

REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS:Rediscovering Lincoln the Writer

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Feature Essay

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Madden, David *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS:Rediscovering Lincoln the Writer.*

Abraham Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer

By Fred Kaplan

New York: HarperCollins, 2008.

Among the many titles and sub-titles of biographies of Lincoln, Fred Kaplan's *Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer*, serves to remind us that Lincoln was a writer. In my column this time, I am not rediscovering a classic, I am calling attention to a new book in which Kaplan, author of biographies of Twain, Carlyle, James, Dickens, and Vidal, rediscovers the classic works of Lincoln.

Take a look at Kaplan's very first two pages. Lincoln's "increasing skill" in his use of words "during his lifetime, and his high valuation of their power, mark him as the one president who was both a national leader and a genius with language at a time when its power and integrity mattered more than it does today. His was a personality and a career forged in the crucible of language." Kaplan writes, "He struggled to find the conjunction between the right words and honest expression, a use of language that respects intellect, truth, and sincerity...." that "has largely been abandoned" by presidents since Theodore Roosevelt.

Too many present day historians and biographers write to a formula that is maddeningly common for the readers of a good many of them and in a style that sounds interchangeable (one exception that I have recently discovered is Allen Guelzo). One has numerous reasons for saying the same thing about the far less readable literary critics of the past twenty or so years. Unfortunately, what Kaplan has left for others to do more fully, typical literary critics of our time cannot or will not do, what the New Critics—Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, R. P. Blackmur, and others—could have done quite naturally.

Kaplan often sees Lincoln the poet, inspired by poets, writing passages that deserve to be lined as poetry. In a passage on “the beauty and excitement of agricultural plenitude,” he hears “the tone of Walt Whitman,” whose poetry Lincoln read often. While I am dead serious about the need for a study of Lincoln as a writer that is more literary than descriptive, I declare that an almost equally great need is for an anthology of passages from Lincoln writings that are lined as poetry, such as was done with passages from Thomas Wolfe in *The Face of a Nation* (1939).

I am eager to stress that Lincoln was a poet, even in his lesser-known passages, such as this one (“poetically evocative and intellectually vivid,” says Kaplan) from his 1848 essay on Niagara Falls. I have lined the passage as a poem.

NIAGARA FALLS NOW AND FOREVER

But still there is more.

It calls up the indefinite past.

When Columbus first sought this continent—

when Christ suffered on the cross—

when Moses led Israel through the Red-Sea—

nay, even when Adam first came

from the hand of his Maker—

then as now, Niagara was roaring here.

The eyes of that species of extinct giants,

whose bones filled the mounds of America,

have gazed on Niagara, as ours do now.

Contemporary with the whole race of men,

and older than the first man, Niagara
is strong, and fresh to-day
as ten thousand years ago.
The Mammoth and Mastodon—
now so long dead, that fragments
of their monstrous bones, alone testify,
that they ever lived, have gazed on Niagara.
In that long—long time,
never still for a single moment.
Never dried, never froze,
never slept, never rested,

There, suspended on a comma, Lincoln deliberately left the passage--leaving Niagara, American natural wonder, hovering, as his spirit hovers over Americans.

Kaplan's usual method is to create a biographical and historical context within which to quote a passage, then paraphrase its meaning, or vice versa, as on the final page where he deals with Lincoln's last speech (with John Wilkes Booth listening), "With malice toward none...." Kaplan's approach is unique. While narrating the events of Lincoln's life in full, he focuses as fully and as often as he can at any given point upon the reading that influenced Lincoln.

His readers, including myself as reviewer, should hold in mind the fact that Kaplan announces his book as a biography of a writer, not a literary analysis of a writer. Even so, sometimes the narrative of events distracts from the continuity of Lincoln's reading experiences and the descriptions of Lincoln's writings (including speeches, of course). And Kaplan follows the convention in regular biographies of fulfilling a sense of obligation to tell the national story as it

progresses with and enhances the personal story, with the effect that the subject himself is sidelined to accommodate exposition. Most often describing the theme and content and practical purpose of a passage, Kaplan seldom takes hold and shows what makes Lincoln not just a writer, but an excellent one.

