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By WESLEY T. MOTT

The Rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr.: *Letter From Birmingham Jail*

TOWARD THE END of his life, Martin Luther King, Jr., was beset by intense criticism of his program of nonviolent direct action from both reactionary whites and newly vocal radical blacks. The reactionary complaint from well-meaning Negroes and whites had long been familiar to King: marches and sit-ins were counter-productive because they provoked violence; truly Christian Negroes would tolerate injustice because whites would ultimately develop sympathy for those who demonstrated patience. King always saw that such procrastination was a disguise for either cowardice or velvet-gloved racism. He had felt early "that the true witness of a Christian life is the projection of a social gospel."¹

The criticism most difficult to answer came from blacks who argued "the non-adaptability of the non-violent technique to the urban, dynamic North which shapes America."² Southern racism — provincial and defended by easily identified local leaders — could be effectively challenged by marches, demonstrations, sit-ins. Northern racism was harder to locate; it was supported by widely diffused, sophisticated, vested interests who were rendered invulnerable by something Bull Connor did not have: real power. King, as though sensing this growing threat to his leadership, began to expand the scope of his civil rights campaign to include opposition to the war in Vietnam. He began to regard the new Black Power as compatible with the Christian ideals that were the foundation of his nonviolent campaign: "Power, properly understood, is the ability to bring about social, political or economic changes. In this sense power is not only desirable but necessary in order to implement the demands of love and justice."³

But the verdict of younger intellectuals and activists was clearly that King's "self-flagellating policy" of nonviolence was no longer relevant to the black movement.⁴ King's nonviolence played into the hands of segregationists; he had been absorbed into the mainstream of American life, losing his cutting-edge as a reformer by becoming virtually an institution: "the award of a Nobel Prize to Martin Luther King and the inflation of his image to that of an international hero, bear witness to the historical fact that the only Negro Americans allowed to attain national or international fame have been the puppets and lackeys of the white power structure."⁵

If Cleaver's judgment is accurate (and Malcolm X and Cleaver have

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York, 1964), p. 24.

² Joseph R. Washington, Jr., *The Politics of God* (Boston, 1967), p. 160.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York, 1967), p. 37.

⁴ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York, 1970; reprinted by arrangement with McGraw-Hill, Inc.), p. 105.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

unquestionably surpassed King as campus folk-heroes), then the enduring popularity of Martin Luther King's writings, notably *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, is a testament to the man's ability to transcend the fickle currents of history. The *Letter* is one of the most frequently collected items in college English anthologies and has proved the most popular reading among black and white students in basic literature courses for several years.⁶ The success of the *Letter* can be attributed, I think, to the remarkable confluence of three distinct rhetorical traits: King's heritage of the highly emotional Negro preaching tradition; his shrewd sense of political timing and polemical skill; and his conscious literary ability.

In view of King's rich legacy of sermons and speeches, it may seem inappropriate to emphasize the oral tradition behind *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. But the *Letter* has proved to be one of King's most eloquent utterances; and much of its power (and a few of its defects) arises from the same rhetorical elements that he employed in his oral addresses. His written style is only a slightly more formalized version of his platform style. In the *Letter* King retains the emotional power that is the trademark of the Negro sermon while he overcomes the flaws that hinder the utility of the sermon in the political and literary spheres.

The traditional Negro sermon derives largely from the preaching of such evangelists as Whitefield.⁷ It aims to arouse the hearer's emotions to the point where he is persuaded to turn to God or to experience God's presence. Although loosely based on a Biblical theme, this kind of preaching emphasizes emotional arousal to such a degree that "the theme itself is relatively unimportant."⁸ Furthermore, because the preacher claims that inspiration for the sermon comes directly from God, he is not concerned with "logical organization."⁹ Rhythm and cadence almost unaided achieve the desired effect.¹⁰ One scholar notes that "the preacher relies upon stock phrases and passages to fill out the skel[e]ton of the sermon, and develops the message through repetition."¹¹ The sermon is based, then, on a formulaic method that employs such devices as repetitive refrains, recurrent rhetorical questions, and formalized dialogue and narrative.¹² The rhythm thus established is all-important: "The rhythm is the message; congregations have been moved to ecstasy by the rhythmic chanting of incoherencies."¹³ The sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr., are unmistakably part of the tradition of "old-time Negro preaching." His *Letter from Birmingham Jail* draws power from this genre while

⁶ The text followed here is that collected in Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York, 1964), pp. 77-100. References to this edition follow quotations in parentheses in the body of the paper.

