Review Essay

The Drama of Liberty, Equality, and Self-Government at Gettysburg

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Two new and resourceful studies have come to us, both published on the 150th anniversary of Lincoln’s delivery of the Gettysburg Address. Both deepen our understanding of that compelling and elusive work, and each is somewhat problematic in its conclusions. Jared Peatman industriously examines Lincoln’s dedicatory remarks in light of their reception over the following hundred years. Martin P. Johnson returns to the hallowed site to ponder Lincoln’s process of composition in the context of the political and devotional geography of Gettysburg itself. Both books analyze and contemplate the strange fact that Lincoln’s address reaches into our time with a defining power that 150 years of commentary have yet to encompass.

Peatman argues, against Gabor Boritt, Garry Wills, and others, that the precise shape and meaning of the long shadow of the Gettysburg Address were not adequately recognized for a long time—indeed, not until the 1960s.¹ In that era of crisis and moral fervor, Lincoln’s message that all men are created equal finally became actualized in legislation. At Gettysburg Lincoln reanimated the Declaration of Independence and captured the significance of democratic government, but for a century his words were ignored, deflected, misappropriated, faintly echoed, selectively quoted, and misleadingly praised.

For Peatman, the deepest meaning of Lincoln’s words at Gettysburg is that equality is a “necessity,” without which democratic

government, which ensures freedom, cannot continue: “For Lincoln, freedom and equality were connected, one impossible without the other” (23). Whether by lack of commitment or by moral comprehension, Lincoln’s immediate audience and their descendants failed to make that connection. It took the wheels of history, the moral force of the Civil Rights Movement, and the threat of ever greater social disruption to manifest the meaning of Lincoln’s words in law. By implication, then, liberty and equality were in no way secured or brought into combination by the Founders’ charters: the Declaration and the Constitution. Real freedom and real equality could not exist until they were coexistent in law.

Peatman works to show that newspaper coverage and other appropriations of Lincoln’s words were scattered or insufficient. There were predictable differences between the North and the South in their reactions, some of them surprising. Peatman finds that the newspaper of Lincoln supporter Horace Greeley, the New York Tribune, said nothing much for years about the Address or its preamble about equality. The strongly antiabolitionist New York World, taking up a venerable Democratic argument from the North and the South, was quick to criticize what it saw as the president’s illegitimate reliance on the Declaration over the Constitution. For three years the New York Times ignored the Address. Only in 1869 did it begin to praise it.

Although Lincoln’s address rose rapidly in general esteem in the North, appearing in school readers there as early as 1888, Peatman argues that the overall response was retrograde. He cites the most popular appropriation of the Address, the short story “The Perfect Tribute” by Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews, as a case in point. Appearing in Scribner’s Magazine in 1906, it introduced an ahistorical, revisionary approach to the Address that held the American imagination for generations. It merely told people, Peatman asserts, what they wanted to hear. Andrews immortalized a humble yet wise and long-suffering Lincoln who depends on pencil and brown paper to write his unpretentious lines. He is humbled first by his lack of polished rhetorical ability and later by what seems to be a crushing silence after the delivery of his brief remarks. When he accidentally becomes, on his return to Washington, the kind anonymous bedside comforter of a dying Confederate officer, he is gratified to hear the young man praise the speech as a deathless message that will bring the sections together on the basis of their patriotism. Indeed, when we return to the story text we see that the Confederate is not at all interested in Lincoln’s statement about equality. To the officer, the Address appeals to his desire for reconciliation on the basis of high-minded brotherhood in arms. Each side fights unselfishly for its country.
A more detailed discussion of “The Perfect Tribute” would uncover more of the substance of Andrews’s lasting if defective appeal to audiences North and South, as well as her literary ingenuity. Given that generations of Americans have known, and to some degree accepted as true, a number of her story’s elements, whether they have read the work or not, it is worth questioning the notion that their response is fundamentally perverse and retrograde.

