

## The Language of Abraham Lincoln

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When Abraham Lincoln became President, he was already a writer of great ability, but as far as the American public was concerned, this was a distinctly hidden asset. While he had earned high marks as a political speaker on the stump, as well as on more formal occasions, Lincoln had no reputation as a writer with the public at large, or even with his closest friends. At the time of his election, an editorial voiced the reservations of many in Lincoln's own party when it asked, "Who will write this ignorant man's state papers?" But as we know, his presidential papers subsequently came to be understood as literary productions, such that he would eventually acquire standing as a writer – and in the fullness of time, a great writer. I have argued that insofar as we judge the stature of American writers by such things as the familiarity of the public with their words, or by the importance of their writings as expressions of the national purpose, Abraham Lincoln is simply unsurpassed, and is possibly in a class by himself.

What the American public had no way of knowing in 1861 was the singular fact that Abraham Lincoln, though almost totally bereft of formal schooling, had been a keen student of language from childhood. The testimony of his family and his neighbors in Indiana leaves no doubt that, as a boy, he was more than merely interested in words and meanings, he was obsessed by them. The evidence bearing on his intellectual

development in his formative years, particularly the testimony of his step-mother, suggests that what was even more important than his legendary fireside reading, was his early dedication to writing.

Once we are attuned to it, the lore about Lincoln turns out to be replete with stories and examples of his long-standing preoccupation with words, his sensitivity to the diversity of their meanings, and his delight in wordplay. When once asked about his family's lineage, he said that he understood the first American Lincolns had "settled in a small Massachusetts place called Hingham, or it might have been Hanghim."<sup>1</sup> To read through Lincoln's writings is to uncover a persistent fascination with verbal equivocation – both as an observer and practitioner. He was, after all, a lawyer, and legal arguments often come down to the meaning of words, or the manipulation or evasion thereof. One of the stories of his early days at the bar is ostensibly about some young men Lincoln was asked to defend in frontier Menard County who had been arrested for playing cards. In my reading of it, the story is more about the clueless prosecutor, who knew nothing about card games, but since there were allegedly two different games involved, he thought he could show these rude miscreants how the prosecutorial game should be played. To assure that they felt the full force of the enormity of their crime, he brought one indictment against them for playing a game identified as "Seven Up" and a second indictment for playing one designated as "Old Sledge" – two games, two indictments. But for all he knew about the law, there was something he didn't know that everyone else in the courtroom did – that these were two different names for the same game. So when the first charge was brought, the sympathetic witnesses solemnly testified that the defendants accused of playing "Seven Up" were playing "Old Sledge," with the result

that all were acquitted. For the officious prosecutor, this must have been bad enough, but imagine his chagrin (and the crowd's delight) when the second charge was brought, and all the witnesses testified that those accused of playing "Old Sledge" were actually playing "Seven Up."<sup>2</sup>

This is admittedly equivocation at a primitive level, but Lincoln's experience with it covered a wide range. It is arguably one of the reasons he favored Macbeth over all other Shakespearian plays, for as Garry Wills has shown in his book Witches and Jesuits, equivocation is a deeply-embedded theme of that play. The issue of equivocation, in fact, entered Lincoln's most anguished meditations, such as those that underlay his long struggle as President to fathom the direction and purpose of divine providence in the course of a horrendous Civil War. With these matters very much on his mind in the autumn of 1864, he told a visitor that when he called, he (the President) had been "deep in Pope," and he quoted from memory the famous passage from Alexander Pope's "Essay on Man" that concludes with the lines:

And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,

One truth is clear, whatever is, is right.

When his visitor remarked on the beauty of this passage, Lincoln reportedly said "Yes, that's a convenient line, too, that last one. You see, a man may turn it, and say, 'Well, if whatever is is right, why, then, whatever isn't must be wrong.'"

One of the very few public speeches Lincoln gave as President, and one that deserves to be better known, was delivered at the Baltimore Sanitary Fair in April of 1864, and it contains a notable example of Lincoln using the issue of equivocation for a

serious political purpose. Here the subject is something he cared deeply about and that was somehow at the center of the national crisis – the concept of liberty.

The world [he says] has never had a good definition of the word liberty, and the American people, just now, are much in want of one. We all declare for liberty; but in using the same *word* we do not all mean the same *thing*. With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself, and the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's /301/ labor. Here are two, not only different, but incompatible things, called by the same name – liberty. And it follows that each of the things is, by the respective parties, called by two different and incompatible names – liberty and tyranny.

