Litigation #39

The Rhetorical Reasons Why Martin Luther King's "I have a dream speech" Is One of the Greatest 20th Century American Oratorical Gems

[*I urge you, either before or after reading this article – or both -- to listen to the speech online. It is 16 minutes in length*.]

If we formed a committee to choose the top five greatest American speeches of the 20th century, you can be sure that Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech would be, as the sportscasters say, "in the conversation." Narrow the choice down to two, and it would probably still be there. The odds would probably be in its favor to win. Why?

Context controls meaning. It also affects memorability. The Reverend King gave this speech at the right place (in the shadow of the Lincoln memorial), at the right time (100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation), and at a moment of great racial intensity in our history. He had a captive audience of millions. He was expert at making speeches. He understood the politics of the moment. He wrote it brilliantly. But what made it brilliant? His delivery was perfection itself. But how did he manage that?

The answers lie in his control of three ancient rhetorical figures of speech – *anaphora, auxesis,* and *epistrophe.* You probably will never have the opportunity to sway a nation with your oratory; but you may often have the opportunity to sway a room. An understanding of how Dr. King achieved his success may well help you better serve your clients.

Anaphora is the beginning of several consecutive units of discourse with the same, recognizable opening word or words. You might immediately recognize that the famous 3-paragraph "I have a dream" section of his 11-paragraph speech is sub-divided into a number of dreams, all introduced by the anaphoric unit-marker "I have a dream."

But that was – by far – not his only use of anaphora. In those 11 paragraphs, he uses it 8 times. It became a form of cheer-leading. In this essay *On the Papers*, we will look at some of those passages that precede the famous one. In the next issue's essay, we will follow him from that moment to his stunning conclusion.

His first anaphoric passage is in the 2nd paragraph. He notes that the Emancipation Proclamation occurred 100 years ago; and that "100 years" becomes his anaphoric marker.

but 100 years later, the Negro still is not free.

100 years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.

100 years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.

100 years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land.

The passage grows as it goes. The first unit is simple. It contains only 6 words after the anaphoric marker "100 years later." It contains but a single, simple clause.

The second unit expands: It contains 19 additional words; and its verb, "is crippled" depends on two agents ("manacles" and "chains"); and those agents are balanced with each other by each having its own prepositional phrase ("of segregation" and "of discrimination"). Note that balancing of twos. He uses it throughout the speech – to the point where we come, as listeners, to depend on it.

The third unit contains 20 words. It too is balanced, but this time not by twos but by threes: The three words "lonely island of poverty" balance the "vast ocean of ... prosperity." But the second of these triples is made slightly longer by including the addition adjective "material": "lonely island of poverty" // "vast ocean of material prosperity." This too is a constant device of his: If in balancing two essentially equal units you make the second one just slightly longer or heavier or more dramatic, the audience senses a slight sense of expansion and crescendo.

The last of these 100 year units continues that sense of expansion; for this time, the grammatical subject is afforded *two* verbs, each of which is followed by a balanced modifier – "in the corners of American society" and " in exile in his own land."

The crescendo in this passage is present, but not dramatic. It is too early in the speech for serious drama. The crescendo has a technical name – *auxesis*. We can already sense that auxesis can be created by a notable anaphora. Say "100 years later" four times, following each one by a serious statement that grows in complexity while still staying within the bounds of control. No violence. The control is produced by the insistence of everything being balanced, rhythmically and grammatically. He will repeat these techniques –

anaphora, auxesis, tempered by balance – throughout the speech. Each anaphora builds on those before it, creating a speech-long auxesis, that leads to an explosion at its end.

"100 years later" emphasizes in its repetition just how long a period has passed without true freedom having materialized. The next anaphoric passage follows two paragraphs being devoted to the metaphor of his community having been given a bad check. At its end, he uses a tame banking term that at the same time sounds threatening: "So we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon *demand* the riches of freedom, and the security of justice." He connects this to another tame word, "now," that also sounds somehow threatening, especially since he reserves it for the stress position of the end of the sentence: " We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of *now*." Having emphasized the word "now" by its placement at the end, he can then link it forwards to "This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism." If this is indeed "no time" for cooling off, then what kind of time could it be? He combines "now" and "time" to create his next anaphoric marker, "Now is the time."

