

Martin Luther King, Jr. Borrows a Revolution: Argument, Audience, and Implications of a Secondhand Universe

Calling for “the rhetor’s search” with an audience “for mutually agreeable grounds for probable knowledge” (157), John Gage criticizes the way composition textbooks often teach invention: “many of the latest heuristic systems are applied to subjects independently of the need to consider the beliefs of one’s audience on any question involving that subject” (166).¹ In other words, we frequently teach invention as self-exploration instead of mutual searching.

In an effort to understand how speakers and writers can successfully argue from premises that audiences accept, we could do worse than to examine features of and sources for the discourse of Martin Luther King, Jr. as they relate to the language and assumptions favored by his listeners and readers. Although King’s attentiveness to the beliefs of his audiences is in some ways obvious, much of it has been obscured by wrongheaded scholarly efforts to paint King as a philosopher instead of as a rhetor.² This failure, however, should not prevent our looking at both the conspicuous and the hidden attention King paid to the rhetorical universe of those he wished to persuade.

One of King’s foremost rhetorical strategies was to locate his appeal within the context of cherished religious, cultural, and patriotic traditions. To this end, he frequently quoted the Old Testament and John Donne, Paul and Socrates, Aquinas and Emerson, Shakespeare and Jefferson, hymn-writers and Paul Tillich. Many of these quotations (e.g. “No man is an island”; “Any man’s reach should exceed his grasp”) are highly familiar—the modern equivalents of the commonplaces of classical rhetoric.

King’s use of language and assumptions beloved by his hearers is a prominent rhetorical strategy in “I Have a Dream.” The oration includes the most famous

1. This essay is a revised and expanded version of a lecture delivered at the Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, July, 1985. Portions of the essay derive from a dissertation completed at Texas Christian University in 1984 under the direction of Jim Corder and Gary Tate.

2. See, for example, Smith and Zepp; Scruggs; and Ansbro. Scruggs quite unaccountably fails to consider the possibility that King read Fosdick’s sermons. Smith and Zepp and Ansbro also completely ignore King’s reading of homiletic literature, as do other King scholars.

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line of the Declaration of Independence (“All men are created equal”), an easily recognized adaptation of the most familiar passage of the prophetic books of the Old Testament (“justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream”), and a portion of the Old Testament that Jesus repeated and that Handel included in his *Messiah* (“every valley shall be exalted”). King ends the address with a climactic peroration (“Let freedom ring”) that simply extends the lyrics of “America,” the unofficial national anthem, which King had quoted immediately prior to the peroration.

And, unlike Thoreau, King in “Letter from Birmingham Jail” takes the unlikely tack of arguing that the ethos of nonviolent civil disobedience is deeply imbedded in the traditions of Western culture.

In addition to its self-evident use of revered traditions, much of King’s discourse appeals to audiences in ways that have never been understood. Because King borrowed without acknowledgement from the sermons of both black and white Protestant ministers, much of his rhetoric had been tested—often repeatedly tested—with both listeners and readers before King employed it. King borrowed major themes, literary quotations, and other homiletic commonplaces that both explained his politics and did much to convince ultimately an entire nation to support civil rights for blacks.

In an effort to understand King’s use and transformation of secondhand material, I will examine four themes then the quotations and commonplaces.

Love

According to David Lewis, “there were few who followed [King’s] career who have not heard his favorite discourse on the meaning and significance of *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*” (44). Although John Ansbro (8-36) interprets King’s analysis of the three Greek words for love as a response to philosophical texts, King’s discussion of *eros*, *philia*, and *agape* closely resembles that of several pastors, including the celebrated Harry Emerson Fosdick, whose radio sermons were heard by millions; Fosdick’s one-time student and fellow New York City preacher Ralph Sockman (*Man’s First Love* 22-23); and everyday minister Clyde Hickerson (68-72). Compare:

Fosdick: Love in the New Testament is not a sentimental and affectionate emotion . . . There are three words in Greek for love . . . *Eros*—“erotic” comes from it—that is one. In vulgar use it meant sensual lust; in Platonic philosophy it meant the yearning of the soul for the realm of the gods. . . . *Philia*—that is another Greek word. It meant intimate personal affectionateness and friendship. . . . But the great Christian word for love is something else: *agape*. . . . means nothing sentimental or primarily emotional at all; it means understanding, redeeming, creative good will. (*On Being Fit to Live With* 6-7)