Writing in a style that is an expression of a penetrating intellect, of narrative acumen, and of a lyrical sensibility, Kaplan has laid a sturdy foundation for the next major study of Lincoln's writings. Ideally, the author of such a study would be more like a New Critic than the scholars most of whom have carried theme-mongering to such an extreme as to leave aesthetics in a literary ghetto, and he or she would also best be a poet as well. That writer would also do everything that Kaplan the biographer has done very well in narrative, but in far less detail. Poetic analysis of Lincoln's prose would set up for each passage examined the biographical-political narrative context, the specific audience for the written or spoken words, of which Lincoln was uncommonly aware; and it would cite works by poets, playwrights, biographers, and the Bible that directly or indirectly affected the passage being examined. The analysis would draw upon the full and rich range of prosody, rhetoric, and the literary art of prose.

An earlier study of Lincoln's style, Douglas L. Wilson's *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words*, winner of the Lincoln Prize (Vintage, 2007), came near to being such a study. One was actually done in 1900 by Daniel Kilham Dodge, *Abraham Lincoln: The Evolution of His Literary Style* (reprinted by University of Illinois Press, 1999). Sixty years later, Herbert J. Edwards and John E. Hankins published *Lincoln the Writer: The Development of His Literary Style* (University Press of Maine), a thin paperback of only 107 pages of text.

Edwards and Hankins agree with Kaplan and many others that the Cooper Union speech, the Gettysburg Address, and the Second Inaugural are the greatest works, but they stood on historical quicksand when they included and analyzed Lincoln's response to Mrs. Bixby's letter, failing to note that "beguile" and "assuage" are not Lincolnesque in diction, not yet knowing what has been discovered since, that Lincoln did not write it and that Mrs. Bixby was a fraud.

They note that in centuries past, Sir Philip Sidney in *Defence of Poesie* and William Hazlitt in *On Poetry in General* were already arguing that some great prose is the creation of a poetic imagination and sensibility and should be valued as prose-poems of high quality. Carl Sandburg declared that the Gettysburg

Address is “the great American poem.” Even Alexander H. Stephens, Vice-President of the Confederacy was so impressed by the elevated poetic quality of the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural that he said, “The Union with Lincoln rose in sentiment to the sublimity of a religious mysticism.” Edwards and Hankins sum up with “...the fiery crucible that finally fused his genius for logic and his genius for poetry and gave to the world his imperishable works of literature was the terrible events of his last years.” Kaplan says eloquently much the same, but I like that passage.

After the death of Ann Rutledge, Lincoln was seen to behave and to speak in a Byronic mode. “Lincoln’s love for Ann Rutledge had expressed and even expanded his capability for Romantic absorption and intensity.” Like Edwards and Hankins before him, Kaplan cites and quotes literary influences upon Lincoln, from childhood on, from textbooks and inspirational readers to the Bible, Shakespeare, Burns, Byron, Bunyan, Cowper, Thomas Gray, Milton, Defoe, Wordsworth, Weems’s biography of Washington, and Henry Clay’s speeches. But neither does sufficient justice to affinities between Lincoln and Whitman, whose poetry, several recent books have shown, Lincoln read repeatedly. Kaplan does note similarities in tone, but don’t they share a similar grand or epic poetic vision of America, democracy, and “the common man”? Reading Kaplan, one sees how Lincoln’s reading and his speaking enhanced his writing, lines and phrases from which people sometimes attribute to the Bible and Shakespeare.

Edwards and Hankins go fairly deeply into what Kaplan seldom delves into. Doing close analysis of Lincoln’s prose-poetry, they give numerous examples of his choice of the most effective word, Latinate or Anglo-Saxon, of repetition of key words and phrases (“we can not”), parallel adverbs (“nobly save, or meanly lose.”), alliteration (“dead—devotion...dead—dead...bind—bore—battle), actual rhyme, of allusions and direct quotations of phrases, of imagery, of the device of deliberate ambiguity, of rhythm, of the interaction and effect of denotative and connotative words, of melodious phrases, and of revisions that made great and small differences (“perished out of the earth” becomes “perish from the earth”). To demonstrate rhythmic effects, more as if spoken than literary, in Lincoln’s works, they line famous passages as poems, italicizing metric patterns. They end by quoting Buffon’s line, “Style is the man himself.” Kaplan’s biography of a writer proceeds out of that definition, but does not illustrate it fully enough.

