

On Teaching the Universe

In many a religious speech, the secular life of a person matters little to the orator. And few of those ecclesiastical compositions continue logically—the Bible is the textbook, ethics the subject.

Simple. And boring.

But transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson effectively effects more effective preaching by welcoming nonreligious members of society and by building up a climactic effect to direct the audience's thoughts. In his speech, "The Divinity School Address," Emerson incorporates schemes of balance and repetition that either appeal to a larger audience or build a literary climax in order to better instill his moral beliefs on his listeners.

Emerson casts a wide net for the audience when he considers the broadest, deepest questions of human existence. "What am I? What is?" (Emerson 1), he asks—these questions are not limiting, not imposing, not condescending, but just curious. "What is?" is so open-ended, so philosophical, inviting the reader from any background and any disposition to assemble for the grand cause of answering it. What is it? What is *it*? Perhaps too grand for anybody to know. Specifically, Emerson addresses "the planters, the mechanics, the inventors, the astronomers, the builders of cities, and the captains" (1) of society, clear evidence of the diversity of his audience. By listing these different occupations coordinately—by placing educated, renowned "builders of cities" on the same level as the more lowly "planters"—Emerson reflects his impartiality on his audience.

But this isn't an indifferent impartiality. It stems not from lack of care, but from an excess of it. Who to address first? The aforementioned questions are too immense to be tackled by any single person, and Emerson places them all together. Farmer amongst prime minister amongst laborer. A giant think tank of everybody.

This straightforward acknowledgement of the global audience he speaks to opens a link between author and listener, a strong ethos. Although he talks of Man and its very essence—its tendency to move toward the "sentiment of virtue" (1)—there is a personal connection. Because he knows *who* he is talking to—everybody—he knows *what* to talk about. He teaches a Morality 101 class, assuming no prior knowledge, inviting everyone to his ideas.

While Christianity and the Christian God form the religious basis of the speech, it serves merely as an exemplar rather than an assertion. Emerson is not stating that Christianity is the only form of finding moral value—in fact, he modifies some of its principles considered by him to be faulty. Arguably, his claim extends to people of all religions: he uses the examples "of Moses, or of Zeno, or of Zoroaster" (8) as moral models for society. The other forms of worship "are like the zodiac of Denderah, and the astronomical monuments of the Hindoos" (6), considered favorably to Christianity. No, in the mind of Man, there is no correct religion—"all the expressions of this [virtuous] sentiment are sacred and permanent" (3), including all religions. And Emerson expresses that this occurs not only in Europe with Christianity, but "in Palestine, ... in Egypt, in Persia, in India, in China" (3). The "zodiac of Denderah" and "Moses" originate from Egypt and the "Hindoos" from India—yet Emerson shuns the difference, pushing people of all kinds side-by-side.

Certainly this creates a global awareness that indicates that anybody in these countries may relate to his speech. The sense of equity between these coordinate elements again place no emphasis on one country or religion over another, praising everyone but slighting none. If it were possible to please everybody at once, Emerson does so.

This use of repetition in the form of lists, especially mixed in with polysyndeton in the former, gives the sequence of examples a sense of flow that reinforces a main idea. The latter comes with asyndeton, which gives the list an unfinished, endless feel, bringing together all of the nations, included or not in his list. How many people, places, pieces of property could one uncover in the detail of non-Christian worlds? How many other religions could have been made an example in place of Christianity? Alas, Christianity is the main focus of Emerson's religion, but solely for his

convenience—his primary audience was a group of graduate students from a Christian school. Nonetheless, he toils to explicate its nuances such as the misconceptions of Jesus and the modern sermon. Thus Emerson gives a great range of option, expanding the world to the unknowable infinity of religious choices.

