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Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address

Lincoln was at the top of his game in manipulating the language in two different but complementary ways.

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In my On the Papers installment last issue, I looked with some care at the rhetorical music and structure of the fourth and final paragraph of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. This installment deals with the first two paragraphs of the same speech. It can stand by itself; but it would benefit from your reading the last issue's article beforehand.

In writing the final paragraph, his *peroration*, of his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln had concentrated his rhetoric primarily on lyricism, as he urged the country to take this moment as the beginning of the future. He was able to effect that memorable, musical closure because, in the previous three paragraphs, he had already taken care of the rhetorical *business* of narration, exposition, and argumentation. In this edition of On the Papers, we explore that business as it is done in the address's first two paragraphs.

We will find that he is at the top of his game in manipulating the language in two different but complementary ways: (1) He continues to understand in what structural locations of a sentence readers expect to find certain kinds of information; and (2) he continues to attend to the music of his prose, by expanding and contracting its rhythms. All of these concerns can prove helpful to you in reaching and controlling your audience in any legal brief,

memo, or letter you may need to write.



Illustration by Dave Klug.

With Union victory all but assured, just a few weeks prior to Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Lincoln could have used this occasion for a final rallying of the troops—for a pounding of the communal chest. He chose not to do so. He created instead a first paragraph that is quiet and modest. This was a fitting prologue for his purpose for the speech as a whole—to make possible, at its end, a great moment of rapprochement between the opposing sides. To achieve that, Lincoln uses rhetoric to produce a quiet, calm sense of control. He does this by his subtle manipulation of perspective, rhythm, and emphasis, with rhetorical techniques still viable today.

Perspective for a paragraph as a whole is controlled in prose by controlling “whose story” each sentence is. Note “whose story” he makes each of his first paragraph's five sentences. I remind you that a sentence in English is the story of who or whatever shows up as the grammatical subject. Here are the grammatical subjects for each of these five sentences: (1) “There” is a word that just waves at the wind, referring to no one nor no thing; (2) “A statement”; (3) “Little that is new”; (4) “The progress of our arms”—no people

here, just arms; and (5) “No prediction.” No “I”; no “we”; no “us.” Just the facts, disembodied. This is *the* story, not *our* story. A self-important president would have done just the opposite.

What kind of music did he summon to accomplish his rhetorical aim here? He needed something balanced, calm, and predictable, without being boring or wooden. Look at the colometric for the last two sentences of this opening paragraph: (For those new to my colometrics, just read each spaced unit on a horizontal line with one prose “beat.” Note how many beats each line has compared with its neighbors, and the balances will appear.) (Please [download the article PDF](#) to view the colometrics.)

The quiet 2 beats of the first line are expanded to 4 beats in the second line that can be neatly balanced internally into half-lines, thus retaining the sense of “two,” even though the unit of thought has expanded to 4 beats. Keeping control, he gives us a third line that repeats the rhythmic structure of its predecessor, with the two “as . . . to” mileposts pointing out again an internal 2+2 balance. Time to repeat the 2-beat line as line 4; and round it all out by ending with yet another internally balanced 4-beat line. Nothing strikingly dramatic, this is the music of quiet control. It presents the facts without fanfare so that they weigh only as a prologue for what is to come.

He could, instead, have relayed the same information in a manner to incite a self-congratulatory sense of victory. He could have put it something like this:

We all know, all too well, over the last four years, how this war has progressed. All of us, I trust, must feel that we have done well in the face of great difficulties. And, while stopping short of predicting our final victory in this war, we can all feel high hopes for its speedy and victorious conclusion.

This is also the story of its grammatical subjects, which now have become “we” and “all of us.” The stress positions, at the end of the sentences, emphasize progress and great difficulties and victory. That was not the

speech he came to make.

When he switches to the 3-beat lines of the last sentence, he raises the temperature just a bit by employing the musical technique of *rubato*: The 3 beats of “With high hope for the future” will expand to fill the space and shoulder the weight of the 4-beat line already posited as the norm in the previous sentence. But then comes a remarkable moment of rhetorical subtlety: Even with “high hopes” in hand, the “whose story” of this last sentence is neither “I” nor “we.” It is not even the story of a “prediction”; it is the story of “no prediction.” And what occupies the sentence’s stress position at the end of this paragraph? He ends with a verb that expresses as little action as possible—a mere “is ventured.” And to weaken that stress position even further, the verb, you will note, is used in the passive. Intentionally weakened stress positions are the opposite of chest-pounding. This is how to produce modesty in an atmosphere that could have produced hubris.

I’m sure his audience knew when he uttered that sentence that the paragraph was over. The clues could have come from his voice or from his pausing for just a moment. But he also uses a method of closure favored by Shakespeare—ending a scene in which there were no rhymes with a rhymed couplet. “Future” and “ventured” quietly sing to each other—not only in the similarity in the sounds of their last syllables but also with the secondary alliteration that occurs between *f* and *v*, the unvoiced and voiced versions of the same sound-making process. He ends a quiet paragraph with a quiet half-rhyme.

We can learn from him how to fashion narratives. If, of the six main facts you need to present in a single paragraph in your statement of the facts, you want your reader to note but not emphasize the third and fourth, then weaken the attention paid to them by *not* placing them in stress positions; and be sure to place all the others prominently next to colons, semicolons, or periods. If you wish the reader to attend to all these facts as being part of the story of your client, X, then be sure that X or something X-related appears as the grammatical subject of every sentence—even if in order to do

so you have to employ the passive. And when all of that is accomplished, then pay attention to how the rhythms of each of your subunits within a sentence are sending instructions to your readers about how to balance this unit with some other unit.

