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"The Power to Hurt": Lincoln's Early Use of Satire and Invective

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How did Abraham Lincoln become a great speaker and writer? How did he get from doggerel in a copybook to the mastery of the Lincoln- Douglas debates and the speeches of the presidential years? This is an abiding mystery in Lincoln biography, and its obscurity will probably never be dispelled fully.[1] Still, we cannot help wondering, and so we look for early signs of precocity and power in the boy "back home in Indiana" during the 1820s and the young man of the New Salem, Illinois, years from 1831 to 1837. We continue to search and speculate despite few and questionable sources and the itching temptation to historical backfilling. Because the mature Lincoln indubitably was a literary artist, he must have had an apprenticeship. Surely, we hope, the traces of the teenage boy's incipient rhetorical greatness have not entirely been obliterated from the folk memory of the Little Pigeon Creek settlement, while tales of the young man in Illinois might be expected to dramatize Lincoln as the verbal equivalent of a champion frontier wrestler. After all, tradition has made him the one, why not the other? In the West the sports were not that different: Both were forms of "deep play;" violent, no-holds barred, and basic to the male social pecking order¯the more so in locales peopled largely by upland southerners.

Edgar Lee Masters, who knew these people and their folkways as well as anyone, put fighting and stump-speaking together into a delightful and telling metaphor of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, but one that applied to most of western politics before the Civil War: "The debates thus proceeded with Lincoln wrestling, running, dodging under, coming close when there was chance for a tight grip upon Douglas.... His long debating arms fouled Douglas when Douglas was too short armed to come back; and in close quarters he dug his sharp elbows into Douglas's face. "[2]

As a tool of politics, rhetorical skill was an important means to election and party authority. Whether or not Lincoln threw Jack Armstrong in their legendary tussle, the storied man-child of Little Pigeon Creek, New Salem, and Springfield—like an adolescent Jesus astonishing his elders in the Temple—seems from an early age to have bested all corners in storytelling and public debate, including such redoubtable opponents as the Methodist preacher and Democratic politician Peter Cartwright, an Illinois and national legend himself (and more so than Lincoln in the 1830s and 1840s). Thus, when we turn to Nicolay and Hay's *Abraham Lincoln: A History* or Herndon and Weik's *Abraham Lincoln,* the two foundation caissons of Lincoln studies, we not surprisingly find the seeds of the man--of-words myth already sown and germinating.

Consider this bit of appealing hearsay from the early pages of volume one of *Abraham Lincoln: A History:* "It is. . . reported that he sometimes impeded the celerity of

harvest operations by making burlesque speeches, or worse than that, comic sermons, from the top of some tempting stump, to the delight of the hired hands and the exasperation of the farmer."[3] The young Lincoln is given no specific age here, nor is any particular incident or time mentioned. Both language ("impeded the celerity of harvest operations") and props ("from the top of some tempting stump") make it clear that the scene is generic frontier humor: a broad burlesque, full of satire and mimicry, played effectively to an audience of rubes, mildly ridiculing the "establishment" and two of its basic institutions, religion and politics. But because this is a solo performance and Lincoln has no face-to-face opponent, the butt is neither preacher nor politician: It is the proprietor, whose field hands cannot work for laughing ¯and the laughter is very much at his expense.

William H. Herndon, too, thought that Lincoln first developed "the gift of satire" during the late 1820s, his teenage years in Indiana. Moreover, he had the temerity to publish his attacks. According to Herndon's informants, Lincoln "wrote a number of pieces in which he took occasion to lampoon those who provoked in any way his especial displeasure." And he *very* especially detested "the leading family" of the neighborhood, the Grigsbys, into which sister Sarah Lincoln had married in 1826, only to die in childbirth two years after. "Something in the conduct of the Grigsbys," Herndon continues, "and their treatment of his sister gave Abe great offense;' and he sought revenge through writing.[4] This was the origin of the uncanonical "Chronicles of Reuben;' a series of pseudo-biblical prose and verse pieces that are, out of their local Indiana context, so topical as to be neither funny nor comprehensible. Perhaps these few lines from the last of the "Chronicles;' with their nudging and winking to the reader about William Grigsby's dubious sexuality, can elicit a smile when read aloud, although I doubt it:

> Reuben and Charles have married two girls,
> But Billy has married a boy.
> The girls he has tried on every side,
> But none could he get to agree;
> All was in vain, he went home again,
> And since then he's married to Natty.[5]

A callow beginning for a man of words, to be sure—"rude and coarse" is the way Herndon puts it—but nonetheless capable "of bringing public ridicule down on the heads of [Lincoln's] victims." The "Chronicles of Reuben" was his first taste of the social power of literary satire, the exercise of which would in the Illinois years, Herndon thought, become second nature: "These crude rhymes and awkward imitations of scriptural lore demonstrated that their author, if assailed, was merciless in satire. In after years Lincoln, when driven to do so, used this weapon of ridicule with telling effect. He knew its power, and on one occasion, in the rejoinder of a debate, drove his opponent in tears from the platform. "[6]

