Review Essay

A Word Fitly Spoken

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This book is a splendid tribute to Lincoln’s gift for “a word fitly spoken.” The famous final line of Lincoln’s first inaugural—where the “better angels of our nature” hold forth hope for restoring national “bonds of affection”—is, as Douglas L. Wilson notes, “one of the most memorable passages in American English” (67). With no less justification, he could have said the same thing about the famous final line of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address—“with malice toward none; with charity for all”—or virtually any passage, sentence, or clause of the Gettysburg Address. Of course, we hardly needed another book to remind us that Lincoln is (undoubtedly) the best wordsmith to have occupied the White House and ranks (arguably) as the nation’s best wordsmith period. Nevertheless, Wilson’s book is a landmark contribution to the vast secondary literature on Lincoln, and is instructive for anyone—citizen and scholar alike—interested in the art of wise political leadership.

Smartly limiting his analysis to selections from Lincoln’s presidential corpus—smart because it effectively focuses the reader on the stirring summit of Lincoln’s literary powers even as it gives space to plumb new depths on the development of some of this country’s most important state papers—Wilson takes us some places we have never been, and other places we have not been enough, starting with Lincoln’s farewell remarks at Springfield on February 11, 1861. In opening his book with a review of this compressed classic of nine short sentences, Wilson briskly reminds us of the familiar—that this statement “admirably display(s) Lincoln’s talent for conciseness, for weaving together appropriate words and rhythms, and for saying ordinary things in an extraordinarily memorable way” (11). But in reaffirming these points, Wilson reaches an arresting level of granularity, adding novel and clarifying detail to an already interesting picture. His careful consideration of the best ear and eye witnesses of
Lincoln’s impromptu speech and his virtually microscopic study of the draft of the remarks that Lincoln wrote out by hand on the train after delivery, give decisive weight to his argument that most readings of this episode fail to do full justice to Lincoln in several ways. For instance, Wilson sees, like others, that Lincoln removed from his written version a heartfelt plea included in his speech at the train depot that his fellow citizens pray for him—a plea that apparently triggered a highly emotional response from Lincoln’s audience and Lincoln himself. In its place Lincoln offers a more muted and impersonal assertion that: “Without the assistance of that Divine Being, who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail.” Where others simply chalk up this move to some strategic worry about appearing too weak and needy in his first presidential utterance, or to some embarrassment that it would convey a religious conviction he did not have but was only uttered spontaneously to cater to the prevailing beliefs of his audience, Wilson persuasively shows that the move says more about Lincoln’s worry over “medium” than “message” (14).

This is the first of several examples Wilson employs to reveal just how expertly attuned Lincoln was to the demands and potentialities of the written versus the spoken word. In this case of the appeal for prayer at Springfield, Lincoln recognized that quiet readers across the nation would receive his remarks in a context quite unlike that of those standing at the train station listening to him in the emotion and physicality of the moment. Because the situation of those reading his remarks would be so different, “the appeal therefore had to take a different form” (14). In making this argument, one buttressed by parallel explanations of other changes in this speech, Wilson establishes for Lincoln a new and even more elevated level of sophistication in the rhetorical arts. He also subtly challenges portraits of Lincoln’s character that still prevail in many quarters. Without disputing that Lincoln could be quite calculating, Wilson affirms a deeper integrity and consistency in Lincoln than is sometimes granted. There are those who see Lincoln’s habit of saying things one way then writing them down another as evidence of a willingness to put personal political advantage ahead of his commitment to certain ideals. Such views must now contend with Wilson’s weighty explanation that Lincoln’s adjustments, in several important cases, are best explained not as furtive efforts to cover his tracks but as brilliant efforts to make his tracks more intelligible and compelling to a differently situated audience receiving his message in different form. Parenthetically, in the case of the Springfield farewell, it is not insignificant that the tracks in
question are of a religious nature—namely some notion of looking to
God for help and direction. By giving more rather than less credence
and importance to the hope for divine assistance in Lincoln’s writ-
ten report of the Springfield remarks, Wilson’s interpretation runs
consistent with a relatively recent strain of prominent scholarship,
starting with David Herbert Donald’s biography of Lincoln, which
acknowledges a religious turn of sorts in Lincoln beginning as early
as 1860 and intensifying throughout his presidency—a turn too many
students of Lincoln still ignore or refuse to admit.1

