Review Essay

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Looking at the flow of books about individual speeches by Lincoln calls to mind the title of a Wallace Stevens poem, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” The better to spread Abraham Lincoln’s words to a people thirsting for moral clarity after 9/11. The potential for satisfying their thirst was demonstrated by the awesome reception in all ranks and classes of Ronald C. White Jr.’s book about the Second Inaugural. He is repeatedly asked to speak the speech on the radio, television, and platforms from coast to coast, from service clubs to Karl Rove’s staff. He must feel the awe that Tolstoi felt on the steppes of Siberia as he came upon isolated villagers worshiping an icon of Lincoln. Sharing that awe is what Lincoln scholars are supposed to be doing outside the insulation of symposia. As White spreads the sound, John Channing Briggs seeks to share the message of Lincoln’s words.

A professor of English at the University of California, Riverside, Briggs reconsiders the importance of Lincoln’s earlier speeches by applying the kind of close reading practiced by academic literary critics. Where they read closely to expose logical and rhetorical incompatibilities, Briggs discloses how Lincoln transformed logic and rhetoric into a poetic faith in the fusion of human nature with the supernatural.

The book’s scope excludes familiar speeches on the Subtreasury and the Dred Scott decision as well as the debates with Stephen A. Douglas. The discussion treats, in order, the lectures on political institutions and on intemperance, the speeches on the Mexican War and on the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the eulogies on both Taylor and Clay, and—in a single chapter—the addresses at both inaugurals and at Gettysburg.

The book’s conclusion has a puzzling “postscript” chapter with a close reading of the letter to Mrs. Bixby that some of us old fogeys think of as a letter Lincoln never wrote about sons she never lost. Briggs justifies its inclusion this way: “If we must be absolutely certain of Lincoln’s authorship in order to appreciate the depth and range of texts attributed to him, we risk overlooking the power of careful read-
ing to discover the astringency and richness of Lincolnian eloquence” (328). Are we to take this as dismissing the primacy of Lincoln’s own words? If so, then the book is less about Lincoln speaking than about Briggs reading.

A random example is chapter 3 with eight pages of close reading of the Temperance Address. Double the number of pages provide readings of Jesse Goodrich’s earlier temperance tract, then of Parson Weems’s life of Washington in order to invoke “the political religion of reverence” for this “mightiest in the cause of civil liberty and moral reformation” (69), twin themes that Briggs develops in the book. The obligatory motif of slavery is also introduced as Briggs notes that Lincoln is “analogizing the temperance campaign to gradual abolition” (64). But before concluding chapter 3, he analogizes passages from Macbeth, from a talk by Frederick Douglass, and from Honor’s Voice by Douglas L. Wilson. Such close reading of texts besides Lincoln’s must be to show the common humanity in his struggles to resolve basic problems of self-indulgence versus self-control extrapolated to self-interest versus self-government.

The book addresses general readers along with specialists, yet an overload of erudition requires a close attention, especially if readers like to stop and meditate on what they have just read. Commentary on the phrase “better angels of our nature,” for instance, digresses to David Donald’s reference to John Keats’s notion of “negative capability” that Keats applied to Shakespeare—which made me stop to speculate that Lincoln, too, was capable of being both in and out of a scene simultaneously just like Jay Gatsby looking out of the window upon the New York scene below. A related cause for distraction is use of such nonce words as “discandy” (132), which resulted in a long search to find it previously used only twice, both times in Shakespeare’s Antony & Cleopatra.

Another risk factor for misunderstanding even by a specialist is the choice of appropriate texts. Briggs wisely uses Roy P. Basler’s edition of Lincoln’s collected works that now, thanks to the Abraham Lincoln Association, is accessible to all (and with a concordance) on the World Wide Web. So in talking about Lincoln’s idea of Providence, why not limit the argument to his own words rather than derive it from a long passage attributed to him by unreliable witness James F. Wilson (292), an attribution given the grade of E (“probably not authentic”) in Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher’s Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln? Such slights make for rough reading.

On its own terms, however, the book succeeds in illuminating the earlier speeches as elements in Lincoln’s evolving ideology. As Lincoln said about Robert Dale Owen’s manuscript on an abstruse subject,
“For those who like that sort of thing I should think it is just the sort of thing they would like.” Necessarily the focus is on each speech as it survives on paper not as performed on the stump or in the courthouse. Neither Briggs nor White should be faulted for sidestepping the early arena. Who would capture the sense, much less the essence, of those speeches as delivered? Rodney O. Davis and Douglas Wilson have demonstrated that despite William Herndon’s cross-examining, his informants often displayed signs of enhanced memory. Both Paul Angle and Harold Holzer printed multiple press reports of the Douglas debates as a kind of variorum of veracity.

What stenographic report could re-create the sensual ambience of those earlier speeches much less the theatrical setting of Congress as Lincoln saw it, with new garish drapes ceiling to floor and dazzling new gaslit chandeliers. In such circumstances his speechifying was conditioned, as Briggs adroitly demonstrates, less by the logic of his hero Clay than by the rhetorical hyperbole of Daniel Webster.

