The Rhetoric of Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address:

Why It Works the Way It Works

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The Gettysburg Address

> Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.
> Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.

Note: The following letter of analysis is written to President Lincoln by Miss Annabel Grundy, Lincoln's old rhetoric teacher when he was a boy. He maintained an on-going relationship with her by sending her all his most important speeches, for which she acted as a kind of consultant or coach. She absent-mindedly (hmm) refers to them as "assignments" in order to retain the old power structure between them.

Note on the note:

Abraham Lincoln had no formal schooling in which he was taught advanced rhetoric. He had precious little schooling at all. There was no Miss Annabel Grundy. For the purposes of the present document, this slight factual discrepancy matters not.

A further note:

Lincoln was a great admirer of Shakespeare's work. He felt that reading improved the mind, and that Shakespeare's plays were the best works to read. Shakespeare's default meter was iambic pentameter – five accentable two-syllable or three-syllable units ("feet") per line. Lincoln himself attempted to write poetry. According to the unidentified editor of The Poems of Abraham Lincoln (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1991), Lincoln wrote a total of three poems: "My Childhood's Home," "But Here's an Object," and "The Bear Hunt." All three are written in "ballad meter" – alternating four-stress and three-stress lines, in imitations of the great Scottish Border Ballads. It is a meter well suited to oral performance and ease of memorization. Here is the first stanza from "My Childhood's Home."

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

The drama and pathos increase during its ten stanzas; but the quality of the verse never rises to a level that would threaten to undo the sublime standing of Shakespeare as first among poets. The final stanza:

I range the fields with pensive tread
    And pace the hollow rooms,
And feel (companion of the dead)
    I'm living in the tombs.

Lincoln knew his poetic skills were not sufficient to attempt the nobler, more complex iambic pentameter line. Poetry is easier to create in three-stress or four-stress lines; five stresses require a far more sophisticated hand than most writers possess. Ballad meter, a much simpler affair, was good enough for Abe Lincoln – and probably all he could handle. When it came to prose, it was a different matter altogether, as this colometric analysis will demonstrate.

Afternote:

I have borrowed the term "colometric" from Biblical exegesis. It refers to the "cutting" (a root meaning of the word "colon") of prose lines into their smaller, rhythmic sub-units. It is a way of demonstrating in writing how one hears the rhythm of prose – as an aid not only to performance but also to interpretation. Having experimented with its possibilities since the 1960s, I was intrigued by an imaginative use of it in 1974 by Jack S. Margolis, who published a slender paperback volume entitled The Poetry of Richard Milhous Nixon. It was a selection of infamous quotations from the Watergate tapes, arranged into poetic length lines, with no alteration of text or punctuation. Margolis had discovered Nixon had a number of rhythmic tendencies in his natural speech that produced locally balance phrases. These could then be arranged on a page visually to indicate their rhythmic structure, in the manner of poetry. Margolis was juxtaposing the highly unpoetic political chicanery of the president with the musical euphony of his natural speech tendencies. The result was dark, comic irony. Here is an example. (The "titles" are supplied by Margolis.)

The Jackasses in Jail

It is going to cost a million dollars
To take care of the jackasses in jail.

That can be arranged.

That could be arranged.

But you realize that after we are gone,

And assuming we can expend this money,

Then they are going to crack

And it would be an unseemly story.

Frankly,

All the people

Aren't going to care

That much.

Arranging lines of prose into what looks like poetic form can help demonstrate how the text functions. The opposite is also the case: If we reduce even famous poetry to the form of prose, certain poetic aspects of it will disappear. For example:

> When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes, I all alone bewail my outcast state, and trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries, and look upon myself and curse my fate.

If one does not know this text already – the beginning of Shakespeare’s 29th sonnet – one might well miss the equal balances and oppositions set up by its being four lines of iambic pentameter with alternating rhymes:

> When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,
> I all alone bewail my outcast state,
> And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
> And look upon myself and curse my fate.