This time, again building four anaphoric units like before, he does not repeat the constant growth from one unit to the next. Instead, he starts with a simple statement, grows larger and heavier for the second, balances the second by the third, and returns to a simple statement for the fourth. This produces a crescendo followed by a decrescendo. The units threaten to grow out of control, but are contained once again by balance:

> Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy.
>
> Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice.
>
> Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.
>
> Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

Counting the words that follow the "now is the time" marker, we have 11 words, followed by 21, followed by 20, followed by 14. Size alone carries us out and brings us back. You can clearly see the balancing factors in

the second and third units: the "dark and desolate valley" is resolved into the "sunlit path of racial justice"; the "quicksands of racial injustice" are resolved into the "solid rock of brotherhood." The first and fourth more simple units, also balance each other. So here we have an anaphora that intentionally does *not* create an auxesis. The prose here is balanced, contained, and markedly non-violent.

He devotes his 6th paragraph to urging all of his race not to lose control but to remain non-violent.

Immediately thereafter, in the 7th paragraph, he builds a third anaphoric unit that heats up the matter considerably. He introduces it with a question that devotes its stress position to words that will immediately become the next anaphoric marker: "There are those who asking the devotees of civil rights, when will you be satisfied?" The four sub-units of the previous anaphorae here grow to six sub-units, each one pounding away to create a dramatic auxesis. The anaphoric marker expands grammatically to become a full main clause – "We can never be satisfied":

> We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality.

> We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities.
>
> We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negroes basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one.
>
> We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating, For Whites Only.
>
> We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote, and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote.
>
> No, we are not satisfied and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Here the multiple repetitions of the troubling anaphoric marker are enough by themselves to create an auxesis. The sub-units grow not in size so much as in complexity, especially the fourth and fifth. We see again the careful balancings – "smaller" and "larger," "stripped" and "robbed" (both violent words), and "Mississippi" and "New York." We see again the increase in weight in the second of two balanced

phrases – "cannot vote" and "has nothing for which to vote."

The climactic sixth unit lets this auxesis explode – but not into violence. In that unit, Dr. King gives up his own voice in favor of that of a biblical text, from Amos 5:24. The final deluge is not one of destruction but of salvation. Let it all out – but control it. The Amos quotation uses the same kind of balance, with justice/righteousness resulting in waters/mighty stream. You can now guess from where Dr. King derived most of his rhetorical examples.

The 8th paragraph is an anaphoric wonder. He begins by giving us three iterations of "Some of you have come." "I am not unmindful that

> ... some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations.
>
> Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells.
>
> Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality.

In the last of these units, we see again his technique of

clearly balancing the "battered" and "staggered" sub-units, while making the second of the two just a touch heavier. The three main words of "battered by the storms of persecution" become four main words in "staggered by the winds of police brutality." These are mini-techniques that are noted by none but experienced by all. Note that he also gives us sound repetitions – the "s" sounds in "storms" and "staggered,' the "b" sounds in "battered": and "brutality," and the vowel sounds in "battered" and "staggered." All these taken together produced a polished piece of rhetoric, a sublime piece of oratory.

He ends this anaphora with a most remarkable sentence: "You have been the veterans of creative suffering." It is an 8-word buffer zone of sympathy, empathy, and pity. It snatches victory from the jaws of defeat.

Then immediately, having given us a short anaphoric passage on where his people "have come from," he follows it up with another anaphoric parade built on his advice to them as to where they should "go back to":

> Go back to Mississippi,
>
> go back to Alabama,

> go back to South Carolina,
>
> go back to Georgia,
>
> go back to Louisiana,
>
> go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.

