Lincoln’s Address to the Young Men’s Lyceum: A Speculative Essay

John Burt

December 7, 2001

What stands out for most readers of Lincoln’s 1838 Lyceum Address is his startlingly Miltonic description of the character of the tyrant. Aware that “men of ambition and talents” will continue to arise in America, Lincoln asks how such people, now that the Revolution is over, may put those ambitions and talents to use. In the revolutionary era the greatness, and also the will to power, of heroic personalities was fully realized in, and to that extent neutralized by, the grandeur and difficulty of the revolutionary task. But since that time the only task equal to the grandeur of genius is tyranny:

The question then, is, can that gratification be found in supporting and maintaining an edifice that has been erected by others? Most certainly it cannot. Many great and good men sufficiently qualified for any task they should undertake, may ever be found, whose ambition would aspire to nothing beyond a seat in Congress, a gubernatorial or a presidential chair; but such belong not to the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle. What! think you these places would satisfy an Alexander, a Caesar, or a Napoleon? Never! Towering genius disdains a beaten path. It seeks regions hitherto unexplored. It sees no distinction in adding story to story, upon the monuments of fame, created to the memory of others. It denies that it is glory enough to serve under any chief. It scorns to tread in the footsteps of any predecessor, however illustrious. It thirsts and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves, or enslaving freemen [emphasis Lincoln’s].

It’s that last sentence, of course, that has attracted most notice, leading Edmund Wilson to argue that Lincoln is warning the country here against himself (as both the emancipator of slaves, through the Thirteenth Amendment, and the enslaver of freemen, through the suppression of habeas corpus). The same passage led psychohistorians like Charles Strozier to posit an Oedipal relationship between Lincoln and the Founding Fathers. While it is a mistake to see in this passage either a prophecy of Lincoln’s policies a quarter-century later, or an explanation of the neurotic basis of those policies, certainly Lincoln does feel the magnetism of the
role he describes. And just as certainly what Lincoln describes here is not just the tyrant familiar from the civic republican literature of the previous century to which we have been introduced by Bailyn, Pocock, and Appleby, or even the Machiavellian man of virtú, but the demonic hero familiar to us from the Romantic reading of Milton. At least it is clear that the figure Lincoln describes resembles Melville’s Ahab far more than he resembles Sir Robert Walpole, and Lincoln’s own feelings resemble far more that mixture of fascination and repulsion which Melville felt for Ahab than it does the far simpler disgust the revolutionary generation felt for King George or Lincoln’s own Whig allies felt for King Andrew.²

What is especially Miltonic about Lincoln’s tyrant is not only his unwillingness to play a small part in a great drama that centers on some other person’s greatness, but his resentment at a world which does not owe its creation to him and which, by offering him security and prosperity while asking from him only the comparatively small price of grateful acceptance of its bounty, shows him all too painfully that it is in no essential need of him. It is in possessing a real but inconvenient grandeur that Lincoln’s tyrant is most like Milton’s Satan and unlike the lesser tyrants that haunt the civic republican imagination. Tyranny is not the consequence of interested parties seizing power to serve those interests. It is a sweeping answer to the question of what use a heroic spirit is to make of its heroism in a world that is too small for it.

——

Lincoln was of course not alone in locating a major threat to American democracy in its material and political success. What the tyrant rejects is after all not very different from what Thoreau eight years later would call a life of quiet desperation. Is it only to my ear that when Lincoln describes the task of his generation he seems somehow grudging about it, as if, say, he had been given a beautiful suit of clothes, but nothing to do with it except to keep it from getting dirty?

We, when mounting the stage of existence, found ourselves the legal inheritors of these fundamental blessings. We toiled not in the acquirement or establishment of them—they are a legacy bequeathed us, by a once hardy, brave and patriotic, but now lamented and departed race of ancestors. Their’s [sic] 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; ’tis ours only, to transmit these, the former, unprofaned by the foot of an invader; the latter, undecayed by the lapse of time, and untorment by usurpation—to the latest generation that fate shall permit the world to know. This task of gratitude to our fathers, justice to ourselves, duty to posterity, and love for our species in general, all imperatively require us faithfully to perform.