Things seem to happen to the mind in response to the poetic form that might well not have happened in response to the prose format. We can more easily detect the alternation between looking outwards (lines 1 and 3) and looking inwards (lines 2 and 4). The rhyme becomes pronounced – literally and figuratively. His "fate" has caused his unhappy "state." The "cries" of the third line, when taken in the context only of the third line, clearly mean something auditory, like "shouts." The word does not seem to connect to the act of "crying," as in the shedding of tears. But the teary suggestion happens because "cries" is rhymed with "eyes." The end-word of line 1 comes to mind as we approach the end of line 3 because we know, this being a sonnet, that these two end-words will sound the same. The subtle presence of tears in "cries" is further supported by the word "bewail" existing about half-way between the two rhyme words. If you take away the poetic form, you run the risk of losing all those interpretive experiences.

It stand to reason, then, that arranging prose units into their own natural rhythmic sub-units may suggest relationships between words, thoughts, and thought progressions that can be felt in a normal listening or reading but perhaps not consciously noted. This is true only of texts whose quality is high because of the integral relationship between their structure and their substance. If you make a colometric of a badly written text by a writer with no ear for music, you are likely to come up with no new insights into its function.

I take this a step further than Margolis, and in imitation of the Biblical exegetes who use colometry to analyze Biblical verse, by sub-dividing individual horizonatal lines into their rhythmic sub-units. Applying that to the Nixon Watergate quote, it would come to look like this:

It is going   to cost   a million   dollars
To take care   of the jackasses   in jail.
That   can be arranged.
That   could be arranged.

But you realize   that after   we are gone,
And assuming   we can expend   this money,
Then   they are going   to crack
And it would be   an unseemly   story.

Frankly,
All   the people
Aren't   going to care
That much.

Constructing a colometric analysis of the Gettysburg Address reveals not only its inherent musicality, but also the ways in which the rhetoric attempts to direct and control the reader's/listener's attention and interpretive progress throughout the speech. It allows small portions of the text to be read vertically as well as horizontally – just like two rhyme words talk to each other vertically better than they do horizontally.

a2.

A

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

B

Now we are engaged in a great civil war,

testing whether
that nation or any nation
so conceived and so dedicated
can long endure.

C

We are met on a great battlefield of that war.
We have come to dedicate a portion of that field
as a final resting- place
for those who here gave their lives that
that nation might live.
It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

D

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

E

The brave men,
living and dead
who struggled here
have con- secrated it far above
our poor power
to add or detract.

The world **F**

will little note
nor long remember
what we say here,

but it can never forget what they did here.

It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here **G**
to the unfinished work which they who fought here
have thus far so nobly advanced.

It is rather for us to be here dedicated **H**
to the great task remaining before us--

that from these honored dead
we take increased devotion
to that cause for which they gave
the last full measure of devotion --

that we here highly resolve

that these dead shall not have died in vain, **I**
that this nation
under God
shall have a new birth of freedom,

and that government
of the people,
by the people,
for the people
shall not perish from the earth.

Miss Annabel Grundy to Abraham Lincoln, President, November 22, 1863

Dear Abe –

Thank you for sending me your latest public speech and the informative colometric you have constructed for it. The speech is, in general, a really fine piece of work. It is much improved over those you used to write for my classes. It has more energy and more elegance – perhaps inspired by the first piece of good news you've had in a long time, from that battle a few months ago in Gettysburg. In fact, I would say this piece is good enough to have earned the category title of "Address." Well done. It has a weak point in the middle, with which I've helped you. (See below.) But there are many strong points, some of which I dwell on to you here. The numbering and lettering system below corresponds to the numbers and letters I've written in the margins of your paper.

By the way: I know you yourself were not well satisfied with this effort. I think you're wrong – and that you're allowing yourself to be too depressed by this interminable war to take hope in any given moment of the process. Cheer up. I feel sure this will all come out well in the end, even if that end is nowhere now in sight. You're doing a really good job, under very bad conditions. Keep up the good work.