Second to the list elements themselves, what is more important than order? Emerson is a master of the art of manipulation—with bait. The frivolous and suspenseful come first; the crucial and momentous last. Should it beckon towards the positive? The pessimistic? As if directing a suspenseful movie, Emerson lays down hints in an order of increasing relevance and importance, building up to a great excitement—or dread, if he so chooses. When he describes the fall of society as faith disintegrates, for instance, it is not such a simple step; it is a smooth degradation, graceful in the eyes of the Devil. “Then falls the church, the state, art, letters, life” (3), he specifically writes instead of a blunt, dystopian generalization. Loss of religion would affect the daily routines of billions. Collapse of a government would mean anarchy and fear. But then the lack of art, which many people consider the most human form of expression, would degrade people to the level of beasts; the absence of the precious letters which hold Man’s collective knowledge, as had happened in the novel *Ella Minnow Pea*, would destroy its collective memory and basic communicational needs; and then the loss of life itself. By then, life would not be worth living; Emerson steals the essence out of it; the order, combined with a sense of urgency by the asyndeton, leads to an accelerated tumble, the wretched demise of society. The rush messes with the sense of time and scope: could it be in a century? A decade? A year? Confined to American borders? Around the world?

Or perhaps today? Across the entire universe? Beginning with you, right here?

Such is also the case in the positive. Emerson writes that a child plays with “the action of light, motion, gravity, muscular force” (1) and lives in a playpen of “human life, love, fear, justice, appetite, man, and God” (1). He plays an interesting game here: the first list travels from the abstract to the concrete, from the wonders of light and motion to the everyday feelings of gravity and muscular force. The next clause, however, travels in the opposite direction: from down-to-earth life to the supernatural God. This pattern is repeated in the sentence: “[virtue] will I serve, day and night, in great, in small, that I may be not virtuous, but virtue” (1); day is greater than night, “great” greater than “small,” but the act of being virtuous lesser than virtue itself. This creates a valley, a single half-wavelength, and the asyndeton adds a rush that shoots the listener into the fold: down, up, out. What editorials take pages of anecdotes to achieve, Emerson does in a sentence or two. Commas and the loss of smooth conjunctions accelerate this to an otherwise-unachievable level.

The point of Emerson’s speech is to demonstrate the importance of moral education, an issue demonstrated by his alluring persuasion and effective listing. If he needs to show the effect of the opposite cause of destruction to juxtapose his, so be it; Emerson is elegantly ruthless with repetition.

Emerson is especially clever with his usage of apposition similar to Queneau’s “double-entry” approach in his book, *99 Exercises in Style*. The more significant always follows. The second is an afterthought, superfluous in *understanding* the text; however, it is necessary in *teaching* the morals by reinforcement. When he says that “to the good, to the perfect, [Man] is born” (1), he emphasizes the fact that Man is born not only from good intentions, but from the *perfect*—the perfect, that which we always seek, is innate. Virtue is attainable, perfection is not—thus, Emerson builds up with what one is, a crescendo of a person. For a man cannot be perfect without first being good; but once the good is reached, perfection is the next step; like so, Emerson forces the listener into believing.

To create a sense of rhythm, Emerson also repeats some words. Aphoristic sentences such as “If a man dissemble, deceive, he deceives himself” (2) and “The man who renounces himself, comes to himself” (2) give logical order to otherwise brief, unmeaningful sentences. To repeat the idea of deception in the first gives a negative, cautionary tone; the repetition of “himself” gives the image of the Self, the great truthful entity that gives a positive impression. Simply choosing the word exemplifying

the tone and duplicating it in a subsequent clause becomes a powerful and simple method to change the tone of the piece and direct it like the lists do.

Sentence structure sometimes follows a pattern to create flow as well. The same rule of climax applies; now entire thoughts can be conveyed as each unit of the pattern. Emerson states that a just man is essentially “God, the safety of God, the immortality of God” (2). There is a clear emphasis on God, God, God; again, the asyndeton crumples it into a jiffy of a thought. Emerson wants to show Man as God when he is righteous, and the listener only hears and sees God. And God is Man. Now that Emerson has established a person on moral grounds about the perfection of Man, he then builds up the person as God. All in patient, timely, logical order.

Mission accomplished.

How do teachers teach? Teachers teach with repetition, redundancy, reiteration. Students listen for patterns, tone, argument—accordingly. To be cemented to the dynamic nature of the mind, Emerson follows this fundamental of teaching. He is the chemist who has boiled it down to a science; he is the lobbyist who speaks with the intent of communicating; he is the scholar who has inspired his pupils. And his words will live on—more influential and everlasting than those of ordinary writers—because he writes to give, bestow, teach.

Emerson whispers into the open ear of the universe, again and again and again. Men listen; Man learns; God smiles.