Even so, Edwards's and Hankins's analysis does not draw upon all the aesthetic possibilities, does not create fully enough the rich context I envisioned above. Kaplan performs a service in making a case for Lincoln's poetry, such as "My Childhood Home":

My childhood's home I see again,
And sadden with the view;
And still, as memory crowds my brain,
There's pleasure in it too.
O Memory! Thou midway world
'Twixt earth and paradise,
Where things decayed and loved ones lost
In dream shadow rise...

He continues with "Memory will hallow all/ We've known, but know no more."

"The command of literary models and of language that enabled him to write these credible poems in 1846 were inseparable from his command of language as a prose writer." Again, another book employing more extensively the terms of prosody in close reading of Lincoln's poems would be another kind of service, one Kaplan renders only sparsely.

Kaplan's generalizations are excellent. "Like Emerson, he had the gift of aphoristic vividness in arranging linguistic tropes into effective combinations and shifting viewpoints." But he is not overbearingly worshipful, especially in ten pages of his last chapter, in which he criticizes Lincoln for aspects of the development and implementation of some of his ideas. It struck me as odd, by the way, that only 61 pages out of 356 are devoted to "The Master of Language and the Presidency, 1861-1865," and that in that chapter, Kaplan quotes fewer passages than earlier. In those pages, however, the effectiveness of Kaplan's own excellent style comes into play more often.

Reading his essays, especially those of the 1850's, one may enjoy Lincoln's satirical tone. Young America, he says, "owns a large part of the world, by right of possessing it; and all the rest by right of wanting it, and intending to have it."

Lincoln settled into a style more like that of this line: "In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free—honoring alike in what we give, and what we preserve." Had Lincoln not written to Horace Greeley the following passage we might be less able to follow the phases of his approach to the question of freeing the slaves: "If I could save the union without freeing any slave, I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that."

Kaplan deals only slightly with Lincoln's attitude about a not yet "enslaved" population within the Union, the Native Americans. He declared that the existence of an "Indian" nation and a United States nation on the same expanse of land was as incompatible as two very different families living in the same house. A stylistic analysis of his writings would reveal more than does a paraphrase of the direct meaning of what Lincoln said and wrote on that subject.

In revision, "The changes transformed the adequate to the brilliant." Lincoln changed "The mystic chords which proceeding from so many battlefields" to "The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field..." He changed "guardian angel of the nation" to "the better angels of our nature." Among his most memorable phrases, those changes alone raised his first inaugural address to the level of greatness.

Ever since awareness of the upcoming Lincoln birthday dawned a few years, one might have noticed the almost daily allusions to and quotations from Lincoln in the media, not only to enhance a point being made, but in the spirit of Kaplan's mission, to share the President's speaking and writing style. Recently, columnist Rich Lowry quoted Lincoln, "We live in the midst of alarms; anxiety beclouds the future; we expect some new disaster with each newspaper we read." In a folksier vein, "If there is a worse place than hell, I am in it." Without enthraling ourselves, we would all do well in expressing ourselves to do as so many columnists are doing—keep before us as an example Lincoln's style.

Just as I am more mindful of my own style in writing about Kaplan's study of Lincoln as a writer, Kaplan aspired, one might well imagine, to write very

well himself. And indeed he does that so well on every page.

No president has been as many presidents as President Lincoln. Most American revere the saintly president, some revile the hated president, and in the face of the many facts long known and continuing to be revealed, the mythic president abides. Novelist Gore Vidal, subject of an earlier Kaplan biography, imagined a power hungry president, made lovable even so by the very nature of reading fiction. Fact and fiction, adoration and repulsion matter less finally than the transformative and transcendent power of the collective American consciousness that has for 150 years imagined and pursued a democratic, idealistic vision of a free America, derived from this uniquely myriad image of President Abraham Lincoln.

Chair of the Louisiana Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, David Madden is founding director of the United States Civil War Center and creator of the Civil War Book Review. Novelist, poet, playwright, and author of five books on the Civil War, he is LSU Robert Penn Warren Professor of Creative Writing emeritus. His ninth novel will be published in the fall of 2009.