The fact that she skillfully crafts the narrative to win sympathy and assent tells us, whatever that narrative’s retrograde purposes and effects, that her audience has a disposition that is capable of rejecting her portrait or reading it differently. Her appeal to low or retrograde motives addresses higher capacities. The complex history of the reception of the Gettysburg Address might be enriched by closer attention to such deflections.2

Lincoln enters the Andrews story as a man of the people who is also in need: he is seemingly alone with his humble genius, apparently misunderstood not only by his silent audience at Gettysburg but by himself. This condition in fact makes Lincoln akin to the isolated, dying Confederate whom he eventually encounters at the prison hospital, where he offers to write the young man’s will. The president is unrecognized by those around him and in a sense does not recognize himself. He believes, as his friend Ward Lamon said he believed in the few days immediately after the ceremony, that his speech was a failure. Yet the conversation between the unknown president and the dying officer takes place in a world of melancholy isolation illuminated by goodwill. Each man is looking for some form of confirmation, and each receives it, though incompletely, from the other.

The appeal of Andrews’s fiction comes from more than a mere spirit of denial and a love of happy endings. She does not misquote Lincoln’s words; her story repeats them in their entirety at its beginning. She makes clear that the two main characters are not of one mind about slavery, depicting the young man’s contempt for the speech’s opening lines despite his admiration for the orator and the speech as a whole. The Gettysburg Address, he says, is “one of the great speeches of history” (38). But “of course, it’s all wrong from my point of view. The thought that underlies it is warped, inverted, as I look at it” (45). He will not speak the words about equality in the Address, even though they are fresh in our memory because Andrews has put them in the story’s first pages. In part or in their totality, we aren’t sure, they so

have captured the prisoner’s imagination that he tries to articulate his wonderment in the broken syntax of a dying man. In a voice sweet and opinionated, patient and “impetuous,” he tries to articulate what they mean, and asks for his visitor’s approval.

All humanity, he says, might be lifted by the sentiments of the Address: “It lifts humanity to something worth dying for. . . . Do you agree with me? ’There’s nothing finer. . . . I only feel the love of country, the satisfaction of giving my life for it. The speech—that speech—has made it look higher and simpler—your side as well as ours’” (44–6). Unable to join with the Union and support what Lincoln has called its founding principles, he prides the display of a common humanity in Lincoln’s magnanimity, and the two sides’ devotion to “our country.” His dying words echo lines from the Second Inaugural (“as God gives us to see the right”) but give them changed meanings: both sides have fought for “the right of our country as it is given us to see it” (46). Lincoln listens quietly. “I believe it is a good speech,” he finally replies. He has heard praise for the speech “with a happy heart.” Something has happened so that he no longer thinks it a failure. But what that is, precisely, is unclear. His indirect reply does not endorse the young man’s rejection of the Address’s preface or the idea that “our country” can be two countries joined in patriotic sentiment. In saying that it is a “good speech,” Andrews’s Lincoln points readers back to the speech itself, in the story’s introduction. Beyond its appeal—and it is a considerable appeal, as Peatman notes—to the desire to reconcile the sections without facing the legacy of slavery or Jefferson’s principle, the story also opens to Lincoln’s enlargement, in the preface of the Gettysburg Address, of the idea of a common humanity.

Peatman documents how, in the years following “The Perfect Tribute,” the articulation of the Gettysburg legacy began to change. On the centennial of Lincoln’s birth, William Jennings Bryan spoke on the superiority of Lincoln’s oratory, especially the Gettysburg Address. Peatman finds in his populist rhetoric “the implication that the Gettysburg Address guaranteed everyday Americans equality with the elite” (78). But Bryan was more specific. Lincoln’s power as a speaker rested in his ability, especially in the Address, to condense “the knowledge of the people” and the “earnestness of the heart” in language “so simple that anyone could understand it.” For Bryan he was a great man capable of reaching audiences with mighty efforts of analysis and condensation. Although Bryan mentions slavery only once in that speech and says nothing about “a new birth of freedom,” he does not hesitate to declare what Lincoln’s clarity was clear about: In the 1858 debates and afterward, “no one else more clearly stated
the fundamental objections to slavery than Lincoln stated them, and he had a great advantage over his opponents in being able to state those objections frankly; for Judge Douglas neither denounced nor defended slavery as an institution—his plan embodied a compromise and he could not discuss slavery upon its merits without alienating either the slave-owner or the abolitionist.”

