THE PUBLIC LETTER AS A RHETORICAL FORM: STRUCTURE, LOGIC, AND STYLE IN KING’S “LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL”

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In Birmingham, Alabama, on 12 April 1963, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in order to have himself arrested on a symbolic day (Good Friday), disobeyed an Alabama Supreme Court injunction against demonstrations. That same day, in the Birmingham News, King saw a public letter signed by eight leading (white) Birmingham clergymen calling on the protesters to cease their activities and to work through the courts for the redress of their grievances.

On the morning following his arrest, while being held in solitary confinement, King began to write in response to the clergymen the now famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” As he wrote later, “Begun on the margins of the newspaper in which the statement appeared while I was in jail, the letter was continued on scraps of writing paper supplied by a friendly Negro trusty, and concluded on a pad my attorneys were eventually permitted to leave me.” The “Letter” was completed on Tuesday, and the American Friends Service Committee had 50,000 copies printed for distribution. Later, after polishing, it became a central chapter in King’s Why We Can’t Wait (1964).

Judged by the frequency with which it has been reprinted, the “Letter” has already become an American classic. It

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3 Alan F. Westin and Barry Mahoney, The Trial of Martin Luther King (New York: Crowell, 1974), p. 140.

4 My analysis is based on the first published version. In all major respects the two versions are almost identical. King’s editing was restricted to minor alterations of diction and syntax in more than 200 sentences. Six other sentences were deleted, and one was added. In fourteen instances two sentences were combined in revision; and four original sentences were divided. The changes seem to have been made in the interests of economy and a move toward slightly more formality. Anyone reading the two versions, however, must search carefully to find the changes. The overall difference in impact is negligible.

5 The “Letter” is included in a number of college anthologies: Charles Muscatine and
has been characterized as a "compelling argument," 6 "a virtuoso performance," 7 "a model of effective persuasive writing," 8 and "one of the strongest pieces of persuasive writing to come out of twentieth-century America." 9 Despite these comments, the "Letter" has been the subject of only one rather cursory study. 10 Most of the published commentary on it constitutes praise rather than criticism.

The "Letter" deserves more extensive study, for it is an instance of superb rhetoric in action. Designed apparently as a refutative response to the clergymen, King's essay actually addresses two audiences simultaneously: the limited and precisely defined group of eight clergymen and a broader and less exactly defined group of intelligent and religious moderates. The purposes of this study are, first, to consider the nature and relationship of King's two audiences and the rhetorical benefits King gained from using one audience to provide a focus through which the other could be addressed, and, second, to demonstrate how carefully and effectively King adapted his presentation to suit both audiences on three levels: structural, logical, and stylistic.

THE CLERGYMEN'S LETTER

In their letter, the eight clergymen, representing both Christian and Jewish faiths, address not the issue of racism, but the propriety of civil disobedience and the timing of the protest. A restrained document of seven paragraphs and slightly more than 400 words, the clergymen's letter supports the theses that "these demonstrations are unwise and untimely," and that, "When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts." 11 It is a clear statement of the moderate position: Injustice may exist, but the methods of remediation must lie in compromise and in the appropriate legal channels. Typically moderate also is the tone of optimism; the clergymen refer to a "new constructive and realistic approach" and "increased forbearance" which make these "days of new hope." Such positive signs, along with the patience and restraint now being shown by the police, make this an especially inappropriate time for protest.

Specifically the clergymen accuse King and his followers of (1) being led "in part by outsiders," (2) failing to negotiate, (3) inciting hatred and violence, (4) choosing an inappropriate time to act, (5) using extreme measures, (6) ignoring the courts as the correct


Burt and Want, p. 554.

Taylor and Okada, p. 310.


11 The clergymen's letter along with the earlier version of King's response is reprinted in Muscatine and Griffith, pp. 283-34.
avenue of redress, and (7) not observing the principles of "law and order."

