Lincoln’s Rhetoric

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In the first of a series of public lectures that William H. Herndon delivered on Abraham Lincoln after his assassination, he called attention to his law partner’s “peculiarity,” a topic he would return to in subsequent writings. “The true peculiarity of Mr Lincoln has not been seen by his various Biographers,” Herndon said, “or if seen they have failed—woefully failed to give it that prominence which it deserves.”

Speaking in December 1865 to an audience composed of Lincoln’s Springfield friends and neighbors, he went on: “As an Evidence of this especial peculiarity of Mr Lincoln let me ask one question & it is this—Were not Mr Lincoln’s Expressions and language queer—odd—fresh—and origional, standing out odd & peculiar from the language and Expressions of all other men.” Herndon’s question assumed that, among people long familiar with Abraham Lincoln, there would be little dispute about the peculiarity and oddity of his language and way of expressing himself.

If the people of Springfield thought as Herndon did on this point, they were not the only ones. Before his assassination, Lincoln’s presidential writings were frequently characterized in the same way, even by his defenders. The friendly New York Times, for example, commenting in 1863 on the series of successful public letters the president had produced, allowed: “In his own independent, and perhaps we might say very peculiar, way, he invariably gets at the needed truth of the time.” And again: “His letter to Mr. Greeley, odd as it seemed at first blush, was, as everybody now admits, perfectly adapted to that stage of the war.”

Abraham Lincoln’s famous letter to Horace Greeley “odd”? His distinctive way of expressing himself “peculiar”? This sounds strange to twenty-first-century ears. Lincoln’s words are by now among the most familiar of all American writings and sayings. What, we might

2. Ibid., 363.
ask, was “odd” and “peculiar” about a mode of expression that we have come to regard so highly?

Perhaps the obvious thing to notice is what has happened since Lincoln’s time. When he was president, he was not in any sense a great national hero, but he became one almost overnight after he was assassinated. It was in the meteoric light of his martyrdom that his writings began to be reread and reappraised. Although eventually it would be widely known and admired, the Gettysburg Address, like the Declaration of Independence before it, was not immediately an object of widespread special attention. But seen in the perspective of the changing American language from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first, it has taken on a new meaning. Garry Wills noted that “Lincoln’s remarks anticipated the shift to vernacular rhythms that Mark Twain would complete twenty years later. Hemingway claimed that all modern American novels are the offspring of Huckleberry Finn. It is no greater exaggeration to say that all modern political prose descends from the Gettysburg Address.”

What seems reasonably clear in retrospect is that there was a general movement in American writing away from the prevailing language of formal address and in the direction of the vernacular, which Wills calls “a revolution in style.” And Lincoln’s example, like that of other writers of his age, was helping to bring it about. This is surely the most obvious sense in which writing that seemed odd and peculiar in the mid-nineteenth century no longer seems so, but there are other noteworthy aspects of Lincoln’s peculiar use of language that contributed to his distinctive rhetoric, which is to say, his persuasive mode of expression, especially in writing.

A prime consideration is that Lincoln was self-taught. His rhetoric, like so many other things about him, was strictly a home-grown affair, and its roots go back to his earliest childhood. Except for a few brief stints at extremely primitive country schools, Lincoln had no formal instruction, certainly nothing in the art of effective writing. Public speaking, such as could be heard in churches or in local court-houses, had an early attraction for him, but that would not have been uncommon. What was uncommon, especially in a community that was largely subliterate, was the intense interest he took in writing. Lincoln’s boyhood reading is justly famous, a familiar part of the legend that surrounds him, and it was undoubtedly critical in his

intellectual development, but for a consideration of his rhetoric, it is arguably more revealing to focus on his writing. For one thing it is difficult if not impossible to judge with any certainty what books Lincoln read or what he took from them. Even with texts that he is supposed to have recommended to others, such as Lindley Murray’s *Reader*, we can’t be sure precisely when he read it or what parts made a significant impression. That he seems to have read and mastered Kirkham’s famous *Grammar* in his early twenties tells us much, but we can’t assume that he then and there adopted Kirkham’s formal precepts about rhetoric. This early reading was undoubtedly important and should not be minimized or underestimated, but as Ronald C. White suggests, while we have no indication that Lincoln read Aristotle, the important thing is that Lincoln’s rhetoric “embodies the principles” of Aristotle, whose definitions can in turn be helpful in analyzing certain aspects of the subject.\(^5\)