Over these very years—the heyday of American braggadocio—the idea that stability and prosperity would breed a debased culture was very much in the air. What
was feared in different ways by Lincoln, by Emerson, and by Tocqueville was not the
modern nightmare about early market economies, which is to say that the United
States would become a society of rapacious exploiters serving accumulation with
ruthless dedication and interested in public culture only to the extent that it could
provide security for their possessions and the opportunity to seize more of them.
What all three feared was that even a more modest political culture, interested in
securing a steady if undramatic advancement of its material conditions (the culture
Martin Diamond describes of fairminded, worldly, and enlightened traders and nego-
tiators) will somehow issue in a habit of life that is less than fully human. Emerson’s
critique of this habit of life is well known. Tocqueville’s is less so, but more telling,
since what he describes as a nightmare—a tyranny that degrades rather than tor-
ments its victims because it unfailingly supplies them with what they think they
want and subjects them to the irresistible power of their own desires—is not terribly
different from what both political parties then and now have always described as a
dream.
Tocqueville notices the modesty of the material desires of the Americans, and
is puzzled that such modest desires should be pursued with an obsessiveness more
appropriate to the grander aims they eclipse:

There is no question of building vast palaces, of conquering or ex-
celling nature, or sucking the world dry to satisfy one man’s greed. It is
more a question of adding a few acres to one’s fields, planting an orchard,
enlarging a house, making life ever easier and more comfortable, keeping
irritations away, and satisfying one’s slightest needs without trouble and
almost without expense. These are petty aims, but the soul cleaves to
them; it dwells on them every day and in great detail; in the end they
shut out the rest of the world and sometimes come between the soul and
God.

The restlessness of American materialism seems to Tocqueville to mark what he
sees not as materialism in any traditional sense but rather as a spiritual passion of
a displaced kind, one never to be satisfied with its ostensible objects and in fact
exacerbated by the possession of them:

Americans cleave to the things of this world as if assured that they
will never die, and yet are in such a rush to snatch any that come within
their reach, as if expecting to stop living before they have relished them.
They clutch everything but hold nothing fast, and so lose grip as they
hurry after some new delight. . . .
That is the reason for the strange melancholy often haunting the
inhabitants of democracies in the midst of abundance, and of that disgust
with life sometimes gripping them in calm and easy circumstances.

Accustomed to confining his attention to private concerns, the secular American
will also accustom himself to thinking of the larger concerns as cloudy and unreal;
he will “confine the activity of private judgment within limits too narrow for the
dignity and happiness of mankind,” until he is finally induced to give up thinking at all. The result of this is a kind of despair in which only concerns of money or pleasure or comfort have any essential reality, and ultimate realities are, if not actually dismissed as illusions (or as disguised versions of seeking money, pleasure and comfort) then mystified as “value-judgments” and leaps of faith which, because they are never quite rational, one always honors with a slight edge of contempt, since what one cannot reflect upon in a critical way also finally can’t much matter either.

What is to be feared about this state of despair is not that the vision of life it embodies is not a human one or that lives lived under its auspices will be empty, but that it is characteristic of despair to do desperate things. As Tocqueville darkly argues:

Each man gets into the way of having nothing but confused and changing notions about the matters of greatest importance to himself and his fellows. Opinions are ill-defended or abandoned, and in despair of solving unaided the greatest problems of human destiny, men ignobly give up thinking about them.

Such a state inevitably enervates the soul, and relaxing the springs of the will, prepares a people for bondage.

Then not only will they let their freedom be taken from them, but often they actually hand it over to themselves.

When there is no authority in religion or in politics, men are soon frightened by the limitless independence with which they are faced. They are worried and worn out by the constant restlessness of everything. With everything on the move in the realm of the mind, they want the material order at least to be firm and stable, and as they cannot accept their ancient beliefs again, they hand themselves over to a master.

The failure to find a good use for freedom, whether by the people or by the would-be tyrant, invites them both to invent a dramatically bad use for it. People turn themselves over to a master because materialism, “coming between themselves and God,” afflicts them with “a strange melancholy,” in which they are no longer capable of “thinking,” except in impulsive, dogmatic, or uncritical ways, about the “cares of living.” By “cares of living” Tocqueville means not plans about material prosperity but concern with those problems of human life, of being born and having to die, which we cannot expect to solve and cannot be human unless we try to. The passive despair Tocqueville fears for America is a failure of thinking—precisely what Hannah Arendt has in mind when she describes the banality of evil in the same language, as a failure of thinking.

But there is also an active despair, a despair which turns itself over to a tyranny not to relieve itself from living but in order to revive in itself the sense of being alive. This despair is the central subject of Lincoln’s Lyceum speech. The thesis of the speech—and of this essay—can be stated in a sentence: the purely secular society, given to getting and spending and to postponing ultimate questions because it lacks the means to argue them out, is a society finally driven by a hopelessness
so profound that men will kill each other rather than endure it. The reader will recognize in Tocqueville’s description of secular society simply a collective version of the crisis of vocation which Lincoln attributes to the tyrant: the demonic hero, and the despairing society, are each other’s creatures. Each are fanatics, not out of a violent devotion to a violence-justifying idea, and not out of pure will to power either, but out of a panicked sense that only by fanaticism can they face down the inner deadness of a secular life.