As a boy, Lincoln had read every book he could lay hands on, which resulted in a motley collection of literary models, but one book that had an undoubted and enduring impact was *Aesop's Fables*, as is evident in the passage that follows the one I just read:

The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep's throat, for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as a *liberator*, while the wolf denounces him for the same act as the destroyer of liberty, especially as the sheep was a black one. Plainly the sheep and the wolf are not agreed upon a definition of the word liberty; and precisely the same difference prevails to-day among us human creatures, even in the North, and all

professing to love liberty. Hence we behold the processes by which thousands are daily passing from under the yoke of bondage, hailed by some as the advance of liberty, and bewailed by others as the destruction of all liberty.

There are a number of reasons why Lincoln had chosen to speak in Baltimore, but the most important was surely to call attention to the dramatic turnaround that Baltimore and the state of Maryland represented. At the outset of the Civil War, there had been powerful forces at work in Maryland, and especially in Baltimore, first, to oppose Lincoln's inauguration, and later, after the firing on Fort Sumter, to impede his efforts to defend the Capitol, to say nothing of the attempts, by these same forces, to bring about Maryland's secession from the Union. Now, three years later, the state of Maryland was preparing to do something quite astonishing and monumental – it was about to abolish slavery. This is what Lincoln refers to in the sentence that follows his Aesopian fable on liberty. “Recently [he says], as it seems, the people of Maryland have been doing something to define liberty; and thanks to them that, in what they have done, the wolf's dictionary, has been repudiated.”<sup>3</sup> There is a world of meaning packed into Lincoln's provocative metaphor, the “wolf's dictionary,” but it will suffice for our purposes here simply to point out that Lincoln's way of exploiting the opportunity presented by Maryland's forthcoming emancipation act was to focus on the importance of words.

Another of Lincoln's speeches that deserves to be better known is his Address to the Wisconsin Agricultural Fair, delivered in Milwaukee in September 1859. While not a political speech, it has, as someone has noted, a definite “political edge,”<sup>4</sup> and this is

evident in the way Lincoln opens the address. Having been preoccupied for all of five years creating a new political party, a fusion party, as it was called, composed of former political adversaries, it was no accident that Lincoln began his address by emphasizing the good that agricultural fairs do by bringing people together. This is the burden of the first sentence, but in the second sentence he brings this notion alive by an appeal to specific words:

From the first appearance of man upon the earth, down to very recent times, the words “*stranger*” and “*enemy*” were *quite* or *almost*, synonymous. Long after civilized nations had defined robbery and murder as high crimes, and had affixed severe punishments to them, when practiced among and upon their own people respectively, it was deemed no offence, but even meritorious, to rob, and murder, and enslave *strangers*, whether as nations or as individuals. Even yet, this has not totally disappeared.

Starting out with what looks like commonplace – fairs bring people together – Lincoln’s appeal to the words “stranger” and “enemy” galvanizes our attention, and by the third sentence we are swept into the story of civilization – literally, the civilizing of society – a process that, by Lincoln’s telling, was still incomplete. Along the way, the issue of enslavement has been quietly inserted into the discussion as one of man’s inhumanities to man that has “not totally disappeared.”

This is part of the “political edge” we spoke of earlier, but it is most pronounced in connection with a discussion labor, where Lincoln tackles a particular rationalization of slavery then being touted as the “mud-sill theory.” The mud-sill theory, first

expounded by a U. S. Senator from South Carolina in 1858, held that “In all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life,” and that without such a class “you would not have that other class which leads progress, civilization, and refinement.” The South, James Henry Hammond proclaimed on the floor of the Senate, has fortunately “found a race adapted to that purpose . . . and call them slaves.” The North, he said, also has a mud-sill class, and while it deigned not to use the word, the “whole hireling class of manual laborers . . . are essentially slaves.”

A dispute about free labor and the meaning of the word “slave” was a question tailor-made for a person with Lincoln’s political and linguistic interests. The chief obstacle a modern reader has with this passage is the unfamiliarity of the key word “mud-sill,” on which everything turns. As almost everyone in Lincoln’s audience in 1859 would have known, this word refers to the lowest structural part of a building, whether board or stone or block. The bottom-most member was called a “mud-sill,” and it was the kind of word that Lincoln relished, for its metaphorical potential, with its invidious connotations for human beings, played right into his hands.