Comments

A. The opening is both imaginative and daring. It's imaginative in that anyone would be really stymied as to what could be done with an unmemorable number like eighty-seven. The "four score," while admittedly a bit dated, raises this opening moment to the level of high rhetoric; it successfully warns your readers of the solemnity and rhetorical weight of what is to come. No one would be engaged the same way had you started out, "Eighty-seven years ago . . . ."

It is daring because you have reached for Shakespearean heights in attempting an echo of his five-stress line of blank verse. I know this was in your mind, given you admiration of the Bard, your own attempts at poetry (noble, but unimpressive – keep your day job), and the clear evidence from the colometric you've done for me.

You were even bolder to attempt a second five-stress line; and you were appropriately wise in abandoning it for the third and fourth lines (see colometric), where you settled for four-stress lines. The four-stress line is easier to write and easier to orate; but it also stays in the Shakespearean mode, since so many of his most famous lines, although written in five feet, are performed with only four stresses. (I'm happy to see you've learned this from my class.)

> Now is/ the win-/ ter of/ our dis-/ content
> Made glo-/ rious sum-/ mer by/ this son/ of York
> (iambic pentameter – five feet)
>
> NOW is the WINter of our DIS-conTENT
> Made GLOrious SUMmer by this SON of YORK
> (accentuation in performance – four stresses)

You establish a nice balance between the participles "conceived" and "dedicated." It is strong enough so that we are prepared to separate the following line into the four heavy stresses you so clearly wanted us to hear:

> ALL MEN ... CREATED ... EQUAL.

It was a fine touch to bring to our minds the Declaration of Independence. That's a nice use of allusion.

B. Your next sentence is a real triumph. It is both very sophisticated and flowingly elegant – a difficult combination to achieve. I can easily see your intentions from your colometric. Line 5 establishes a pronounced "five" – leading us back to the effect of the Shakespearean line of the beginning. This might raise the expectation that we will immediately have another "five" to balance it, since one five tends to invite another. Although what we first see in lines 6-9 does not at first seem at all a "five," by the time we come to the end of that structure we can see and hear how it is reverberant of "five." These lines are just brilliant. We can be sure of that from the way you arrange your columns. The echo of "nation" with "nation" and of "conceived" with "dedicated" gives us a repeat, an extension, of the second and third columns in this complex "five." You are giving us an echo of line

7 by the parallel rhetorical and rhythmical structure of line 8:

"that nation	or any nation"
"so conceived	and so dedicated."

In line 7, the modifier varies, but remains connected: "That" multiplies into "any." But the line is anchored by the exact repetition of the more substantial term, "nation." Contrastingly, in line 8, it is the smaller modifier, "so," that remains the same, while the more substantial terms – the participles – vary but remains connected: "Conceived" expands into "dedicated."

You demonstrate the confidence to be able to interrupt your progress towards the closure of "five" for a repetitive echo of columns two and three. It is a technique often used by the European musical composers of our era. You have quite an ear.

And then on top of that, just to ensure that we can hear this sentence as all one poetic unit, you offer a faint "rhyme" in the fourth columns – "war" and "endure." Really subtle! Well done.

C. The next two sentences – lines 10-15 of your colometric – are just a touch rougher rhythmically, but a really good reach for elegance. You cleverly and skillfully give us two lines of "four," followed by two lines of "three," followed by a line of "two," and then – wonderful to see – a line of "five." Daring! The rhythmic decrescendo thus induced is appropriate to the solemnity of the moment. It also transitions us neatly from the high rhetoric of your opening 9 lines down to a less ringing rhetoric, which I think is called for by the text. And what a wonderful rhythmic surprise for us. After two "fours" and two "threes" and then a single "two," you have us expecting (for the sake of predictable balance) a second 'two"; but instead, you give us a surprising and uplifting"five," which returns us to the nobility of the "fives" of your opening two lines. I wish some of our American composers could make such good use of European musical expectations. I fear we shall have to wait for some other century for our composers to catch up.

