrest, the *Birmingham News* published a short open letter signed by eight prominent clergymen. These men were regarded as moderates on the race issue, and just three months earlier they had signed another public letter that directly appealed for citizens of the Alabama to obey the court order to desegregate schools and that indirectly criticized Governor

Wallace's policy of defiance. In this second letter, the clergymen also urged moderation and obedience to the law, but now their criticism was turned implicitly toward King and his program of non-violent direct action. The letter asserted that the city was moving toward a new, constructive, and realistic approach to racial problems, and demonstrations, "led in part by outsiders," were both unwise and untimely. Racial issues ought to be resolved through "open and honest negotiations," and nothing had been accomplished by actions that incited "to hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be." The authors praised the community as a whole, and the law enforcement officials in particular, for handling the situation in a calm manner, and they concluded with a plea for the Black residents of Birmingham to withdraw support from the demonstration and to resolve their grievances through the courts and the negotiating process (Bass 2001: 235-236).

King's lawyer smuggled the newspaper to him in his prison cell, and according to the standard account, King immediately began to compose a response (at first writing on the margins of the newspaper since he had no other paper). The published version of the letter is dated April 16th, and though we have good reason to believe that the document was not actually completed until after King left jail, its tone and texture support the impression that the author composed it from within a prison-cell (Bass 2001: 131-152 Branch 1988: 737-745). The letter had little impact in the immediate context, but before the end of 1963, it had circulated widely both as a pamphlet and as reprinted in magazines. It soon won a large and enthusiastic audience and eventually earned a place in the canon of American political rhetoric and in anthologies of American literature.

3. The Letter: Dialectical Aspects

As a student at Boston University, King was fascinated by Hegel's philosophy, not because of its metaphysics or ethics, which he rejected, but because of its dialectical method. The Hegelian pattern of paired oppositions and synthetic resolution seemed to fit King's own intellectual and temperamental inclinations, and one his professors, L. Harold DeWolf, commented that "regardless of the subject matter, King never tired" of moving from thesis to antithesis and from there toward a synthesis (Garrow 1986: 46). This dialectical sensibility is fully apparent in the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," and in fact, the text may be characterized as "dialectical" in several senses of the term.

First and most obviously, the text works through a series of opposing arguments.

Aside from the brief introduction and conclusion and two sections that King labels as “confessions”, the letter consists of a seriatim response to claims attributed to the eight clergymen. The following topical outline reveals this pattern clearly:

A. Introduction
B. Refutation
1. That King is an outsider
2. That King and his supporters should negotiate rather than demonstrate
3. That the demonstrations are ill timed.
(First confession: King’s disappointment with white moderates)
4. That non-violent direct action precipitates violence
5. That racial problems will work resolve themselves over time
6. The King and his supporters are extremists
(Second confession: King’s disappointment with the white clergy)
7. That the Birmingham police deserve praise
C. Conclusion**[i]**

On close reading, the structure of the text proves much more subtle than this schematic reduction indicates, but the outline does accurately represent the prominence of dialectically paired allegations and counterarguments.

The text is also dialectical in the sense that its argument develops within a dialogic form. While the public letter of the eight clergymen is not addressed to any specific person or persons, King’s letter begins with their names followed by the salutation, “My Dear Fellow Clergymen.” And the first paragraph continues in the idiom of direct address with King’s “I” speaking in response to the “you” who are the authors of the earlier letter. The paragraph ends with a clear articulation of this relationship: “But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms” (84). This mode of address continues throughout the letter, and it is especially notable in the sentences that mark a new section of the text. Almost all of these sentences attribute a specific position to the clergymen that King expresses in the second person pronoun – e.g.: “You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws” (89). At times this dialogic quality is heightened through the use of rhetorical questions: “You may well ask, ‘Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn’t negotiation a better path?’ You are exactly right in your call for negotiation” (86). The letter, then, has a strong dialogic orientation.