King: The meaning of love is not to be confused with some sentimental outpouring. . . . In the Greek New Testament are three words for love. The word *eros* is a sort of aesthetic or romantic love. In the Platonic dialogues *eros* is a yearning of the soul for the realm of the divine. The second word is *philia*, a reciprocal love and intimate affection and friendship

between friends. . . . The third word is *agape*, understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. (*Strength to Love* 36)³

When a group of angry blacks gathered around King's newly bombed house, words of Jesus that King quoted to them ("Love your enemies; bless those that curse you; pray for those that spitefully use you") were ones that slaves had used to console themselves (Feldstein 76; Blassingame 465-466). Black preacher and college president Benjamin Mays, who exerted a major influence on King's life, included Jesus's admonition in a sermon ("The Inescapable Christ" 30-31). Numerous blacks who either heard King or read King's account of the incident (*Stride Toward Freedom* 137-138) were quite familiar with the scripture; so were others who saw it in "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (88).⁴ King's use of the passage was as ritualistic as it was inspired.

King offered an illustration of the power of love by relating Lincoln's decision to take into his cabinet a man who had publicly villified him but who later came to admire him (*Strength* 38-39). The narrative echoes an earlier anecdote in a book of sermons by Sockman (*The Unemployed Carpenter* 59). King's sermon about a paragon of love, the Good Samaritan, derives largely from a quasi-homiletic explication of the parable by George Buttrick, another New York City preacher and editor of the highly influential, twelve-volume *Interpreter's Bible* (*Strength* 16-24; *The Parables of Jesus* 149-155).⁵ Even though King had personally visited the road that serves as a setting for the Samaritan's deed, his description of the road closely corresponds to one by Buttrick:

Buttrick: Jerusalem was some two thousand feet above sea level and Jericho over one thousand feet below it. The twenty miles between the cities wound through mountainous country, whose limestone caves offered ambush for brigand bands, and whose sudden turns exposed the traveller to unforeseen attack. The road became known as the "Bloody Pass." (*Parables* 150)

King: When Mrs. King and I visited the Holy Land, we rented a car and drove from Jerusalem to Jericho. . . . Jerusalem is some two thousand feet above and Jericho one thousand feet below sea level. The descent is made in less than twenty miles. Many sudden curves provide likely places for ambushing and expose the traveler to unforeseen attacks. Long ago the road was known as the Bloody Pass. (*Strength* 20)

(King offered a similar, extemporaneous account of the road in "I've Been to the Mountaintop," his address to striking Memphis garbage workers on the eve of his death [224].) Describing the Samaritan's compassion, both Buttrick and King interpret the parable as a revelation of the universal nature of love:

3. See also King, *Stride Toward Freedom* 104-107; King, "The American Dream: Part II"; and Clark (24). For Hickerson, compare *Strength* 37.

4. King also quoted the scripture in his maiden speech to those boycotting the buses of Montgomery (*Stride* 62), based a sermon on the passage (*Strength* 34-41), and recited it in another sermon (*Strength* 10).

5. Because Buttrick's explication combines textual analysis of the parable with applications to twentieth-century life, I label it "quasi-homiletic." Resisting classification, his book is neither strict Biblical exegesis nor simply a collection of sermons.

Buttrick: The priest and the Levite saw a bruised and bleeding body . . . but they did not see a man made in their own likeness. . . . We say "He is an American," a "Japanese," a "negro". . . . We label him "catholic" or "protestant." . . . Rarely do we discover a *human*. . . . The stricken man was brother to the Samaritan because the stricken man also was human. (*Parables* 153)

King: We see men as Jews or Gentiles, Catholics or Protestants, Chinese or American, Negroes or whites. We fail to think of them as fellow human beings. . . . The priest and the Levite saw only a bleeding body, not a human being like themselves. . . . [The Samaritan] saw [the wounded man] as a human being first, who was a Jew only by accident. (*Strength* 19)

Need for Nonconformity

Although King's call for unconventional living might seem to depart from the thinking of other ministers, portions of King's "Transformed Nonconformist" (*Strength* 8-15) correspond to a response to McCarthyism offered by an obscure preacher named Eugene Austin. Compare:

Austin: Chiseled into the magnificent Jefferson Memorial by the Potomac is his creed: "I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." And yet if he were alive today and dared to bring his independent thinking to focus upon the problems of our time, he would be under investigation by a dozen congressional committees at once. Why? . . . because across America today the tide of independent thought and courageous individualism is running out. (14)

King: [A nonconformist] is liable to be summoned before some legislative investigation body. . . .

