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Reflections on Lincoln and English Studies

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Prime Minister Gordon Brown concluded a recent tribute to the current American president with these words: “When he speaks, he gives those who hear him confidence: not in him but in themselves. It was said of Cicero that when people heard him, they turned to one another and said, ‘Great speech’; but when Demosthenes spoke, people turned to one another and said, ‘Let’s march.’ All around the world people are marching with Barack Obama.” As is well known, this same president has himself identified with Abraham Lincoln, suggesting he is an ideal rhetorical model, one whose speeches retain both monumental political significance and ongoing literary value.

“I am loth to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature” (Lincoln, “First Inaugural” 224). To understand the rhetorical reasons for Lincoln’s literary greatness, one might begin by comparing this final paragraph of his first inaugural address with Secretary Seward’s original draft. The simple marker—“I close”—becomes the subjectively expressive “I am loth to close.” The parallelism of “We are not, we must not be, aliens or enemies, but fellow countrymen and brethren” becomes a simpler yet more powerful statement followed by reiteration, “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies.” An idea for a musical metaphor appealing to patriotism—“mystic chords” passing through “all the hearts and all the hearths”—becomes a richer figuration—“mystic chords of memory”—expressed more fluidly and rhythmically in its elaboration. And the concluding image of an other-worldly helper, “the guardian angel of the nation,” is brilliantly transformed into a direct appeal to his audience’s own forgotten resources, “the better angels of our nature.”

This first inaugural. The “House Divided” speech. The Cooper Union Address. The Gettysburg Address. For these and other writings, Lincoln has long been included in the canon of American literature. As Brook Thomas recently pointed out, William Dean Howells hailed the “Abraham Lincolnian word” as “American, Western” even before he made his more famous statement naming Mark Twain “the Lincoln of our literature” (qtd. in Thomas 125, 171). After the separation of speech communication from English departments early in the twentieth century,

the golden age of oratory faded from our literary histories and anthologies, but Lincoln's literary rhetoric continued to be praised by literary critics and scholars for its stylistic directness and ideological power. He received a separate chapter in the influential *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1921), and an early volume of *American Literature* included Roy Basler's "Abraham Lincoln's Rhetoric" (1939), analyzing Lincoln's distinctive style with its repetitions, parallelism, antitheses, and dramatic figurative language. The 1948 *Literary History of the United States* (Spiller et al.) asserts that "Lincoln is the one American orator who survives as a literary artist" (Harding, Hunt, and Thorp 555) and includes a chapter on Lincoln by Carl Sandburg, which begins, "There is one man in whose words, spoken and written, the West of vast spaces and the East of many peoples are subsumed under one meaning" (778). More than sixty years later, all the major anthologies of American literature continue to include Lincoln's speeches in the revised canon.

But, as I have already noted, it is not only professional literary historians and rhetorical critics who have recognized Lincoln's skill in the language arts. Admiring him for his words as well as his deeds, President Obama has called Lincoln a master of language and law, citing his second inaugural address and King's "I Have a Dream" speech as memorable examples of effective religious imagery. Obama's most significant comments about Lincoln's use of words are perhaps his remarks on the importance of deliberative rhetoric within a democracy. Praising Lincoln's understanding of the limitations as well as the power of deliberation, Obama writes,

That self-awareness, that humility, led Lincoln to advance his principles through the framework of our democracy, through speeches and debate, through the reasoned arguments that might appeal to the better angels of our nature. It was this same humility that allowed him, once the conversation between North and South broke down and war became inevitable, to resist the temptation to demonize the fathers and sons who did battle on the other side, or to diminish the horror of war, no matter how just it might be. (98)

Obama ends *The Audacity of Hope* with his own rhetorical flourish, as he describes reading the speeches on the Lincoln Memorial, looking out over the Reflecting Pool, "imagining the crowd stilled by Dr. King's mighty cadence," and thinking about the ultimate sacrifices of both Lincoln and King in laying down "their lives in the service of perfecting an imperfect union" (362).

Why should Abraham Lincoln matter to English studies today? Some members of the discipline believe that literature and rhetoric are two distinct types of discourse. Others consider one to be a mere subset of the other. In either case, renewed attention to the literary rhetoric of Lincoln can energize efforts to forge significant bonds between those in our discipline who privilege the study of literature and those who do the same with rhetoric.