Dialectic is also sometimes characterized by an expectation of reasonableness that interlocutors are supposed to fulfill, and King invokes this kind of standard both explicitly and implicitly. In the passage I have just quoted from the opening paragraph, King commits himself to respond in a patient and reasonable fashion, and he consistently sets out his arguments in clear, logical form. Moreover, as I will soon explain, the text sustains this attitude implicitly through its scrupulously restrained and reasonable tone.

All told, the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" represents its author as a disciplined advocate engaged in rational argument with a specific adversary concerning well-defined and sharply opposed positions. In these respects, the letter has a dialectical character, and it invites, and should handsomely reward, the fine-grained argumentative analysis of contemporary dialecticians and informal logicians. The letter, however, also issues an appeal to action, and it powerfully illustrates the three special dimensions of rhetorical argumentation – embodiment, enactment, and evocation. I now want to turn to these matters and study the text from a rhetorical perspective.

4. Rhetorical Embodiment

Although King's letter literally addressed the eight Birmingham clergymen, it was never delivered to any of them personally, and in fact, they were not his intended audience. The clergymen functioned as a synecdoche, as a representation of the larger audience King wanted to reach, and his decision to respond to their letter and his manner of doing so were both strategic. The success of the Birmingham campaign, and of the SCLC's efforts in general, depended heavily on support from white moderates – people who were already inclined to disapprove of racial segregation and to feel uncomfortable about the discrepancy between their basic values and discriminatory public policies then in evidence throughout the South. The letter by the eight clergymen offered King an opportunity to embody this target audience and engage their concerns directly without appearing to manufacture either the occasion or the issues. Moreover, as Richard Fulkerson (1979:124) has noted, the choice of a specific and actual group as ostensible audience for the public letter allowed King to cultivate a personal tone and to project his own personality in ways that would have been impossible in a document addressed no one in particular.

King did not have to construct a synecdochic relationship between himself and the civil rights movement. That connection already existed in the public mind, and

thus King's rhetorical problem was not to embody the movement in his persona, but to establish a persona that embodied the values and interests of his target audience. Much of the text is devoted to this task, and King's effort works along several lines. By direct statement, King associates himself with basic American principles of equality and liberty, endorses the "the American dream," and commends "those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence" (100). Likewise, though in more fully realized expression, King also explicitly embeds himself within the Christian faith: "In deep disappointment, I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love… Yes, I love the church; I love her sacred walls. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson, and the great-grandson of preachers" (97). Here King's figuration overlaps at three levels of embodiment: Christianity is made physical through the Church as a walled physical space; King, coming from a lineage connected with that space, embodies his identity within those walls, and from this inside position his disappointment with the Church can be materialized only as tears of love. All of this figurative work presents King as someone who has the appropriate credentials to criticize the Church from within and to recall it to its own ideals.

King also embodies his solidarity with mainstream American values through the use of *ad verecundiam* appeals. The text is peppered with references to authoritative figures from American history, Judeo-Christian lore, and the Western intellectual tradition. These include: Paul, Socrates, Reinhold Niebuhr, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Buber, Paul Tilllich, Jesus, Amos, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and T.S. Eliot, and King invokes these references to vindicate and explain his own actions. Thus, to take one notable example, in response to the charge that he is "an outsider," King cites Scriptural precedent for his behavior: "Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth-century prophets left their little villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns; and just as the apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown" (84-85).

King is obviously concerned to dispel the perception that he is a literal outsider in

Birmingham and an ideological outsider whose basic attitudes depart from respectable American opinion. The *ad verecundiam* appeals do double service in countering this image. First, by citing icons of accepted belief and faith, King associates himself with authorities who command unquestioned respect from his target audience, and this suggests affiliation with that audience. Secondly, the words and deeds of these respected figures, insofar as they appear to be the same as or similar to King's words and deeds, become exemplars that justify King's position and open space for it within the horizons of Judeo-Christian orthodoxy. If Amos, Paul, Socrates, and even Jesus, behaved as agitators then it follows that agitation to expose and overcome injustice is no threat to the common tradition, but is instead something needed to renew and sustain its integrity.