I said this was a touch rougher. It is due to the slight awkwardness created by the repetition of the word "that" both to end line 13 and to begin line 14 in the colometric. I can see why you didn't put the two "that"s on line 14: It would look unreadable. But you perhaps can hear now why this moment is not up to the strong forward-moving fluidity of the rest of the piece to this point. It's complicated further by the previous appearance of "that" in more prominent locations in lines 10 and 11. Those two "that"s talk to each other because of the parallel structure in which they exist; but the second set of "that"s (ll. 13-14) try to avoid each other because their jobs are so different, so "un-parallel."

D. With your semantic warning that we are to engage with "a larger sense" (line 16), you plunge us into the higher drama of lines 16-20. You had established a resounding "two" in line 14, which, although it could have introduced almost any rhythmic structure, firmly prepares us for the series of "twos" that then assail us. The assault is led – (please pardon the war imagery in my prose, but it's in the air now, as you know) – by your use of anaphora: The repetitive "we cannot . . ." makes us attend to and value the three verbs that follow. It is another bold move, since the audience had gathered in Gettysburg precisely to do those things – dedicate, consecrate, and hallow; and here you are, telling them they *can't* do that. We are all ears to hear (lines 21-26) why this is so.

And then we discover from your colometric something again dazzling. Lines 16-20, just like lines 6-9, prove to be an "interrupted five." That is, the beginning and ending of the unit prove to be a "five" that is interrupted by a set of parallel "two"s. The interruption in lines 16-20 is even more virtuosic because your interruption continues for three of these sub-unit "two"s instead of just the two in lines 7 and 8. Wonderful! It adds to your sense of auxesis here – a long, growing crescendo.

Your colometric is also helpful for one detail that could future performances of this speech (which I feel sure there will be). I think most people would mis-orate this moment if they worked only from a regular text. They might mistakenly stress (and therefore anaphorize) the "cannot." After all, you're telling them they "cannot" do things they clearly want to do. But your colometric shows us that the anaphoric unit you want us to focus on is the

"we." And that sets up nicely the lines that are to follow. WE cannot do these things because THEY, the people who fought here, have already done the job for us. This point is so subtle that I fear future generations of solemn orators will not notice it and will stumble incoherently through, telling us that we CANNOT do things. Ah well. Perhaps they'll have a teacher of rhetoric to set them straight.

E. I like lines 21-26 as well. You continue the solemnity of the "twos" from the previous section. You begin the passage by offering us a slant rhyme with "men" and "dead," helping to establish a rhythmic parallel. And then the word "here" – so important in the dedication of a *place* – can then receive an equally solemn stress, following in the rhythmic pattern established by its two predecessors. And then, wondrously, we are carried into an unlooked-for line of "four" – suggesting by its very sound how much greater the achievement of those fighting men had been in consecrating this place than we could ever hope to achieve by mere words ourselves, even aided by the solemnities of this special day. And then you slip back into "twos." You have created a kind of musical crescendo, starting in line 21, culminating in line 24, and then decrescendoing to line 26. Just wonderful.

F. Your colometric is particularly helpful in demonstrating the flow and balance you were after here. Imperfect orators who haven't the benefit of having seen your colometric might well stumble on this passage. But anyone who has seen the colometric would be sure to "get it right" in performance.

You do a marvelous job here – (I'm running out of superlative adjectives, which never happens to me) – of recapitulating a remarkable effect from earlier in the speech. You repeat that sophisticated structure I noted above from lines 6-9 and from lines 16-20: Lines 27-30, here, taken as a whole, gives us another "five" (as the columns indicate), with an interruptive echo, created by a repeat of the second and third columns along the way. In lines 6-9, you created the necessary balance by echoing in a horizontal manner: "Nation" balanced "nation" in the same line; "conceived" balanced "dedicated" in the same line; and the smaller words talked to each other as well. Then, in lines 16-20, "we" was balanced by "cannot [verb]" three

times. But here, in lines 27-30, you achieve the balance in a different way: “little” talks to “long,” both through their meanings and through the alliteration of the “l”; and “note” talks to “remember.” I begin to wonder whether you didn’t create the colometric form first and then fill in the words. (Just kidding.)

