Review Essay

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In the age of the book’s supposed disappearance into virtual ether, the Lincoln Studies Center has presented us with a gift: the first rigorously edited, annotated version of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, including a general introduction, a text-editor’s introduction, factually intriguing introductions to each debate, the edited texts (with instructive footnotes), a glossary of key terms and phrases, and an index that includes important topics as well as names. The University of Illinois Press has made the complicated text remarkably readable, searchable, a thing to be pondered. It is not only beautifully and usefully formatted as a handheld device of 392 eminently accessible pages, but unlike a computer-screen projection or a set of excerpts, it is a book that invites reading from beginning to end. Much like Lincoln’s original edition, which he urgently brought forward just in time for the Republicans’ 1860 nomination debate in Chicago, this unique scholarly edition calls out to be read at a turning point in our country’s political life. The book combines intellectual and tactile appeal with the best versions we have of what Douglas and Lincoln said in one of the greatest political debates in American history. The achievement here is a discovery—or a rediscovery—of what that signal event meant.

Yet what a mighty gulf now separates us from the Lincoln-Douglas Debates; the chasm is not so much in our powers of comprehension or—now—the tools we have to cross it, but in our resources of imagination. Only a few times in American history—and assuredly in 2008—have so many lines of political force converged on a campaign season. But because as a citizenry we pay little notice to Iraq or Afghanistan, we are dulled by the perception of a long peace or the quotidian acceptance of greatness. For reasons calling for gratitude as well as misgiving, contemporary issues do not often focus our attention as issues of the day that once concentrated the minds of Lincoln and Douglas and their audiences.
A more subtle yet momentous change removes us: the certainty that our new technologies for recording voice and image have solved the problem of gaining access to such events in our own time. We measure our imperfect recovery of the past by our apparently comprehensive ability to capture the essence of political debates in our own era. The exquisitely literate tool that Davis and Wilson have fashioned to recover the textures and crosscurrents of Lincoln’s and Douglas’s rival speeches therefore struggles, no matter how much we give it praise, with the widespread, condescending conviction that we have the means in our own time to make comprehension complete.

Our practiced familiarity with technology that seemingly captures the full visual and auditory drama of political debate has paradoxically corroded our interest in debate. Taped images, which seem to come to us directly without the slightest need for editing or reading, paradoxically lend themselves to our much-valued manipulations—sound bites—that weaken our hold on the play of gesture and word. Fascinated by the display of a full visual and audible text, along with the power to reconfigure it, we lose our ability to discern, listen, or read. The very availability of momentary quotation provides a powerful means of distorting what is said and remembered. The now precipitous decline in the reading of newspapers was preceded by television-induced aphasia. Transcriptions of speeches disappeared from newspapers’ pages, even though long texts of oral performance had long been the nutritious staple of an older form of reading, which easily turned readers into reenactors for audiences of their fellow citizens.

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By doing such a thorough job (Lincoln liked that word thorough) of sifting through divergent transcriptions and preparing the reader for what follows, Davis and Wilson have given us the opportunity to reassess the debates as a compelling phenomenon for interpretation. Rather than claiming to discover fundamental novelties in the record of both men’s speeches, the editors weigh the textual variants—many of them unnoted in previous editions—with judgments informed by their knowledge of historical context and their reading of the whole. The design and editorial substance of the work encourages us to do the same, with the editors’ help. They bring to light a multitude of linguistic, rhetorical, and contextual factors that influenced the formation of an authoritative printed text. In reading their work, one’s mind is more likely to focus on the formative questions that influenced why and how each man’s views unfolded in the course of the debates.
What is an authoritative text of the debates? Standard editorial practice is to look for a base text and, if one is available, map variants upon it according to various criteria of authenticity. Like their predecessors, Davis and Wilson have focused on the first edition of the debates edited by Lincoln himself, with Lincoln’s and Douglas’s speeches rendered by their respective transcribers and supporting newspapers. But they go much further. Lincoln’s daring decision to favor the partisan record for each man was of course the editorial decision that set everything else in play, in that he wisely conceded that the different accounts of each man’s speeches had to be fairly reckoned with. It was an objective decision, but it was also obviously and effectively political, and full of implications. Partisans claimed to know what their man said and how the other man reacted, but the transcript Lincoln pasted together juxtaposed competing transcripts for a trial of opinion, each side presumably presenting its man in the best possible light. In this second sense, he most emphatically did not employ a modern academic approach to the problem of establishing a reliable text. And yet his book, full of acknowledged partisanship, was at the same time a high-minded extension of the debate. Much in Lincoln’s spirit, Davis and Wilson take us within Lincoln’s complex and richly human view of the written record by establishing their academically edited text on the basis of thorough editorial comparisons and their own acknowledged, indispensable interpretive judgments.