Thomas Jefferson wrote, "I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." . . . Have we permitted the lamp of independent thought and individualism to become so dim that were Jefferson to write and live by these words today we would find cause to harass and investigate him? (*Strength* 11)

In the same sermon and in two others (*Strength* 9, 12, 14, 44, 47, 129) King follows Fosdick (*The Hope of the World* 4-7, 112) in urging the church to challenge society rather than to uphold the status quo. In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King also repeats Fosdick's ideas and language and seems to adapt a metaphor from H. H. Crane's sermon to the Chicago Sunday Evening Club, a group that King occasionally addressed:

Fosdick: That is joining the real church . . . *ecclesia*— . . . a minority selected from a majority. . . . There was a time, however, when Christianity was very powerful. . . . "We are a colony of heaven" . . . (*Hope* 5)
[Christianity] stopped ancient curses like infanticide. It put an end to . . . gladiatorial shows. (*Hope* 6)

Crane: Instead of being *conformed* to this world, [man] can *transform* it. . . . For when he is what his Maker obviously intended him to be, he is not a thermometer; he is a thermostat. (32)

. . . there is a thermostatic type of religion . . . and its highest expression is called vital Christianity. (38)

King: There was a time when the church was very powerful. . . . In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas . . . of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. . . . the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were “a colony of heaven”. . . . By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests. . . . (“Letter from Birmingham Jail” 91)

Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church . . . as the true *ekklesia* and the hope of the world. (“Letter from Birmingham Jail” 92)⁶

Inadequacy of Materialism and Humanism

Like other preachers, King wrote sermons criticizing materialism and humanism as philosophically inadequate. Based mainly on Buttrick’s *Parables* (28-35), King’s “The Man Who Was a Fool” (*Strength* 51-57) reflects Buttrick’s quarrel with materialism. Two preachers (Fosdick, *Hope* 236; Loutitt 211) saw James Jeans’s remark, “The universe seems to be nearer to a great thought than to a great machine” as homiletically useful before King did (*Strength* 55). King’s quotation of Arthur Balfour’s observation, “We now know too much about matter to be materialists” (*Strength* 55) was anticipated by Fosdick (*Hope* 236), as was King’s technocratic parody of the Twenty-third Psalm (*Strength* 55; *On Being Fit* 22). An unpublished version of King’s “What Is Man?” contains a reductio ad absurdum of chemists’ view of human worth as totaling ninety-eight cents (2).⁷ This caricature of empiricism had appeared in a sermon by yet another New York City preacher (and later seminary president) John Sutherland Bonnell (*What Are You Living For?* 36); in Fosdick’s *Successful Christian Living* (265-266); and in a collection of homiletic anecdotes by the Methodist bishop of Los Angeles, Gerald Kennedy (128). King’s published “What Is Man?” features a description of the spiritual qualities of humanity (*Strength* 90) that largely coincides with a paragraph in a sermon by a popular, self-educated preacher in Florida named J. Wallace Hamilton (*Horns and Halos in Human Nature* 51).

King’s rejection of humanism in “The Answer to a Perplexing Question” (*Strength* 119, 121) also parallels Hamilton’s argument in *Horns and Halos* (62-63). In addition, King’s middle position between Calvinism and humanism (*Strength* 118-126) approximates the thinking of Mays (*Seeking to Be Christian in Race Relations* 35-44).

6. King expresses a similar view of the church in *Stride* 207-208 and *Strength* 128-129.

7. Transcripts of “What Is Man?” and other unpublished addresses by King are housed in Atlanta at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change.