It is impossible to rehearse here, even in summary fashion, how
Wilson shows even more extensively the labored development, literary
grace, and subsequent political impact of other noted Lincoln classics,
like his First Inaugural, Special Message to Congress on July 4, 1861,
public letter to Horace Greeley (August 22, 1862), Gettysburg Address,
and Second Inaugural. Suffice it to say, if Wilson’s book was limited
to treating only these texts, it would still stand as a noteworthy study
of this nation’s great poet-president. But perhaps the greatest genius
of Wilson’s work is in what he has to tell us about several texts that
are rarely if ever noted for their quality of expression. For instance,
his treatment of the Emancipation Proclamation, famously maligned
by Richard Hofstadter as having “all the moral grandeur of a bill of
lading,” shows that it too deserves literary admiration, though not
for its eloquence.2 Rather, in a phrase that effectively models a Lin-
colnian flare for lyrical antithesis, Wilson argues convincingly that
it is the document’s “inexquisite language exquisitely suited to the
occasion” that demands our respect (142). For a nation not yet fully
committed to human equality, even in the North, the document’s sterile
legalism—purely reducing the move to a constitutionally approved
military necessity—was, at the time, human equality’s best vehicle for
advance.

Surely the most unexpected selection of evidence of Lincoln’s tal-
ent for composition is his letter to James Conkling of August 26, 1863.
In that message, Lincoln declines Conkling’s invitation to come to
Springfield for a gathering of the different parties who favored Union
whatever their other differences were. Knowing the letter would go
public, Lincoln also responded at some length to friends of the Union
who were highly critical of his Emancipation Proclamation and even
more opposed to his move to enlist black soldiers into the Northern

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army. Disarmingly cordial yet argumentatively firm, most of the letter is indeed a fine example of Lincoln’s way with words. But Lincoln concludes the letter with an infamously clunky, light-minded passage rejoicing over the opening up of the Mississippi River by military effort. Lincoln writes: “The signs look better. The Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea.” With similarly overwrought language, Lincoln goes on to compliment various regions of the country for their contribution to the fight, culminating with a goofy reference to the U.S. Navy as “Uncle Sam’s Web-feet.” Lincoln was aware of how sophisticated readers would choke on such a passage and he had direct advice to eliminate it. Why does he refuse such counsel? Because, as Wilson reveals, he could see more clearly than better-educated advisors all around him what words were needed at what point for what audience. Lincoln understood that many of his “critics” on emancipation and black enlistments were otherwise supportive friends, and that they were, or were like, the everyday folk of Springfield rather than the intelligentsia of Washington, D.C. For such an audience, Lincoln recognized the utility of closing the letter somewhat whimsically. Not only would this would take a little edge off the uncomfortable and building pressure he knew his troubled allies would feel from his argument, it would help strike the kind of common-man connection he knew was needed to build broad and essential democratic support for his position—a connection easy to lose in the razor-sharp reasoning that characterized much of the letter. One shrewd observer of the day confirmed that indeed, “There are sentences that a critic would like to eliminate, but they are delightfully characteristic of the ‘plain men’ who wrote and will appeal directly to the great mass of ‘plain men’ from Maine to Minnesota” (191).

One way to characterize this today is to say that Lincoln was not above employing a kind of mild Straussianism working in reverse. Rather than cloaking one’s real message in language that purposely misleads the vulgar many while reaching the enlightened few, Lincoln sometimes consciously alienated elite audiences precisely so the masses could hear and accept what he had to say. The temptation simply to call this demagoguery must be resisted. It is true that in an earlier day Lincoln was not above appealing to certain prejudices—especially racial prejudices. But after assuming the presidency, such appeals virtually disappear from his public statements. Written to a pro-Union but considerably anti-black audience, the Conkling letter is a prime example where Lincoln might have easily employed such appeals but did not. (If anything, his rhetoric gently tweaks the prejudices of his audience: “You say you will not fight to free negroes.
Some of them seem willing to fight for you; but, no matter." In other words, even as Lincoln’s occasional low-brow approach intentionally threw off a few refined readers in order to hold on to less discriminating crowds, he still paid common citizens the compliment of addressing them primarily with principled logic. The one problem with characterizing Lincoln this way is that it only captures half the story, for it fails to show how Lincoln could just as easily take things in the other direction. Wilson gives us an implicit illustration of this with his examination of the famed public letter to Horace Greeley, the highly influential newspaper editor and antislavery gadfly of the Lincoln administration. This message, where Lincoln’s carefully parsed position notes, among other things, that his “paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery,” had the effect of reassuring sizeable conservative constituencies still opposed to emancipation, even as it signaled to more careful readers, like Lincoln’s own cabinet and Greeley himself, that Lincoln was laying the groundwork for a shift in his policy that the war would not be used to affect the institution of slavery. Lincoln’s keen sense of audience and remarkable precision with language gave him a truly unique ability to communicate indirectly as well as directly, to the enlightened few as well as the recalcitrant many, according to the imperatives of the moment.