The editors provide some important guidance for working through questions of authenticity. They document a number of patent distortions in the various printed records that Lincoln’s principle of favoring friendly transcribers managed to avoid. They point out others that Lincoln’s method preserved—two of the most notorious being his acceptance of the pro-Douglas newspapers’ rewriting of Lincoln’s excerpts from his Peoria Speech, and a Douglasite account of Lincoln’s being physically restrained by his own men when he took offense at an apparent insult. Remarkably, the editors also discover a number of cases in which a rival’s version confirms or apparently corrects the wording in the friendly version. The numerous variations documented in the notes and interpolations not only help us appreciate the linguistic, rhetorical, and political variables that influenced the written record; they reenact the process of listening to each man and parsing his words, after the event, in local written accounts. The result is two-fold: a greater confidence in the text Davis and Wilson have established, and, paradoxically, a much greater awareness of the indispensability of interpretation for scholarly and citizen-like recovery of the debates one by one and as one event.
The evidence unearthed serves both impressions: there is sometimes a tension between the establishment of objectivity and the revelation of contingency. The book adjudicates a wide range of errors and differences of opinion in the use of certain words and phrases. Was the right word wrongly heard (“eliminates” instead of the more logical “insinuates”)? Did both sides hear it incorrectly? Was an interjection authored by an enthusiastic or a protective transcriber, or by the speaker himself? What about Lincoln’s use of the N-word? Do ironizing quotation marks originate from the speaker or his scribe? When they are not there, are we not also occasionally hearing irony anyway? How do we know? What do we make of the change to “negroes” for Lincoln’s word in the Douglas newspapers’ version? Why do the Douglas newspapers never have their man using the slur (unlikely), while the leading Lincoln source attributes it to both men a number of times? What are we to make of Douglas’s complaint about his own transcribers? The editors have considered answers that invite us back into the text to read more for ourselves.

If Lincoln himself wrote extra wording next to the newspaper text in his scrapbook, was he remembering, clarifying, or altering the words? How are we to treat evidence that Lincoln partisans sometimes embroidered their champion’s positions, occasionally with abolitionist arguments we know he elsewhere rejected? What do we do with the evidence that the debaters misquoted themselves, or were misquoted by their friendly scribes, particularly in the candidates’ reading of their own prior speeches? Or when one candidate claimed his own scribes had made a mistake, or when one asked them to strike out something he had just said (Lincoln’s request after using the word “sneak” to characterize the action of one of his own supporters)? Or when (as in the modern Congressional Record) earlier speeches were printed in full though they seem not to have been delivered in the debate as such? Again, the great virtue of this book’s editorial spirit is that it is interpretive, adjudicating the answers to such questions in light of a consistent editorial policy that yet takes into account the historical, rhetorical, and linguistic context of various editorial conundrums.

What close readers of the debates have long appreciated is instructively evident in the Davis-Wilson edition: the debates are in themselves interpretative exercises of a high order. Each man reads from and interprets his earlier speeches as well as those of his opponent. Each reads from documents of the moment, including party platforms and paraphrases of congressional legislation, and places those texts amidst past and present controversies and competing points of view. There is
argument about inaccurate transcriptions and even forgery, authorial intent, logic, and consistency. From the beginning, Douglas hammers at Lincoln’s vulnerabilities and tests the limits of debate by repeating, with vehemence, charges that Lincoln comes to refute with cool, then incisive replies. Lincoln returns repeatedly to Jefferson’s key phrase in the preamble of the Declaration of Independence for emphasis and to disclose new and deeper grounds for refuting Douglas.