TWO "FICTIONALIZED" AUDIENCES

Since King's response to these charges is a "Letter" to "My dear Fellow Clergymen," one might assume the eight clergymen to be the audience. On the other hand, it is a public letter in the tradition of Emile Zola's Dreyfus letter. Thus, because the letter has an apparent audience (the clergymen) and a larger, more diverse one (King's public reader), the question of audience is complex.

Ong has recently argued that "the writer's audience is always a fiction," since no writer addresses the audience at the moment of writing but must imaginatively project both the audience and its potential response. This becomes more true and thus presents a more difficult rhetorical problem as the distance between writer and reader widens. While seeming to address the clergymen and to respond to their charges, King had also to address his broader readership; thus as he wrote he had to fictionalize two audiences, one sharing his clerical perspective, the other more diverse. Such a perspective obviously creates some difficulties. The writer, for example, must not assume (i.e., fictionalize) anything about the ostensible audience that would not also apply to the broader real audience. Structure, logic, and style, all have to be appropriate not just for a single defined audience but for the larger one as well.

Yet King turned the rhetorically complex situation into an advantage. Had he chosen to defend his actions directly to a public audience, he would have had to fictionalize his audience with virtually no guidelines. Instead, he wrote as if he were addressing the clergymen, about whom he could reasonably make certain assumptions; he took them—or rather his fictionalized image of them—as a metaphor for his broader readership.

By using the clergymen as his ostensible audience, King found the guidelines for fictionalizing the broader audience, much the more important one to address under the circumstances. The clergymen, of course, were religious, white, moderate, educated leaders of public opinion. Thus they were representative of only a segment of the broader public, but it was a segment which King had both a need to and a possibility of persuading. Little, if anything, was to be gained in addressing white segregationists, black revolutionists, or people indifferent to civil rights. The situation called instead for an address to as wide a range of moderate-to-liberal, involved readers as possible; so much the better if a substantial number of them were also leaders of public opinion.

All social movements face the potential problem of splintering; and the civil rights movement, then in its infancy, was in danger of falling apart because of disagreement over the propriety of King's tactics. In addition to persuading a broad public, King thus needed also to unify civil rights proponents by persuading the more moderate among them that his course of action was the right one. By answering the clergymen, he in effect answered the mental reservations held by those whose dedication to equality fell short of support of public demonstrations.

The rhetorical advantages of addressing the broader audience in terms of the clerical audience are clearer if King and the clergymen are perceived as opponents in a written debate. Debaters seem to address each other, and they do respond to each other, but the response

is determined by its intended effect on a third party, the judge or audience.

Despite the complexity resulting from the dual audience, this debater's stance gave King five argumentative advantages. First, the already existing document defined the key issues. Instead of having to fictionalize all potential arguments that an audience might hold against protest, King had only to respond to assertions in the clergymen's letter. Fortunately for his purposes, their letter was a synthesis of almost every likely criticism. This allowed King the fullest range of issues to discuss and thus allowed the greatest opportunity for persuasion; had the clergymen disagreed with King on only one matter, such as timing, he could have answered that charge, but his response could not have become a refutative manifesto for a broader audience, a defense of his movement and the theory of peaceful civil disobedience on which it was based.

Second, refutation of an existent paper allowed a clear, easy to follow, point by point organization. Purely by enumeration, if King wished, he could handle each argument as it had been brought up by the opponents. The only necessary scaffolding was the transition, "You also argued . . ."

Third, refutation worked particularly well since the clergymen were in a weak position to begin with. They could not deny the charge that Birmingham was a thoroughly segregated city; at best they could argue that the means being used to remedy segregation were improper and/or that they were pursued at the wrong time.