And then you produce the solemn weight of the Shakespearean blank verse “five” for the memorable line 31, which concerns itself with memory. You tie the echo-inclusive “five” of lines 28-30 to the straightforward “five” of line 31by the strong vertical parallels – vertical in the colometric form:

. . .	what we	say here
. . .	what they	did here

The vertically parallel “what”s and “here”s establish the strength and solidity of the structure; and the oppositive qualities of “we” versus “they” and “say” versus “did” drive the point home: Their actions really consecrated this place; those things are memorable. Our words may be appropriate; but they are only in the service of the actions of the men who fought and died here.

And may I, Mr. Presiddent, be allowed to presume to tell you that you are absolutely wrong in your claim here (ll. 27-30)? The world, I predict, will take *great* note and will *long* remember what you have said here. I can just feel it.

G. But now we come to the scruffy part. Perhaps you tired a bit at this point? Too much on your mind to go back and clean up the rhythm and make your colometric less rhythmically awkward? The rest of the address is so extraordinary: It is a shame this one moment should come closer to the ordinary. I think even Edward Everett would have told you to spend a few more moments on this passage. You create what looks like a parallelism (in lines 32-33), to be sure; but the rhythm fails to be parallel because the main thrust of the meaning of these two lines does not allow the reader (and probably the listener) to exert any kind of emphasis on either of the arrivals

of the word “here.” When a colometric invites such an emphasis by vertical repetitions of the same word, but no oratorical sense can be made of stressing both of them, something is probably wrong with the rhetorical structure. Here is your colometric for these struggling lines:

It is for us   the living   rather   to be dedicated   here
to the unfinished   work   which they   who fought   here
          have thus far   so nobly   advanced.

You can even SEE the problem, can’t you? Those poor “here”s are left dangling out in space, hardly connected to the previous text which produced them. We cannot SEE how the “us” and the “they” are supposed to talk to each other, lost as they are in the structure. The sentence ends with the word “advanced”; but the sentence, ironically, has great trouble “advancing.”

Retaining your words, here is a proposed revision that I think is somewhat better -- but still nowhere near the quality of the rest of the piece:

          It is rather   for us the living
          here   to be dedicated
          to the unfinished   work which
          here   they who fought
have thus far   so nobly   advanced.

I think what you were after was a play on the use of the word “dedicate.” We don’t have the standing to dedicate *this field* (since they have already done all the hard work); but we do have the ability to dedicate *ourselves* – and we should do so. We should finish the work they have begun, using this moment to raise our adrenalin and renew our commitment. I can see a colometric in which the balancing of what they did and what we must do appears from the rhythms and the placements of those pieces of substance. Maybe this is a moment when you could call upon the prose equivalent of that meter you always preferred when you used to write poetry. Perhaps you could give a “four” line to us, followed by a “three” for what we must do; that could then be balanced by a similar “four” line for them, followed by a “three” line for what they had already done. I can’t do the job as well as you could; but here’s an atempt:

It is rather	for us,	who continue	living,
to dedicate	ourselves	and our efforts	
to finish	the work	that those	who fought here
had thus far	so nobly	advanced.	

In "prose," it would look like this:

> It is rather for us, who continue living, to dedicate ourselves and our efforts to finish the work that those who fought here had thus far so nobly advanced.

I'm just not as good as you are at this; but I hope you see what I mean about the structure.

H. You see how here, in line 35, you felt it necessary to repeat this concept of our "dedicating" ourselves. And why did you do this? (I've told you about this before. Remember?) You did it because you recognized that you hadn't done the job well enough in the previous passage! Don't be afraid to use your eraser! Doing it better the second time does not justify leaving the former botched job in the text. Perhaps the speech could be improved simply by omitting the previous, problematic sentence (lines 32-34).