⁷ William H. Pipes, *Say Amen, Brother! Old-Time Negro Preaching: A Study in American Frustration* (New York, 1951; reprinted by Negro Universities Press of Greenwood Press, Inc., Westport, Connecticut, 1970), p. 68.

⁸ Bruce A. Rosenberg, *The Art of the American Folk Preacher* (New York, 1970), p. 73.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27; Pipes, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

¹⁰ Pipes describes the delivery of the "old-time preacher" as "awkward, spectacular, dramatic, bombastic; . . . rhythmical and emotional; enthusiastic; sincere." *Op. cit.*, p. 72.

¹¹ Rosenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 54-56.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

avoiding its main weakness: a self-contained emotionalism that historically has encouraged the aloofness of blacks from social reform.

"Old-time preaching" is characterized by its lack of concern for logic. Pipes, nevertheless, identifies a recurrent structural pattern in the sermons: (1) an introduction "to establish a common ground of religious feeling" among the audience or to establish rapport between speaker and audience; (2) a "statement of the text," which, of course, is almost always drawn from the Bible; (3) the "body of the sermon," which consists of repeated emotional climaxes; and (4) the conclusion, which resolves the emotional tension aroused by the sermon by drawing the sinners to God.¹⁴ Pipes's framework shows that the traditional Negro sermon, however much it derives its strength from formulaic repetition, is not mere unartistic incoherence. It justifies our treating the sermons — and, by inference, *Letter from Birmingham Jail* — as an art form.

The *Letter* is essentially a written sermon that both answers charges and exhorts to action. It is a measure of the artistic control that King exerts over the *Letter* that he creates a vivid persona aimed at arousing the sympathy of the audience. The ideal "old-time preacher" is a majestic, imposing figure; but King's projection of the image of a meek, suffering prisoner effectively strikes an appropriate rapport with his "audience." He immediately introduces himself, "confined here in the Birmingham city jail." And yet, despite adversity, he is capable of benevolence and generosity toward those eight clergymen, those "men of genuine good will" who have criticized his protest activities; he hopes his answer "will be [in] patient and reasonable terms." (p. 77) He is patient with the slowness the clergymen show in coming to terms with his arguments: "I hope you are able to see the distinction I am trying to point out"; "I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church"; "I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed." (pp. 86, 93-94)

It quickly becomes clear, however, that this understatement is not the sign of an Uncle Tom cringing before his oppressors: it is a calculated rhetorical stance. The *Letter* is, of course, more than a letter to eight Birmingham clergymen: it is an open letter. King's conciliatory tone — while apparently conceding ground in its humility — is intended to reveal the inhumanity of the clergymen's position and to hold it up to the scorn of those of us who are reading over their shoulders. Against the outrages King so powerfully exposes, the recalcitrance of the eight clergymen reveals them as the true felons for their toleration of evil. *Letter from Birmingham Jail* transcends the problem of social evil in its very real Christian vision of love and brotherhood. But King's tone here is a rhetorical strategy. Its "inoffensiveness" allows an audience which might not fully sympathize with his program to participate, at least, in his argument — and perhaps unwittingly to share his lofty disdain for

¹⁴ Pipes, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-44.

the kind of short-sighted criticism of which the audience itself might normally be guilty. King's stance does not hide his rage. By suppressing his personal anger and frustration, and by resisting the human impulse to bombast and diatribe, he has given structure to individual misfortune and achieved a compelling piece of polemic.