Fourth, it is simpler to disprove someone else's moral argument than to build a case for one's own. Demonstrating that an opponent's position is unsoundly argued does not logically validate one's own argument, but rhetorically it often seems to a reader to do so. A reader-judge does not engage in argument but, rather, compares the two cases presented. Instead of listening to King to decide whether he is right, a public reader is more likely to judge which of two presentations is the more persuasive. And, although a reader might be unconvinced by the "Letter" as an independent entity, when it is compared with the clergymen's argument, King's case is clearly superior on all counts.\footnote{13}

Finally, adapting his presentation to his ostensible audience, instead of having to launch it into the dark, allowed King to create a warm, personal tone. His essay is stylistically and tonally a real letter with a real personality behind it.

The "Letter's" Structure

King's essay is primarily a series of refutations of the arguments made by the clergymen, a point made by several commentators.\footnote{14} But saying this tends to obscure its more subtle features. In constructing his essay King, by design or accident, adapted the pattern of the classical oration to suit the situation in Birmingham, the clergymen's letter, and the wider audience as well. He reduced the classical confirma\-\tion to utmost brevity and expanded the refutatio to carry the burden of argument.

The letter opens without an impassioned exordium, and this seems entirely appropriate to the already heated circumstances. Instead, the salutation, "My dear Fellow Clergymen," establishes im-

\footnotesize{12} I do not mean to imply that a reader of King's essay must be familiar with the clergy's letter. It is quite enough to "know" their letter through King's restatements of its main points. He "responds" to the clergy's arguments but does not allow them to structure his essay; they only seem to do so. If one knows the clergy's letter well, it is even clear that King slightly restates some arguments to make them more refutable.

\footnotesize{14} The refutative structure has been pointed out by Larson and Bosmajian.
immediately the warm, tactful tone prevalent in the essay. How different would have been the more formal “Dear Sirs,” or “Dear Clergymen,” or even “My Fellow Clergymen.” The body of the letter begins with the classical narratio, “the exposition of the state of affairs at the moment,” the facts that have motivated the writing. Subtly emphasizing the irony of a minister’s being in prison, King notes, “While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities ‘unwise and untimely.’ . . . I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.” Both the “patient and reasonable” tone and the intimacy of direct address continue throughout the essay.

King quickly deviates (pars. 2 and 3) from the pattern of the classical oration, however, by addressing one point in the clergy’s letter: “I think I should give the reason for my being in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the argument of ‘outsiders coming in.’” The reason for refuting this argument before presenting the constructive case seems clear; if the argument about “outsiders” has any validity in the minds of either audience, then King has no right to discuss circumstances in Birmingham. He must earn the right to talk.

After his response to the “outsiders” argument, King states (par. 4) his propositio, that the Negro in Birmingham has had no choice but protest. Then, using the classical partitio, King notes (par. 5) that four steps are necessary in a protest campaign: “(1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive; (2) negotiation; (3) self-purification; and (4) direct action.” King now takes up successively (pars. 5-7) the first three steps to show that in fact the Birmingham protesters had gone through them before determining to use direct action (par. 8).

These few paragraphs constitute King’s unusually brief confirmatio, his constructive case for civil disobedience in Birmingham at this time, an argument built on what Bosmajian has called the “Method of Residues.” Altogether, proposition, partition, and confirmation comprise only five of the essay’s forty-eight paragraphs.

King now turns (par. 9) to the first of six major issues: “You may well ask, ‘Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn’t negotiation a better path?’” This was not the first point raised by the clergymen, but King wisely adapts the order of his main arguments to move from the obvious to the more complex, presumably for the benefit of the wider audience. By agreeing, King logically and gracefully turns the argument back on the clergymen: Certainly negotiation is desirable; the goal of the protest is precisely to make the other side willing to negotiate. In the succeeding paragraphs (10-20), King handles the second and third major issues, the charges that the protests were ill-timed and violations of “law and order.”