When Lincoln surveys his society, he finds several examples of precisely the desperate acts we have been discussing. The most famous, of course, is the murder of the abolitionist editor Elijah Lovejoy by a mob in Alton, Illinois, an event recent enough at the time of the speech that even the delicate and indirect allusion Lincoln employs cannot help but have brought it fully before the imagination of his contemporary audience. His treatment of the Lovejoy case is peculiar, especially in the light of his later political friendship with Owen Lovejoy, in that he does not treat the mob as a crowd wrought to the pitch of violence either by, say, a positive interest in slavery, or simply by its own native wickedness, but as a group of people who perhaps have a genuine grievance but who are impatient of the ability of law to respond to that grievance. After an offhand reference to crowds who “throw printing presses into rivers,” and “shoot editors,” Lincoln launches into a rather abstract (and to my mind rather thin) argument about why people with grievances should not resort to mob action:

There is no grievance that is a fit object of redress by mob law. In any case that arises, as for instance, the promulgation of abolitionism, one of two positions is necessarily true; that is, the thing is right within itself, and therefore deserves the protection of all law and all good citizens; or it is wrong, and therefore proper to be prohibited by legal enactments; and in neither case, is the interposition of mob law, either necessary, justifiable, or excusable.

Lincoln’s argument seems too sweeping, for what it rules out is not just lynching but the idea that popular feeling has any role to play in politics at all, and he describes all pressure put upon politics by popular feeling as if it were the moral equivalent of lynching. And it is not at first clear that this upwelling of popular violence has anything to do with the stereotyped despair which prepares one to accept and to give tyranny, since the lynchers here are not creatures of despairing emptiness but people driven by a passionate if unjust conviction. The key is in the power of such acts to corrupt a culture of deliberation about matters of ultimate value.

Lincoln here, as in the 1858 debates with Douglas, is skeptical about the role of popular will in legitimate government, seeing popular will not as the lifeblood of a democracy but as a kind of intoxicating stimulant which corrupts a republic’s judgment. Lincoln, like Webster and most American Whigs, believed that the legitimacy
of law is not the authenticity of its expression of popular will, but the product of reflection and evaluation by deliberative bodies who are responsible to the people but not merely their instruments. Popular will, even unanimous popular will, is not sufficient grounds for legitimacy, which depends also upon the ability of a course of action to stand the test of disciplined and principled reflection.

The authority of law does not arise merely from the fact that it has been enacted regularly by a legislature but because it is also, as Lincoln says, “right within itself and therefore deserves the protection of all law and all good citizens.” In other words, for Lincoln the force of law arises from some stratum beneath that of the positive law, a layer of collective moral reflection which embodies itself both in the established sense of a culture’s felt values and in the critical examination both of particular courses of action and of traditional cultural values.

It is because of the dependence of a living politics upon a political culture within which its commitments make sense that Lincoln, like Webster or John Quincy Adams, argues that freedom is available only within a specific cultural horizon which historically has developed specific habits of political life capable of supporting democratic institutions. Democrats of Lincoln’s generation tended to see democracy as easily within the grasp of all persons, and that is why nativism was so unattractive to them. Whigs, by contrast, thought of democracy as requiring the support of structures of feeling which shape experience and judgment but which are not in any immediate way accessible, and therefore often embraced nativism. The culture of freedom, Webster argued in the Girard Will case (and Lincoln argues here), is not the product of rational choice alone, but depends strongly upon what might be called “opinion,” a body of salutary prejudices which remain only half-articulated but into which one is initiated by culture.

We call views “self-evident” not because they are in fact logically self-evident, nor even because they are logically required to make sense of our political experiences. We call them self-evident because people who deny them seem so strange to us that we do not know how to argue with them, or what kind of thing will be telling to them, or even what kind of thing they can be counted upon not to do because it will seem to be beneath them. Opinion in this sense is a marker of identity, of membership in a particular culture, a sign that one has standing to judge. But opinion is more than this: it is not merely the way one can differentiate the in group from the out group, it is also the way the in group shapes for itself a sense of its reason for being.

How does this concept of opinion differ from the more commonly available concept of ideology? The difference is that opinion is subject to the review of reflective equilibrium, and ideology is not. Because it is subject to reflective equilibrium, opinion is an instrument of freedom, while ideology is not. Opinion provides occasion for moral autonomy; ideology by nature is compulsive and provides only occasions for moral heteronomy. Ideology forecloses the review of reason; opinion humanizes that review, and keeps us from becoming rational monsters like Swift’s Houynhnhnms and Laputans. Opinion, particularly when embodied in institutions which require (and are the fruit of) a long tradition of circumspect deliberation, is what keeps passionate needs and desires, and even passionate convictions about
matters of ultimate value, from becoming the intoxicants which move us to kill in their name to prove that we are not already inwardly dead.