Having growled enough now, I'll quickly add that this passage, lines 35-40, is noble, uplifting, elegant, and powerful. The emphasis you invite us to place here on the words "for us" is the key to getting this passage going. "We," not "the field," must be dedicated. You finally got it right. Lines 37-40 are memorable – and memorizable -- for a number of reasons: the alliteration of the vertically placed "dead" and "devotion" (twice); the vertical connection between "increased" and "full measure"; and the difference in meaning of the two "devotion"s, made possible by the parallelism of the "we take" and the "they gave." All these work wonderfully well. In this address, you have used "fives" for nobility, "twos" for intensity, and now "threes" for solemnity. You have chosen well

in each case. Your studies in rhetoric have served you well.

I. In line 41 you had announced, in stentorian terms, that the peroration of this short speech is at hand. No one could miss it – with its “highly resolve” raising the highest of expectations for what will come. You have intelligently colometricized this as a “three,” making it flow easily from the previous four lines, all of which were “threes.” It is as if the bow is being drawn. The shaft you fire from that bow in the concluding lines, 42-50, will, I predict, be known and cherished by Americans for all time – assuming the country survives this wretched war. Its rhetorical brilliance just dazzles me. Its music won’t get out of my head. And you have done such a good job using your colometric to instruct us how to sing these lines. Here is that section:

that these	dead	shall not	have died	in vain,
that this	nation			
		under God		
		shall have	a new birth	of freedom,
and that	government			
		of	the people,	
		by	the people,	
		for	the people	
		shall not	perish	from the earth.

I’m so delighted with both the verticality and the horizontality of this passage. Your columns are so strong. Had we columns this strong at Bull Run or Fredericksburg or Chancellorsville, perhaps the war would not have lasted this long. The first vertical column contextualizes us for everything that follows each of its three categories: “that these,” “that this,” and “and that” help take us from the past (“these dead”) to the present (“this nation”) and to the future (“that government”).

The second vertical column is filled with the people and institutions whose story this final passage tells. And you have cleverly and powerfully used that old 16th century rhetorical trick of increasing the number of syllables to show an increase in rhetorical tension: “Dead” is one syllable; “nation” is

two; and "government" is three. You might have had Shakespeare in mind again: "Friends" was one syllable; "Romans" was two; "countrymen" was three; and "lend me your ears" was four. Neat – and memorable.

The third column rings with echo: "shall not"; "shall have"; "shall not." By giving this trio of verbish phrases its own column, you signal us to allow them a certain amount of stress is our performance of them, underscoring the negatives of the first and third and the positive of the second.

I must recognize here what a bold stroke – *such* a bold stroke – for you to have the courage to interrupt this extraordinary colometric moment by the insertion of "under God." It doesn't seem to fit anywhere. It "spoils" the symmetry. Why did you do this? I think I understand why you did this. God's presence, you are suggesting, can and should be felt at any moment, in any way, as part of every thing. Even at this stunning, emotional moment of this momentus speech, as everything is building in an auxesis the likes of which I cannot recall in previous American rhetoric, even then the presence of God should be allowed to intrude itself. "Under God" can spoil no structure. If we ever have a pledge of allegiance to our flag, and they forget to put that into it, I bet they'll be able to add it years later without causing as much as a rhythmic ripple.

And, I must note, you can get away with this rhythmically intrusive "under God" because you have used this "internal echo" technique in other "fives" several times before, all of which I have pointed out: lines 6-9; lines 16-20; and lines 28-30.

You reinforce that by placing in the same vertical column "have died," "a new birth," and "(not) perish." I think you were right to end with a negative instead of a positive. Given this horrible war, swirling all around us, we need to believe that we and our government will "not perish." So many have perished.

The last vertical column is subtler in its parallelism, for which you deserve kudos. If it had been semantically parallel, like the others, the very end of the address would have been immediately and disappointingly predictable by its listeners. Given "Papa Bear" and "Mama Bear," they would know all

too well that the ending would give us “Baby Bear.” We, as listeners, would end the speech for you. The way you’ve arranged it, you, as the orator, end it for us.