The narrator confined in the Birmingham city jail, then, is not simply the activist minister who languishes in solitary confinement, irritated by isolation from comrades, family, and the wife who had just given birth to their fourth child.¹⁵ The narrator is also a construction of polemical expediency and literary imagination. He is further defined in the "second stage" of the exposition of the sermon/letter, the "statement of the text." Like the traditional Negro sermon, King's *Letter* has a broad thematic unity; and like the sermon, the *Letter* draws its "text" from the Bible. King is pressed to defend his nonviolent direct action, his "meddling"; his defense is based largely upon Biblical precedent, that God commands Christians to spread the gospel and to aid their brethren regardless of where they live: "Just as the prophets of the eighth century B. C. left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid." (p. 78) The *Letter* is both a social manifesto and a religious testament. King is arguing for a religious life that translates vision into practice and that finds the spiritual life enriched by communal efforts for justice. Although the details of King's program remain open to challenge from reactionary and radical points of view, the vision itself is virtually above criticism in the context of the letter. Having established his text, with its justification of the active Christian life, King's persona subtly exposes the timid inaction of the eight clergymen as an ungodly denial of the necessary fruits of the religious life. To the religious man, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. . . . Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea." (p. 79)

As we have seen in Pipes's scheme, the "third stage" of the sermon, the "body," with its repeated emotional climaxes, essentially is the sermon. Much of the raw emotional power of King's *Letter* arises simply from the increasing tempo and from the relentless force of repetition and parallelism. The first few paragraphs, which establish the speaker's personality and the text, contain relatively short sentences presented matter-of-factly; but as it proceeds, the *Letter* accelerates a strong rhythm, the sentences become longer in key emotional passages. Bruce Rosenberg has observed that many oral preachers "were unaware of creating" the moving passages of parallelism that characterize such

¹⁵ King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 73.

preaching; but he suspects that "in the case of Dr. King and other preachers of comparable learning who preach spontaneously, it is hard to believe that they were not aware of the effect on the audience."¹⁶ King is certainly in full control of the effects produced by parallelism and repetition in the *Letter*. A few of the weaknesses of King's written style arise from the attempt to translate oral rhetoric onto paper: it is occasionally grating to hear philosophical definitions artificially confined in a paragraph structured on rigid parallelism; and repeated neat antitheses ("dark clouds of racial prejudice/radiant stars of love") are often predictable and trite. When one recalls King's ability on the platform to make clichés sound fresh and exciting, however, one is aware that these are weaknesses of adapting the message to a different medium. Even in the *Letter* he achieves great power from parallelism and repetition.

The measure of this power cannot be appreciated fully, however, by examining emotional effects apart from other rhetorical elements. Pipes notes that the Negro sermon has always contained implicitly various kinds of deductive and inductive logic, that ethics accompany emotional arousal as a secondary concern, that sources outside the Bible are sometimes cited, and that argument from authority often complements simple formulaic progression.¹⁷ King effectively exploits this potential in *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.

King begins his defense of the Birmingham campaign by listing the "four basic steps" of "any nonviolent campaign." (p. 79) One is finally less interested in the logic of his analysis than with the opportunities the "four basic steps" afford for his powerful denunciations of injustice and exhortation to action. It is the nature of men caught up in emotionally charged debate to be unimpressed by rational discourse and logical argument; certainly no one will be convinced by the logical force of King's "four basic steps" who is not already sympathetic to his nonviolent philosophy. It is not to deny the logic of King's argument, then, to say that his logical scheme is effective on a largely verbal level. Yet his logic throughout the *Letter* is unanswerable. In a brilliant paragraph he answers the charge that his actions "precipitate violence": he challenges the logic of the clergymen and in a series of increasingly dramatic, grammatically parallel rhetorical questions, he reveals that those who make direct action necessary are guilty of precipitating violence: "Isn't this like condemning a robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like condemning Socrates because his unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical inquiries precipitated the act by the misguided populace in which they made him drink hemlock? Isn't this like condemning Jesus because his unique God-consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to God's will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion?" He concludes in eloquent understatement that