What a change of anaphoric tempo! Instead of anaphoric sentences, we get a single, fast-paced sentence that contains five anaphoric sub-units. The first four pound away at southern states; and the longer fifth one takes care of the entire north. But although sounding like a possible crescendo, this anaphora does not reach its conclusion with any sense of climax. It is in the service of the next anaphora, which will begin at this memorable paragraph's end:

> Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. I say to you today, my friend, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

Here we go. He has already prepared us with 5 anaphorical passages, almost each of which creates a

local auxesis. Taken together, they have built a continual tension that has led us to this moment. The stage is set.

We can therefore view the next, famous, "I have a dream" anaphoric unit as a climactic arrival, prepared for by these multiple, smaller anaphoras that have preceded it. He will then add to it that third rhetorical device, *epistrophe* – the ending of several consecutive units with the same words, much in the way *anaphora* begins them. His intertwining of *epistrophe* and *anaphora* in a public speech is, in my experience, unique. I think it is a major reason the "I have a dream" unit is as well remembered as it is; and it depends not simply on the written text, but more dramatically in the way he orates the text.

In my next essay, we will explore this famous climax – and the ways in which, at its end, he is able to maintain that climactic energy and forge a yet greater *auxesis* that explodes in an even greater climax at his speech's end.

[The end of Part I of this article, published in two parts]

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How do we know that this announced "dream" is going to take over, is going to flower into the most famous and effective anaphora of 20th century American rhetoric? Look at the way he prepares for it locally. First he puts "I ... have a dream" at the end of a sentence, in its stress position. Then he starts the next sentence by repeating the dream at its beginning; and then he ends that short sentence by placing the dream once again in the stress position. He has revved up the rhetorical engine.

He ends the 8th paragraph by beginning the extended "I have a dream" anaphorical section that will stretch from the end of the 8th paragraph all the way into the 10th. That is a long time to support such a continual figure of speech. It results in a sublime auxesis. And in its middle, he performs a dazzling oratorical miracle that you cannot see on the page if you read it but was completely gripping when you listen to it. Let us watch this unfold.

The first of its 8 anaphorical sub-units ends by quoting the Declaration of Independence.

> I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed, "We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal."

Thomas Jefferson and Martin Luther King know how to occupy a stress position.

This first anaphoric unit, counting from the end of the marker "I have a dream," is 30 words long. The second, third, and fourth ones will be essentially equal in length – 33, 31, and 31 words long. The auxesis will not depend upon the sheer length of its units but rather be stoked by the constant intensification of its content.

The second anaphoric unit gives us a peaceful vision:

> I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

Georgia at that time was a seat of great racial unrest; but it paled somewhat in comparison to the distress in Mississippi and Alabama. We note that the parties sitting down at the table in Georgia are equal, and therefore are equally balanced by another of his pairs – the sons and the sons.

The third unit moves us to the more troubled state of Mississippi:

> I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

He increases the tension here by his use of two more pairs: On the one hand, we have a pair of swelterings; and on the other, the dream resolves that tension into a mild-weathered oasis of the pair of desiderata, "freedom and justice."

At the end of this unit, he performs his rhetorical magic trick. He does not pause at the period after "freedom and justice" but rather plunges headlong into the "I have a dream" beginning of the fourth unit, which will envision a great future for his children. *Then* he pauses. So the Mississippi unit begins and ends with "I have a dream."

At first, this might seem to be a usage of another figure of speech known as *epanalepsis* – the beginning and ending of a unit with the same words:

> Nothing will come of nothing. (*King Lear*)

> Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say rejoice. (Phillipians 4:4)

But nothing so tame as that is happening here. The Reverend King seems to have shifted from anaphora to its sibling figure of *epistrophe* – the ending of several units of discourse with the same word or words. This is a favorite technique of African-American preachers. The simplest example is when a congregation is invited to say "amen" at the end of a number of points being made by the preacher. With every successive "amen,"" the congregational response tends to grow in volume and power. In other words, epistrophe is also a way to create an auxesis.

The magic here is in King's delivery. "I have a dream," for the rest of this whole passage, functions simultaneously and therefore ambiguously as a beginning and an end. That results in our experiencing the closure of one dream and the beginning of the next at the same moment. It is an extraordinary way to create and sustain tension.