The Address was cut into marble a few years later. Peatman notes, however, when the Lincoln Memorial was dedicated in 1922, the two most prominent officials who spoke at the ceremony focused on national unity, not emancipation. Chief Justice William Howard Taft and President Warren Harding distanced themselves (as an approving New York newspaper put it) from “abolition of any particular evil” (111).

Peatman points out, however, that another speaker at the dedication, Tuskegee Institute president Robert Moton, who preceded Taft and Harding on the program, saw the occasion differently. There are two versions of his remarks in the Library of Congress. Historians have argued that the memorial commission objected to the first draft’s inclusion of urgent remarks about the need to secure the civil rights of all Americans, and that as a consequence Moton read from a second, more conciliatory, draft. Peatman asserts that the second version’s omission of a direct call for reform created a speech that was “totally different” from the original (110). But that is a verdict not universally held by commentators.

If one examines the two Moton texts, one sees substantial changes have indeed been made, but not all to contrary effect. The two speeches are certainly different in overall tone and in much of their content. Several pages in the first version, about the urgency of overcoming injustices contrary to the principles of Jefferson and Lincoln, have disappeared, replaced in the second draft by an extension of Moton’s broader history of the conflict between freedom and slavery in American history, a struggle he says was brought to judgment in the Civil War. He limits later sections of the speech to documenting the economic advancement, since the war, of black people, confirming and building on that judgment, and he is silent about political and social progress. But he retains from the more strident version its powerful

5. See, for example, Adam Fairclough, “Civil Rights and the Lincoln Memorial: The Censored Speeches of Robert Moton (1922) and John Lewis (1963),” Journal of Negro History 82 (1997), 408–16, especially 411.
narrative of the origins of the Civil War, a narrative that enlarges on the language and concepts of Lincoln’s words in the Gettysburg and Second Inaugural Addresses. In the core of that story is a struggle Moton says all Americans have inherited. Here he says more about the meaning of Lincoln’s speech at Gettysburg and its affinities with the Second Inaugural than anyone else in Peatman’s survey:

While the Mayflower was riding at anchor preparing for her voyage from Plymouth, another ship had already arrived at Jamestown. The first was to bear the pioneers of freedom, freedom of thought and freedom of conscience; the latter had already borne the pioneers of bondage, a bondage degrading alike to body, mind, and spirit. Here then, upon American soil within a year, met the two great forces that were to shape the destiny of the nation. . . . Freedom was the great compelling force that dominated all, and like a great and shining light, beckoned the oppressed of every nation to the hospitality of these shores. But slavery like a brittle thread was woven year by year into the fabric of the nation’s life. They who for themselves sought liberty and paid the price thereof in precious blood and priceless treasure, somehow still found it possible, while defending its eternal principles for themselves, to withhold that same precious boon from others.6

The “foundations of our national existence,” in place since the nearly simultaneous landings of colonists and slaves in Plymouth and Jamestown, rest on “freedom” and “the bed-rock of liberty.” Freedom is “the heritage bequeathed” by America to “all her sons.” It is a gift to all. The realization of that gift, and the extension of its blessings “to all mankind,” depended on the sacrifices exacted by the Civil War and, by implication, a continuing effort of dedication to the things Lincoln thought most important:

In the process of time, as was inevitable, these great forces, the forces of liberty and the forces of bondage, from the ships at Plymouth and Jamestown, met in open conflict upon the field of battle. And how strange it is, through the same over-ruling Providence, that children of those who bought and sold their fellows into bondage should be among those who cast aside ties of language, of race, of religion and even of kinship, in order that a people not of their own race, nor primarily of their own creed or color, but sharing common humanity, should have the same measure of liberty and freedom which they themselves enjoyed.7