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 259.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 120.

resolves the tension created by the rhetorical questions: "Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber." (pp. 88-89) King's devastating logic, then, exploits an untapped root of the traditional Negro minister's resources. It lends authority and dignity to his argument. It permits a sharp analysis that reveals unexpected and stunning truth which our comfortable commonplaces too often prevent us from seeing; it reminds us that the eight clergymen deny, in effect, the very truths their offices were created to perpetuate. But the great impact of *Letter from Birmingham Jail* does not arise from King's being a clinical logician. It is his ability to discover fundamental moral flaws in his opponents' charges that makes his argument so unanswerable. And it is his conscious literary skill with parallelism and understatement that makes his argument so emotionally convincing.

King's theme of the social and ethical implications of Christianity is reinforced by another strategy uncharacteristic of the traditional Negro sermon: reference to sources and authorities outside the Bible. The *Letter* remains, I think, an essentially Christian statement; but it gains force from King's eagerness to cite contemporary events and people and to muster authorities from Moses to Buber and Tillich, from Socrates to Jefferson and Lincoln. The references to Aquinas, Buber, and Tillich have special relevance, of course, to King's immediate audience, the clergymen. But the general effectiveness of citing authorities again lies in its impressive verbal impact. (He is not concerned here with such complex historical problems as Jefferson's keeping of slaves, or Lincoln's playing politics with the Emancipation Proclamation.) The very weight of his authorities assuages a reluctant audience's fears that his actions are frighteningly without precedent.

Herein lies King's greatest strength as a rhetorician: his ability to gently answer charges that he is impatient, radical, an "outside agitator"; to surprise the reader into an unexpected awareness of what the charges really imply; and to transform the very charges leveled against him into an occasion for exhortation and encouragement for his own camp. King has an uncanny ability to translate familiar terms into new and challenging concepts; but at the same time he convinces us that his seemingly revolutionary techniques belong to tested and revered traditions. To the assertion that negotiation would be better than the forms of direct action which produce "tension" in the community, King replies that "tension" is a necessary ingredient of any "creative" process; without continual challenge to existing conditions, opportunities for constructive change will never appear. When King says "I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation," he has not given any ground to his accusers; on the contrary, he has usurped their ground by showing that the "negotiations" they prefer can be achieved only by his method of forcing a recalcitrant South to welcome the "tension" necessary for creative change — by nonviolent direct action. (pp. 81-82) He has thus redefined

a term that commonly connotes unpleasant friction into a concept that evokes promise and vitality. The dense antitheses in this paragraph depend upon rather trite metaphors ("from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realms of creative analysis and objective appraisal"; "from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood"). But the cumulative force of King's interchangeable, formulaic metaphors carries the weight of his argument in a flight of noble emotion. Profound but elemental truth can find expression often only in language that borders on triteness.

To the charge that his actions are "illegal," King replies that "legality" and "justice" are not always compatible. Through rhetorical antitheses he demonstrates that to serve justice one must sometimes break the law: "An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is a *difference* made legal. By the same token, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is *sameness* made legal"; "Sometimes a law is just on its face and unjust in its application"; "We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was 'legal' and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was 'illegal.'" (pp. 85-87)

By carefully establishing precedents for his nonviolent direct action, King convinces us that his program is a means of restoring what rightfully belongs to the blacks. He assures us that "there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience" and cites Biblical figures, Socrates, and American patriots as his predecessors. (pp. 86-87) Blacks seek nothing extraordinary or alien to "the American dream." On the contrary, "our destiny is tied up with America's destiny. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence across the pages of history, we were here." (p. 97) The very act of protest against repression, then, is not an act of arrogance but an attempt to restore and fulfill the ideals on which our nation was founded: "One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage." (p. 99) King is not simply lending "respectability" to his philosophy by citing revered precedents; he is employing sound methods of persuasive rhetoric by arguing within the frame of reference familiar to a broad audience. Again he swallows the natural impulse to assault the sacred cows of the opposition; in so doing, he has produced prose that is both inspiring and polemically effective.