Another reason for emphasizing Lincoln’s youthful affinity for writing over his reading in this regard is that it has deeper roots. There is good evidence his interest in writing was keen from the very beginning and that it preceded his interest in reading. John L. Scripps, a Chicago Republican newspaper editor who knew Lincoln, interviewed him for a campaign biography in 1860, and one of things Lincoln told him that is often overlooked had to do with his earliest schooling. “In his seventh year,” Scripps wrote, “Abraham was sent for short periods to two of these [Kentucky] schools, and while attending them progressed so far as to learn to write. For this acquirement he manifested a great fondness. It was his custom to form letters, to write words and sentences wherever he found suitable material. He scrawled them with charcoal, he scored them in the dust, in the sand, in the snow—anywhere and everywhere that lines could be drawn, there he improved his capacity for writing.”\(^6\) What Scripps drew from what Lincoln told him was apparently a picture of a small boy, in the process of learning his letters, becoming fascinated with the act of shaping them and eventually with stitching them together into words and then into phrases and sentences. It probably only added to this young boy’s pride in the process that he was learning to do something important that his father and mother couldn’t do.

\(^5\) Ronald C. White, Jr., *The Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln through his Words* (New York: Random House, 2005), xxi.

Also commonly overlooked is that Lincoln’s stepmother, Sarah Bush Lincoln, whose recollections of Lincoln’s boyhood are so informative, placed more stress on his writing than his reading. She told Herndon: “Abe read all the books he could lay his hands on—and when he came across a passage that Struck him he would write it down on boards if he had no paper & keep it there till he did get paper—then he would re-write it—look at it repeat it—He had a copy book—a kind of scrap book in which he put down all things and this preserved them.”

Sarah Bush Lincoln also revealed the salient fact that, even as a boy, Lincoln had a passion for clarity of expression. “Sometimes,” she said, “he seemed pestered to give Expression to his ideas and got mad almost at one who couldn’t Explain plainly what he wanted to convey.”

Note that this statement is in two parts: she tells us first that the boy was “pestered” to find the right words for his own ideas, but also that he was impatient with other people who had the same problem. Directly confirming this recollection is something that Lincoln told the Rev. John P. Gulliver who, during a chance meeting in 1860, had complimented him on the “clarity” of his statements. Gulliver reported that Lincoln told him “among my earliest recollections I remember how, when a mere child, I used to get irritated when any body talked to me in a way I could not understand.” For his part, Lincoln said he himself was never satisfied “until I had put it in language plain enough, as I thought, for any boy I knew to comprehend.”


8. Ibid.

9. Gulliver’s story was originally published in The Independent (New York), September 1, 1864, and is related in Francis B. Carpenter, Six Months at the White House (New York: Hurd & Houghton, 1866), 312–13. Some knowledgeable observers have shied away from Gulliver’s testimony because he puts things in Lincoln’s mouth that are palpable errors, such as having trained for the law as a clerk in a law office. But Gulliver was aware that he was unsure of the details of what Lincoln had told him in their chance meeting four years earlier and went so far as to send his manuscript to the White House in 1864, prior to publication, asking the president to advise him of any errors it might contain. When the editor of the publication couldn’t wait, Gulliver allowed the manuscript to be published, but when the accuracy of his piece was challenged, he wrote again to Lincoln for his assistance. Neither of his letters appears to have been answered. Thus, while we may doubt the complete accuracy of Gulliver’s account of Lincoln’s exact circumstances at the time he obsessed over the meaning of the word “demonstrate,” that he told Gulliver he did so is no less credible. The same can be said for his confessing to a similar youthful obsession with meaning and verbal clarity. See John P. Gulliver to Abraham Lincoln, August 26, 1864 and September 12, 1864, The Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/connections/abraham-lincoln-papers/file.html
his stepmother had suggested, what Lincoln told Gulliver connected his obsession with clarity to his writing, which he says he actively employed as an aid to understanding.