What Wilson helps us never lose sight of is that while Lincoln loved words, he was not, in the end, seeking to be an admired poet or essayist. He was first and foremost a politician seeking certain political outcomes and had the capacity and willingness to employ poetic prose, dry legalism, and even embarrassing doggerel, as needed, to help shift public opinion, however patiently, in favor of his aims. Wilson’s work is also to be admired for recognizing and addressing, in various degrees, a number of large questions that develop along the way of describing how Lincoln effectively marshaled words to move a splintering nation through its worst crucible.

The first question is, in an age before focus groups, large-N polling, and sophisticated market segmentation analysis, how in the world did Lincoln seem to understand so accurately what certain audiences wanted or needed to hear? Here, Wilson briefly touches on the well-worn, from Lincoln’s regular and direct personal interactions with citizens from all walks of life to his daily habits of reviewing correspondence and reading a variety of newspapers. In fact, much of Lincoln’s ability for taking the pulse of the public, unassisted by modern technology, seems to have come from an innate genius for such. Since no one has yet figured out how to explain the development
or existence of such innate genius, Wilson can hardly be faulted for basically assuming such a gift then shifting to other core aspects of his story.

Next, how was it that Lincoln could produce such sublime formulations of rhythm and phrase? Here one yearns for, and Wilson delivers, something more satisfying than a passing assumption that Lincoln had an innate genius for doing so. Part of the answer Wilson supplies is simply that of sheer effort. By the end of the book, one is left with an inspiring portrait of a plodding, above average, first-draft writer who ended up with world-class product by a relentless commitment to rewriting. Lincoln’s method apparently approached that of, say, a Hemingway, who reported to George Plimpton that he rewrote the ending to *A Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times in order to “get the words right.” One of the more striking images of Wilson’s whole account is that of Lincoln making subtle adjustments to the Emancipation Proclamation on the very morning it was announced, and this after months of circulating multiple drafts among his advisors, whose advice he often followed. Wilson also makes abundantly clear how much Lincoln benefited from an aural sense of the written word. Time and time again Lincoln insisted on reading drafts of his material out loud to others, even when it was destined not for the podium but for the printed page. This staple process of *listening* with others to his *written* word was no doubt one reason Lincoln’s work so often stretched beyond the serviceable to the memorable.

But rewriting and listening cannot be the whole story. After working through draft after draft and hearing his own work read aloud, how did Lincoln finally know he had it right? One key here has to be that he was an assiduous student of language. Though apparently not a broad reader, Lincoln repeatedly consumed some works—most notably the Bible and a handful of Shakespearean plays—in large part because he was as enchanted by their poetry as their substance. Wilson does not fail to reference these and other literary influences on Lincoln, but the discussion of such is surprisingly scant given Wilson’s noted expertise on the reading habits of Lincoln and Jefferson (Lincoln’s closest rhetorical rival in the American presidency). A more extended, seasoned reflection from him on how Lincoln’s self-education in several of these linguistic classics helped develop his ear for elegantly clear and moving prose would have been a most welcome addition to this work.

In considering the question of how it was that Lincoln was so good at finding just the right words at just the right moment, it must also be noted that Lincoln’s search for the poetic and the convincing was inextricably bound up with his search for the true and the wise. Though his ambition was apparently a “little engine that knew no rest,” from the beginning there was always for Lincoln “something higher” than his own desire for personal distinction that gave shape and purpose to American civic life and his involvement in such.4 Throughout his entire career, that “something higher” was connected to the self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence and the conditions of human liberty and opportunity they created. Towards the end of his career, that “something higher” was also increasingly connected to a biblical understanding of human existence, a biblical understanding more profound in many instances than that of any theologian of his day, despite the fact that Lincoln’s thought about the Judeo-Christian tradition lay largely outside of any formal connection to that tradition. As Lincoln said in a letter commenting on his Second Inaugural, the notion that there is a God, one who commands charity for all, condemns violations of basic natural rights (like slavery), and finally governs the earth according to purposes not always fathomable to mortal man, was “a truth which I thought needed to be told.”5