> ... will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice[.] I have a dream ... that my four little children . . .

All that is elided together in his delivery, with the only pause coming after the word "dream." We are into the vision of his children as we are still resolving Mississippi oppression into "freedom and justice."

Shakespeare (no surprise) articulates this phenomenon better than anyone else. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Enobarbus (in II, ii) describes Cleopatra's trip down the Nile with the lushest of detail, in an attempt to indicate her almost incredible powers of sexual control over all who see her. He ends with this:

> Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
> Her infinite variety; other women cloy
> The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry
> Where she most satisfies.

What an extraordinary sexual power – simultaneously to excite anew at the very moment of greatest fulfillment.

This same kind of energetic simultaneity MLK achieves by simultaneously ending one anaphoric unit and beginning another with a single utterance of "I have a dream": The energy gained by affecting closure combines with the energy given a new and echoing beginning. It is principally from this technique of combining anaphora and epistrophe that he can sustain such a long and glorious auxesis. Though it is nowhere visible on the page, it is clearly present when we listen to his delivery.

The fourth sub-unit, in full:

> I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

This is one of the most often quote portions of the speech. It is made memorable, and easily memorizable, by the rhythmic echo and the alliteration of yet again another balance of two things: "Color" is opposed by "content"; "skin" is opposed by "character"; and the "k" sounds in all four of those words make the comparison between the outer and the inner of those children ring.

This visionary moment needed closure. For his fifth sub-unit, he provides that by adding just a single word to his anaphoric/epistrophic marker:

> I have a dream today.

The marker takes over, all by itself – as a beginning and an end in itself.

After that refreshing stop at the oasis, the sixth unit comes roaring at us, followed by the seventh – the latter being a repetition of one-sentence fifth sub-unit.

Notice how he raises the heat in the sixth sub-unit, – 53 words instead of the 30 or so words for the first four sub-units – which brings us to Alabama and Governor George Wallace:

> I have a dream that one day down in Alabama with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.

This dream gets interrupted grammatically, at great length. The dream, that "one day . . . little black boys and black girls ...," must wait upon a 28-word outburst brought upon him by the very mention of Alabama. We get two of his bifurcated pairs – the racists and the governor on the one hand, and ther multi-syllabic "interposition and nullifcation" terms that are longer (5 syllables each), more Latinate, and more condescending than any of the other words in this speech. The repeated vowel sounds in "lips" and "dripping" add to the ugliness and bestiality of the animal imagery they present.

But the true balanced couple here is the juxtaposition of the racists and the governor on the one hand and the

double-double of the black boys and black girls with the white boys and white girls on the other. The 18 words devoted to the former, as horrible as the image might be, are outdone by the 23 words of the children joining together. No wonder he punctuates the speech by another solo sentence – the 7th anaphoric unit -- reiterating that he has a dream today.

How could he write the final words of this long auxesis so that they would be powerful enough to absorb all the tension of the build-up and be grand enough to bring it to a sufficient, successful closure? He was wise enough to repeat his solution to that problem with his earlier "we can never be satisfied" auxesis: He gives up his own voice in favor of the Bible's:

> I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

Again, at 48 words, this is significantly longer than any of the first four sub-units. He is quoting Isaiah 40:4. You can locate the several balancings of two elements throughout, which flow so easily from the rest of the speech. I think it significant that these words also

evoke a famous piece of music. They are the text for the opening tenor aria from Handel's *Messiah*. MLK is invoking a human solution to racism that parallels the messianic vision of a day of equality and peace. But for those who know the famous work by Handel, they hear the music of it as well. MLK will invoke two other pieces of music before he is finished.

He sums all of this up, having now ended his "Dream" auxesis, with the simple statement, "This is our hope." He echoes that immediately with "This is a faith." That is his springboard into his seventh, penultimate anaphoric unit. Here are all of its three sub-units:

> With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

He orates this with a sense of expansion throughout, but with no sense of a crescendo that will need to be satisfied by a glorious arrival at its end. He had to save that drama for the eighth anaphora, which will bring us

to the speech's end and closure and climax.