Interdependence

In its emphasis on interdependence, King's analysis of the rich fool (*Strength* 51-57; *Where Do We Go from Here* 181) often matches that of Buttrick (*Parables* 128-135). From a sermon by noted pacifist E. F. Tittle (*A World That Cannot Be Shaken* 13), King apparently adapted an explanation of how ordinary breakfast foods demonstrate our dependence on far-flung countries (*Strength* 54; *Where* 181). In *Where* (167) King stresses interrelatedness by equating the world's peoples to a separated family forced to live in a single house. This analogy originated in a sermon by Yale homiletics professor Halford Luccock (*Marching off the Map* 63-64) and reappeared in Hamilton's *Horns and Halos* (72-73). Also, King's "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality" ("Letter from Birmingham Jail" 77) seems to stem from Fosdick's "We are intermeshed in an inescapable mutuality" (*Riverside Sermons* 251-252).

Black preachers also expounded this theme before King did. According to Henry Young, major black religious figures during the years of slavery and segregation did not "perceive reality as bifurcated and compartmentalized but as interconnected, interwoven, and interlocked" (13). The notion of interdependence did not surprise King's black audiences.⁸

For King, borrowing the above themes meant borrowing a ready-made theological *Weltanschauung* that served the rhetorical function of explaining and legitimizing the civil rights movement. Appealing to love validated King's politics as an expression of concern for the general welfare. Demonstrating that his notion of love was grounded in the Bible and history kept his insistence on non-violence from sounding tinny and naive. Championing nonconformity helped to justify his radical tactic of civil disobedience. Contrasting the heroic, early church to the apolitical, modern church aided his successful attempt to use churches as a political base. Refuting materialism and humanism distinguished his cause from that of communism, which he was constantly accused of supporting. Stressing interdependence made possible an appeal on the basis of self-interest as well as that of love and altruism: if all people are truly "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality," then to help another is to help one's self.

In addition to the themes, King borrowed a miscellany of literary quotations that lent authority to *Strength*. These include two anonymous poems (92, 117), a stanza by Paul Laurence Dunbar (105), another by John Bowring (33), a single line from a verse by Swinburne (101), two complete and one partial quatrain by Omar Khayyam (80-81), a phrase by Keats (102), and five excerpts from Shakespeare (5-6, 31, 45, 60, 88). The anonymous poems and the passages of Bowring,

8. King's initial exposure to the idea of interdependence may well have occurred in a black church. On this point and others, tracing the exact relationship between King's texts and black pulpit traditions is made difficult by the relative scarcity of either published or recorded sermons by black pastors. (Mordecai Johnson, whose preaching first prompted King to learn about Gandhi, is only one example of a black pulpit legend whose sermons were apparently unrecorded and remain largely unpublished.) This difficulty should lead no one to conclude that white sermons exerted more influence on King than black sermons.

Swinburne, Khayyam, and three of Shakespeare were broadcast many times by many preachers.⁹

King's citation from Emerson (109) had surfaced earlier in Fosdick's *Hope* (61); his phrase from Thoreau (128) had turned up in Fosdick's *Successful* (67); his selection from Chesterton (56) had emerged in Hamilton's *Horns and Halos* (44); his chestnut from Matthew Arnold (65) had appealed to Fosdick (*Successful* 42), Tittle (*World* 7; *The Religion of the Spirit* 241), and Hamilton (*Who Goes There?* 13). Two published sermons (Fosdick, *On Being Fit* 125; Peabody 12) and a compilation of homiletic illustrations by one of the editors of *Strength*, Charles Wallis (124), included Angelo Patri's "Education consists of being afraid at the right time" before King did (109). Wallis also preceded King in publishing a fairly long quotation from Tolstoi (Wallis 83; *Strength* 126), T. R. Glover's contention that the early Christians "outlived, outthought, and outdied" their contemporaries (Wallis 67; *Strength* 100), and Booker T. Washington's admonition, "Let no man pull you down so low as to make you hate him" (Wallis 162; *Strength* 132; *Stride* 106), a line that Hickerson had repeated as well (65).¹⁰

King also embraced commonplaces that originated in the pulpit. His black audiences recognized "God is able to make a way out of no way" (*Strength* 50, 107) as standard fare of an oral preaching tradition. In *Stride* (207) King joined Liston Pope (105) in borrowing an observation from black pulpit legend Gardner Taylor (16) ("There is more segregation at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning . . . than at any time in the week"), which Kennedy found suitable for his collection of anecdotes (246).