5. Rhetorical Enactment

Embodiment and enactment are closely related rhetorical phenomena. In most texts, especially ones that are well made, they overlap, and it always requires careful interpretive work to distinguish them. Nevertheless, as I now hope to show, the distinction is worth making. Embodiment arises from what the text says, from the assertions and appeals that it makes. Enactment arises from what the text does. To understand this distinction, we need to think of an argumentative text not just as an inert product but also as a field of action that constructs representations and relationships as it unfolds – as a microcosm of the social world to which it is addressed. In this sense, texts construct a persona for the author, a persona for the audience, and a relationship (or a set of relationships between the two). Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, though they do not use my terminology, present an excellent example of such an enacted relationship in their analysis of a Shell Oil Company's advertorial when they note that the text addresses its audience as "a father would speak to his children" (1999: 490). Of course, the text never explicitly articulates this relationship; van Eemeren and Houtlosser infer its presence based on the tone and the attitude displayed as the argument proceeds, and once they disclose the parent/child relationship enacted in the text, they are able to make some important judgments about the character and motives of its author. The text behaves, as it were, in a certain way toward the audience, and from this behavior, the audience can make inferences about its maker.

In King's Letter, the process of enactment is complex and subtle, and it offers a complex but consistent representation of the author's character: He is depicted as energetic, active, committed to principles and committed to act in accordance

with his principles, but also as poised, balanced, reasonable, and restrained. The dominant image is one of restrained energy, and this image is well calculated to diffuse the accusation that King is a radical who lacks good judgment and acts without a due regard for consequences.

Throughout the sequence of refutations, the text enacts balanced judgment through what Fulkerson (1979:127) calls a "dual pattern." King responds to the allegations against him first on an immediate practical level and then on the level of principle, and as this pattern unfolds, the reader witnesses King exercising the kind of judgment most appropriate to deliberation – judgment that encompasses both particulars and principles, that engages both questions of expediency and honor. The first of King's refutations provides a clear illustration of this development. In responding to the charge that he is an "outsider", King begins by explaining that the Birmingham affiliate of the SCLC asked for his assistance, and so he is "here, along with several members of my staff, because we were invited here." But this is not the end of the matter, since beyond such particular concerns there is also a moral imperative that leads King to confront injustice just as the Hebrew prophets and the apostle Paul did. And, to place the issue on an even broader ground, King recognizes "the interrelatedness of all countries and states… Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all directly" (85). Thus, whether judgment rests on the concrete particulars of the case or on sweeping ethical principle, King should not be regarded as an outsider; his presence in Birmingham is both appropriate and right.

The second, third, and fourth refutational sections also employ this double structure, but it is in the sixth section, where King addresses the charge of extremism, that the technique achieves its most powerful articulation. King begins his response by expressing surprise that anyone would label him as an extremist, since in actuality he stands "in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community." On one side, there are those who simply acquiesce to injustice and do nothing, and on the other, there are the black nationalists who react to injustice with hatred and bitterness and come "perilously close to advocating violence." Between these extremes of complacency and angry despair, King offers the "more excellent way" of non-violent protest, and he acknowledges disappointment that this position would be dismissed as extremist. King, however, has a second thought on the matter, and he gradually gains "a bit of satisfaction

from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love – "'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you.'" This *ad verecundiam* appeal continues through a long list of heroic figures (including Amos, Paul, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson) who are also linked to famous quotations expressing extreme ideas. And King concludes that the question is not whether "we will be extremists" but whether we be extremists for love and justice or extremists for hate and injustice (92-94).

As other commentators (e.g. Fulkerson 1979: 128) have noted, this passage distinguishes between extremism understood as placement along a spectrum of existing positions and extremism understood in terms of intensity of conviction. By the first standard, King is not an extremist but rather a dialectically tempered moderate, since his position comes between and constructively synthesizes the antithetical forces of apathy and violence. By the second standard, however, King is an extremist since he is passionately committed in principle to act against and eradicate injustice, but as King's historical witnesses demonstrate, this form of extremism is not necessarily bad since it can function to preserve the cultural heritage. The whole movement of the passage reflects a combination of restraint and commitment that reflects favorably on the persona of the author and on the character of the movement with which he is identified.