King thus gives historical and philosophical justification to his movement. He proceeds to handle deftly more specific and gnawing criticism from both the clergymen and black nationalists. In one of his most brilliant passages of "redefinition," King rejects the clergymen's charge that

his action is "extreme." He warns them that his "extremism" has been the last stop-gap between responsible protest and violence; for white Birmingham to ignore his movement is to invite "a frightening racial nightmare." (p. 91) Essentially, then, King redefines himself as a "moderate" trying to "stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community": "complacency" and black nationalism. (p. 90) Not to remain a sitting duck for Muslim critics, King launches into an impassioned account of the results of repression and frustration; he concludes that his philosophy of nonviolent direct action has been a "creative outlet" for these forces. That this action had been termed "extremist" King admits "initially disappointed" him. But, in another of those marvellous paragraphs that combine sophisticated technique and emotional preaching power, King decides that the charge of extremism is cause for satisfaction; for if fidelity to noble principles of love, faith, and conscience be "extreme," then extremist he admits he is. He cites towering authorities: Jesus, Amos, Paul, Luther, Bunyan, Lincoln, Jefferson — all "extremists" in the cause of truth. (p. 92) The relentless parallelism with which he alternates rhetorical questions with quotations from his authorities gives an air of inevitability to his self-defense.

King has here resolved attacks from white racists, white moderates, Uncle Toms, and Black Muslims. On one level, he has simply and eloquently rediscovered the kind of extremism that is always latent in Christianity. On another level, he has cleverly defended his method of social action against sharp and painful criticism from divergent groups. Surely King was especially hurt by the hostility of other blacks who felt that he had begun to drag his feet, had become ineffectual; for the moment, at least, King transcends such conflict in a vision of Christian perfection.

With authorities firmly established and the cry for freedom for blacks clearly rooted in sacred American institutions, King truly can turn the accusations of the clergymen upon their own heads. Authentic Christianity never shirks the truth. The original "God-intoxicated" Christians so faithfully followed the inner light regardless of persecution that "they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests." It is the most telling blow against the clergymen that they stand accused of hypocrisy and of defending a dead institution: "Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. . . . If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century." (p. 96) King is no longer on the defensive, a man charged with "extremism"; he is now the discoverer and champion of old, cherished, and sacred values. Like the Birmingham that denies the promises of the Founding Fathers and the American

dream, the eight clergymen represent a sterile convention that mocks the body of sacred truth from which it was born.

Probably the most memorable passage in *Letter from Birmingham Jail* is that in which King explores the familiar injunction to "Wait!" for civil rights rather than to provoke turmoil. (pp. 83-84) Here King's greatest rhetorical assets operate simultaneously. He curtly states that "This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.'" His definition is not that of a skilled grammarian: it provides an adverb as a synonym for a verb. But the meaning rings clear. In a painful, powerful paragraph, King presents the numerous abuses that black people have endured for generations. But he does more than enumerate complaints: in the merging of content and style, he also achieves great artistry. An agonizingly long series of dependent clauses establishes intellectually and sensuously the conditions that make "waiting" no longer possible ("when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when . . . ; when . . ."). The very process of reading the series of abuses becomes so physically wearying, the cumulative impact of the grammatically parallel dependent clauses so enervating, that the long-awaited independent clause that resolves all the conditional statements deflates our expectation of a thundering protest with its eloquent understatement: "then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait." King continues: "There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over." What better metaphor than this, not only for a recapitulation of theme, but also for what King has achieved stylistically! The torrent of adverbial clauses capturing the agony of "waiting" literally pours over the simple little cup of the main clause, moving us emotionally while convincing us intellectually that "waiting" can no longer be expected. King concludes the paragraph with another masterly stroke of understatement: "I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience." Controlled irony is infinitely more devastating than self-indulgent vitriol.