Much of the published material that King employed undoubtedly circulated orally as well. Volumes of homiletic illustrations, like those of Kennedy and Wallis, served the needs of workaday preachers to locate appropriate narratives, quotations, and commonplaces for their sermons. In all likelihood many thousands of churchgoers listened to many of the sketches and maxims that added

9. For the anonymous poem, "To Every Man There Openeth," see Bonnell, *Fifth Avenue Sermons* 81; Chalmers, *The Constant Fire* 104; Chalmers, *High Wind at Noon* 76-77; Austin 15. For the anonymous poem, "Fear Knocked," see Buttrick, *Sermons Preached at a University Church* 43; Macartney, *You Can Conquer* 18; Sangster 32. For the Dunbar stanza, see Tittle, *World* 78. For the well-liked verse by Bowring, see Fosdick, *Riverside* 62, 254; Fosdick, *Hope* 77, 99; Fosdick, *On Being Fit* 93; Fosdick, *Living under Tension* 221; Fosdick, *Successful* 96; Sockman, *Man's First* 136; Bonnell, *He Speaks from the Cross* 21; Bonnell, *What Are You* 55; Buttrick, *The Christian Fact and Modern Doubt* 234; Scherer 174; Walker 108; Stewart, *The Strong Name* 159; Macartney, *Macartney's Illustrations* 80. For the line from Swinburne, see Fosdick, *The Living of These Days* 250; Fosdick, *Successful* 160, 161; Fosdick, *Riverside* 360; Buttrick, *Sermons* 178; Stewart, *Heralds of God* 15; Luccock, *Christian Faith and Economic Change* 76; Bosley 135. For the Khayyam passages, see Fosdick, *Successful* 235; Hamilton, *Horns and Halos* 31; Buttrick, *So We Believe So We Pray* 170; Buttrick, *Sermons* 113; Stewart, *A Faith to Proclaim* 61; Stroup 55; Carrington 206. For the Keats phrase, see Fosdick, *On Being Fit* 88. For Shakespeare's "bear those ills," see Fosdick, *A Great Time to Be Alive* 4. For Shakespeare's "sweetest things," see Fosdick, *Hope* 33. For "a tale told by an idiot," see Fosdick, *Living under Tension* 52; Fosdick, *Successful* 195; Fosdick, *Hope* 115; Fosdick, *On Being Fit* 163; Fosdick, *Riverside* 151; Buttrick, "The Gospel of Immortality" 186-187; Buttrick, *Christian Fact* 258; Chalmers, *High Wind* 153; Luccock, *Haunted House* 208. For "There's a divinity," see Fosdick, *On Being Fit* 94; Tittle, *World* 108; Buttrick, *Prayer* 61; Buttrick, *So We Believe* 174; Sockman, *Date with Destiny* 13. For "What a piece of work is man!" see Bosley 136; Bonnell, *What Are You* 37; Davis 226.

10. For an examination of Fosdick's tendency to use literary quotations from secondhand sources, see Robert M. Miller 357-58.

color to the popular books of sermons by leading preachers or that made their way into well-thumbed collections like those of Kennedy and Wallis. Every minister I know acknowledges the popularity of borrowing in the pulpit.

King's reiteration of passages from Fosdick, Buttrick, Austin, Luccock, Hamilton, Sockman, and other white preachers provides further evidence (if any were needed) for black theologian James Cone's claim that King's major audience was white America. By adapting and readapting sermonic boilerplate and by refining and retesting his best original material, King successfully placed the strands of his homiletic arguments against segregation into a web of ideas and phrases that the moderate and liberal white Protestant community had already approved. Undoubtedly, many of King's Northern white supporters who annually poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into King's organization had listened for years to Fosdick's nationally broadcast radio sermons and had heard in their own churches pastors who consciously exemplified the liberal pulpit manner of Fosdick, Buttrick, Bonnell, Luccock, Sockman, and Hamilton that the pastors had absorbed at seminary. King borrowed passages carefully attuned to his core audience of white supporters and recited them again and again as he hopscotched the country.

Literary quotations comprised an important element in that material. Had King read volumes of Shakespeare, Keats, Bowring, Chesterton, Fitzgerald's Khayyam, Swinburne, Arnold, Thoreau, Dunbar, and Tolstoi, he might have been able to ransack selections that would seem as apt as those he took from other preachers. However, such fresh citations would not have resonated as well as those he used *because his audiences would never have heard them before*. The intertextual quality of King's language enhanced and invigorated his appeal.