7. Moton, revised draft, p. 2.
The precise political effectiveness of Moton’s eloquence, augmenting Lincoln’s, is a matter for debate. But we can say that its calculated directness and resonance with Lincoln’s thinking unsettles superficially ameliorative views as well as tendencies to avoid Lincoln’s words. Moton explicitly and implicitly expands on Lincoln’s accruing argument that the legacy of slavery is inescapable for all, that its extirpation has required sacrifices, and that if freedom and those sacrifices are to be acknowledged as a common inheritance, the endurance of that legacy depends on the generations that follow.

When Peatman considers later learned attempts to bring the Gettysburg Address into the new century, he does not discuss them as significant contributors to the enlightenment of the 1960s. What counts is political will and legislative results. Various illuminating and inspiring interpretations of Lincoln’s speech in the early part of the twentieth century, such as those by Earl George Curzon and Lord Charnwood, are mentioned, but they hardly seem to count. Their consideration of the ways in which Lincoln’s oratory makes possible his expression of statesmanlike ideas is at best a preliminary exercise. They do not elicit commitment and action. What matters for Peatman’s history is moral resolve: Can we find it in ourselves to act on principles set out in what is being said? Can we make use of a crisis, fueled by a confluence of historical events and willpower (the Cold War, the Civil War centennial, and the movement for civil rights) to bring about the required changes?

In some form these considerations are of course crucial for any speaker and audience, especially in matters of high political importance. History may have an arc, but its patterns are not precisely known to us. In moments when they do emerge, or seem to emerge, the necessity of taking decisive actions will arise. Circumstances sometimes change in such ways that choices must be made in tandem with, or against, the flow of events. Precisely how we read the Gettysburg Address and live and act in such times is not a matter for scholars to legislate or armchair critics to treat casually with second guesses. There are moments and eras of decision.

In *The Long Shadow*, however, our understanding of this process in the context of Lincoln’s political life is disappointing. His power to choose is dwarfed by events. Lincoln is presented, as many modern historians have viewed him, as a wise yet compromising politician whose views lack sufficient moral clarity before the crisis forces him to take a decisive stand. Before Gettysburg, the account assumes, Lincoln must evolve. For most of the time prior to the Gettysburg Address, he stands for “equality of opportunity,” not the unalloyed principle...
and imperative of freedom for all (25). Standing on that Pennsylvania battlefield, he finally puts the ideal and the real into one place and so takes on the full mantle of abolition. He finally sees what we now see clearly, what he should have seen earlier.

As Peatman traces it, the long shadow of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address is clear in outline but remarkably granular and indistinct in substance, even though it is assumed to be one of Lincoln’s greatest achievements. Do we really need it? Is it really in any way indispensable? The Long Shadow does a good job of tracing the clarifying allusions to the speech for domestic and international purposes by President Eisenhower and U.S. secretary of state Dean Rusk in the 1950s and early 1960s to distinguish America’s accomplishments, shortcomings, and its overarching aspirations from the record of its Cold War rivals. But leading up to that period and in the years after, the legacy of the Address (as evidenced in the many appropriations and allusions that Peatman helpfully collects) is surprisingly shadowy.

Accompanied by Lincoln’s ubiquitous visage, the Address’s concluding passage about government of, by, and for the people, saw lengthy service in the morale-boosting drives of America and its allies during the world wars. But the Address’s deep entwining of liberty, equality, sacrifice, and devotion with the origins and aspirations of the new nation could never be adequately preserved and extended in such massive campaigns or by the mechanical recitation by generations of schoolchildren. Excerpts pulled from context have served widely discordant purposes: “the brave men living and dead who struggled here” has long been construed as directly including Confederate soldiers in Lincoln’s Gettysburg dedication. In its entirety, the Address continues to have a checkered history. Jiang Zemin enjoyed reciting the full address in the presence of Presidents Nixon and Clinton, not (one guesses) as a mere display of facility. In an opening scene of Stephen Spielberg’s powerful film Lincoln, its recitation by a group of African American soldiers throws it back at the exhausted president almost as a taunt.