The most potent kinds of intoxicating popular sovereignty are after all not those which arise out of desire and interest but those which arise out of an angry love of justice. But an angry love of justice is finally not all that different from an urgent but unjust desire, and the Crusader morality which can ride down anything that stands between it and God is not in practice terribly different from the most amoral kinds of will to power. The crucial distinction is not between those who claim to be motivated by interest and those who claim to be motivated by values, but between those who unfold their values and interests in circumspect acts of reasoned engagement with people of different views and those for whom their motivations reduce to imperative compulsions, whether moral or not, by which they are driven and dehumanized.

Lincoln introduces two further detailed discussions of mob violence to make this point. Like the Lovejoy case, both of these cases turn on issues of slavery and race. Lincoln’s first description of the St. Louis burning case is particularly stark:

Turn, then, to that horror-striking scene at St. Louis. A single victim was only sacrificed there. His story is very short; and is, perhaps, the most highly tragic, of any thing of its length, that has ever been witnessed in real life. A mulatto man, by the name of McIntosh, was seized in the street, dragged to the suburbs of the city, chained to a tree, and actually burned to death; and all within a single hour from the time he had been a freeman, attending to his own business, and at peace with the world.

The last few sentences give the impression that the victim had been seized at random by an enraged mob. Indeed, the depiction of him as “a freeman” and “at peace with the world,” imply that the story Lincoln intends to tell is one of pure victimization. The case was in fact a well known one, alluded to also by Horace Bushnell of Hartford in a letter to Henry Clay, in which he, too, uses it as an example of the increasing threat to society posed by mob rule. But Lincoln goes on to elaborate the case in such a way as to make it clear that the horror of it is not a function of the innocence of the victim but of the extralegality of the act.

He had forfeited his life, by the perpetration of an outrageous murder, upon one of the most worthy and respectable citizens of the city; and had he not died as he did, he must have died by the sentence of the law, in a very short time afterwards. As to him alone, is was as well the way it was.

What offends Lincoln is that it is only by accident that the right person was lynched, for enraged mobs, who will as likely visit upon Clara Petacci the same
punishment they visit upon Benito Mussolini, are not to be expected to render fine
discriminations of guilt.

Contempt for the forms of justice is finally contempt for moral autonomy, because
it is only the deliberative machinery of justice which enables one to distinguish
between actual justice and a rage for justice that is all too often driven by some
other urgency. Without deliberation, the rage for justice is indistinguishable from
any other impulse, and is no more deserving of respect than any other impulse.

Still more startling is Lincoln’s treatment of the Vicksburg lynching case:

In the Mississippi case, they first commenced by hanging the regular
gamblers: a set of men, certainly not following for a livelihood, a very
useful, or very honest occupation; but one which, so far from being
forbidden by the laws, was actually licensed by an act of the Legislature,
passed but a single year before. Next, negroes, suspected of conspiring to
raise an insurrection, were caught up and hanged in all parts of the State:
then, white men, supposed to be leagued with the negroes; and finally,
strangers, from neighboring States, going thither on business, were, in
many instances, subjected to the same fate. Thus went on this process of
hanging, from gamblers to negroes, from negroes to white citizens, and
from these to strangers; till, dead men were seen literally dangling from
the boughs of the trees upon every road side; and in numbers almost
sufficient, to rival the native Spanish moss of the country, as a drapery
of the forest.

Lincoln is referring here to the famous Madison County slave insurrection hyste-
ria of July, 1835. The case was widely reported in the newspapers at the time, and
the citizens of Livingston, Mississippi, the county seat, were angry enough about the
bad press to publish a pamphlet exculpating themselves by adopting the common
later southern strategy of blaming the whole thing on northern agitators. Lincoln
has some of the details mixed up. That bumptious madman Senator Henry Foote,
who was there, describes the lynching of the gamblers as among the later conse-
quences of the hysteria rather than as among the first incidents of it. (The recent
historical literature about the hysteria doesn’t mention the lynching of the gamblers
at all.)

Briefly, the facts—a grim weird story that even Garcia Marquez could not do
justice to but which William Freehling has recently retold—are these. In late June,
1835, rumors of an impending slave insurrection, set for July 4, began surfacing
among the slaves of one Mrs. Latham, of Beatie’s Bluff. Assiduous beating induced
Mrs. Latham’s slaves to implicate Peter, a slave of a master named Ruel Blake,
of Livingston. Blake’s lack of enthusiasm about whipping Peter focused the vigi-
lance committee’s suspicion on himself, and other slaves were induced not only to
implicate Blake, but to claim that his misgivings about slavery induced him to or-
ganize the conspiracy in the first place (and to promise the favors of white women
to any male slaves who would join him). They also implicated two itinerant quacks,
“Thompsonian Doctors,” Dr. Joshua Cotton and Dr. William Saunders, who im-
plicated each other (and Blake) in the vain hope of saving their own necks. Their
testimony was important, because Blake could not be hung merely on the testimony of slaves. On the scaffold, Blake freed his slaves (which gave color to the mob’s suspicions about him). Six more slaves were hung, who, under torture, provided exactly the lurid testimony the mob sought. Cotton, bargaining for time on the scaffold, claimed that the slave insurrection had actually been organized by the famous Natchez Trace bandit John Murrell. Murrell was in fact in jail then, but his jailer, one Stewart, had published a book claiming that Murrell had planned to lead a slave insurrection to take place on Christmas Day, 1835. Foote thinks that it was Stewart’s book that started the whole thing, and he was the defense attorney for Murrell’s alleged co-conspirator, the bandit Alonzo Phelps. (Readers of Eudora Welty’s stories may recognize some of these names.) By this time suspicion focused on white men who lived with black women (especially with black women who were not their own slaves) and on masters with a reputation for leniency.