So did King's failure to acknowledge sources. By invariably crediting Shakespeare, Keats, and other cultural icons while failing to acknowledge other preachers from whom he obtained most of his quotations plus much of the remaining content for several of his published sermons, King created the impression that he was speaking not for a group of preachers but for Western civilization itself. Systematically suppressing his ties to homiletic traditions elevated King's status as a rhetor, even as he was shrewdly flattering his audiences by telling them what they already believed with words they had already heard.

Just as secondhand language invigorated King's appeal, his appeal invigorated the language. King dramatically transformed borrowed discourse by carrying it from the comfortable sanctuaries of Northern churches to the troubled streets of Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma.¹¹ No one could have looked at the sermons of Northern white preachers before mid-century and predicted that their voices could help to propel a social revolution in the Deep South. Although their homiletics was at times tinged with the Social Gospel, none of the white clergy had the ability to envision serious political agitation, let alone to create or foster a monumental social upheaval.¹²

11. Of the white preachers whose sermons served as major sources for King, only Hamilton held a Southern pulpit.

12. A number of the preachers, however, were political activists. For an account of Fosdick's activism that also provides information about the political involvement of Buttrick, Tittle, and other ministers, see Robert M. Miller 449-63, 490-547.

In part King did so because borrowing the preachers' worldview involved borrowing not only their themes and quotations but also their nostalgic conception of a reliable, beneficent universe not yet shattered by Darwin, Freud, or Einstein. How did King use their optimistic belief in a dependable cosmos? Again and again he borrowed variations and examples of the ordinary homiletic notion that the nature of the universe guarantees the eventual triumph of good over evil. He gave voice to the idea in a litany that originated in Fosdick's *On Being Fit* (94):

The New Testament rightly declares: "No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: *nevertheless afterward* it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness." Pharaoh exploits the children of Israel—*nevertheless afterward!* Pilate yields to the crowd which crucifies Christ—*nevertheless afterward!* . . . Something in this universe justifies Shakespeare in saying:

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will. . . . (*Strength* 60)

For an example of evil surrendering to goodness, King joined other preachers in looking to Napoleon. In their collections of illustrations, both Wallis (143) and Kennedy (104) feature Victor Hugo's interpretation of Waterloo that King cites approvingly:

Was it possible that Napoleon should win this battle? We answer no. Why? Because of Wellington? Because of Blucher? No. Because of God. . . . Napoleon had been impeached before the Infinite, and his fall was decreed. He vexed God. Waterloo is not a battle; it is the change of front of the universe. (*Strength* 103-104)

Napoleon's own remark contrasting the weakness of armies to the power of religion appeared in Wallis's compilation (47-48) and in a sermon by Mays ("The Inescapable Christ" 30) before King pressed the comment into service:

Napoleon . . . looking back over his years of conquest . . . said: "Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I have built great empires. But upon what did they depend? They depended on force. But centuries ago Jesus started an empire . . . built on love, and even to this day millions will die for him." (*Strength* 41)

More frequently, King evoked goodness victorious by alluding to the fate of the Hebrews under the Pharaoh. By constantly equating blacks under segregation to the Israelites in Egypt, King offered hope to black audiences: if the Jews finally escaped slavery, then blacks would eventually shed the manacles of segregation. This analogy simply updated one held by slave preachers and by huge numbers of slaves who routinely compared themselves to the Hebrews and their masters to the Pharaoh (Genovese 252-254; Raboteau 250-251).

A group of acquired, thematically related quotations also helped King to reassure audiences that he and they lived in an unfailing, God-ruled universe. These lines and their original sources are as follows:

You're going to reap what you sow.

—The Bible

Those who live by the sword will die by the sword.

—The Bible

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.

—slave spiritual

Only when it's dark can you see the stars.

—anonymous; cited by Charles Beard

No lie can live forever.

—Thomas Carlyle

Truth crushed to earth will rise again.

—William Cullen Bryant

Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne;

Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown

Standeth God within the shadow keeping watch above His own.