Our ideas of democracy and equality as we find them in the Address or impute them to it are not so easy to pin down. Peatman observes that the meaning of “securing equality”—making equality a fact for all in democratic government—is “filled with multiple and contested meanings” (46). The general history of the Gettysburg Address’s reception would seem to prove the wisdom of that assertion. What exactly does Lincoln mean when he indicates that “all men are created equal” as an almost Euclidean “proposition”—not simply a moral imperative but something to be proven? If the ordeal is one of “testing whether that nation, so conceived and so dedicated,” can endure, then is that
test one of warlike resolve alone or is it also a test of a truth, and our understanding of that truth, which is embedded in the new nation’s birth? The Gettysburg Address is arguably Lincoln’s most comprehensive definition of what equality means through the course of that ordeal and as Jefferson’s self-evident principle, which calls for an understanding of equality that is connected to our origins as created beings—as beings endowed with liberty. If we merely assume that we know what equality is and focus only on securing it, have we adequately undergone our own Gettysburg ordeal, and thereby understood the truth Lincoln is talking about? Have we appreciated what liberty and equality mean on Lincoln’s own terms in the Gettysburg Address?

We should continue asking as well about the meaning of Lincoln’s idea of “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” How is it related to his longstanding preoccupation with self-government and its perpetuation? In his collected writings, he almost never uses democracy to characterize the political system that would secure that form of government. With perhaps only one exception, he uses “the Democracy” to refer to the opposing Democratic Party. Lincoln never explicitly equates democracy with government “of, by, and for” the people, except in one instance, where he uses democracy synonymously with “a constitutional republic.” That rare confluence of terms appears in Lincoln’s crucial speech to Congress on July 4, 1861, where in considering the Confederate reasons for seceding he counters by saying that democracy is not adequately understood without its connection to constitutional republican government. His phrasing forecasts his thought and language in the conclusion of the Gettysburg Address: The Civil War (the current conflict) “presents to the whole family of man, the question, whether a constitutional republic, or a democracy—a government of the people, by the same people—can, or cannot, maintain its territorial integrity, against its own domestic foes.”

In this important case “constitutional republic” and “democracy” are functional synonyms. Democracy depends not only on freedom and equality but also on a form of government that requires deference to expressions of popular will as well as self-government understood as adherence to laws that do not necessarily answer to changeable expressions of that popular will. In a constitutional republic the people make and adhere to government-framing laws that endure not

simply as a product of the people’s will but as laws that are respected and defended against challenges from within as well as from without. Without such law, democracy is merely rule by will.

Free republican democracies, Lincoln indicates, endure insofar as their people are devoted to and defend those principles of self-government. Hence the importance to Lincoln of *endurance* when that nation, its constitution, and the principles that animate that constitution are tested by an internal conflict, the very embodiment of a challenge to self-government. The evidence Peatman amasses suggests how important it is to meet that challenge to our memory, understanding, and capacity for action. The Gettysburg Address seems made for inspiring and guiding that work.

Martin P. Johnson, author of *Writing the Gettysburg Address*, takes a different path. The shape and meaning of the speech, especially in its composition and delivery and the history of later revisions, are his points of concentration. He discovers new things that have a bearing on our understanding of what Lincoln said. The history of the Address becomes known in the interaction of purpose, text, audience, and circumstance, the last including the conditions under which it was composed, delivered, received, recorded, and then altered in the course of its shorthand, telegraphic, printed, edited, and memorial circulation. Far more than an editorial or evidence-weighing project (though it does both impressively well), *Writing the Gettysburg Address* is a model of historical and textual inquiry combined with imaginative scholarship. It is a record of contemplation as well as industry. It yields surprising results by returning, with patient persistence, to uncertain and approximate evidence so that progressively deeper levels of meaning come into view. The book draws from many sources of scholarly commentary but seems most appropriately described as a revisionary hybrid and extension of Douglas L. Wilson’s method and subject matter in *Lincoln’s Sword* and *Herndon’s Informants*. It credibly addresses several important textual and interpretive problems left open in Wilson’s penetrating analysis of the Address.

