

On the Papers

WHAT, IN ADDITION TO ITS CONTENTS, MAKES THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS SO MEMORABLE?

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Everyone who writes about Lincoln's great speeches agrees that he was a consummate master of rhetoric. They note how skillfully he borrows from the Bible. They sometimes laud his lofty tone. But then they usually change the topic. Almost no one—perhaps no one—attends to the influential cause that makes the Gettysburg Address not only memorable but memorizable. They do not work with its structure. They do not note its music. In attending to these highly important matters, important to Lincoln as well as to us, this essay will try to give you a new way of appreciating one of the greatest masterpieces of American political rhetoric. And as a result, I hope that it, together with the essays that follow this one in the On the Papers series, will begin to offer you a new way of understanding how your own prose can range beyond clarity and achieve the power of elegance.

The Gettysburg Address was short: It contains only 272 words and took something like two minutes to read. We are taught by most teachers of writing, "To make it better, make it shorter." So here is my new, shorter, and therefore clearly improved version of the Gettysburg Address:

Eighty-seven years ago, men here founded a new kind of country, based on the idea that we are all equal. Now we have a civil war on, whose outcome will show whether such a country can last. We come here today, as we should, to dedicate some land for a memorial cemetery, for some of those who died here. But really, we are not the ones to do the dedication, since those who died here have already done that. Their deaths will be remembered, not this speech. Instead of dedicating a field, we should rededicate ourselves to finishing up the war. That way, these

fellows will not have died in vain. And, in addition, it will save our country.

There. I have cut it by more than 56 percent: 119 words to Lincoln's 272. By definition then, this must be better.

But, you might protest—you *should* protest—I seemed to have lost something in the translation. That which I have lost is the sum total of all the ways in which Lincoln used rhetoric and music in making this speech great. Of my reduction/translation, all that can be said is that "the world will little note nor long remember" it.

Lincoln's address, referred to by those who wrote the program for that day as "dedicatory remarks" by the president, immediately followed a speech in the highest of styles by the greatest orator of the day, Edward Everett. Everett's speech lasted just under two hours. The next day, Everett wrote to Lincoln a memorable compliment: "I should be glad, if I could

Illustration by Tim Bower

flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes.” His comment reminds me of Arnold Schoenberg’s comment on the remarkable brevity of expression in the music of his astonishing pupil Anton Webern, whose longest piece is 11.5 minutes and whose whole life’s opus lasts less than 4 hours. Schoenberg said of Webern’s *Six Bagatelles for String Quartet*, which take just over four minutes to play, “One has to realize what restraint it requires to express oneself with such brevity. You can stretch every glance into a poem, every sigh into a novel. But to express a novel in a single gesture, joy in a single breath—such concentration can only be present in the absence of self-pity.” Lincoln had much cause for self-pity. At Gettysburg, he exuded none of it. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass called the address “a sacred effort.”

My “revision” lacks many things—chief among them Lincoln’s music. By “music,” I am referring to two of his major achievements: (1) the structural arrangement of his words so that they form meaningful units, balancing and counterbalancing each other, and (2) the rhythm of his prose, with which he took much care.

We know that Lincoln wrote most of his own addresses, taking into account the suggestions of people close to him whom he considered skillful readers and writers. We also know that he constantly read his own prose aloud. If it did not *sound* right, he clearly felt, it could not *mean* right.

We also know that Lincoln was self-educated in the main and that his two greatest literary influences came from the King James translation of the Bible and from Shakespeare. Lincoln wrote a bit of poetry himself but by no means considered himself a poet. All the poems we have of his are written in the same meter—a line of 4 beats followed by a line of 3 beats.

*My childhood’s home I see again
And sadden with the view;
And still, as memory crowds my brain,
There’s pleasure in it too.*

In his letters and his public statements when he was younger, he often quite naturally depended on consecutive 4-beat phrases, balancing off one another, with a 3-beat phrase to end the sentence:

Time and experience have verified to a demonstration, the public utility of internal improvements. That the poorest and most thinly populated counties would be greatly benefitted by the opening of good roads, and by the clearing of navigable streams within their limits, is what no person will deny.
(1832)

This is from the first entry of Lincoln’s complete writings. It may not sound like poetry to you, but he has structured the beats of prose rhythm so that the people of Sangamon County, to whom the letter is addressed, would be able to balance their own reading experience, while at the same time perceiving him to be a sagaciously balanced person. I am going to transform these two sentences into what I call a *colometric*. After deciding into what subunits a sentence would be likely to be divided for oral performance, I give a separate line to each subunit, just as in a poem; but I go further still in separating that line visually (horizontally) into yet smaller units, each of which contains only one prose beat. In that way, the music of the prose (if there is any) will be revealed. Here is the colometric, showing how all subunits except the final one have 4 beats, rounded off at the end by the sole 3-beat line:

1

Time and experience have verified to a demonstration,
the public utility of internal improvements.
That the poorest and most thinly populated counties
would be greatly benefitted by the opening of good roads,
and by the clearing of navigable streams within their limits,
is what no person will deny.