At this point King interrupts his refutative pattern with one of the personal sections that Larson calls digressions. If the section is digressive, it is progressive at the same time; and such asides, merged into the rigid refutative structure, enhance the feeling that this is a personal letter in which personal feeling and digression (of sorts) are acceptable. In this “digression,” King moves by association from the clergy’s “law and order” argument to the first of “two honest confessions.” He feels compelled to “confess” (par. 21) that he has been profoundly disappointed in the Southern white

15 Corbett, p. 27.
16 Bosmajian, p. 130.
17 Larson, p. 84.
liberal for making arguments such as the "law and order" one instead of joining the Negro cause. Suddenly the clergy are on the defensive; not just their argument but their inaction is criticized. King does not attack angrily; he is merely forced (against his own good will) to admit that he has been saddened by such behavior and "almost" made to conclude that the people who make up his audiences are more dangerous to the Negro than outright segregationists. This tone of sadness and compulsion is effective precisely because it allows King to attack without seeming aggressive.

After two paragraphs (21-22) on his first disappointment, King returns (par. 23) to his refutative strategy and disposes of the argument that his nonviolent actions are evil because they precipitate violence from others. Then he refutes (pars. 24-25) what he calls "the myth of time," an argument that Negroes should wait for the natural course of social evolution to solve their problems. The clergymen had not made this argument, although it might have been suggested in their assertion that the protest in Birmingham was untimely. So to provide this view explicitly, and consequently maintain his refutative pattern, King quotes another letter, one from "a white brother in Texas" who had argued, "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but is it possible that you are in too great of a religious hurry? It has taken Christianity almost 2000 years to accomplish what it has." The "white brother," and perhaps the clergymen, is answered quickly. Then King devotes three paragraphs (26-28) in response to the argument that his actions are "extreme."

His second "disappointment," this one sadder and more pointed, follows; it is not only disappointment with the white liberal Southerner, but also disappointment with the Southern white church, which King sees as having sacrificed the "extremism" of moral commitment historically typical of the Christian faith. In the characteristic sad tone, King devotes twelve paragraphs (30-41) to the irony of the Southern churches' professing equality in the eyes of God, and the spirit of Christian fellowship, while allowing the ungodly and immoral practice of segregation to continue unopposed. By implication this is a direct attack on precisely the behavior of the eight clergymen to whom he is responding, for they profess a religiously rooted equality and fellowship but are arguing to allow the continuation of an ungodly segregation. King cannot understand such an "other-worldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular." 18

Whereas the major confirmatio received only five paragraphs, the refutatio with its two attendant confessions extends for thirty-three paragraphs. 19

King then begins (par. 42) his moving peroratio, stopping once (pars. 43-44) to refute the clergymen's praise of the restraint shown by the Birmingham police. The peroration, in its apology for having written at such length, recalls both the calm tone and the prison reference of the opening: "what else is there to do when you are alone for days in the dull monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange

18 It may not be too farfetched to argue that these two digressions actually constitute the real constructive case of the essay. They do not directly support the proposition as I have described it, but they do make a case for concerted action against, rather than endurance of, segregation. And motivating such action may be the real implicit purpose.

19 Actually one of the clergymen's corollary claims, that King and his followers had ignored the courts, is never answered. Since King, in fact, had chosen protest in the streets rather than action in the courts, he can scarcely answer such a charge directly. The whole letter is, however, a justification of ignoring the courts.
thoughts, and pray long prayers?” The closing paragraph reasserts the identity of his viewpoint with that of his ostensible audience and speaks confidently of the future, when they may all meet and the “deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities.”

Schematically, then, the essay’s structure looks like this:

A. Narratio (pars. 1-4)
   1. Clergy’s letter
   2. King’s reasons for being in Birmingham

B. Propositio—“the white power structure of this city left the Negro community with no other alternative” (par. 4)

C. Confirmatio—the four steps to protest (pars. 5-8)

D. Refutatio (pars. 9-41)
   1. Negotiation
   2. Timing
   3. Breaking laws
      (First “Confession”: Disappointment in white liberals for not breaking laws)
   4. Precipitating violence
   5. The myth of time
   6. Extremism
      (Second “Confession”: Disappointment in white Southern church for not being extreme)

E. Peroratio (pars. 42-48)
   1. Confidence in the future
   2. Clergy’s praise for police (refuted)
   3. Hope to meet in a better future

The interjection of the two “disappointments” into the six main refutations, as well as the length of some of the refutations, may create the impression of looseness. So may the informal, epistolary style. But the essay is actually tightly and elaborately structured. It combines the clarity, efficiency, and persuasive force of the classical oration with the personal warmth and associative structure of a letter to a friend.