Lincoln’s continued pursuit of clarity in later life was not lost on those associated with him. His longtime political associate and friend at the bar, Joseph Gillespie, is a good example. “If Mr Lincoln studied any one thing more than another and for effect,” he wrote, “it was to make himself understood by all classes He had great natural clearness and simplicity of statement and this faculty he cultivated with marked assiduity.”

Gillespie’s characterization is revealing in representing Lincoln’s clarity as a seemingly natural attribute, yet one that he did not take for granted but worked hard at. Herndon described the same phenomenon in a letter to his collaborator, emphasizing the “assiduity”: “Lincoln always struggled to see the thing or the idea exactly and to express that idea in such language as to convey that idea precisely. . . . he used to bore me terribly by his methods—processes—manner &c. &c. Mr. Lincoln would doubly explain things to me that needed no explanation. . . . Lincoln’s ambition in this line was this—he wanted to be distinctly understood by the Common people.”

As president, this changed very little. Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had met President Lincoln and supported him when other liberals were turning away, reported in 1864 that “our own politicians were somewhat shocked with his state papers” (peculiarity again) and that attempts had been made to get Lincoln to let other, more experienced hands do that kind of writing for him. She reported that he stubbornly declined all offers of assistance with his important papers and insisted on writing them himself. Stowe represented Lincoln as saying “No, I shall write them myself. The people will understand them.” Understanding, not conformity, was still the great test.

If the foregoing indicates that Lincoln quite consciously sought clarity of expression from boyhood and continued striving for it as president, this logically leads us to another important characteristic of his rhetoric—plainness of language. This quality was far more evident in his own day than it is in ours, for he lived in an era in which elevated and self-consciously ornamental diction was an expected part of public speech and writing. An imposing vocabulary was the
acknowledged mark of learning and refinement when those were almost synonymous with respectable discourse, written or spoken. But Lincoln’s well-attested passion for clarity and for making his ideas and arguments understood by ordinary citizens implied, if not dictated, a plainness in diction. By his own rule, to use words and expressions that your audience was not familiar with made little sense. True, it was always possible to charm and beguile an audience by talking over their heads. Ralph Waldo Emerson was notorious for making his living that way. But if you wanted to change the minds of farmers and storekeepers and ordinary folks and persuade them to accept new ideas and support new positions, Lincoln’s theory was that you must talk their language.

In his provocative book on Lincoln as a writer, Fred Kaplan suggested that the native speech the future president grew up with had “special colloquial power,” which he recognized and embraced. “There may have been verbal flights of fancy, but his acculturing tendency was toward the laconic. Precision, brevity, and plain speech became his characteristic style.”13 His law partner Herndon reported that Lincoln frequently advised him not to “shoot too high—shoot low down, and the common people will understand you: . . . The educated ones will understand you anyhow.”14

The first Lincoln speech for which we have a complete text, his Lyceum speech of January 1838, is written in language that is fairly conventional for the oratory of that day, but much of it sounds decidedly un-Lincolnian. Take, for example, what is perhaps the best-known sentence Abraham Lincoln ever wrote, the opening of the Gettysburg Address:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.15

Compare this with a statement in the Lyceum address that expresses very nearly the same idea. Speaking of the founders, he says:

Their’s was the task (and nobly they performed it) to possess themselves, and through themselves, us, of this goodly land; and

to uprear upon its hills and its valleys, a political edifice of liberty and equal rights.\textsuperscript{16}

This sounds more like Senator Claghorn than Abraham Lincoln, but not long after he delivered this speech, the manner and diction of Lincoln’s written speeches began to change. This was, for example, the last “edifice” he would ever “uprear,” for these two words, along with a great many others from the Lyceum speech, thereafter disappear from his written vocabulary.\textsuperscript{17}

Lincoln did not reform his diction overnight, but the next speech of which we have a complete text, his Sub-Treasury Speech nearly two years later, is notable for the comparative absence of the twenty-five cent words that decorate the Lyceum address. Part of the difference may reflect the pressure he was under, having disappointed his Whig friends with a lackluster performance in an earlier appearance. In bearing down to redeem himself, he focused intently on marshaling arguments in forceful, direct language such as this: “By the Sub-treasury, the revenue is to be collected, and kept in iron boxes until the government wants it for disbursement; thus robbing the people of the use of it, while the government does not itself need it, and while the money is performing no nobler office than that of rusting in iron boxes. The natural effect of this change of policy, every one will see, is to reduce the quantity of money in circulation.”\textsuperscript{18} One can hear a harbinger of Lincoln’s mature prose in that.