According to that theory, [Lincoln says] the education of laborers, is not only useless, but pernicious, and dangerous. In fact, it is, in some sort, deemed a misfortune that laborers should have heads at all. Those same heads are regarded as explosive materials, only to be safely kept in damp places, as far as possible from that peculiar sort of fire which ignites them. A Yankee who could invent a strong *handed* man without a head would receive the everlasting gratitude of the “mud-sill” advocates.

Here Lincoln zeroes in on something that is completely ignored or overlooked by the mud-sill theorists, namely, the intellectual potential of this “hireling class of manual laborers.” This is, of course, the main point of the passage, and its effectiveness as an argument is much enhanced by his audience’s instinctive identification with “mud-sill” laborers and Lincoln’s depiction of them as having heads as well as hands. But we should also note the way Lincoln’s argument is quickened by the striking phrase he uses to characterize the minds of the “mud-sill” laborers – “explosive materials.” Now I grant you that those who attend or teach in liberal arts colleges like Grinnell are probably reminded on almost a daily basis that the human mind contains “explosive materials,” but for Lincoln’s audience, and especially as applied to the “mud-sills” he was talking about, this was more than a little audacious, and as such, it represents a characteristic Lincolnian touch, his constant affinity for unexpected and quietly electrifying language.

Here and elsewhere Lincoln promoted free labor by pointing out the prime difference between a slave and a free laborer, which is that the free laborer is free – free to move, to improve his skills, to acquire education, in short, to better his condition. As the arguments justifying slavery had intensified and become more public in the 1850s, Lincoln had been talking increasingly about the inter-relationship, or perhaps we should say, the inter-dependence of democracy and freedom, especially emphasizing free labor, and the liberating force of initiative, education, and self-improvement. In these writings and speeches, he developed a model for the kind of fulfillment that approximates what is now called the “American Dream,” something he repeatedly used as an answer to the mud-sill theory, but he never expressed it more compactly than in a single sentence in the Milwaukee address: “The prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages

awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land, for himself; then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him.” It wasn’t quite his own success story, though he often pointed out in his speeches that he himself had started out as a penniless laborer, but this it was a pattern of success that was very familiar to his audience.

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We are indebted to Lincoln’s step-mother, Sarah Bush Lincoln, who 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.”<sup>5</sup> Observe, if you will, 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 in 1860 told the Rev. John P. Gulliver, who had complimented him on the “clarity” of his statements. Lincoln replied by telling Gulliver that “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.”<sup>6</sup> Just as his step-mother 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 friend in politics and at the bar, Judge 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."<sup>7</sup>

Gillespie's characterization is helpful in representing Lincoln's clarity as a seemingly natural attribute, yet one that he did not take for granted but worked hard at. Lincoln's law partner, William H. 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.<sup>8</sup>

As president, this changed very little. Harriet Beecher Stowe reported in 1864 that "our own politicians were somewhat shocked with his state papers" and that attempts had been made to get Lincoln to let other, more experienced hands do this 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.*"<sup>9</sup>

Understanding was still the great test.

My own thinking on Lincoln and his use of language has been substantially influenced by the literary perspective in which I am inclined to see his writings. I taught Lincoln as a writer in my American lit classes at Knox long before I got involved with serious research into his early life and the work of his law partner and biographer, Herndon. Therefore I tend to see his writing not only as the medium for expressing his political arguments and ideas, but as being directly related to the transformational literary ferment of the 1850s. Consider, for instance, this brief list of some of the works that first appeared in that decade that turned out to be American classics of the first order: 1850, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*; 1851, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*; 1854, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*; 1855, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*; 1858, Emily Dickinson's first hand-sown collection of manuscript poems. Another work that seems destined to be accorded comparable stature is Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*, which was published in 1855.

Now if we consider that this sudden eruption of landmark literary works marks a revolution in the nature and quality of American writing, it is hardly an accident that Abraham Lincoln, in enunciating a political and personal reawakening in 1854 over the extension of slavery, suddenly found a powerful new voice in what is known as his Peoria speech, the greatest of his pre-presidential speeches. In this perspective, Lincoln's emergence in the 1850s, which is usually regarded in a purely political aspect, can be seen as a part of the flowering of literary art and expression that F. O. Matthiessen famously called an "American Renaissance."