The “Letter’s” Refutative Logic

Even more impressive than the overall arrangement of the “Letter” is its internal logic in each refutative segment. King characteristically refutes the charges brought against him with a dual pattern. Never satisfied with one response, he answers each argument on at least two levels, usually a practical, immediate level, perhaps most appealing to a public audience, and an abstract, philosophical level involving unstated moral premises, an argument appealing more to the ostensible audience and others with some concern for philosophical abstractions. Multiple refutation is especially effective for the onlooking audience because it creates the impression that the other side’s reasoning is not just weak but so unsound as to be unacceptable.

For example, in response to the charge that he is an outsider who has no business in Birmingham, King has four answers. First, he explains that the black leaders of Birmingham had invited him to come assist in the protest (rather than being a cause of it); second, that as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference of which the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights is an affiliate, “I am here because I have basic organizational ties here.” These are the practical answers. They establish (if accepted) that he is not in fact an outsider, or at least not a complete outsider. But beyond these, King moves to attack the concept of the “outsider.” Thus his third response is that, in the tradition of Paul and other Christian prophets and missionaries, he has gone wherever there was need. Such a view is the direct consequence

20 Larson, in his valuable set of notes on the essay, has characterized it as “randomly interconnected” (p. 84); obviously, I disagree.
of a historical, religious precedent that neither of his audiences could reject. Fourth, since all communities and states in the modern world are interrelated, King argues, no man can be an outsider in his own nation. With that he has turned to the attack: "Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea."

For refutative purposes King, here and throughout, expands the clergymen's enthymemes into syllogisms, without using the dry and formidable phrasing of formal logic. In formal terms their reasoning had to be as follows:

Outsiders have no right to protest.
King is an outsider.
Therefore, King has no right to protest.

In response, King first attacks the minor premise by showing the ties that make him other than an outsider in Birmingham. But if this is not convincing, he also attacks the major premise by citing the tradition of Christian missionary work and by arguing that in our interdependent nation, no citizen is an outsider anywhere.

Perhaps the clearest example of King's strategy of dual refutation is his answer to the label "extreme measures." The phrase masks a full syllogism:

Extremism is wrong.
King and his followers' actions are extreme.
Therefore, their actions are wrong.

At first King attacks the minor premise by pointing out that in fact among the Negro community his is precisely the moderate position, midway between the passive complacency of some older Negroes and the violent militance of the young. Then, upon rethinking the matter, King attacks the unstated major premise by citing historical precedents of great extremists whom his opponents and the observing audience cannot help but revere: Christ, Paul, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson. To deny first that one is an extremist, and then to argue that in fact extremism in moral matters is desirable, not wrong, seems self-contradictory. Actually King works on two definitions of extremism: The first is holding a position far from the norm (which King says he does not); the second is holding a view, no matter what, without compromise. Since the clergymen's brief letter did not define the term, King takes the two possible definitions and shows his own position superior in either case. His position is not an extreme one, but he holds to it with extreme commitment.

Throughout the essay similarly, precise meanings of key terms are used as the bases for arguments. In answering the most important charge, that it is improper to break a law, in this instance a court-ordered injunction, King graciously acknowledges the apparent inconsistency: "Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws." Because this is in fact the central issue and the one probably most likely to evoke disagreement, King devotes the longest refutation to it, eight paragraphs, and gives the greatest number of different answers. This time King cannot attack the minor premise; he had in fact broken a law. Instead he answers the implied major premise (that it is always wrong to break the law) on several levels, each carefully calculated to persuade both his ostensible and his
observing audiences, both of whom were likely to be hostile to such a claim.