By the time he came to the presidency, his prose was mature, but this was either not apparent or made little difference to those who knew little about him, particularly the large number who were suspicious of his qualifications to be president. For someone like the ex-slave Frederick Douglass, another autodidact with a gift for expression, and one who was sharply critical of the government’s policies, the president’s plain style reflected his shortcomings. When in August 1862 Lincoln met with black leaders to urge a scheme of colonization, Douglass was furious, especially since the president had seemed to put the blame for the Civil War on blacks. In denouncing the meeting


\textsuperscript{17} For access to Lincoln’s written vocabulary, see the “Word Index” function on the Web site for \textit{The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln}, Abraham Lincoln Association, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/.

\textsuperscript{18} “Speech on the Sub-Treasury,” December [26], 1839, ibid., 1:160.
and the president in his magazine, Douglass struck out at Lincoln’s language. “We might also criticize the style, adopted, so exceedingly plain and coarse threaded as to make the impression that Mr. L[incoln] had such a low estimate of the intelligence of his audience, as to think any but the simplest phrases and constructions would be above their power of comprehension. As Mr. Lincoln however in all his writings has manifested a decided awkwardness in the management of the English language, we do not think there is any intention in this respect, but only the incapacity to do better.”

But Douglass wrote this in anger and before he had any personal acquaintance with Lincoln. After the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, followed by two memorable encounters in the president’s office and a warm reception at the White House following the Second Inaugural, Douglass became an admirer not just of Lincoln but of his use of language. “In my interviews with him, I found him as I have already described him, a plain man. There was neither paint nor varnish about him. His manners were simple, unaffected, unstudied. His language, like himself, was plain strong and sinewy, just as it appears in his written productions. He spoke as he wrote, without ornament. Earnest always but never extravagant. I never met a man who could state more clearly and forcibly, just what he wished to make apparent.”

The plainness of Lincoln’s mature prose style consisted of a great deal more than plain diction. A technique that surely owed something to his career in the courtroom and that arose frequently in his presidential writing was the practice of putting what are essentially declarative statements in the form of pointedly worded questions. In his Message to Congress of July 4, 1861, which laid out the basis on which the Civil War would be conducted, Lincoln used this strategy to good effect. In defending his suspension of habeas corpus in Maryland, for example, where troops coming to the defense of the government in Washington were being harassed and obstructed, he cut through the legal and constitutional entanglements by putting a question that was blazingly clear: “To state the question more directly, are all the laws, but one, to go unexecuted, and the government itself go to pieces, lest that one be violated?”

Lincoln’s reference to putting his question “more directly” spotlights another a characteristic of Lincoln’s rhetoric that was certainly

unexpected and probably considered, in governmental prose, somewhat odd—directness. Like a shrewd military commander, Lincoln knew the strategic value, under the right circumstances, of going straight at his opponent. When Horace Greeley attacked him publicly in his newspaper in 1862, demanding in a long, scolding harangue that he spell out his policy, Lincoln replied with something he had already written that was breathtakingly direct: “I would save the Union.”22 In another of his public letters, he began by directly confronting his critics: “There are those who are dissatisfied with me. To such I would say: You desire peace; and you blame me that we do not have it. But how can we attain it? There are but three conceivable ways. First, to suppress the rebellion by force of arms. This, I am trying to do. Are you for it? If you are, so far we are agreed. If you are not for it, a second way is, to give up the Union. I am against this.”23 This is surely a model of directness. By seizing the initiative, the writer is able to set the agenda as well as the pace and establish a tangible momentum.