Seeing Lincoln's writing in this perspective helps us to account for the distinctive character of his prose. When it began to attract the attention of critics and journalists

during his presidency, the word they commonly used to characterize it was “peculiar,” a judgment that was, in fact, advanced by Herndon himself. What they were referring to was essentially this: largely to achieve clarity of expression and to be widely understood, Lincoln had for 20 years been deliberately and quite self-consciously perfecting a discourse of plain language. The result 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 literary 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 this way. But if you wanted to change the minds of farmers and storekeepers and ordinary folks and persuade them to accept new ideas and positions, Lincoln’s theory was that you must speak their language. His law partner Herndon, who was also a frequent public speaker, reported that Lincoln frequently advised him not to “shoot too high – shoot low[er] down, and the common people will understand you: . . . The educated ones will understand you anyhow.”<sup>10</sup>

The first Lincoln speech for which we have a complete text, his Lyceum speech of January 1838, is written in language that was 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.<sup>11</sup>

That's Lincolnian. 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 . . .<sup>12</sup>

If this sounds closer to Senator Claghorn than Abraham Lincoln, there are reasons for it, but what I would like to call attention to here is that 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 simply disappear from his written vocabulary.<sup>13</sup>

He 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 marshalling 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.<sup>14</sup>

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 didn't know much about him, particularly the large number who were suspicious of his qualifications. For someone like the ex-slave Frederick Douglass, another autodidact with a remarkable 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 appeared to put the blame for the Civil War on blacks. In denouncing the meeting and the President in his magazine, Douglass struck out at Lincoln's language.

We might also criticise 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.<sup>15</sup>

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 himself but of his use of language.

In my interviews with him [he wrote later], 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.<sup>16</sup>

The plainness of Lincoln's mature prose style consisted of a great deal more than plain diction. A technique that surely owes something to his career in the courtroom and that turns up frequently in his presidential writing is 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 fought, 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?”<sup>17</sup>

Lincoln’s reference to putting his question “more directly” spotlights another a characteristic of Lincoln’s use of language that was certainly unexpected and probably considered, in governmental prose, distinctly 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 breath-takingly direct: “I would save the Union.”<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

By seizing the initiative, he is here able to set the agenda and establish a tangible momentum. But the means of accomplishing this feat are directly related to the language employed, which consists almost entirely of words of one syllable.

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 I know of no better example than that of the manuscript for this lecture. Further on, Lincoln begins 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 is even more direct and more emphatic: “Discourage litigation.”<sup>20</sup>

We have been speaking of clarity, plainness of diction, declarative interrogatories, directness, seizing the rhetorical initiative, and maintaining argumentative momentum. A comprehensive example encompassing all of these is found in Lincoln’s response to his fractious Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase, who, in September 1863, urged the President, for shamelessly expedient reasons, to rescind certain territorial exemptions specified in the Emancipation Proclamation. Whether Lincoln 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 false step was exactly what Chase had in mind, Lincoln wrote a quietly ripping refusal that 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?<sup>21</sup>

The facility with which Lincoln finds and runs out fatal objections to Chase's plan seemingly leaves little choice between a judgment of either ineptitude or disloyalty. This may explain why this incisive letter is unsigned and possibly remained unsent.

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If Lincoln's principal aim was indeed that of clarity, of being understood by a wide range of readers or auditors, he certainly did not intend thereby to sacrifice persuasiveness, if he could help it. While he avoided the florid, ornamental language of conventional oratory, at the same time, he was consciously cultivating a keen sense of cadence and developing rhythmic effects that, even though he was using ordinary language and diction, could result in a kind of prose poetry for which his best presidential writings are known.

Here is a passage from an early speech on temperance that deals with the prosaic subject of the merchandizing of liquor:

Wagons drew it from town to town – boats bore it from clime to clime, and the winds wafted it from nation to nation; and merchants bought and sold it, by wholesale and by retail, with precisely the same feelings, on the part of the seller,

buyer, and bystander, as are felt at the selling and buying of flour, beef, bacon, or any other of the real necessities of life. Universal public opinion not only tolerated, but recognized and adopted its use.

There is nothing here to rival the Gettysburg Address or the Second Inaugural, but the cadenced cataloging, which lends interest to the presentation, may be seen as something of a harbinger of the later style. The Milwaukee address, which was written 17 years later in 1859, contains a more developed example of the same mode, and what is so noteworthy here is that the writer most likely to be brought to mind by this passage is Walt Whitman. Less surprising, but perhaps more venturesome, is that Lincoln's subject, before an audience of farmers, is unabashedly intellectual – focusing on the way in which farming presents the mind with what he calls “an exhaustless source of profitable enjoyment.”