All told, some half dozen whites and a dozen blacks were killed in Madison County, although there were other effects all over the state, and many other persons where “whipped from the locality.” It all ended when the militia of Madison County, enraged that a Hinds County planter named Patrick Sharkey had released two young men named Rawson from their tender care, mounted an attack across the county line to seize Sharkey. This was enough for Hinds County, whose militia fought a pitched battle with their Madison County opposites, and for the state (Sharkey’s brother was a judge of the Supreme Court), which finally put a stop to the whole thing.

What strikes Lincoln about the Madison County hysteria is the rapidity with which it changes its object. The best modern students of the event, Laurence Shore and Christopher Morris, attempt in their accounts to provide a rationale for why certain parties came under suspicion at certain times. But it is the nature of historical accounts like theirs to be retrospective, and to treat plausible retrospects as if they had almost the force of necessity. It is hard, however, to see how anyone in the thick of the event could have seen any inevitability in how it unfolded. Indeed, what is frightening about this or any other hysteria is the rapidity with which it overruns even the most powerful ideological agenda which may have operated upon it.

That popular passions turn in unexpected directions is one of the first lessons about them. Think for instance how often class antagonisms erupt and are transformed into racial antagonisms—as in New York in 1863. Or think of the reverse, as in Madison County, where the vigilance committees were suspicious of masters with too much noblesse oblige. The enraged people, ignited by a passion for justice, do not merely desire unjust things or avail themselves of unjust means. They lose the ability to control or even to choose what they want—they become people possessed by an endlessly changing and endlessly self-overthrowing elán. This is one reason why popular movements are so notoriously difficult to negotiate with: the movement does not so much want its ostensible objects so much as it wants to run its course to exhaustion. This is also the reason why revolutions so often, in Arendt’s phrase, eat their children, for the revolutionaries who are destroyed by the revolution they initiated make the mistake of assuming that the revolution is about the concrete
aims they entertained when they set it in motion, and thus they are placed in a vulnerable position when those aims are swamped.

Lincoln’s consciousness of revolutionary *amor fati* separates his account of mob violence and tyranny from other nineteenth century accounts. For if the traditional account sees the tyrant as an interested man who stirs up popular rage for some end, and sees the mob also as if it entertained a concrete aim, Lincoln’s tyrant, like the modern totalitarian and unlike the classical Caesar, has no interests apart from passion itself; passion is the end, not part of the means. What else could Lincoln mean when he says that the tyrant will seek distinction, whether at the price of emancipating slaves (like an idealist tyrant, a Lenin), or enslaving freemen (like a cynical tyrant, a Louis Napoleon)? Lincoln’s tyrant is not a republican Caesar, who uses the people’s feelings to destroy popular government and to secure position for himself. He is not even particularly interested in power in the ordinary sense of that word, since power is always the power to do something, and what he wants is not so much to do something as to be always doing, to restlessly follow a kind of vital energy through its endless self-overthrowings.9

The reason popular passions turn in unexpected directions is clear when one reflects upon the unconscious despair that underlies them, for the aim of the passion is less important than its intensity. Quotidian politics in secular societies leads to despair because it provides no occasion for strong feeling. Or rather, what the despairing person—whether the tyrant or the lyncher—laments is the lack of strong feeling. But the despairing person does not know the cause of that lack, which is that he has no object morally worthy of strong feelings. Therefore he looks for feelings rather than for things that are worthy of feelings, and seeks stronger and stronger occasions for feeling the way a jaded appetite seeks more and more strongly spiced cuisines. The despairing person turns to politics in search of a circus of feeling. And the more extreme the feeling the better chance it has—for a minute at least—of holding off the deadness of a life without purpose.