—James Russell Lowell

The familiarity of the Biblical truisms requires no explanation. By the time King began his career, most of the other declarations had also attained the status of homiletic commonplaces. "There Is a Balm in Gilead" was beloved by black churchgoers. Beard's observation, referred to by homiletician H. Grady Davis as a "familiar [generalization]" (244), had appealed to Fosdick (*Riverside* 156); Carlyle's statement also enhanced a Fosdick sermon (*On Being Fit* 94); some or all of Lowell's poem comforted audiences for five homiletic texts by Fosdick and sermons by Sockman, Hamilton, W. E. Sangster, Paul Robinson, and Laurence Howe as well; Bryant's affirmation was also seized by Sockman and by Fosdick, who called it a "saying."¹³ King's own professor of homiletics, Robert Keighton, used the Bryant quotation as though it were a proverb (82).

The "live by the sword/die by the sword" maxim helped to calm furious blacks gathered around King's bombed home and also provided an appropriate ending for *Stride* (137, 244). Beard's assertion served King in *Strength* (63) and in "I've Been to the Mountaintop" (222). He combined the declarations of Bryant and Carlyle with the "reap/sow" saying in an important speech to twenty-five thousand followers at the state capitol in Montgomery at the conclusion of the famous march from Selma to Montgomery (Oates 364; Garrow 117). At times King joined Lowell's poetry to the lines of Carlyle and Bryant to form an oratorical set piece that he occasionally augmented with other commonplaces. For example, in the recorded version of "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," King began his conclusion:

We shall overcome . . .

13. For all or part of Lowell's verse, see Fosdick, *Successful* 223; Fosdick, *On Being Fit* 94; Fosdick, *Riverside* 99, 253; Fosdick, *Living under Tension* 220; Sockman, *The Paradoxes of Jesus* 192; Hamilton, *Who Goes There?* 111; Sangster 49; Robinson 184; Howe 119. For Bryant's assertion, see Sockman, *Paradoxes* 191-92 and Fosdick, *Living under Tension* 247.

Because Carlyle is right: no lie can live forever. . . .
 Because William Cullen Bryant is right:
 Truth crushed to earth will rise again. . . .
 Because James Russell Lowell is right:
 Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne;
 Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown
 Standeth God within the shadow keeping watch above His own. . . .
 There *is* a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.

The “nevertheless afterward” litany, the Napoleon illustrations, the Pharaoh analogy, and the thematically related commonplaces performed the extremely important function of interpreting the demonstrations, jailings, and general disruption fostered by the civil rights movement as events occurring within a universe as upright and old-fashioned as a Victorian sofa but far more comfortable. These secondhand materials offered a metaphysical guarantee for the principle upon which King’s appeals to nonviolence rest. In “I Have a Dream” King summarizes this principle by saying, “unearned suffering is redemptive.” In a beneficent cosmos, unearned suffering *automatically* pays long-term dividends. The unearned suffering of the Hebrews under the Pharaoh *made inevitable* their eventual arrival in the Promised Land. Christ’s unmerited crucifixion *inexorably* implied his resurrection. The suffering of American slaves *impelled* the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Those who refuse to suffer but instead live by the sword *unavoidably* die by the sword. If these interpretations are valid, King insisted, then protests and civil disobedience will *of necessity* occasion the rebirth of Southern society.

The rhetorical advantages of this theme were threefold. First, the idea of redemptive suffering reassured blacks tempted to despair of the ability of Christianity to eliminate their oppression. All Christians face the thorny theological problem of reconciling the claim that Christ was God’s ultimate revelation with two thousand years of ambiguity and tragedy following the arrival of Christ. King addressed this problem by arguing that the redemption purchased by Christ’s undeserved suffering served as the ultimate model for a process that recurs continually in human history. Even though goodness triumphs, evil always returns to create additional unearned suffering that in turn necessitates the triumph of goodness. (Or, in King’s words, “the death of one tyranny is followed by the emergence of another tyranny” [*Strength* 64].) The Christ event is ultimate because it both enacts and illuminates the underlying, recurrent meaning of all history. Essentially, King told blacks that their unearned suffering did not refute Christianity but instead re-enacted it and thus reaffirmed it.

The second rhetorical advantage of this theme was its extreme elasticity. If the idea could explain hundreds of years of slavery, it could easily account for anything white racists could dish out in Alabama or Mississippi. Similarly, even a modest success, such as the concessions to King made by the business community of Birmingham, could be interpreted as the dawn of a new day for the entire nation (Anthony Lewis 183-184). When white racists reacted to these concessions with violence against blacks, then blacks were involved in more unearned

suffering. The theme allowed King to explain *in advance* almost anything that could happen to or with the civil rights movement.