Every blade of grass is a study; and to produce two, where there was but one, is both a profit and a pleasure. And not grass alone; but soils, seeds, and seasons – hedges, ditches, and fences, draining, droughts, and irrigation – plowing, hoeing, and harrowing – reaping, mowing, and threshing – saving crops, pests of crops, diseases of crops, and what will prevent or cure them – implements, utensils, and machines, their relative merits, and [how] to improve them – hogs, horses, and cattle – sheep, goats, and poultry – trees, shrubs, fruits, plants, and flowers – the thousand things of which these are specimens – each a world of study within itself.

Like the one from the Temperance address, this brief passage from the Milwaukee address is not a full-fledged mode of expression but more of an exercise, an *étude* for greater things to come.

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I would like to conclude my remarks with something that combines relevance to my topic with local interest. 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, Charles Smiley, an American professor of Classics at Grinnell College, of all places, traveled to Berlin, then the Mecca of Classical studies, to spend a winter immersed in ancient Greek texts. A true American, Prof. 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.”<sup>22</sup> 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 Prof. 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?”<sup>23</sup> 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 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.”<sup>24</sup>

Prof. Smiley’s discovery spotlights something important about Lincoln’s use of language, and ultimately his eloquence. Though submerged and generally inconspicuous, the same rhetorical devices that have been suspect since ancient times as telltale signs of superficiality and insincerity are nonetheless part and parcel of many of Lincoln’s most inspiring works. In being, in his hands, somehow unobtrusive, they have not only not stigmatized the writer, but, in Smiley’s words, they “had somehow proved themselves capable of sincerity.”<sup>25</sup> Prof. Smiley’s conclusion is reminiscent of that of Gillespie, Herndon, and many others on the subject, but has never been better stated: “[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.”<sup>26</sup>

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I want to close these brief remarks on Lincoln’s use of language by calling attention to the way he closes his Milwaukee address, which is with a story about the

ideal sentence. This is another Aesopian fable, the story of an Eastern monarch who charges his wise men to invent a sentence “which should be true and appropriate in all times and situations. They presented him the words: ‘*And this, too, shall pass away.*’” Lincoln grants that this ultimate sentence is wonderfully expressive, so “chastening,” he says, “in the hour of pride” and “consoling in the depths of affliction,” yet, he says, shifting into the mode so much admired and emulated by President Obama, “let us hope it is not *quite* true. Let us hope, rather, that by the best cultivation of the physical world, beneath and around us; and the intellectual and moral world within us, we shall secure an individual, social, and political prosperity and happiness, whose course shall be onward and upward, and which, while the earth endures, shall not pass away.”

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by Michael Burlingame's full text

<sup>2</sup> Herndon's Lincoln, 216-17.

<sup>3</sup> CW, 7:301-02

<sup>4</sup> John Channing Briggs, Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). Chapter 9, "The Milwaukee Address," 224.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Gulliver's story is related in Francis B. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1866), 312-13.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Gillespie to William H. Herndon, Dec. 8, 1866, *Herndon's Informants*, 508.

<sup>8</sup> William H. Herndon to Jesse W. Weik, Jan. 9, 1886, Herndon-Weik Collection, Library of Congress.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 195.

<sup>10</sup> William H. Herndon to Jesse W. Weik, Jan. 9, 1886.

<sup>11</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg (Final Text)," November 19, 1863, Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 7:23.

<sup>12</sup> "Address Before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois," Jan. 27, 1838, *Collected Works*, 1:108. Roy P. Basler finds "the essential germ of the 'Gettysburg Address'" in this sentence. See Basler, "Lincoln's Development as a Writer," *A touchstone for greatness; essays, addresses, and occasional pieces about Abraham Lincoln* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), 61.

<sup>13</sup> For access to Lincoln's written vocabulary, see the "Word Index" function on the Web site for *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, sponsored by the Abraham Lincoln Association, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/>.

<sup>14</sup> "Speech on the Sub-Treasury," Dec. [26], 1839, Collected Works, 1:160.

<sup>15</sup> *Douglass' Monthly* 5:9 (September 1862), 708.

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<sup>16</sup> Two-page document (numbered 12 and 13) on Abraham Lincoln, Box 22, Folder "Abraham Lincoln," Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>17</sup> *Collected Works*, 4:430.

<sup>18</sup> AL to Horace Greeley, August 22, 1862, *Collected Works*, 5:388.

<sup>19</sup> AL to James C. Conkling, *Collected Works*, 6:406.

<sup>20</sup> *Collected Works*, 2:81. To see the manuscript, consult the web site of the Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/malhome.html>

<sup>21</sup> *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 Co., 1890), 6:434.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Smiley, "Lincoln and Gorgias," Classical Journal, v. 13 (1917), 124.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 128.