Johnson is not satisfied with the longstanding idea that the five surviving versions of the Address somehow form a synoptic whole, or that there is a missing and authoritative delivery draft that Lincoln gave to reporters. He does not accept the reasoning that led to the establishment of a derivative version in the *Collected Works*. His daring project is not only to pursue a reasonably complete resolution of the chief textual problem posed by the history of the Address but also to find the origins of that resolution in Lincoln’s preparations leading up to November 19, 1863, most particularly Lincoln’s tour of the
battlefield that morning and the hour he spent after breakfast back at
the Mills house revising, Johnson argues, the Address’s last page.

Striding into old controversies about Lincoln’s process of composi-
tion, Johnson deftly argues that an authoritative text of the speech in
Lincoln’s hands on the platform is before us: the version that presi-
dential secretary John Nicolay published in 1894 and claimed was
Lincoln’s at Gettysburg. Johnson rejects the view that the version
preserved by presidential secretary John Hay and published in 1908
should be the authority for the others. Synthesized, derivative, or
hypothesized versions of the speech have important uses in John-
son’s analysis, but for his central project they are beside the point. No
delivery text was handed over to reporters. Lincoln revised the press
reports because they had caught his words, not because he spotted
differences between his written text and that of the best reported
versions. By far the best early published versions were those deriv-
ing directly, Johnson concludes, from a few reporters with excellent
recording skills: the Associated Press report—which Johnson believes
was the result of auditory transcription, not a synthesis of shorthand
and copying from Lincoln’s text—and the Charles Hale text, the prod-
uct of meticulous shorthand (some say longhand). Hale claimed, with
justification according to the preponderance of the evidence, that he
had caught “the words actually spoken by the President, with great
deliberation” (207). The Nicolay text is the “delivery manuscript” from
which Lincoln spoke while correcting and adding elements that later
found their way into the versions. Lincoln later edited slightly vary-
ing printed versions that he said best captured his actual speech, but
those versions had no material connection to the original manuscript.

Although the Nicolay draft is not far from those versions of the
Address we read as authoritative today, it is also idiosyncratic. The
first page is in ink on official White House stationary, the second
in pencil on oversized foolscap. The two pages are linked ungram-
matically. One of its sentences (“This we may, in all propriety do”) is
strange to our ears. There are other, minor anomalies. The synoptic
versions have been taken as more authoritative largely because they
include slight revisions we know Lincoln himself made. Why take
Nicolay’s less finished, possibly incomplete version as the primary
text? A dozen small but telling variants in the other versions include
phrasing and diction that make the speech more finished, literary, and
somewhat more moving than it is in the Nicolay draft (4).

In reply, Johnson opens a new line of reasoning, hypothesizing that
Lincoln’s journey to the battlefield before breakfast on the morning of
the ceremony was a formative experience. His thoughtful experience of
the place and the occasion, likely to have included his encounter with
the place where General John Reynolds was shot, led to the comple-
ition of a delivery draft that changed and deepened the meaning of
his words.

The physical attributes of the Battlefield Draft are crucial to Johnson’s
thesis. Its two pages, the first in ink showing several small but signifi-
cant revisions in pencil, and the second—all in pencil and made up
of nine smoothly written lines without edits—lend themselves to the
view that Lincoln made significant changes while in Gettysburg. Sifting
a wide range of testimony and editorial judgment, Johnson proposes
that Lincoln drafted the greater part of the Address in Washington
but then, on arriving in Gettysburg, discarded and rewrote the second
page in pencil and made several slight edits on page one, perhaps on
the night before but most likely in the hour before the ceremony.