Or consider the way he begins his only known law lecture: “I am not an accomplished lawyer.” This is equally direct, but not confrontational. It is, instead, ingratiating by its unexpected candor. Manuscripts can sometimes be helpful in showing the writer actively engaging in rhetorical strategies, and there can hardly be a better example than that of the manuscript for this lecture. Further on, Lincoln resorts again to rhetorical directness by beginning his third paragraph “Never encourage litigation.” What could be more direct and emphatic than this forceful three-word sentence? The manuscript shows Lincoln in the act of seeking an answer, for he struck out the words “Never encourage” and created a two-word sentence that was even more direct: “Discourage litigation.”24

We have been speaking of clarity, plainness of diction, directness, declarative interrogatories, seizing the rhetorical initiative, and maintaining argumentative momentum. A comprehensive example encompassing all these rhetorical assets is found in Lincoln’s response to his fractious Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase, who, in September 1863, urged the president, for political reasons, to rescind certain territorial exemptions specified in the Emancipation Proclamation. Whether he thought that Chase couldn’t see that what he was urging was ill-advised, or whether he suspected that getting him to take such a take

a false step was exactly what Chase had in mind, Lincoln replied with a devastating series of interrogatives that effectively covered both possibilities. “If I take the step must I not do so, without the argument of military necessity, and so, without any argument, except the one that I think the measure politically expedient, and morally right? Would I not thus give up all footing upon Constitution or law? Would I not thus be in the boundless field of absolutism? Could this pass unnoticed, or unresisted? Could it fail to be perceived that without any further stretch, I might do the same in Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri; and even change any law in any state? Would not many of our own friends shrink away appalled? Would it not lose us the elections, and with them, the very cause we seek to advance?” The facility with which Lincoln finds and runs out objections to Chase’s plan would seem to leave little choice between the Secretary’s ineptitude or his disloyalty. This may explain why this incisive letter is unsigned and possibly remained unsent.

In his eulogy to his “beau ideal of a statesman,” Henry Clay, Lincoln wrote that Clay’s eloquence did not result from the use of rhetorical devices but rather from the “impassioned tone” that comes from deep conviction. The same might be said of Lincoln’s eloquence, yet the devices are undoubtedly there. Nearly a hundred years ago an American professor of classics at Grinnell College, Charles Smiley, traveled to Berlin, then the mecca of classical studies, to spend a winter immersed in ancient Greek texts. A true American, Smiley deliberately carried with him the Everyman selection of Lincoln’s speeches and letters to serve, he says, “as an antidote against Prussian bureaucracy and despotism.” The Everyman Lincoln was also expected to serve as an antidote to the object of his study: Leonard von Spengel’s three-volume edition of the ancient Greek rhetoricians. As Smiley put it (in un-Lincolnian diction), after a “careful study of the flowers of speech in the ancient world, . . . what could be more refreshing than a look into some old-fashioned garden—into some book unbedizened with any form of meretricious embellishment?”

What Smiley found instead when he turned from the ancient Greeks to the untutored American statesman was that Lincoln’s best writings exhibited clear-cut examples of the very rhetorical devices identified

25. Collected Works, 6:428–29. This unsigned draft may not have been sent, but Lincoln’s secretaries imply that it was. See John G. Nicolay and John Hay, Abraham Lincoln: A History, 9 vols. (New York: Century, 1890), 6:434.
27. Ibid.
with Gorgias, a flamboyant rhetorician whose practice had been severely censured by Aristotle as exhibiting “the marks of superficial sham and insincerity.” And yet Smiley discovered that the Gettysburg Address, for example, had “two antitheses, five cases of anaphora, eight instances of balanced phrases and clauses, [and] thirteen alliterations.” Lincoln’s famous letter to Horace Greeley was even more Gorgian: “In forty-four lines we have six completely balanced sentences, eight cases of anaphora, six instances of similar clause endings, six antitheses. Even the [passage in praise] of Helen attributed to Gorgias,” Smiley tells us, “is not so completely Gorgian in its embellishment.”

Smiley’s discovery spotlights something important about Lincoln’s eloquence. Though submerged and generally inconspicuous, the same rhetorical devices that have been condemned since ancient times as telltale signs of superficiality and insincerity are integral to many of Lincoln’s most inspiring works. In being unobtrusive, especially to an audience unschooled in formal rhetoric, they have not only not stigmatized the writer, but, in Smiley’s words, they “had somehow proved themselves capable of sincerity.” His conclusion is reminiscent of that of Gillespie, Herndon, Roy P. Basler, and many others on the subject: “[Lincoln] cared more for his thought than for his style; but he cared so much for his thought that he studied with care the means of making it incisive and effective.”

