

WOLFGANG HOCHBRUCK

Edward Everett's Union Rhetoric

Wolfgang Hochbruck

EDWARD EVERETT'S UNION RHETORIC

Edward Everett (1794 - 1865) was a university professor, editor of the *North American Review*, congressman, senator, governor, and minister to Britain, but he was most popular for his ceremonial oratory.¹ His oration on "The Character of Washington" was repeated 137 times.² Today Everett is usually (if at all) remembered in connection with Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*. On that occasion, Lincoln's two-minute address followed Everett's official oration which had lasted for the better part of two hours.³ One recurrent form of epideictic oratory in Everett's oeuvre were speeches on the national holiday Fourth of July. On at least thirteen occasions between 1826 and 1861, he delivered Fourth of July orations in public or as after-dinner speeches.⁴

Laden with qualifying adverbs and adjectives and sometimes bordering on hyperbole in its praise of American men and institutions, Everett's style is typical for the age in many ways. One outstanding feature is Everett's ability to pinpoint the central elements of the evolving American myths surrounding the Fourth:⁵ "... and regarding the declaration of our independence . . . we are authorized to assert, that from that era dates the establishment of the only perfect organization of government, that of a Representative Republic, administered by persons freely chosen by the people." (*OSVO*, 1826, p. 110)

¹The authoritative volume on Everett is Ronald F. Reid, *Edward Everett: Unionist Orator* (New York, 1990). By the same author: "Edward Everett: Rhetorician of Nationalism, 1824 -1855," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 42 (1956), 273-282; and "Edward Everett," in Bernard K. Duffy, Halford R. Ryan, eds., *American Orators Before 1900. Critical Studies and Sources* (New York, Westport Conn., London, 1987), 162-168.

²Reid, *Everett*, p. 81.

³Cf. Ronald F. Reid, "Newspaper Response to the Gettysburg Addresses," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 53 (1967), 50-60.

⁴According to the extensive bibliography in Reid, *Everett*, pp. 203-222. Most of the orations appeared in pamphlet form and, in excerpts, in various newspapers. They were reprinted in Edward Everett, *Orations and Speeches on Various Occasions*. The edition used for this article appeared in New York in 1850. It contains orations at Cambridge, Mass., 1826; Charleston, Mass., 1828; Worcester, Mass., 1833, and Beverley, 1835 (hereafter *OSVO*, year + page number).

⁵Cf. Paul Goetsch, "The Declaration of Independence," in this volume, p. 11-32.

The exact wording of the orations is difficult to determine. Everett himself described his method in the following words:

With respect to speaking *memoriter*, I write out all my elaborate passages beforehand. . . . These imprint themselves on my memory by writing them. For the body of the discourse, I find a little study sufficient, and the written text is not accurately followed except in a few passages.⁶

Letters and notes also indicate that Everett revised his orations for publication. This contributed to the impression that his "addresses, literary and commemorative, are rather eloquent pieces of writing than orations in the popular acceptance of the term."⁷

By the late 1820s many of Everett's fellow orators had abandoned the generic constraint that had characterized early orations on the Fourth. They turned the Fourth into yet another platform for the discussion of political issues of the day. Everett, however, continued to believe in the necessity of a spirit of the Union that superseded the fissures of party sectarianism, and he clung to this ideal with stubborn tenacity. Accordingly, already among his first public addresses, given during "Mr. Madison's War,"⁸ were two sermons on Unionist topics. He consciously perpetuated the traditional form of the Fourth of July oration, because he believed that "the natural tendency of celebrating the Fourth of July" was "to strengthen the sentiment of attachment to the Union" (*OSVO*, 1833, p. 356). As dissent grew particularly over the issues of abolition and nullification, Everett's epideictic oratory became the somewhat quixotic attempt by one man to overcome through the power of his rhetoric the party divisions that were tearing the United States apart.

The development of his Unionism can be traced over a period of 35 years, from Everett's first Fourth of July oration in Cambridge, Mass., in 1826, to the last one which he gave in New York in 1861. In 1826, Everett and his audience could look back on fifty years of prosperity, whereas the later oration was given a few weeks after the outbreak of hostilities had virtually shattered all hopes of preserving the Union through peaceful reconciliation.

Well versed in classical rhetoric as well as in the German university tradition, Everett's Fourth of July orations usually centered on historical themes.