To reiterate, then, Lincoln’s quest for the right words was always significantly governed by a deeper quest for the right position or policy as inspired by ideals not of his own creation. While this surely made Lincoln’s task more difficult in some respects, in others it facilitated the power and precision of his politico-linguistic artistry because, to use an Aristotelian metaphor, that art was directed by a stable and rich moral standard critical to human flourishing at which Lincoln could take aim.6 Though Wilson never quite says this, it could be argued that Lincoln ultimately recognized right words not simply because they sounded clear, beautiful, and persuasive, but because he sensed, as many of us now sense today, that they were substantially right. That is to say that they approached a perspicacious expression of what the citizen, president, or whole country should be doing at that moment in light of various moral truths and basic temporal realities. There is a lot here. Another metaphor may help illustrate.

5. Collected Works, 8: 356.
The opening compliment of this essay, that Lincoln had a gift for the “word fitly spoken,” is drawn from Proverbs 25. In verse 11, the “word fitly spoken” is likened unto “apples of gold in pictures of silver.” Whatever the writer of Proverbs meant by this image, Lincoln himself took it to illustrate his view of the relationship between the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. The latter, he argued, was like the frame of silver which was made to “adorn and preserve” the apple of gold constituted by the principle of “liberty to all” found in the former.7 Said another way, the Constitution is an attractive but ultimately lesser metal than the Declaration because it is subordinate to and designed to implement the more foundational truths of freedom embedded in the Declaration (the frame being made for the apples, not the apples for the frame). The Constitution is also a lesser metal because, in the face of insuperable human frailty and the practical necessities of time and place, the Constitution can only make the more perfect principles of the Declaration concretely operable in an imperfect way. Roughly following this same interpretive logic, one might say that Lincoln’s talent for a “word fitly spoken” is best recognized in and significantly explained by his determination to carefully delineate and promote workable political policies and positions (frames of silver) that attempt to answer, as best they can in the real world, the demands of certain transcendent ideals (apples of gold), including but not limited to those of the Declaration of Independence. As an aside, putting things this way may further clarify certain anomalies with which Wilson wrestles, like why it is that the flat and sterile language of the Emancipation Proclamation worked, while soaring and still-inspiring lines from Lincoln’s companion efforts to promote compensation and colonization for slaves did not (142). The Emancipation Proclamation was, in the day and the moment, just that perfect frame of silver—an imperfect but precisely prudent advance of the Declaration’s ideals. As previously noted, its sterile language worked and justly remains admired because its sterility was key to its practicality. Plans for compensation and colonization were, given the state of things, never going materialize. Likely not even the cleverest of verbal defenses would have made them viable frames of silver. Nevertheless, parts of Lincoln’s rhetoric with respect to those plans still move us because they speak directly to that great apple of gold, our American sense of the eternal rightness of human liberty for all.

In his epilogue, Wilson certainly nods in the direction of all of this, making Lincoln emblematic of the respective hopes of Emerson and

Santayana for philosophic rule—where ideas drive action, not vice versa. For a more robust articulation and defense of the position, Wilson might have turned directly to Plato and his archetypal vision of how difficult yet critical (from the standpoint of political justice) it is to have political power and the search for truth—or philosophy—“coincide in the same place.”8 He might also have offered a more specific summary account of the content of Lincoln’s philosophical leadership. As Wilson himself concludes, what made Lincoln truly distinctive as a statesman was his ability to embody in words insights he drew from deep reflection (284). Presumably this was a deep reflection on the good and the true, otherwise, what was the point of the reflection? That being the case, these insights, these apples of gold hewn from Lincoln’s profound consideration of “something higher” should have much to tell us finally about the power and appeal of his words. Presuming that Lincoln was right, that there is “something higher” out there, what exactly are these apples of gold and how did they help define, empower, and give articulate voice to Lincoln’s policy and position frames of silver? To his great credit, Wilson offers pockets of discussion of such throughout his book and brings us to the brink of a more cumulative discussion of such at the end. That he does not round out this discussion is a loss, but not one that diminishes this book as a magnificent piece of scholarship.

Wilson’s account of the power of Lincoln’s pen bristles with fresh and significant learning. It is brilliantly convincing. No one who cares about understanding the greatness of our greatest president can afford to miss it.