Another notable feature of this passage is that when confronted with the charge of extremism, King reacts not with an expression of anger or indignity but disappointment. This sort of verbal restraint recurs throughout the Letter, and his choice of words in this respect consistently supports the image depicted by other aspects of the text. But King's restrained energy is even more powerfully represented in the structure of some of his sentences, where the syntax enacts restraint.

In the third refutational section of the letter, King offers a carefully modulated response to the charge that the demonstrations are untimely. African Americans, he reminds his readers, already have had to wait for 340 years for their rights, and it is no wonder that they are growing impatient. "Perhaps," he adds "it easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, 'Wait'":

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; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: "Daddy, why do while people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-country trip and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger" and your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs.", when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of nobodiness; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait (88-89).

The most obviously remarkable feature of this sentence is its length – 331 words by Fulkerson's count – which makes it by far the longest sentence in the text and probably one of the longest sentences in contemporary English prose. But the syntax of the sentence also ought to be noticed. Because it is structured in left-branching or periodic form, the syntactic complexity of the sentence develops through the accretion of dependent clauses that occur before the main clause. This arrangement suspends the completion of the sentence as a meaningful unit until the end, and so, to understand the sentence, the reader must wait until the final twelve words provide closure. Moreover, since the dependent clauses narrate a series of injuries, insults, and outrages, the whole development iconically represents the plight of the African American (cf. Klein 1981: 30-47). White readers, who have never directly suffered from the "stinging darts of

segregation, must wait while this long list of grievances continues to assault their sensibilities, and they thereby experience, in vicarious form, the frustration of the African American. The sentence enacts and transmits that experience in a way that no propositional argument could accomplish.

Given the length of the sentence, the tension that mounts through it, and the vivacity with which it represents the effects of bigotry, we might expect it to end on a note of outrage and anger, perhaps even with an accusation against those who ask King and his people to wait. Instead, however, the climax comes in the form of an understated address to the white audience: "Then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait." In this instance, the understatement probably works to heighten the emotional impact of the sentence, but it is also a striking enactment of King's restraint. Indeed, I find it difficult to imagine a more appropriate textual representation of King's pledge to proceed in reasonable and patient terms**[ii]**.

To sum up, enactment plays an important role in the argumentation of "Letter from Birmingham Jail." If King is to reach his target audience, he needs to dispel the perception that he is a radical given to intemperate action and committed to views that fall outside the mainstream of American society. The text consistently represents King in a different light, and it does so not just by direct statement, but also by enacting balanced, temperate forms of judgment and by "speaking" in a voice that is aggrieved and determined yet still restrained and reasonable. At the end of the Letter, King articulates this theme in two nicely balanced sentences that encapsulate the persona he projects throughout the text:

If I have said anything in this letter that is an overstatement of the
the truth and is indicative of unreasonable impatience, I beg you to
forgive me. If I have said anything in this letter that is an understatement
of the truth an is indicative of my having a patience that makes me patient
with anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me (100).

6. Evocation

Evocation operates at a higher level of generality than embodiment or enactment, since it refers to the representation and apprehension of a situation as a whole. In their recent account of the concept, Walter Jost and Michael Hyde explain that evocation occurs through the realization of a pattern within a set of accumulated particulars. This realization must be vivid, and it must grasp something as "a whole within which everything else makes sense," and it is achieved through

persuasion (1997: 23). Approaching the matter from the dialectician's perspective, Nicholas Rescher offers a similar account of the force of rhetorical persuasion. Rhetoric, Rescher maintains, can elicit agreement through synthetic expression that captures and highlights regions of our experience and brings them to conscious attention. This process entails a sense of fittingness with some overall scheme and arises, in some large measure, from the intrinsic appeal of what is said (Rescher: 1998). In other words, evocation reframes or restructures perception of a situation because it summons up recognition of the situation both as an integral whole and as something that fits within our cultural inheritance, and this summoning is related to the power of the language used in the persuasive effort.