When the lyncher rises above the despair of quotidian politics, he feels that he rises above fate by loving fate. That seems to him like freedom. Like those who lay down their lives for the pseudo-God History, the lyncher seeks to maintain the distinction between finding one’s destiny, and so transcending it, and being driven by destiny, and so becoming its fool. Aware that he has been caught up in something larger than himself, something to which he himself is nothing, he sees others as nothing as well. But both of those reductions to nothing seem to him to be the price of a kind of greatness, and his sacrifice of freedom to impulse seems to him like a kind of self-discovery, an awed beholding of a Big Dark Force which will give him meaning at the price of life. He sees it as an act of freedom to throw himself and others down before necessity. This is why the sacrifice of life and freedom seems worth it to him, why he is not daunted even by the frank amorality of his act, for the amorality of the act is a testimony to his own seriousness about it, a kind of measure of just how far he is willing to go.

It is this love of the abyss which links the Crusader, who sacrifices everything to a transcendental ideal, with the Nihilist, who believes that there is no ultimate reality but force, and yet also believes that that force has grandeur and beauty.
For the nihilist, whether lyncher or tyrant, will, in Nietzsche’s phrase, accept the void as purpose rather than be void of purpose, and his eagerness to do this is the sign of a soured and unacknowledged idealism. In seeing greatness only as power the nihilist enjoys to the full both the satisfactions of an idealism he never has to subject to reflective scrutiny (because he never acknowledges it as idealism) and the satisfactions of a thoroughly unearned claim to superior realism. Later generations will single out this unearned claim to a superior realism as one of the characteristic brutalities of our era.

The tyrant and the lyncher are enthralled by force because it seems to them to be the expression of freedom and the arena of grandeur. But it’s worth wondering just how grand and free either of these people are. It’s clear in the first place that the claim to superior realism made by such persons is an illusion, although one of the more powerful illusions of our time, because such persons never demonstrate the values—the tender sadness about human limitation, the stoic generosity towards the weak and the fallen, the circumspection about their own temptations—which we would expect would follow from realism. Nor, if their own driven acts are any testimony, can we give much credibility to the claim to a superior freedom made by frank adherents of the will to power.

What Lincoln offers as an antidote to the destructiveness of the desire for heroic action, whether entertained by the tyrant or by the lyncher, looks at first like nothing more than repressive conformism:

The question then recurs “how shall we fortify against it?” The answer is simple. Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others., As the patriots of seventy-six did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and Laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor;—let every man remember that to violate the law, is to trample on the blood of his father, and to tear the character of his own, and his children’s liberty. Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap—let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in Primmers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;—let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.

Is the idea here that Americans are to be so indoctrinated with filial piety that they never are tempted by heroic virtues? Is the safety of the republic to be entrusted
to the thought-controlling power of the state’s cultural apparatus to blunt ambitions so that no person with enough character to threaten the republic may arise within it? But one can only see it this way if one thinks of law as a kind of limitation—as a restraint put upon the strong by the weak, as a reluctant sacrifice of our powers which we make in order to avoid being killed by each other. But this Lockean vision of law is not precisely Lincoln’s, (although he does not elaborate an alternative here) for Lincoln does not see the law as a list of things people have to give up in order to have hope of getting along; he sees the law as the instrument by which we shape a specifically human form of public life.

If the aim of the law were only to keep the tyrant in check, Lincoln would be asking for a world which dulls all of the excellences of political life. To dull the passion for greatness, or to divert it towards some harmless because trivial aim, would be not only to devise a cure worse than the disease, but even to risk a worse outbreak of that disease, since it does not answer the alienation and despair that give rise to the lyncher and the tyrant to divert their energies in even more alienating and despairing directions. The only cure for tyranny is to demonstrate that it is self-thwarting. One does not seek to clip the wings of the eagle but to find that work which is truly the work of eagles. Lincoln does not discover that work in the Lyceum Speech, and for that reason adherence to law sounds like a small thing. The only way to discover that work is to demonstrate that tyrannical power is not a goal worthy of genius, and that the highest public task is not tyranny but a passionate apprehension into an order of communal values—not merely into what we happen to honor, but into what our purpose is in living together, into some end that we are incompetent to do justice to alone.

The most striking fact about the worship of power is its futility, and no person experiences that futility in a more pointed way than the tyrant Lincoln describes in the Lyceum speech. When Lincoln proclaims in the 1854 Peoria speech that “as I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master,” one of the things he recognizes is the corrosive effect of mastery on the political personality. It isn’t only that being a master accustoms one to doing things that one should not do in free societies (as Jefferson had also argued); it is that the desire for mastership itself causes one to sacrifice the only things worth being master of. For the master as Lincoln, no less than Hegel, describes him, is a slave to the adulation of the most insignificant of the people he dominates, and must work continuously to extort the adulation of those whose praise is worth nothing anyway, since if it is extorted praise it isn’t praise at all, and if it is genuine praise it is foolishly given, and thus worth nothing as praise.

There is no greatness which does not depend upon winning the considered allegiance of others whose agency is as real as one’s own. Because law breaks the tyranny of the strong, we think of it as winning freedom for the weak. But law wins freedom for the strong as well, for it frees the strong from the futility of their strength, which seeks to compel what compulsion always destroys.