⁶Everett, quoted in Paul R. Frothingham, *Edward Everett: Orator and Statesman* (Boston, 1925), p. 392.

⁷[A. Hayward], "American Orators and Statesmen," *The Quarterly Review* [London], 67 (1840), 1-53, p. 39, referring to the first edition of *OSVO* (Boston, 1836).

⁸Reid, *Everett*, pp. 16ff.

Speeches such as "The History of Liberty" (Charleston, 1828) or "The Seven Years' War, the School of the Revolution" (Worcester, 1833)⁹ provide a wealth of historical information. In an age when schooling was still rudimentary and the average citizen's historical training negligible, epideictic oratory was one of few sources available. However, the purpose of Everett's oratory (as of all ceremonial oratory) was not historical but, so to speak, ideological accuracy. As Reid observes, "On the contrary, his speeches reveal a distinctly rhetorical bent, to which historical exposition and clarity are subordinated. And his extended introductions, his frequent and lengthy digressions, his long illustrations, and his protracted perorations are often devices for stressing nationalistic themes."¹⁰ The potential impact of this ideologically charged presentation of historical topics should not be underestimated.

The Fourth of July orations which most closely follow the traditional pattern¹¹ are the first (Cambridge, 1826) and the second (Charleston, 1828). They were given in locations that allowed direct references and deictic elements: at Cambridge, Everett pointed out Washington's seat in the church where the celebrations were held (*OSVO*, 1826, p. 95); at Charleston, Mass. he mentioned that the signal light from Boston to announce the advance of British troops in 1775 "was answered from the steeple of the church in which we are now assembled" (*OSVO*, 1828, p. 154). The revolution and the benefits of the Union are mentioned in their ubiquitously positive effects, the Union is perceived of as a given asset. Looking back on fifty-two years of prosperity and constant rise as a nation provides a comfortable position from which Everett in 1828 proclaims the role of America as a visionary guide to liberty for other peoples, notably those of Central and South America. The oration was originally entitled *The History of Liberty*, liberty (according to Everett) being a "theme [that] belongs to us. We inhabit a country, which has been signalized in the great history of freedom. We live under institutions, more favourable to its diffusion, than any which the world has hitherto known" (*OSVO*, 1828, p. 162). As usual, Everett treats the subject from a historical perspective, starting with ancient Greece and Rome (pp. 143f.), and via Columbus--already an American myth, but one not suited for Everett

⁹Cf. Reid, *Everett*, pp. 204, 206. *OSVO* gives only the dates, not the original titles of orations.

¹⁰Reid, "Rhetorician of Nationalism," p. 275.

¹¹For the common stereotypes of Fourth of July orations, see Howard H. Martin, *Orations on the Anniversary of American Independence, 1776 - 1876* (Ph.D., Northwestern University, 1955).

here¹²--he turns to the colonists that settled America. Leaving out the War of Independence itself (apart from certain matters of local interest), Everett devotes almost half of his oration to the organization of government, the constitutional convention, and the very issue of union itself. A sequence of primarily self-laudatory passages culminates in a set of repeated "let us . . ." formulas admonishing his listeners, but not to immediate action.

Let us then, as we assemble, on the birth day [sic] of the nation, as we gather upon the green turf, once wet with precious blood, let us devote ourselves to the sacred cause of CONSTITUTIONAL LIBERTY. . . Let us resolve, that our children shall have cause to bless the memory of their fathers, as we have cause to bless the memory of ours. (*OSVO*, 1828, p. 162)

Fourth of July addresses like this one meant to inspire a sense of belonging in the listener; they needed not to persuade nor were they aimed at arousing sentiment. Only once before 1860 did Everett deviate from the purely epideictic form to pursue personal aims: in an oration entitled "Stability and Progress," given at a public Fourth of July dinner in 1853.

It was an explicit call to balance the two "opposing principles" of "stability and progress," just as our Revolutionary forefathers had done. It was a particularly valuable speech for a potential presidential candidate. Printed versions circulated widely; and its antisagogic rhetoric had something for everybody.¹³

Before the war, appeals to save and preserve the Union were not specifically topicalized. They appear, however, with increasing frequency and intensity in Everett's introductions, perorations, and digressions. Hardly discernible in 1826 and 1828, such appeals gain prominence for the first time in 1833 when the whole exordium is devoted to the issue of saving the Union.