Early in the morning of the nineteenth, before breakfast, Lincoln rode
out with some others onto the battlefield. Johnson makes a good case
for one of his stopping points being a place that was already a hallowed
station on visitors’ pilgrimages: the site in McPherson’s Woods where
Reynolds, one of Lincoln’s favorite officers and the highest-ranking
Union soldier to die at Gettysburg, had been mortally wounded in the
forefront of the Union line as he rallied his men to delay the advanc-
ing Confederates in the first hours of the battle. Only months before,
Reynolds had turned down Lincoln’s offer of the command of the army
that eventually fought at Gettysburg under General George G. Meade.
In fact, Reynolds had recommended Meade in his place. In McPher-
son’s Woods, at the place where a commander had fallen with his men,
buying crucial time for Union reinforcements, Lincoln would have
encountered the Union victory’s elemental sacrifice. Johnson might
have added that Reynolds at that moment embodied the commander
pushing forward literally at the head of the Union forces, a model of
resolve, unlike Meade after July 4, to pursue the issue to its end.

We know that Lincoln returned to the Wills house for breakfast and
then an hour of writing in an upper room. It was at that point, Johnson
argues, that Lincoln made his final revisions. Today, Johnson contends,
we see one of the results of that moment in the word “did,” which is
emphatically underlined in pencil on page one (“we will never forget
what they did here”). We see a hurried and grammatically awkward
transition at the bottom of the White House leaf, and then on page
two, the foolscap page, an almost clean, penciled version of Lincoln’s
closing words.

Johnson allows for many factors to have influenced Lincoln in
making these changes, but he ventures to assert that the best way to

John Channing Briggs
describe the impetus for Lincoln’s final penciled words is that they were revisions “sparked by something unexpected, seemingly by a vivid experience or insight” having to do with the power and meaning of “what they did here” (165). The meaning of the sacrifice is not only intensified by Lincoln’s emphasis on did; it is deepened by a more vivid imagination of the act, and thereby a more fundamental readiness to risk sacrifice—to join in and extend what has been done for self-government and the nation’s new birth. Lincoln’s words at Gettysburg involve his audience in that imagination and resolve, taking them from what happened “here.”

In an investigation that includes an especially impressive analysis of Joseph Gilbert’s unintentionally revealing 1917 account of his role as a young reporter at the event, Johnson contends that William Barton’s long-standing account of the origin of the Address’s supposedly authoritative printed version is suspect. The newspaper transcriptions of the speech, which are the basis for the later edited versions, do not displace the Nicolay draft. Johnson credibly contends that once they have been carefully analyzed they actually capture the spoken version of Lincoln’s speech, the words that Lincoln used as he read, and in select places revised and extemporized what he had written. In this line of reasoning, Johnson sets himself fundamentally apart from Gabor Boritt and to some degree from Douglas Wilson. Through his treatment of almost a hundred and fifty years of textual controversy, Johnson does us the service of redirecting the editorial discussion by linking important editorial issues to fundamental questions about Lincoln’s meaning.

Looking at the full history of Lincoln’s speech, Johnson observes that it took “many hands to write the Gettysburg Address” (137). Indeed, a “mixture of make-do and majesty . . . defines the history” of what we now consider to be the text of Lincoln’s words (12). At the same time, Lincoln’s conception of the speech was remarkably precise: “Action and policy, the end in view and the larger purpose—these were what motivated Lincoln” (165). The edited versions we have today are remarkably close, despite numerous small variations, to the Nicolay draft. Lincoln’s process of composition, stimulated in its final stages by his visit to the battlefield, worked to perfect his execution of his overall conception, as did his delivery and his later edits to versions published by the press.