King's fundamental answer is drawn from the premise that laws are not ends in themselves but means of achieving justice. If so, justice, and not the law per se, must be served. In fact, he asserts, initiating another key distinction, there are just laws and unjust laws, and it is one's moral duty to disobey unjust laws because they subvert the purpose of law—justice. By subtle implication then, if he is right, his audiences have not lived up to their moral duties.

King offers three definitions of the difference between just and unjust laws, presumably in the event that one of the distinctions proves less than persuasive. First, "A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law." Second, an unjust law is any law forced on a minority not followed also by the majority. And third, an unjust law is any law that a minority had no voice in making.

On all three counts, King argues, segregation laws (and presumably laws against or used against public protests) are unjust. His audience might not agree with his definitions, but few could deny that some laws are unjust. However one defines injustice, the opponents of protest are in the untenable position of defending at least temporary obedience to unjust law.

King then turns again to historical tradition for key instances of disobedience to patently unjust laws. Several examples from the Judeo-Christian tradition can scarcely be rejected by the ostensible audience, and probably not by most members of the wider one. As a more current instance King alludes to Hitler, who in persecuting the Jews was following the law. Anyone who does not accept, at this point, the notion that it is sometimes moral to break the law must also accept the implication of defending on similar grounds obedience to the antisemitic decrees of the Nazi regime.21

In this instance King's argument rests on premises similar to those underlying the "Higher Law" argument of the nineteenth century abolitionists and the "Natural Law" argument of the eighteenth century revolutionists. Thus, in outline, the argument is one with which his audience was likely to be familiar and sympathetic. King's position, consequently, is well adapted to both of his audiences and increases his chances of being persuasive. Moreover, King's use of the historical tradition here (as throughout) has the rhetorical virtue of presenting him as a traditionalist, an image likely to be valued by his moderate audience, who tend to regard him as a radical bent on "extreme measures."

Reading the "Letter" a first or second time, one is not yet fully aware of the shape of King's refutation, but, as in many affective situations, awareness is not requisite. King's combination of definition, precedent, and multipremise refutation is rhetorically effective, both directly and indirectly. Because the refutation seems at once precise, clear, and elegant without ostentation, the reader-judge is encouraged to assume not only "this is a sound position," but also "this is a master at work. He knows his subject, he knows his audience, he knows his art." And, I believe, a reader comes unconsciously to feel that "a man who can perform these tasks is able and honest and worthy of belief." In short, as he argues, King not only adapts to a fictionalized audience, but creates for that audience an image of himself

21 In his revision, King added a further historical example, the Boston Tea Party.
through his adaptation. In classical terms, he creates his *ethos*. To extend Ong’s argument, in any instance of *written* communication, the rhetor—whether the image be true or false—is always a fiction created for the audience and based on the writer’s fictionalizing of them.

Any rhetorical choice thus has two dimensions. A choice effective in its own right becomes doubly effective because it fictionalizes a writer as the sort of person who makes such choices—a wise, shrewd rhetor worth listening to. Likewise, a choice that fails presents an image of a rhetor who had no better judgment than to make that choice. Persuasion results not only from the *logos* of content but also from the *ethos* created through the performance, and King’s “Letter” is outstanding on both grounds.

**Style as Persuasion in the “Letter”**

The positive ethical image does not result only from the chosen audience conceptualization and refutative strategies discussed above, however. It also results from the essay’s style. Although this is not the place for a complete descriptive analysis of King’s stylistic versatility in “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” I would like to highlight some of its more striking stylistic features and to speculate on the ways they reinforce the total persuasive effort. The essay’s style is supple and sophisticated yet readable. An audience is likely to be favorably impressed, without being overwhelmed. The stylistic manipulations both create an image of competence and sincerity and operate on the reader’s emotions.