The third rhetorical advantage was to revive the commonplaces—together with other truisms like “All men are created equal”—by testing them under very tough and challenging circumstances. King essentially told America that if segregation were not overthrown, cherished commonplaces would have been refuted. If segregation were to continue, then the Hebrew people would never escape Pharaoh’s Egypt, a lie would live forever, truth crushed to earth would not rise, truth on the scaffold would not sway the future, evildoers would not reap what they sowed, those who lived by the sword would die in their sleep, and no balm from Gilead would make the wounded whole. King’s insistent precepts and the Pharaoh analogy invited listeners to interpret events within the context of a stable, principled macrocosm and challenged them to support his crusade and thereby prevent the triumph of chaos. Borrowing enabled King to make it difficult for audiences to reject his leadership without also rejecting a beneficent universe. By coupling his fundamentally conservative argument with his deliberate strategy of provoking Southern police to commit violence against peaceful demonstrators, King turned the tables on advocates for the Southern status quo.¹⁴ Commonplaces, the Pharaoh analogy, and his political tactics revealed King as the advocate of conservative order and his adversaries as promoters of chaos who had partially and temporarily upset cosmic justice with the disorder of racial injustice. In King’s secondhand rhetorical universe, order did not forbid social revolution—order *demanded* revolution.

King’s use and radical transformation of commonplaces and other homiletic material was a strategy in his effort to persuade audiences on the basis of assumptions he shared with them. King did not succeed in spite of what his biographer William R. Miller derides as “hoary quotations from intellectually outdated nineteenth-century figures” (285) or in spite of his preference for what civil rights historians August Meier and Elliot Rudwick deprecate as “grand generalizations” (146). Instead, King succeeded to a large degree because the hoary quotations, grand generalizations, and other homiletic boilerplate enabled him to communicate with whites despite their inability to hear entire generations of black speakers and preachers who had previously attacked segregation.¹⁵

Those who ignore King’s borrowing ignore King. Those who would decry it should ask themselves: on what basis do I assume that King could have persuaded his audiences by creating wholly original discourse? While the appearance of originality was necessary for King’s persuasiveness, skillful borrowing was equally necessary. Transforming acquired discourse enabled King to convince his audiences on the basis of what Gage terms “mutually agreeable grounds for probable knowledge” and thereby helped him to achieve his current, undeniable, and lasting status as a national monument.

What consequences should our understanding of King have for our teaching of composition? Let me suggest three. First, cognizance of King’s borrowing

14. Garrow argues convincingly that King attempted to provoke violence by police.

15. For testimony to this inability, see Heath and Farmer 74.

should help us to accept some discourse as inherently intertextual. This recognition should lead us to reconsider our unqualified remonstrations against plagiarism and against the use of clichés.

Second, we should promote our students' awareness of familiar arguments, definitions, analogies, metaphors, illustrations, poems, songs, and adages. Our handbooks now list clichés for students to avoid. They should catalogue workable comparisons, anecdotes, quotations, lyrics, and sayings for students to ponder and to utilize—from literature, mainstream popular culture, and America's diverse ethnic groups. We should have our students compile their own lists of such material—from films, songs, parents, religious and political organizations, teachers, and peers. Students who become conscious of the function of audience-approved language will gain an awareness sociological and epistemological as well as rhetorical. Edward P. J. Corbett occasionally dons a T-shirt that reads: "Rhetoricians dwell in commonplaces." So do our students, who can hardly learn about language—their own or anyone else's—without learning the function of uncopyrightable expressions.

Third, we need to rethink invention in the manner that Gage advocates. Many of our heuristics are based on radically individualistic, Romantic notions that may be appropriate for the writing of fiction, poetry, and drama but that hardly apply to the generation of intertextual discourse common in the worlds of business, law, government, politics, and religion. As Gage urges, we should prompt our students to consider audience more seriously at every stage of invention instead of teaching them to adjust essentially completed discourse to a specific audience.

If King's respect for his audiences' assumptions aided blacks in the elimination of legalized segregation, then it may assist us in solving some of our pedagogical problems as well. Like black America, we *can* overcome.

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