Studies of Lincoln’s rhetoric often refer to the role played by sound and rhythm, and almost every commentator rightly observes that Lincoln’s most impressive writing is “cadenced” and has close affinities with poetry. Roy P. Basler, the author of perhaps the most penetrating studies of the subject, asked the hard question of “whether Lincoln’s memorable passages are remembered today because of [their much-heralded qualities of exactness, clarity, and simplicity] or because of the unique effects of arrangement, rhythm, and sound which accompany them.” The safe answer is both, but Basler himself points to what Lincoln told his law partner about the efficacy of reading aloud. Much to Herndon’s annoyance, it was Lincoln’s regular practice to do his office reading aloud, which he justified by saying that both hearing and seeing what he read enabled him to remember it better.

28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 125.
30. Ibid., 128.
32. Ibid., citing William H. Herndon’s October 21, 1885, letter to Jesse W. Weik.
inside the distinctiveness and effectiveness of his rhetoric, we must come to terms with the sound and rhythm of Lincoln’s compositions.

Lincoln seems to have had an early and long-standing attachment to the sounds of words. Learning to read in “blab” schools, where all the students read aloud (and at the same time), may have been instrumental in starting him in this direction. If true, this would suggest that it was perhaps as fundamental as his early fascination with crafting letters, words, and phrases. Working with words may well have been an aural experience from the beginning that became ingrained in his thought process. These are speculations, to be sure, but there is abundant evidence that Lincoln had long made a practice of reading his writings aloud to test them. One of his law students remembered him saying as early as 1845, “I write by ear. When I have got my thoughts on paper, I read it aloud, and if it sounds all right I just let it pass.”

He certainly punctuated by ear, much to the chagrin of John Defrees, who fought a losing battle trying to purge the excessive commas from the state papers Lincoln sent to the government printing office. As president it was still his custom, according to one of his secretaries, “to read his manuscript over aloud, ‘to see how it sounded, as he could hardly judge of a thing by merely reading it.” The suggestion common to these and other recollections is that he couldn’t pass on the acceptability of what he had composed until he had heard it uttered aloud. In addition, we have evidence that he read virtually every one of his major presidential writings to a confidant before release or delivery.

Lincoln’s affinity for the closely related element of rhythm was also of very long standing, reaching back to his youth, when he attracted the attention of his neighbors as a writer of verse. The surviving pages of a notebook he kept in his teens contain verses, of a sort, in his hand, but what may be even more telling is what appears to be the record of an experiment to see what would happen if poetry were stripped of all punctuation and written out like prose. He begins by writing out a stanza of boyhood boilerplate, found elsewhere in his notebook in standard four-line verse format: “Abraham Lincoln his hand and pen he will be good but god knows When.” Then, perhaps to see how this

33. Gibson William Harris, “My Recollections of Abraham Lincoln,” Woman’s Home Companion (January 1904), 13. I am indebted to Michael Burlingame for calling my attention to this recollected remark.
34. See Wilson, Lincoln’s Sword, 86–90.
35. William O. Stoddard, Inside the White House in War Times: Memoirs and Reports of Lincoln’s Secretary, ed. Michael Burlingame (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 172.
36. See Wilson, Lincoln’s Sword, 180–81.
would work with a verse of bona fide poetry, he adds, again as unpunc-
tuated prose, the first two verses of an Isaac Watts hymn: “Abraham
Lincoln his hand and pen he will be good but god knows When Time
What an empty vapor tis and days how swift they are swift as an indian
arrow fly or like a shooting star the present moment just [appears]
then slides away in haste that we [can] never say they’re ours but
[only say] they’re past.”37

It seems likely that this passage is an attempt by a verbally preco-
cious youth, obsessed with the need to understand, to fathom the
difference between mere doggerel and poetry, and perhaps more im-
portantly, to gain an understanding of the difference between poetry
and prose. Both would have led him unavoidably to a consideration
of rhythm.