In fact, fellow citizens, I deem it one of the happiest effects of the celebration of this anniversary, that, when undertaken in the spirit which has animated you on this occasion, it has a natural tendency to soften the harshness of party, which I cannot but regard as the great bane of our prosperity. (*OSVO*, 1833, p. 354)

Throughout the period preceding the Civil War, Edward Everett's Fourth of July orations promoted reconciliation, at least on the festive Fourth. It was a noble effort. However, particularly after party politicians had

¹²"Causes, upon which I need not dwell, made it impossible, that the great political reform should go forth from Spain." (*OSVO*, 1828, p. 148)

¹³Reid, *Everett*, p. 70.

introduced the issues of abolition and nullification in their orations, Everett was fighting a losing battle. Ideological differences and changing radical positions gradually took on more importance than the purely epideictic functions which Fourth of July orations had before. On many occasions Everett tried to reconcile the feuding parties. Scholars who criticize him for the tenacity with which he clung to Unionist rhetoric and avoided contemporary political issues, misread his intentions.¹⁴

In chapter 7, the author [W.K. Kenneth] condemns Everett for lacking the courage to face the slavery issue, but he fails to recognize that silence about slavery was an integral part of Everett's strategy of saving the Union.¹⁵

On the whole, Everett's pre-war epideictic oratory is best described as an effort to concentrate the axiomatic principles of Unionism into common knowledge or, rather, into a common *credo*: well aware of the impact political oratory could have on the masses, Everett did not rely on arousing sentiment. His method rather appears to achieve a cumulative effect through repetition, a repetition pattern aimed at making the principle of the Union part of the mental history of every American individual.

As late as 1860, Everett gave an oration with the programmatic title *Success of Our Republic*.¹⁶ A year later, even Everett saw that the time for reconciliatory rhetoric was over. Ironically, the one Fourth of July oration which he devoted to *The Questions of the Day*¹⁷ was also his most effective and successful one. Now that the war had proved his efforts to have been futile, Everett showed that his oratory could be persuasive and argumentative. *The Questions of the Day* was given in New York in 1861, and its very title signals the methodological shift. This is not to imply that he deviated from the one principle he had devoted his life to, that of preserving the Union. Using historical data as evidence, Everett argued that, contrary to Southern claims and widespread belief, the secession was unconstitutional, and that the Southern states were therefore in a state of rebellion. This was indeed the question

¹⁴William K. Kenneth, "The Mind of Edward Everett," *DAI*, 13 (1952) 227-228 (Diss. Michigan State Coll., 1952).

¹⁵Reid, *Everett*, p. 275. See also Reid's criticism of Stuart Horn, "Edward Everett and American Nationalism," *DAI*, 33 (1973), 6274-A, (Ph.D., New York, 1972). Horn interprets Everett's varying responses to changing political conditions as changes in ideology. Reid maintains that Everett only changed his rhetorical strategies. Reid, *Everett*, p. 276.

¹⁶Edward Everett, *Success of Our Republic* (Boston, 1860).

¹⁷Edward Everett, *The Questions of the Day* (New York, 1861).

of the day: the North wanted to avoid a situation in which the rebelling Confederate States could present themselves in a manner similar to the thirteen New England States when they broke away from the British colonial empire. If they could portray themselves in the role of the oppressed, overthrowing an unjust regime, the North would be forced into the role of the English King in the *Declaration of Independence*. The effects on public opinion must be disastrous. As it was, some Southern orators employed just this tactic in their Fourth of July orations.¹⁸

Everett was convincing. His New York oration was repeated and distributed in pamphlet form, especially in Missouri.¹⁹ Even though the oration itself (his longest on a Fourth, totalling 42 pages) offers no spectacular vision but a rather dull legal argument as to why secession was unconstitutional and illegal, many undecided politicians and anti-Lincoln Unionists joined the Union cause due to its arguments. The argument itself is based on the *refutatio* as the dominating rhetoric figure. Taking up the adversary's claims and arguments one after the other, Everett proves their untenability, sometimes satirizing them.