Lincoln’s earliest training was in debate clubs around New Salem. Those were not rube groups, rather they boasted college graduates with good libraries and access to newspapers that printed whole texts of congressional speeches and official records. His later training in state and federal halls pitted him against the nation’s premier debaters. Yet he developed his essential star-appeal on the court circuit and in electioneering face-to-face with all kinds of classes of people.

Obviously, the lengthening distance between Lincoln and listeners affected his utterance. Constrained by close reading, Briggs could not be expected to consider the effects of factors like a growing literate and mobile population, of cheap printing, railways, telegraphy, and so on. This was still an era that read aloud and listened for both substance and style. The political arena of Lincoln’s early speeches meant speaking in a dusty, windblown, carnival atmosphere, where the byplay between speaker and listeners meant that with or without script no speech would be exactly the same a second time, where the audience demanded a chameleon-like capacity for taking on the coloration of its surroundings, and where speeches lasted from three to four hours and continued the next day. As Judge David Davis’s father-in-law said, “No wonder your public men are good speakers . . . they are eternally talking.”

But who was listening? On a log, on the stump, at a shooting match, courthouse, or schoolhouse—wherever he spoke—Lincoln would ad-

dress ten or thirty persons. The common folks he encountered as he traveled the circuit or electioneered around the state were in perpetual motion westward—fourteen wagonloads a day from New Jersey, fifty-one to fifty-seven wagonloads from Virginia. By 1860 Springfield’s population had topped nine thousand—“German, Irish, French, Scandinavians, Italians, Portuguese, Spaniard, Jew and Gentile”—and most were still heading west where a farm could be purchased for what it cost to rent one in Springfield. The two thousand registered voters listed as “landless, unskilled and foreign born” undoubtedly had neither time nor inclination for subtle nuances in rhetoric and logic.

Identifying with the audience became complicated as lines of communication stretched from coast to coast. So long as he addressed a live audience, Lincoln had the advantage of an appealing, good-natured, empathic personality. Bostonian visitor J. H. Buckingham on the stagecoach from Peoria to Springfield was struck by the Whig congressman who “knew, or appeared to know, every body we met, the name of every tenant of every farm-house, and the owner of every plat of ground. Such a shaking of hands—such a how-d’ye-do. . . . he had a kind word, a smile and a bow for every body on the road, even to the horses, and the cattle, and the swine.”

On the floor of Congress, too, physician Samuel C. Busey was struck by Lincoln’s talent for cooling the heat over the Wilmot Proviso by “interposing some anecdote, then diverting it into a hearty and general laugh” to dampen the discord and achieve if not consensus at least congeniality. Mary Lincoln saw him as no different in the family circle: “He always jokes at the supper table no matter how tired.”

John Hay attributed Lincoln’s sensitivity to all classes of people to his having risen through their ranks. But besides being sensitive to their concerns, he also studied them. On his tour of New England in 1848, Robert Rantoul Jr. saw Lincoln measuring the public pulse by interviewing local leaders. Rantoul said that if Lincoln had made such a study nationwide he would have been another Napoleon.

As communication with his audience grew less personal, Lincoln learned that it was not enough to be understood. Rhetoric nor logic, nature nor nurture prevailed against being misunderstood. “The newspapers lie, and then they re-lie.” Multiple publics increased the pressure to adapt to multiple standards of correctness. The phrase “turned tail and ran” so outraged proper Bostonians that Lincoln resolved to make “no more impromptu speeches.” No wonder he consulted with Seward and others on preliminary drafts of such vital speeches as the First Inaugural or the Gettysburg Address. Very likely he did the same thing with mentors in the prepresidential speeches so ably reconsidered by Briggs.

I do not mean to fault Briggs or White for failing to explore audience response more deeply, only to suggest that their studies leave room to reconsider Lincoln’s evolving expertise in handling poetic materials, particularly the architecture of imagery. Besides such rhetorical devices as alliteration, balance, antitheses, vowel harmony, and so on, Lincoln had a remarkable mastery of clustering metaphors that fused with sound and sense to constitute art—that is, to create the major speeches as images of what they are talking about. Both Briggs and White are aware of this factor in individual images. In the Gettysburg Address, Briggs sees the hidden metaphor of parentage (306). White sees how being born again contrasts with the old birth (243). But reconsider the repetitive pattern of related images—by which I mean words evoking sensations and ideas in the imagination the way that dropping a pebble into a clear pool generates infinite ripples.

The clearest application may be seen in the way the Gettysburg Address wraps around the core image of the nation as an organism passing through the life cycle. Lincoln uses individual imagery for phases in that process from being fathered, conceived, baptized, confirmed, dedicated, and dying. Such use of core imagery was popular in Victorian prose, as in Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus (“Tailor retailored”) that looked at the world as a suit of clothes. Briggs shows that the image of nation as organism had been overworked even by Calhoun, as in arguing that, “The mail and the press are the nerves of the body politic” (27). But it remained for Lincoln to infuse the natural cycle with the supernatural by inserting “under God,” thus endowing what Briggs calls “political religion” with faith-based affirmation that the nation shall not only endure but prevail.