It doesn’t sing. It lacks variety. It ends lamely. But he has taken care that it is balanced, making it immediately digestible by his audience. It is a good start.

By the time Lincoln gets to Gettysburg in 1863, his careful care of rhythm for three

decades had made him a master musician. Most of his writings—as is common for most fine writers—are dominated by this give-and-take between 4-beat and 3-beat lines. But for Gettysburg, Lincoln wanted something special, something uplifting, something far beyond the ordinary. For that he turned to his favorite writer, William Shakespeare. Shakespeare wrote mostly in iambic pentameter—in which each line of poetry could be divided into 5 recognizable “feet,” with most feet containing a single possible stress. For Lincoln, to reach for 5 beats at significant moments in the address might make those moments soar.

But even Shakespeare had trouble doing that on anything like regular basis. Five is not a natural rhythm in western music. You can’t dance to it. Four is a march; and 3 is a waltz; but 5 is just cumbersome. Shakespeare solved his problem by allowing 5 perceivable feet to occupy the line, but by having his performers emphasize just 4 beats. You can recognize that in many of his most memorable lines:

To be or not to be, that is the question.

We don’t hear this performed with 5 alternating beats:

2 To be, or not to be, that is the question.

Most Hamlets read it with 4 stresses:

To be, or not to be that is the question.

Try it out for yourself:

The quality of mercy is not strained. . . .

If music be the food of love,
play on. . . .

How should Lincoln handle 5s? Should he save them only

for the high points? But what if almost everything in this remarkable, compact speech is a high point? Surely most of the “lines” should be 3-beat or 4-beat units, with an occasional 5? And how about the intensity of a 2-beat or two?

What Lincoln does with this at Gettysburg is breathtaking, once you become aware of it; but its effect is completely uplifting even if you are not aware of it. And until now, I believe, no one has been aware of it.

His opening sentence is as well known as any ever written in the history of this country:

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

People have long pointed out the effect of using the archaic prose number instead of the arithmetic “87.” They note that its fanciness ignites a sense of solemnity. And they speak of his quoting Jefferson at the end of the sentence—though few comment on why the end of the sentence is an appropriate spot in which to highlight it. But this wonderful sentence soars above my earlier impoverished reduction of it above: “Eighty-seven years ago, men founded here a new kind of country, based on the idea that we are all equal.” Lincoln’s immediately solemn and grand tone comes from his reaching for the extra force of two well-fashioned 5-beat lines; that being too difficult to maintain (both for writer and reader), he “calms down” to a pair of 4-beat lines, one of which is the famous Jefferson phrase:

3 Four- score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

The first line expands, filling all that space with the substance of only a single number. The second line, echoing the rhythm of the first, crowds as much in as the first line was poor in contents. With this double-primed beginning in its support, the third line gives us a much more rhythmically commanding 4 that is made up of two parallel half-lines. It parallels, within the single line, two subunits of

participle + prepositional phrase: “conceived in liberty” and “dedicated to the proposition.” This is the first of his six uses of the word “dedicate.”

And, bringing the sentence to closure, the 4-beat “proposition” is allowed to shine by itself.

Put this all together: We can “hear” that there is a continual sense of “growth” from line to line—one long crescendo that does not even require the reader to speak continually louder. The rhythm takes care of that all by itself.

The next sentence is a rhetorical masterpiece of a sentence:

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure.

My colometric for it is here:

4 Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure.

Here is the musician Lincoln being bold enough to use yet another sprawling but controlled 5-beat line, prosaic and as matter-of-fact as can be. The grammatical structure is straightforward: adverb, subject, verb, prepositional phrase. That is sufficient for a whole sentence: Nothing is convoluted; nothing is interrupted. But then comes . . . what? A jumble of 2-beat

lines, with a grammatical subject (“that nation”) separated from its verb (“can . . . endure”) by a series of interrup-

tions? How does it all go together? It goes together wonderfully well if you consider the intricacies of what I am going to call “an interrupted 5.” Read it without the “so conceived and so dedicated.” There is your straightforward 5. Look what the interruptive material does: (1) “so conceived” takes us back to the founding fathers of the first sentence; and (2) “so

dedicated” is the second time we encounter “dedicated” in these present “dedicatory remarks.” This is not a mere pun; it is the pun’s more respectable sibling the Greeks called *paronomasia*—the playing with words to achieve an effect by repetition in different guises.

Why does the interruption not bring down the whole house of cards? That is guarded against by its firmly controlled rhythm. The two stresses in each line balance each other noticeably, with as much balance as if he had told us “on the one hand . . . on the other hand”: “that nation” // “any nation”; “so conceived” // “so dedicated.”