The mini-drama of the seventh is in part due to its sizing. The first two "with this faith" sub-units have 16 and 18 words following the anaphoric marker. The first invokes a stony metaphor and the second a musical one. In his 12th paragraph, he will take up the musical metaphor by giving us the lyrics of a song his whole audience was likely to know; and in the 13th and last paragraph, he will revisit the mountains and the stones. The 11th paragraph is therefore to be considered prep work for his grand closure.

The third, much longer sub-unit (32 words) in the 11th paragraph itself contains an internal anaphoric burst built out of five infinitives – "to work," "to pray," and so forth. It becomes a mini-auxesis by itself, reaching closure with the dreamed of words "be free one day."

As he has done so often to this point, he takes the word that occupies the stress position of the just-ended sentence, in this case "day," and imports it into the next sentence, beginning the next section. At this point, I sense, Dr. King was starting to lose his total, cool control, and got just a touch nervous – or at least anticipatory – since he knew the grand climax was nearing. It think it led him to repeat "This will be the

day":

> This will be the day, this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning, My country, Tis of thee, Sweet land of Liberty, Of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, Land of the Pilgrim's pride, From every mountainside, Let freedom ring. If America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

Here he combines the music and the mountainsides of his previous paragraph, and brings us to the end of the song's invocation, "let freedom ring." This is white music; but he makes it, given his vision, inclusory music that reaches all Americans, no matter their race. By ending his musical quotation with "let freedom ring," he can – yet once again – use that stress position occupant to establish the marker for his next and final anaphoric unit. It is an auxesis in itself; but it supplies a climax for the sensed crescendo that continues all the way through the speech.

So we come to the 13th and final paragraph – a cinematographic tour of the country in a conveyance of anaphora:

> So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty

> mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. Let freedom ring from the snow capped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that, let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring, and when this happens, when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!

The anaphoric reference to that white patriotic song carries us throughout the USA on a well-organized tour of its mountains, large and small: We start in the northeast (New Hampshire); we descend in a southerly direction to encounter New York; then further in the same direction to Pennsylvania; and then we sweep across the country to Colorado. And all this time, the mountains are getting bigger and bigger: They form a

kind of pictorial auxesis by themselves. We complete the westward swing by arriving in California.

To this point, we have not visited the South, the primary focus of Dr. King's geography. When we get there, we find mountains in Georgia and Tennessee that have Civil War and Ku Klux Klan connections. When we reach Mississippi, whose highest point is a non-mountainous 807 feet, we are greeted with mere hills and ignominious molehills.

Now in a real state of excitement, Dr. King stumbles over his transition to the speech's final sentence ("when we allow freedom ring"), and delivers to us his final hailstorm of balanced pairs – village/hamlet, state/city, Black men/white men, Jews/gentiles, Protestants/Catholics – all of whom will be able to join hands and sing, as their comprehensive, inclusatory hymn, a famous piece of black music. Like so many other moments in the speech, he anaphorically repeats a phrase at the beginning – "Free at last!" – and then ends with it: "Free at last." The final auxesis, and the overall auxesis, has come to a glorious end.

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I have never, in these articles *On the Papers*, stated any

of my personal beliefs on issues. My concern is rhetoric and writing. But in this case (and I am writing this on Martin Luther King Day of 2022), I want to state that although our racial problems in this country are nowhere near solved, I think it is important to take note, every once in a while, of the extraordinary progress that has been made since the early 1960s, when race became recognized as one of the country's most pressing problems. A few years ago, while reading a newspaper article about the championship basketball game in North Carolina's state-wide high school tournament, I became fixated on the accompanying photograph of two members of the victorious team. They were leaning against each other, obviously still exhausted from the contest, forehead to forehead, with their arms curled around each other's neck. One was white and one was black. No such photograph would have been printed in a newspaper in North Carolina 60 years earlier. As someone who was coming of age in the turbulent 60s, that picture brought tears to my eyes. I wished Dr. King had survived to see it.