And what, think you, was the grievance in the front rank of those oppressions on the part of the North which have driven the long-suffering and patient South to open rebellion . . . ? . . . You will hardly believe it; posterity will surely not believe it. . . . *the first was the fishing bounties paid mostly to the sailors of New England.*²⁰

The parody of the *Declaration of Independence* in these lines is obvious. Notably, Everett makes use of satire when his argument is weak or concerning real Southern grievances. For example, in this passage he lists several such grievances and ridicules them one by one before finally (and for once in his life as an orator) turning to the problem of slavery.

As stated, *The Questions of the Day* was successful in convincing some wavering citizens--particularly in the border states--of the Unionist position. Naturally, it would convince only those willing to listen to reasonable arguments rather than fiery propaganda. Parts of the oration were later incorporated into a lecture on *The Causes and Conduct of the Civil War* which Everett delivered on about 60 occasions. The legalistic argument to prove the

¹⁸Cf. Robert Pettus Hay, *Freedom's Jubilee: One Hundred Years of the Fourth of July, 1776-1876* (Ph.D., Lexington, Ky., 1967), pp. 252f.

¹⁹Reid, *Everett*, p. 90.

²⁰Everett, *Questions*, p. 24

unconstitutionality of secession reappeared also in Everett's Gettysburg address.

The Gettysburg address was like Everett's earlier ceremonial orations in that it contained historical information and used history as a plea for unity; but it was different in that the history was more recent and the plea much more explicit.²¹

That Union troops prevailed in 1865 did not result in a renaissance of Unionist idealism. Loyalties remained divided, and post-war literature as well as oratory show a predominant concern with restoring regional and local domestic stability rather than national enthusiasm. Consequently, the "Thirteenth Amendment set in motion a legislative process that would permanently alter the relation of state and national governments, a process in which the rhetoric of home and family played a revealing part."²²

After the war, Everett's orations faded from public memory for a variety of reasons.²³ Changes in taste was certainly one of them. Also, as in any conflict, the rhetoric of the victorious side shaped the dominating discourse, whereas the rhetoric of the vanquished turned into an object of sentimental memory and scientific study. Orators and politicians who voiced reconciliatory positions, however, tended to become objects of scorn and even ridicule--like the British premier Chamberlain for his ill-fated appeasement policy, or like the men and women who warned against a precipitate German reunion after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Everett's reconciliatory rhetoric failed to prevent secession, and unlike the names of the outstanding antagonists of this conflict, his is almost obliterated from history.

Yet, Everett's oratory had a lasting though indirect effect. Although he focused on historical themes, he usually compared the histories, situations, and misadventures of other countries and nations to the accomplishments of the Union. More often than not, these comparisons between the U.S. and other countries enhanced the image of the Union at the expense of the other, sometimes unfairly so. For example, in *Success of Our Republic* (1860) Everett refuted criticism of the U.S. uttered by British Members of Parliament during a debate, insinuating that the U.S. political system was in a state of decline. Everett answered not so much by proving the British insinuations

²¹ Reid, "Edward Everett," p. 166.

²² Kathleen Diffley, "Where my Heart is Turning Ever: Civil War Stories and National Stability from Fort Sumter to the Centennial," *American Literary History*, 2 (1990), 627-658, p. 639.

²³ There was only one edition of *OSVO* (in 1872) after Everett's death.

wrong but by reversing them, criticizing British conditions. Both speakers apparently attempted to draw public attention away from internal problems by using the other as negative referent, but the lasting impression conveyed by the speech was one of American superiority.

Everett was known to be a widely travelled man. In his youth he had lived and studied in Germany and travelled in other European countries; later, he served as minister to Britain and, for a short period, even as Secretary of State (for the Fillmore administration). Therefore, whenever Everett compared American and non-American conditions it was taken for granted that he was drawing from firsthand knowledge. In these comparisons, America always came out first, or best, or it was the American example that had paved the other countries' path to democracy (*The History of Liberty*, 1828; *Success of Our Republic*, 1860). As mentioned, Everett's style was popular, and his popularity made him an influential source of public knowledge. Repeating these comparisons in Fourth of July orations and various other contexts over several decades, Everett (and other speakers like him) created an intertextual morphogenetic field of public memory which contributed to the popular American image of itself as superior to other nations and individuals in terms of freedom, progress, and democracy. Even though this was not what Everett had been striving for, his technique of running historical facts through a rhetorical program designed for self-congratulation was instrumental in creating a political belief system that to the present day contains more myth than reality.