In his second paragraph, Lincoln looks backward four years and characterizes the irreconcilable attitudes and intentions of the conflicted parties. It is still too early in the speech to expend moral or emotional capital. To present conflict intellectually instead of emotionally, he relies once again on his techniques of balance and control, raising distinctions by a combination of (1) focused repetition and (2) a rhythmic, musical structure that we can see at work in the colometrics.

That repetition technique extends beyond multiple uses of the same word: It starts with “all” and then divides the country in half, into Northerners and Southerners, without naming them. All these repetitions exist *exclusively* as the grammatical subjects of the various clauses. He thus creates and controls a story that builds in power because of these hammering repetitions. Whose story is this paragraph? Here is the storyline, with the grammatical subjects capitalized in bold, and the verbs that denote actions in italics:

First sentence: C2

Second sentence: C3

Third sentence: C4

Fourth sentence: C5

Fifth sentence: C6

Let me compress the progress of this elegant structure even more: C7

At virtually every moment, Lincoln is using rhetorical techniques that have great effect upon his audience, without the audience necessarily being

aware of any of them. Here are a number of these techniques:

- The powerful number three appears immediately, with “all” doing three actions.
- All three of those actions alliterate, with the voiced *d* sounds in the verbs “directed” and “dreaded” speaking (through secondary alliteration) to their unvoiced partner *t* sounds in “sought to avert” it. All verbs.
- In the third sentence, our single act is de-personified into an address, which, in the passive, “was being delivered.” That is contrasted to their acts, which triple our number and are delivered in the active (very active!) voice. In addition, the three verbs are made even more of a group by the same *d* alliteration of “destroy,” “dissolve,” and “divide.”
- The audience experiences an “all” that agreed on something being divided into opposing forces: First there is *us*, trying to do a single constructive thing; and then there is *them*, three times over, trying to do something destructive. That gets reprised in the fourth sentence, when *both* hate war, but *they* do something bad, while *we* tried to do something good. Note that in this reprise, the *we*/*them* order is reversed to *them*/*we*. *We* get the last word. And, curiously, furthering the sense of confusion, the positive word “survive” is used for *their* action, while *we* are connected to the negative word “perish.” Topsy and turvy. Like the war.

Through four of the five sentences, everything said can find some kind of balance with a near neighbor. Look at the second sentence: C8

Here Lincoln uses a subtlety he learned from Shakespeare, who loved doing this: If the poet said the same thing twice in a row, the second iteration was often just a bit longer and more complex than the first. Here, “dreaded” becomes “sought to avert.” The rest stays the same.

In the fourth sentence, Lincoln's parallel structure is more extensive, cast in a form of alternating lines, somewhat reminiscent of a Shakespeare sonnet: C9

Look at the alternation that unfolds in the left vertical column: one/rather than//the other/rather than. The pattern repeats in the middle vertical column: would make/let the nation//would accept/let it. It happens a third time in the right vertical column: war/survive//war/perish.

This balancing continues throughout the 94 words that make up the first four sentences. Then, suddenly, with stunning effect, the final sentence contains only four words, with no more *them* or *us* about it. Whose story is that last, abrupt sentence? It is the story that **ALL** had feared: "And **THE WAR** came."

All of these balances would be cumbersome if their music did not participate in the balancing process. Lincoln carefully chooses how long each discrete subunit of prose will extend; and each unit speaks rhythmically to its neighbors. This is demonstrated with clarity by my colometric of the second paragraph (see colometric 10 on the right).

Lincoln establishes a 3-beat line right off. He expands to 4 beats for the expanded weight of his third line and then resolves again to 3 beats. In general here, Lincoln's 3-beat lines tend more toward the dramatic, compared with his 4-beat lines, which tend more toward the narrative. But it is not the number of beats in any one line that affects the listener or reader: Instead, it is the comparison of a given line length with that for any adjacent lines that matters. Examples follow.

With 3 beats in our ears, the next two lines gain added drama by being reduced to only 2 beats. See Colometric 11 on right.

This is another use of the musical technique of *rubato*, described above: The 2-beat lines expand to fill the time and match the weight of their longer predecessors.

Note then in the following sentence how he keeps to his 2-beat lines until he wants to expand and emphasize (in 3 beats) the noble goal of “to saving the Union without war.” He returns to the 2-beat lines until he wants to add this extra weight again, with the three nefarious acts of the insurgents. For those, he broadens again to 3-beat lines. Changing between 2 and 3 beats makes a difference in the tone, the weight, and the drama.

Four-beat lines are often his default value choice when he is narrating. This paragraph cares less about narrating and more about depicting opposing forces and increasing tension. He reverts to a 4-beat line to begin the fourth sentence so that the 3-beat lines that follow, with their sonnet-like alternations, can be delivered with greater intensity—again a use of *rubato*. Those four lines together create a rhetorical crescendo (the technical term for which is *auxesis*). The opposing forces have opposed themselves into an untenable dilemma.

With all of this music in our ears, the balancing and the alternating come to an abrupt halt, just when the *auxesis* seems to be coming to its climax; and then we get the stark, anti-musical, “And the war came.” How lonely. How catastrophic. How ironic.

Rhythm, repetition, and balance. Grammatical subjects that tell us whose story is being told; verbs that tell us what is happening; stress positions that tell us what to emphasize; music that tells us when to rise and when to fall. These are the tools of great writing, then and now.

We have one paragraph left in this speech—the penultimate and most difficult one. Next time.

Authors



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