We respect law not because it gives us what we desire, but because it enables us to discover the most worthy objects of desire. In assenting to law we assent to the possibility that we are more than the immediately desiring self, tangled in the metabolism of nature, in futility.
To say that politics cannot survive under conditions where people believe that force is at its center is to say that politics cannot survive unless law serves a teleology, a vision of the proper ends of human life. But to say this is to say that there can be no freedom in a perfectly secular culture, for such cultures cannot conceive of moral engagements among people, seeing people as they do as creatures of money, power, and sex. This was precisely Tocqueville’s view, who felt that no republic in which money counts but faith does not could long retain its freedom.

For my part, I doubt whether man can support complete religious independence and entire political liberty at the same time. I am led to think that if he has no faith he must obey, and if he is free he must believe.

Lincoln does not go this far in the Lyceum Speech, but his position is flawed in ways he does not fully understand until the period of the Second Inaugural, where he essentially takes Tocqueville’s view of the matter. In the Lyceum Speech, Lincoln develops only a theory of restraint, and although there can be heroism in restraint (*Paradise Regained* is about it), Lincoln’s language about reason seems to treat it as something that curbs heroism rather than transforms it, and it is hard not to feel that there is something drab in his depiction:

Passion has helped us; but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy. Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence. Let those materials be moulded in *general intelligence, sound morality* and, in particular, *a reverence for the constitution and laws*; and, that we improved to the last; that we remained free to the last; that we revered his name to the last; that, during his long sleep, we permitted no hostile foot to pass over or desecrate his resting place; shall be that which to learn the last trump shall awaken our WASHINGTON. [emphasis Lincoln’s]

Reason is thin, sober, and above all safe. Lincoln praises it for the plainness and seriousness of its manner, much in the way we have traditionally praised the rhetoric of Lincoln’s own later speeches. Lincoln uses here the kind of language Freud will use when describing the Reality Principle. But Lincoln also describes reason as cold and calculating, as a Mr. Blifil among the faculties, and certainly the slightly jarring tone of those words indicates a not fully acknowledged disappointment that that is all political life comes down to.¹⁰

The end of the passage is stranger still: if we properly revere reason, when George Washington is awakened by the last trumpet and wants to know how we turned out, he will learn good things about us. The invocation of Washington here is more than merely a way of calling down a pious blessing on the end of a patriotic speech. For one of the traditional things one praises Washington for is not only for his refusal of a crown, but for his refusal in more general ways to
be the Man on Horseback. Washington is praised here for initiating the tradition of refusing to employ the charisma of military glory to subvert civilian politics, a tradition carried on by a succession of military presidents from Harrison and Taylor to Eisenhower, whose studied drabness has had much to do with the difficulty Americans have in imagining their country under the spell of a Napoleon. (Lincoln is indirectly making a pointed exception of Jackson. But even the old hero, although he bent and tarnished American institutions a bit, was scarcely the kind of dictator Washington could have been had he chosen to.) Washington is praised here for his wisdom in resisting the temptation to heroism that Lincoln described in the figure of “towering genius.” Is that restraint itself a kind of genius? Nothing in Lincoln’s explicit language about law as the “political religion” or reason as “cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason” suggests that it is. But why have Washington awakened by the last trumpet to learn this unless his restraint is heroic? And why invest in law so passionately if it isn’t finally an insight into the purpose of being human, into the kingdom of ends?

The key, I think, is that the vision of law that Lincoln entertains here is finally not secular, not classical, but religious and romantic. The secular freedom of the classical republic is very different from that established in the United States since the 1860’s. Classical freedom depended upon the distinction between the oikos and the polis. The oikos, the world of daily private life, is subject to necessity and destiny. But what freedom the polis enjoys is bought by the oikos’ subjection to destiny. Only by being freed from destiny are those with membership in the polis made equal to each other. Only by being freed from destiny are they freed to pursue ends beyond the metabolism of nature. (This is as much the Southern as the Athenian vision of freedom: “We have the freedom to create culture because the labor of others has freed us to do so.”) This kind of freedom depends absolutely upon subjection and inequality, as people like George Fitzhugh and J. H. Hammond (the author of the “Mud-sill Speech”) knew. And as Nietzsche did also. The relation of this kind of freedom to subjection has been elaborated recently in different ways by Edmund Morgan, by Drew Faust, by Orlando Patterson, and by Eugene Genovese. Under this view of freedom it is nonsense to say, as we sometimes want to, that slavery is somehow contradictory to freedom, because slavery is the price of it, whether chattel slavery or capitalist “wage-slavery.”