Another piece of this puzzle is that the young Lincoln who kept
this notebook—probably knew those two verses by Isaac Watts ini-
tially, if not exclusively, from the singing in the Pigeon Creek Baptist
Church. Here they likely would have been lined out by the song
leader, and then sung by the congregation. The lining out and the
singing would both have given the same verbal material somewhat
different rhythms, as would reading Watts’s stanzas on the printed
page. It is doubtful that any of this would have been lost on this
studious boy, bewitched by the sounds of words and phrases.

At least until middle age, Abraham Lincoln was a serious poet,
though a secretive one who worked out of public view. Only a few
of his poems survive, but they attest that he had serious and long-
standing aspirations as a poet.38 He seems to have abandoned the
writing of poetry about the time he went to Congress in 1847, but
his best prose writing would always have a pronounced, and often
felicitous, sense of rhythm, as clearly shown by the passage from his
letter to Chase.

Lincoln had what might be thought of as a kind of rhetorical “sig-
nature,” something that figures critically in virtually all the most
memorable passages in Lincoln’s writings, and for which he had a

37. Collected Works, 1:1. Note that Watts’s version has “present moments just appear.”
Even though Lincoln clearly wrote “present moment” and A. H. Chapman copied the
next part as “just is here” presumably before that part of the manuscript disintegrated,
it seems possible from the manuscript that Lincoln wrote “just appears.” My reading
also differs from Collected Works’s in opting for “or” rather than “on” following the
word “fly.”

special genius—the rhetorical use of the negative. This is not to say that Lincoln was a nay-sayer or negative thinker, but rather that he demonstrated an acute understanding of the power of negation in language and discourse and was unusually adept at putting that power to rhetorical use.

Philosopher and literary critic Kenneth Burke has pointed out that the negative is found nowhere in nature but is strictly a human invention, one of the things that sets humankind apart. He also argues that negation is intimately connected to our sense of morality, if not actually responsible for it, so that human beings are, as he puts it, “moralized by the negative.” Law, ethics, and religion, he contends, are all built around the principle of the negative, the “thou-shalt-nots.” 39 This is one way of accounting for the power that the negative undoubtedly has in language and human affairs.

It is this power that Lincoln consistently tapped into in the high moments of his most memorable writings. As with Shakespeare or Emily Dickinson, both of whom had a similar gift, this may be simply an irreducible aspect of Lincoln’s literary genius, but with him it may owe something to his being so often, in the important concerns of his life, in opposition. Political from an early age, he was always in minority parties, starting out in the age of Jackson as an “anti-Jackson” man. We don’t ordinarily think of Lincoln as a contrarian, but dogged opposition was his lot in the major political struggles of his life: Jacksonian political rule, the hegemony of the Democratic party, the Mexican War, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, the Dred Scott Decision, the expansion of slavery, and the dissolution of the Union. This is not to say that he was without a positive agenda in all this, such as party building and reestablishing the principles of the founders, but opposition to a potent political force demanded and shaped much of his effort.

It must also be acknowledged that slavery, the predominating factor in Lincoln’s political struggles, was no ordinary political problem and, because of the moral dimension, proved to be a highly volatile issue that elevated the passions on all sides. Lincoln himself, a notably reserved and self-possessed man, admitted that with the prospect of the extension of slavery into the free territories in 1854 he found himself “aroused . . . as he had never been before.” From that point on, almost all of Lincoln’s rhetoric was in the service of resisting slavery and the

destruction of the Union. One of the effects of this resistance was to channel the resulting emotional energy into his rhetoric and give the negative a moral focus. “If slavery is not wrong,” he famously wrote, “nothing is wrong.”