Pipes notes that the "fourth stage" of the Negro sermon, the conclusion, attempts to resolve the emotional intensity aroused throughout the sermon and to call the sinners to God. King releases us from the repeated emotional climaxes of *Letter from Birmingham Jail* in the final three paragraphs, a kind of apology (in the sense of "justification") for the *Letter* and a benediction urging Christian brotherhood. The next to last paragraph is an eloquent reminder that, however conciliatory and brotherly his tone has been, he has in no way conceded merit to the charges of the clergymen: "If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me." Most of King's rhetorical trademarks are here: the antithesis, the parallelism, the logic cloaked

in strong rhythm, the understatement that cuts more deeply than overstatement. By grammatically paralleling the clergymen ("you") with God, he underlines their failure to measure their complaints against simple standards of morality; he shows that unswerving commitment to truth too often belongs to the man of God "alone in a narrow jail cell." There is release here only from the driving rhythm that marks the *Letter*; there is no escape from the quiet but profound irony of King's conclusion — only the temporary esthetic satisfaction of having comprehended anger and frustration. *Letter from Birmingham Jail* is finally more than a self-defense; it is a challenge to recognize real justice, real truth, and ultimately a challenge to act.

I have not tried to claim that King's final significance is literary rather than social and political; his lasting achievement is that he made civil rights protest a viable tactic for social change. Nor do I mean to suggest that King's vision of the struggle of blacks is more valid than that of any other faction that succeeded him; only history can determine that. What I have tried to show is that King was capable of the kind of sustained eloquence that has made Malcolm X's *Autobiography* and Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* acknowledged masterpieces of the black experience. It is a measure of King's achievement that he pushed the traditional Negro sermon beyond its historical limitations. His *Letter* borrows the most prominent traits of this genre and successfully translates them to previously unexplored fields of polemic.

From its inception in the South in the eighteenth century, the "old-time" style of preaching was an effective tool of repression. White slave-masters actually encouraged the presence of itinerant preachers on their plantations because "they usually taught a religion of consolation rather than of revolt against their white masters."¹⁸ Emotional release through religion did much "to encourage the slave along the road of mental escape from his conditions."¹⁹ Pipes respects the "old-time" sermon as a folk-art form. But he argues that its survival continues to be an index of repression of Negroes. As Negroes have access to "new opportunities of normal expression," and educational and economic advancement, their "degree of frustration is . . . lowered."²⁰ It is easy to see, then, why a new brand of black activists would be tempted to dismiss completely the politics — and indeed the style — of Martin Luther King, Jr., as outdated, irrelevant to the continuing black revolution.²¹

Apart from its unfortunate historical connotations, the "old-time" Negro sermon has recently attained a large measure of respect for its unique artistic achievement. Bruce Rosenberg praises the old oral tradi-

¹⁸ Rosenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁹ Pipes, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

²¹ For a recent sociological study of the role of the black minister in social reform, see Ronny E. Turner, "The Black Minister: Uncle Tom or Abolitionist?" *Phylon*, XXXIV (March, 1973), 86-98. Turner's findings essentially concur with those of Pipes and Rosenberg — that most black ministers stand aloof from social reform movements; but he considers the role of an active minority of black ministers significant. And he regards King as "the epitome of the modern abolitionist and symbol of the civil rights movement," p. 87.

tion because it “frees the minds of the audience from concern with what language, music, or story element is to come next, and so they are freer to involve themselves with the rhythm and the music and the emotion of the performance.”²² King’s achievement — as preacher, public leader, and writer — is that he harnessed the profound emotional power of the old Negro sermon for purposes of social action, thus overcoming the historical limitations of the tradition. Whether or not he had become irrelevant to the protest movement, as Cleaver has charged, King’s service in transforming the Negro sermon was crucially important. He did not abandon the genre for the sake of social engagement: he used the emotional power of the tradition to serve the protest movement. *Letter from Birmingham Jail* is convincing largely because it has an appealing emotional depth rare in argumentative writing. History will decide whether Martin Luther King, Jr. died at the peak of his effectiveness as a reform leader. *Letter from Birmingham Jail* has a timeless eloquence that finally transcends such concerns.

²² *Op. cit.*, p. 105.