The "Letter from Birmingham Jail" exemplifies the workings of this evocative process. It speaks to a target audience of white moderates who sense a gap between their ideals and the discriminatory practices of their society, but who are also wary of radical change, anxious about protests that violate laws and stir tensions, and concerned about outside agitators who would use unrealistic ideals to disrupt the stability of the existing political and social order. King's rhetoric blunts these fears and opens space for a positive connection between his position and the heritage of his audience. As E. Culpepper Clark has argued, King was able to exploit cultural expectations implicit in the situation and transform them "into the controlling metaphor for interpreting non-violent civil disobedience." The letter changes King from a potentially intemperate and dangerous radical into a prophet recalling his people to their better selves and a leader whose voice "resonates with the Judeo-Christian struggle against human bondage" (1993:48-49).

But what is the relationship between evocation and argumentation? Clark suggests that the connection is not particularly strong, since the force of the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" results from selecting the right metaphor at the right time under the right circumstances. That view, however, does not answer the question of how King was able to deploy that metaphor effectively, and when we consider the image involved in this case, the question becomes especially important. The prophetic voice comes from within the people it criticizes; it incarnates what is highest and best in the society and summons others to act on standards that the speaker shares with the listeners. The prophet is not an outsider or an observer, but a member of the tribe, and so to be a prophet among

the Hebrews one must be a Hebrew. And to be a prophet among American white moderates? That is not a role that King inherits by birth or gains through any easy access. He must argue himself into it, and his letter is well designed for that purpose. It constructs arguments that connect the author and the audience even in the presence of disagreement between them, and it speaks in ways that enact and embody the persona of a good deliberator. And once he can plausibly assume the role of deliberator, King is better able to position himself to speak from within the culture of his audience. I do not mean to say that this process is strictly linear – that argumentation is a first step and that evocation can come only after the arguments have done their work. The two seem to work together in a more interactive and less clearly demarcated fashion: As the force of King's argument accumulates, the evocative power of the text becomes more apparent, but as this evocation becomes more powerful, King's arguments assume greater clarity and force. Whatever the order of this relationship, however, I think it clear that it does develop within the text and that King's considerable achievement in speaking effectively as a prophet to a white audience is somehow related to the credentials that he establishes as a dialectician.

The process I have just described is somewhat paradoxical, since prophecy and argumentation ordinarily are assigned to different realms of activity. But perhaps the time has come for argumentation scholars to become more comfortable with paradoxes that shift categories and stimulate new and unexpected connections. With the decline of the formal deductive model and the essentialism associated with it, we can hardly expect our critical apparatus to stay quietly in place and support our old disciplinary assumptions. Thus, for example, Trudy Govier's logically focused study of the tu quoque appeal has led her to the discovery "that the force of an argument depends quite properly on more than its propositional content" (1999:20). Likewise my study of the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" has led me to conclude that there is more to rhetorical evocation than time, chance, and imagery. Govier, I take it, still has an imperfect understanding of the non-propositional things that contribute to the force of an argument, and I confess an almost boundless ignorance about how dialectical argument constrains and enables rhetorical persuasion. What does seem beyond doubt is that we have something to learn from one another, and I suspect that the leaning will proceed faster and better if we attend to cases – and not to simple or obviously flawed cases – but to those that exhibit the best practices of argument. These are the cases that we most need to consider if we want to make the theory of

argumentation not just an instrument for correcting errors of reasoning but a flexible, constructive resource for conducting the public business of scholars and citizens.

NOTES

[i] All references to the letter come from the version published in I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World (San Francisco: Harper, 1986): 83-100. Specific page references are indicated parenthetically in the text.

[ii] Toward the end of the letter (98-99), King composes another very long sentence that sets forth a series of grievances and then is paired with a short sentence that expresses a restrained view in direct address. This sentence is not as long as the one quoted above nor is it in periodic in form. But it also aptly models King's restraint .

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