With our tour guide leading us clearly through this interruption, we can continuously hear (or read) the subject “nation” leaning forward to its verb, “can . . . endure.” There is an “enduring” quality to the progress of the sentence, through both

its grammar and its rhythm, that suggests that the country, like the sentence, will be capable of enduring—and reaching a safe harbor.

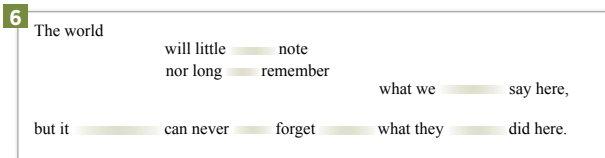
Remarkably, Lincoln uses this technique of the “interrupted 5” five times in this speech of just 272 words. Once you see it, you can never not see it again. Three times he interrupts with two 2-beat lines, as in our first example above. He also once uses three for the interruption; and he ends the address with a quadruple interruption. The next one is the triple interruption:

5 But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground.

This sentence is most often mis-performed. Readers tend to emphasize the important-sounding, negative verbs in the fourth column; instead, the word “we” should be emphasized each time it appears in the third column. The point is not that “we cannot *dedicate*” (there’s that word again); the point is that *we* are not capable of doing any of these things

because *they*, the fallen soldiers, are the ones whose actions have already done the dedicating, consecrating, and hallowing of this ground. Properly performed, the phrase “this ground” has a good right to its location in the stress position at the sentence’s end. Misperformed, “this ground” is something of an afterthought.

The third of these five “interrupted 5s” is a quieter way of restating the same point:



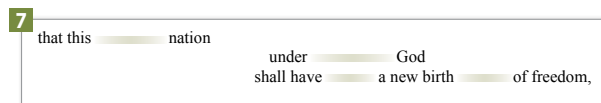
Here is another colometric tool in Lincoln’s rhetorical arsenal. Look at the way the material lines up vertically. These are balances he built in probably by ear; but his ear was well tuned to rhetorical needs. The balance between the “what we say here” and the “what they did here” is the main point of irony in his “dedicatory remarks”: *They* are the dedicators, not *we*—and not Lincoln. Look at the beautiful symmetry, aided by the rhetorical figure of speech *alliteration*—the repetition of all those consonants.

Reading vertically, the first column belongs to “the world” both times. The second column, suffused with three negatives, is bound together by the *l* in “little” and “long” and the *n* in “nor” and “never,” which reach out to the *n* in “note” in the third column. That third column is given over to three verbs, the first two combining with two *l* words from the second

column to establish a sense of dichotomy (“remember” // “forget”) on which the final dichotomy of the fifth column will rest. That is further fed by the dichotomy of “we” and “they” in the fourth column. Lincoln does not just say there is an ironic gap here between us and them where “dedication” is concerned: He acts it out by taking control of his grammatical structure, his rhythm, and his sound.

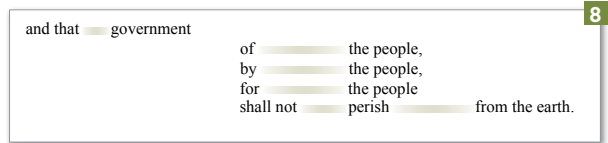
This is what Lincoln’s rhetoric is all about.

The fourth and fifth of the “interrupted 5s” pile on each other at the speech’s end. He did not originally plan the fourth one, we know: He added the words “under God” at the last moment, as he slowly came to the decision that God’s plan must have something to do with the way this war was going. Here is its colometric:



That was the hope, the hope most worthwhile adhering to in the middle of this protracted, bloody turmoil. Without the “under God,” this is merely a prediction; with it, it becomes both a hope and a goal. Read it without “under God”: It sounds like a campaign slogan. Read it with “under God”: It sounds like both a plea and (might we say?) a dedication. Rhetorically and rhythmically, it fits in perfectly with this recurrent “interrupted 5” technique, which now controls this whole speech.

The final “interrupted 5” is one of the most widely known, cherished, and completely memorable moments in all of American rhetoric:



Here is the famous moment—a 5-beat line with four 2-beat interruptions. A fitting finish: (1) The initial cause for going to war—maintaining the Union (freeing the slaves came along later as a motive)—shines forth here; (2) the prepositions (“of,” “by,” “for”) swirl around “the people,” supported in their energy by the ancient Greek figure of speech *epistrophe* (ending multiple units with the same words); (3) the compactness of the interruption is further emphasized by his use of another Greek figure of speech, *asyndeton* (the omitting of the “and” before the last member of a list); and (4) the insistent alliteration, as the *p* sound in the repetition of “people” finds its just climax in the vertically parallel *p* in “perish.”

The more we become sensitive to these structural and rhythmical devices, the more we can incorporate them into our own prose—without our having to become conscious of them during the creation part of the writing process. On revision, we can discover why something “just doesn’t sound right.” We shall experience this increasingly in future numbers of *On the Papers*. Next time, Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address. ■