For some examples of the ways that Lincoln makes rhetorical use of the negative, the antithesis is a good place to begin because the requisite balance and rhythm are seemingly a natural fit, and he proved himself a true master of the form. To address the all-important issue of public opinion in a democracy, he first crafted on paper and then said in the first of the 1858 debates with Douglas: “With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed.” In his closing speech in the 1858 campaign, he summarized the constitutional stance his opponent had worked so hard to distort: “The legal rights of the Southern people to reclaim their fugitives I have constantly admitted. The legal right of Congress to interfere with their institutions in the states, I have constantly denied.” In writing down a concise version of his extemporaneous Springfield Farewell Address after delivery, he wrote: “Without the assistance of that Divine Being, who ever attended him [Washington], I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail.” In speaking forcefully to Southern dissidents at the conclusion of his first inaugural, he said: “You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to ‘preserve, protect, and defend’ it.” With antithesis, the negative is often, if not invariably, the fulcrum upon which the expression turns, but the danger is that such a device readily calls attention to itself, which can cheapen the effect. Remarkably, for a writer whose antitheses turn up at key moments in his works, Lincoln’s rarely fall into this category, perhaps in part because of the plainness of his language.

Negation is often employed to emphasize restraint—what is not claimed or not to be done. When he spoke of his oath in his public letter to Albert G. Hodges, he said, “It was in the oath I took that I would, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. I could not take the office without taking the oath. Nor was it my view that I might take an oath to get power, and

break the oath in using that power.” In this letter, he was at pains to present in detail the numerous provocations he had addressed with restraint in the matter of emancipation, the policy that had so roiled Hodges and his Kentucky colleagues. And, of course, this is the letter that climaxes with the riveting line, “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.”\textsuperscript{45}

But the rhetorical force of the negative in Lincoln’s writing is by no means restricted to the expression of restraint. One of his most fervid lines is “Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history.”\textsuperscript{46} It was offered as a call to action, and much of its force comes from what John Channing Briggs would call a “Lincolnian double negative” — cannot escape.”\textsuperscript{47} Of course the work that makes the most brilliant rhetorical use of the negative was also something of a call to action—the Gettysburg Address. The opening sentences proceed logically towards a pivot point: this is who we are, this is what has happened, this is why we are here, and this is all very well, but . . . That pivotal “but” prepares the way for what is surely the most powerful anaphora in all of American letters: “We can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground.”\textsuperscript{48} These three parallel denials are, in effect, implacable affirmations. Their force as affirmations is partly due to the anaphoric rhythm and symmetry but also to their being framed in the negative. Nor is this the speech’s only notable use of the negative to energize its affirmations: “The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.” “That these dead shall not have died in vain. . . .” It is, in this context, quite notable that the final and most far-reaching affirmation of all is rendered in the negative: “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

If these examples attest to Lincoln’s special affinity for the rhetorical use of the negative, it is little wonder that he continues to be credited with a much-disputed saying containing what looks like his

\textsuperscript{45} Abraham Lincoln to Albert G. Hodges, April 4, 1864, ibid., 7:282.
\textsuperscript{46} “Annual Message to Congress,” December 1, 1862, ibid., 5:537.
\textsuperscript{47} John Channing Briggs, \textit{Lincoln’s Speeches Reconsidered} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 282. I am indebted to Briggs for spotlighting the role of the negative in Lincoln’s rhetoric, one of the many valuable contributions of his book.
\textsuperscript{48} “Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg (Final Text),” November 19, 1863, \textit{Collected Works}, 7:23. Note that the rhetorical effect in this passage is heightened for readers by the very orthography and punctuation—in the deliberate separation of “can” and “not” (as opposed to the expected “cannot”), and the calculated triple use of the dash, which is more emphatic than the comma.
“signature”: “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can’t fool all of the people all of the time.”

Regarded by his contemporaries as “peculiar,” Lincoln’s distinctive way of expressing himself has since become so familiar and admired as to be readily recognizable. Lincoln scholars, who are constantly asked to verify undocumented quotations attributed to the sixteenth president, commonly respond, “It doesn’t sound like Lincoln.” This touches an important summarizing point. While most of the unfamiliar attributions do indeed turn out to be bogus, nonetheless Lincoln’s best prose, like that of other great writers, does seem to have a sound of its own. It is a sound that had its origins in the fascinations of Lincoln’s boyhood and was a lifetime in the making. It bears the imprint of his early aspirations as a poet and the practical applications of a politician. At once plain and complex, it is a sound that appeals both to the ear and the imagination. It draws without fanfare on well-known principles of rhetoric, as well as Biblical language and rhythms. Evocative without being ostentatious, it is superbly balanced and produces eloquence without a trace of unction: “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish, a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”