In America this kind of republicanism freedom has a close connection with racism, because only racism freed the poor white from servitude in the oikos and enabled him to enter (in however small a way) into the polis. This is why the nineteenth century poor white was the great champion of what George Frederickson called herrenvolk democracy. It is also why the bourbon white, who did not care about whether the poor white had entry into the polis or not, was less invested in racism, at least to the extent of seeing in it just one of the many forms of inequality and subjection which were the price of his own freedom. Not only could the bourbon white afford a less virulent racism, because his position was more secure, but also a patronage-and-deference style of racism (such as Genovese describes) confirms his status as a patron, as a race-hatred style of racism would undermine it.

What saved American culture in the nineteenth century from the reprehensible
aspects of republicanism is a notion of the immortality of the soul. (I don’t know what saves it now, or whether it is saved at all.) Although they understood that inwardness in different ways, nineteenth century idealists from Thoreau to Stowe argued that it is only the notion of the irreducibility of the inwardness of individuals as the seat of moral agency and the bearer of the spiritual challenge all souls face when confronted with the ultimate questions that demands that we treat each other as moral equals. Respect for the inwardness of individual arises from the recognition that we discover our calling only in engagement with others to whom we are morally bound. The inwardness of others is valuable not only because it is a creation of the divine, but also because it is only through persuasive engagement with others, who are always larger than our accounts of them are and thus cannot be reduced to their roles in our own inner dramas, that we grope towards a moral reality in which we might not always be the prisoners of our desires and illusions, and discover values that are not in oblique ways self-serving and self-deluding. It is only the concept of the soul as the integer of politics which renders the difference between propertied and unpropertied, black and white, male and female, gay and straight, a scandal when made the basis of political life. Republicanism alone would not be scandalized by such discriminations, and under some circumstances would even depend upon them.

Lincoln’s later role as a liberator is only intelligible if it is seen as a prophetic intervention, like that of Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau, in behalf of a transcendental humanity. The style of liberalism he represents is a style that has ultimate concerns but sees—as Milton does—respect for the transcendence of the transcendental as a guarantee against using those concerns in the repressive way often associated with ultimate concerns. Idealist liberalism springs from a vision of human being as subject to an always intimate but always unfathomable inward pressure of the divine, and its attraction to tolerance and equality arises not from skepticism but from a desire to remain true to the unfathomability of the source of its convictions. When Milton argued for freedom of the press in the *Areopagitica* he did it not as a kind of second-best solution, to put an end to religious war, but as a first best way of testifying to the transcendence of the divine: when we become forcers of conscience we must see our own beliefs with a kind of rigidity which transforms them into idolatries rather than into beliefs. The divine may not be utterly unknown to me. But it is always larger than my claims about it, and if I use those claims as a basis for compulsion I corrupt my relation to it.

Few passages capture this spirit better than a passage Lincoln wrote to himself in September, 1862, when, groping to do the right as he saw it, and puzzled by the repeated failures of his cause, he came to the conclusion that whatever the divine purpose is, it is something nobody has the right to claim that he has in his own pocket, yet at the same time nothing matters so much as that purpose, inscrutable as it always is:

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be wrong. God cannot be *for*, and *against* the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God’s purpose is
something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.

Notes

1See also Anderson (Anderson, 1982) and Forgie ( Forgrie, 1979).
2That said, it must be conceded that certainly Lincoln’s contemporary thrust is indeed directed against Jackson and is in the mainstream of Whig rhetoric. See the persuasive cases made by Fredrickson, Fehrenbacher, and Schwartz. The best treatment of the intellectual and political cast of mind of Whigs like Lincoln remains Howe’s The Political Culture of the American Whigs.
3Diamond describes this culture in Horwitz, The Moral Foundations of the American Republic
4I have in mind not only the specific case of Eichmann in Eichmann in Jerusalem, but also the more general vision of what “thinking” is in The Life of the Mind.
5Indeed, in Basler’s edition of Lincoln’s Collected Works the allusion to the Lovejoy murder is the chief thing to be noticed about the Lyceum address.
6The phrase “reflective equilibrium” is taken from Rawls’ A Theory of Justice.
7The Bushnell letter is cited in Howe.
8Foote’s account is in his autobiography, Casket of Reminiscences (1874). Recent accounts of the incident can be found in Freehling, Shore, and Morris.
9My sense of what modern totalitarianism is like derives from Arendt’s The Origins of Totalitarianism.
10Jaffa sees a kind of heroism in the kind of restraint Lincoln describes in the Lyceum speech, and describes for Lincoln’s career a heroic role as the restrainer of tyranny. I am persuaded by, and hugely in debt to, Jaffa’s argument, and certainly his view of Lincoln’s career as a whole is very close to mine. But Lincoln makes the case for heroic restraint very poorly in the Lyceum Speech, and if there were no Second Inaugural Address nobody would think of the restraint described in the Lyceum speech as anything but commonplace.
11This vision of what classical politics is owes a great deal to Pocock, and also to Alasdair MacIntyre, although neither would find this argument sympathetic.

References