But if you had no connections between these words whatsoever, they would have seemed out of place in a structure that is otherwise so wonderfully isometric. So what did you do? Why, of course, you did something else you learned from Shakespeare. Secondary alliteration! Very nice. (Yes, I know: I invented the term to describe the relationship of sounds that are paired by being the voiced and unvoiced efforts of the same noise-making structure of the mouth, tongue, and palate. The sounds of “B” and “P” are both made the same way by the mouth, tongue, and palate; but “B” uses voice, while “P” does not.) Secondary alliteration functions in the ear when it is accompanied by actual alliteration. A “B” and a “P” might not “talk” to each other much in a line of poetry; but if two or three “B”s show up, establishing alliteration, then a “P” or two can add their strength to the on-going party. (The same would be the case if “P” alliteration were established, thus allowing a “B” or two to join the party.) Here you have combined the voiced sound of “V” with its unvoiced partner “F”: the “V” sounds in “vain” and “of” connect to the “F” sounds in “freedom” and “from,” together producing just enough of an auditory echo in this last column to hold it together as a vertical unit. That is very sophisticated, very subtle writing.

And then you employ that marvelous enhanced “five” technique yet again! Just looking at it on the page in colometric form is such a pleasure. You’ve encased these final five lines (46-50) in – well, I knew you would do this – “fives.” Having had the temerity to begin with “fives” and the wisdom to revert to them at important moments of local closure or enhanced dignity throughout, of course you would have to ring in the triumph of the end of this address with Shakespearean “fives.” But your “fives” had to be climactic. So you gave us one straightforwardly in line 42. Then you gave us another with the single wrinkle of “under God” in lines 43-5. But then you interrupt the “five” that begins in line 46 (“and that government . . .”) with a repetitious series of “twos,” held together by epistrophe (ending a number of units with the same words):

of the people
by the people
for the people

And to prevent us from getting "lost" in the power of this list, you keep us moving forward by employ asyndeton – the omitting of the conjunction "and" – which prevents us from experiencing too much closure at the end of the list. That is a brilliant detail. And I'll bet you right now that many people who memorize this address in the future – (and millions will, I feel sure) – will mar the moment by putting in their own "and."

So if we look at the five times you have used this "internal echo" or "interrupted" technique in lines that are trying to be "fives," we see a steady progression of daring complication:

lines 6-9: The echoing pair ("that nation or any nation" and "so conceived and so dedicated") is tightly knit, one line to the other, and therefore easy for the listener or reader to handle.

lines 16-20: The echo has now expanded to three lines instead of two ("we cannot dedicate," "we cannot consecrate," and "we cannot hallow"). This list is held together by the anaphora of the repeated "we cannot," each preceding a powerful verb

lines 27-30: This two-line echo is rhetorically trickier ("will little note" and "nor long remember"). The parallelism of the grammatical structure is enhanced by sound repetitions to glue the whole together – "little" and "long," "note and "nor," "will" and "little."

lines 42-45: Here you insert the "under God" phrase, which attaches to nothing else in any of these rhetorical ways – no alliteration, no anaphora, no comparative syllable count.

lines 46-50: Saving the best and most daring for last, this is a "five" that is embellished not only by an interruptive list of three ("of," "by," and "for" the people) but also by a fourth member (!) ("shall

> not perish") that is not in the parallel form established by the reverberating epistrophe. (Epistrophe, you will remember, is the figure of speech that ends several consecutive units with the same thing. It is anaphora's twin sibling.) But you manage to tie this fourth list member to the other three through alliteration. Having heard three articulations of "people," we recognize that "p" again when it appears in the vertically parallel "perish." Brilliant!

And one more remarkably subtle tactic: You set up the possibility of this epistrophic list of prepositional phrases by immediately preceding it with another prepositional phrase that also uses "of" – "of freedom." That prepares us nicely for the arrival of the list that begins with "of the people."

I was tempted to take off points for your messing up lines 35-40; but your performance was so stunning throughout the rest of the piece, I just have to give you an A. No, make that an A+. Don't let it go to your head. You may have another inaugural speech to write one day. That will have to be a good one, too.

Your admiring teacher,

Annabel Grundy