There is a famous and notorious crux in the fifth debate, in which we are drawn into this process ourselves—if our reading of this ordeal has enabled us to care about the outcome. At Quincy, before a dramatically mixed group of voters that included a large, moderate contingent from central Illinois, Lincoln exemplified the interpreter’s strategic sifting, his retrospective and prospective task of making sense and taking a stand amidst humanly flawed, richly cargoed records of his own utterances, while presenting us with one of the most difficult—and for many the most disturbing and compelling—interpretive challenges for readers of the debates. To Douglas’s charge that Lincoln was trimming his words to please slavery men in one place and abolitionists in another, Lincoln memorably answered: “At our first meeting in Ottawa I read an extract from an old speech of mine, made nearly four years ago, not merely to show my sentiments, but to show that my sentiments were long entertained and openly expressed. In which extract I expressly declared that my own feelings would not admit of a social and political equality between the white and black races, and that even if my own feelings would admit of it, I still knew that the public sentiment of the country would not, and that such a thing was an utter impossibility, or substantially that. That extract from my old speech the reports, by some sort of accident, passed over, and it was not reported. I suppose they thought that I would hand it over to them, and dropped reporting while I was reading it, but afterwards went away without getting it from me. At the end of that quotation from my old speech, which I read at Ottawa, I made the comments which were reported at that time, and which I will now read, and ask you to notice how very nearly they are the same as Judge Douglas says were delivered by me down in Egypt” [where Douglas alleged Lincoln had tailored his words to please supporters of slavery].

Lincoln then read a longer passage from his Ottawa speech that added, “I hold that notwithstanding all this, there is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I hold that he is as much entitled to these as
the white man. I agree with Judge Douglas he is not my equal in many respects—certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.” [Cheers]

Overlooking for a moment the meaning of Lincoln’s disclosure of what now is typically labeled, at best, latent prejudice, we see the orator speaking with eminent clarity through a layering of at least three textual records of his words, including words of Jefferson he has made his own. From this reading of himself, Lincoln is his own interpreter. He invites his audience to follow and to judge. He re-creates his past feelings about racial differences by setting definite limits to his sympathies that are in fact repeatedly open to qualification. He ends with an emphatic qualification of his original thought that casts new light on the whole.

Races apparently not equal in color (Lincoln focuses on the single element that confirms yet obviates the claim of racial difference) are emphatically equal in the right to eat the bread they earn. If political and social equality had been beyond the power of Lincoln’s feelings to admit, we see upon study—and not incidentally upon the repeated consideration of these ideas in various debates—that he held in mind the possibility that he might not always so feel. And if the general feeling of others made it impossible to consider economic, political, and social equality together, Lincoln’s choice of language did not enforce their perpetual separation. What if Lincoln’s audience agreed with his call for economic equality in the right of ownership, a position from which Lincoln never budged? How far, in fact, would citizenship then be understood to be from ownership? Here Lincoln opened one gate—equality of the right of ownership, as a natural right—without endorsing the opening of other gates along the same path. It is difficult to appreciate the unfolding of this thought without Lincoln’s own instructive discussion of it in the context of several speeches in the course of the different debates. Ownership, by its nature, would lead to the second gate. If it did not open it, it would lead to the question of why those with the right of ownership should not be admitted. And so we have an implicit precursor, in an implied argument, to the history of a new birth of political rights in the outcome of the Civil War. We must learn to read both Lincoln and Douglas through such layers of interpretation and speculation if we are to recover the significance of what they said and did.
III

The visual record and soundtrack of political speeches in our own day now migrate to the new country of YouTube, where perhaps some day our modern political speeches will become the recoverable objects of study they were in Lincoln’s day, even if reading and a spirit of inquiry barely survive as citizen pastimes. In his “Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions,” which Lincoln wrote mostly after the debates and with reference to their power to change minds, he welcomed and praised new technologies of literacy. But he did not forget the initiating power of the word, and of speech. If literacy was for Lincoln a technological extension of that power, written speech could not come into its own, he suggested, without the originating power of one’s own self-governing voice. He went so far as to imply that one could not become literate without overcoming the conviction that one was not capable of joining the company of citizen readers. YouTube might help us recover the Lincoln-Douglas debates for the American curriculum, but only if we prepare ourselves in that process as self-governing citizen-readers. As an aid in that task we have a well-suited instrument: this splendid book.