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

To illustrate these three persuasive dimensions of King’s style, it may be well to start with an obvious and relatively simple feature of the essay. A reader can scarcely help noticing how often King refers to other famous men whom he expects his reader to recognize. These allusions are directly effective in their adaptive and affective appeals to both the limited and broader audiences 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, generally of two types: either enduring archetypal metaphors or 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.22

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.”23 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 cliches (common verbal formulas). They share several stylistic functions. On the adaptive level they are memorable for their ingenuity, and they


23 In the revised version, King cut out three of his metaphors, apparently because they were too harsh. Both the “thalidomide” and the “tail light” images were omitted, as was a reference to the few whites who had joined the black protest as “the leaven in the lump of race.”
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 unavoidably 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' 'Councillor' or the Ku Klux Klaner, 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 clarity before real communication can occur.24 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, troublemaker, 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 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 archetypal imagery:

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances 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 clergymen 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 clergymen," in the third 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,25 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 syntactic 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 or 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

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25 Larson says, "It is, indeed, unfair to speak of the 'tone' of the 'Letter,' for in its varied tones the 'Letter' is more like a musical performance than a piece of argument" (p. 86). True, but, as in a piece of music, the varied tones are all brought into harmony by the tonic note, in this instance the generous, conciliatory stance with which King states his uncompromising case.
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 lengthen.”

Or,

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negroes’ great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens’ “Councillor” 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, some 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 adaptive 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 (par. 12) 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; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an air-tight 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 her 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 white people treat colored people so mean?”; when you take a cross country drive 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 humiliating day in and day out by nagging signs reading “white” men 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 tip-toe 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.

This most impressive periodic sentence of 331 words is highlighted through contrast with the preceding 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 understated 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 persuasive 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.

**Conclusion**

Presumably a public letter, to be credible, must suit the ostensible audience; one of the virtues of the form is that it provides a relatively well-defined (ostensible) audience on which rhetorical and stylistic choices may be based. But this fact in turn both defines and controls the onlooking audience. We can never know who King’s readers were (or will be), but we can deduce who his fictionalized audience must have been. The refutative logic, discussed above, is careful and complex. Precise definitions are used involving careful distinctions. Uncommon (primarily Christian) allusions, some impressive vocabulary, complex syntax, and elaborate metaphor mark this, not as a piece of popular propaganda, but as a moral argument carefully designed for an audience of some sophistication.

The “Letter” lacks the elaborate pathos that might be persuasive to a purely popular audience, the emotional fireworks it could easily have employed about the evils of segregation. It uses instead a combination of logical and ethical persuasion, effective for a broad but generally well-educated audience, “sincere” readers “of genuine good will.”
Further, it is written for a concerned religious audience, an essentially conservative and traditional audience who would generally oppose civil disobedience but who would take the time to listen and not be alienated by extensive citing of other thinkers.

To lose the moral and social content of King’s argument in critical analysis of nuances would, of course, be a mistake. Central to this examination is the attempt to bring about a more refined appreciation of King’s text as an instance of rhetoric in the classical sense, a conspicuously compelling effort to persuade. It cannot be fully understood in isolation. As a public letter it stands in the context of its time and place, and it has a precise dialectical relationship to the document which provoked it. It is thus a very real effort to use language as a medium of social-problem solving, as a medium of change. Nevertheless, it also exists, especially for readers today, as a permanent articulation of human perception of an issue, which justifies examining it in all of its eloquent, rhetorical complexities. As an exercise in clarity and logic, King’s essay well deserves the fame it has gained. Its structure makes it both readable and thorough. Its refutative stance makes it alive with the fire of heated but courteous controversy, and the dual nature of the refutation makes it simultaneously persuasive and logically compelling. Its stylistic variety and nuance portray a personality in print, manipulate a reader’s emotions, and create a union of reader and rhetor.