Isn’t there something more than meets the eye in all this, something almost religious? It is worth observing how carefully Johnson’s book downplays the religious resonances of the Address that it suggests are there. We read several times how Lincoln retired to an “upper room” in
the Mills house (not Johnson’s phrase but one he uses more than once from the record of a witness), as though to prepare something beyond a speech. Here it is not easy to suppress the association between what Lincoln was likely writing there and what is traditionally known as the room in which the disciples were served the Last Supper. This would not be the first time that a historian made discoveries that elaborated on the confluence of secular and religious concerns in Lincoln’s work and legacy, affinities that get one to thinking about Lincoln’s indirect yet evocative use of biblical themes. It is saying nothing new, but worth observing, that those who gave “the last full measure of devotion”—and from whom the living take “increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave” that “last full measure”—are not without resemblance to the one who offered in that upper room “my body, which is given for you,” the “new testament in my blood.”9 It would not be unreasonable to observe that the greater part of Lincoln’s audience would have had little difficulty, on hearing Lincoln’s words, associating the redeeming sacrifice of the Union dead with the Christian original and a “new birth.” Of course, Lincoln routinely refrained from making explicit religious references, even when he quoted from the Bible. His precise relation to Christianity remains obscure, but the prominence that he here gives to “devotion” and the fact of sacrifice (“what they did here”), which Johnson’s analysis makes so vivid and personal as well as comprehensive, suggests parallels that are far more than rhetorical devices.

One more question, elicited by Peatman’s effort as well as Johnson’s, presses forward: What can we conclude after reading both books about the Gettysburg Address’s conception of liberty, its relation to equality, and the connection of both to “a new birth of freedom”? Whereas Peatman tends to take for granted a synonymity of liberty and equality, identifying both with democracy and freedom, Johnson does not always develop the rich implications of his argument for a more complex understanding of what seems to be the Address’s organizing principle. If the soldiers’ sacrifice inspires a new birth of freedom, as Lincoln suggests, doesn’t the worth of their sacrifice derive in large measure from their liberty, their risking and undergoing the consequences through their devoted choice? Doesn’t the sad and inspiring drama that is enacted to this day at Gettysburg draw from and participate in that connection? As we look at the parts of the Address and their relation to the whole in the light of Johnson’s analysis, we see more clearly that Lincoln would have his audience,

and Lincoln himself, resolve a readiness to make a similar choice devoted to Jefferson’s proposition, so that “this nation shall have a new birth of freedom.”

The Address helps us see that self-government, the great goal of the American experiment, is not the same as mere independence. Lincoln elsewhere distinguished between a merely revolutionary principle and an idea of self-government based on upholding the spirit of the Declaration. Southern and northern deflections of Lincoln’s message in the postwar period tended to read the Address as favoring the former over the latter. Lincoln argued at length before the war that even a government of, by, and for the people would easily devolve into Stephen Douglas’s slavery-blinded “popular sovereignty” if the people forgot their beginnings and ends. Liberty fails as self-government without its being dedicated to Jefferson’s proposition. A focus on equality alone, ignoring liberty, misses the drama that makes Gettysburg what it is. And yet by these lights the proposition that all men are created equal would fall away in a democratic republic unless the republic were preserved by those animated by their creator-endowed liberty to protect it and sacrifice for it. At Gettysburg Lincoln framed the outcome of battle as calling for a new birth of freedom brought about by a rededication, a chosen and endured devotion to liberty and equality.

Good Lincoln scholarship is bound to provoke such discussions, and new questions. Martin P. Johnson’s book is very good indeed. He puts a refreshingly archaic sense of story back into the scholarly history of the Gettysburg Address—story being mythopoetic understanding and enactment of imaginative hypotheses that enable us to see what otherwise would have been missed. Johnson also brings Gettysburg into the present, with an uncommon ability to suggest what might very well have been Lincoln’s experience of composition at Gettysburg. Early-morning visitors at that place are likely to feel a certain pressure, something from a dimension of human experience commonly unnoticed: the combined force of a freeing illumination and the burden of history. As Johnson goes far to resolve a number of questions, he draws us back toward the text of the Address in the context of the battlefield and of Lincoln’s own enduring rededication at Gettysburg to the cause of true self-government. This book offers access to a rekindled sense of “what they did here.”