Herndon alludes to Lincoln's merciless mimicking of Democrat Jesse B. Thomas during the electoral canvass of 1840—"the skinning of Thomas" as it was remembered around Springfield for years after. As Lincoln warmed to the performance, impersonating Thomas "in gesture and voice, at times caricaturing his walk and the very motion of his body;' the crowd roared its approval, gave a thumbs down, and poor Jesse B. Thomas was vanquished from the arena, weeping and politically good as dead.[7] Perhaps most prominent among Lin- coin's many targets of the 1830s and early 1840s was George Forquer, whom Lincoln eviscerated in public in the campaign of 1836. This was not long after Forquer had changed his politics from Whig to Democrat, gaining out of the metamorphosis the emolument of office—not to mention a fine frame house adorned with the first lightning rod Springfield had ever seen.[8] Lincoln, always party-loyal, seems to have

husbanded his contempt for just such turncoats. But on this occasion he was also personally angry. Following Lincoln's initial speech at the rally, Forquer announced to the crowd that "the young man will have to be taken down," the unpleasant duty falling to him, one of Lincoln's betters. In other words, Forquer presumed to be above Lincoln socially and politically, his superior in age and experience and prestige. And he addressed the meeting in a manner, according to Joshua Speed, who was in the audience, that "asserted and claimed" precisely this superiority.

Thus, by the time he rose to answer, Lincoln was mad; he loosed the choke-chain on his prodigious powers of invective and delivered a famous and withering put-down of Forquer that was as figuratively brilliant as it was cruelly ad hominem: "The gentleman has seen fit to allude to my being a young man; but he forgets that I am older in years than I am in the tricks and trades of politicians. I desire to live, and I desire place and distinction; but I would rather die now than, like the gentleman, live to see the day that I would change my politics for an office worth three thousand dollars a year, and then feel compelled to erect a lightning rod to protect a guilty conscience from an offended God."[9]

Breathless from the insolent force of the language, we may miss the "sociolinguistic" subtext of Lincoln's attack. Forquer, as noted, has asserted his superiority—as a man, a politician, and a debater. Lincoln responds by claiming innocence when it comes to political sophistication—the tricks of the trade—although, he admits in a concessive nod, he is naturally as ambitious for "place and distinction" as the next man. Then, in the figure of the lightning rod as deflector of "offended" providence, comes the implication of righteousness, the pose of a young politician not yet fallen and not likely to fall: "I would rather die now," he avers, than act as George Forquer has done. Lincoln's language and syntax, apparently affirming his innocence, under scrutiny deny it. For ad hominem rhetoric so skill-fully employed is both sophistical and demagogic, and this is true even though the story is told so as to make us feel that Forquer deserved what he got—more like a tar-and-feathering than a wrestling pin. Abraham Lincoln, young "infidel" and politician, is preaching a little jeremiad to a community imposed upon by George Forquer, of whom he makes a moral rather than a political example. But it is important to add that the lightning rod story could have been a joke in intent and delivery. We do not know the tone of Lincoln's voice—whether thundering, ironic, or modulated—nor his stage manner, but one would hope that even the righteous Whigs in the crowd could see the humor of a God that gets vengeful over someone's jumping parties.

Lincoln's underdog strategy in debate—putting himself in a putatively invidious position with respect to an opponent and then employing verbal prowess as the social and political equalizer, cutting the other down to what Governor Thomas Ford (who saw and rued this sort of politics daily during the late 1830s and early 1840s) with acerbity called "little big man" size—had begun to emerge even before the Forquer and Thomas "skinnings."[10] In a previously unrecorded letter, published in the November 1, 1834, issue of the *Beardstown Chronicle and Military Land Bounty Advertiser;* Lincoln took on someone more his own measure—Peter Cartwright.[11] Dated "New Salem, Sept. 7th, 1834;" the letter carries the name of "Samuel Hill" (presumably the New Salem "grocery" keeper) and was run as a paid advertisement— "in order," the *Chronicle* editor notes, "to avoid a too frequent recurrence" —and not as a conventional letter to the editor. Douglas Wilson, however, is convinced that it is in fact Lincoln's work, and I accept the attribution.[12]

The Reverend Peter Cartwright, whose religion and politics Lincoln equally detested, was indeed a big man in Sangamon County, a power in the Methodist Episcopal church and in Democratic politics. The Cartwright-Lincoln contest, while

neither so protracted nor so heroic as the thirty-year agon between Lincoln and Douglas, was notable for the ambivalence of each's personal feelings for the other, varying from hot animosity to sentimental affection.[13] During the election of *1832* Lincoln and Cartwright were among thirteen candidates for four seats in the Illinois house of representatives (Cartwright was elected, Lincoln finished eighth).[14] The election occurred less than a year after Lincoln arrived in Sangamon County, where Cartwright had been building a power base for nine years. The men would face off again fourteen years later in the congressional election of *1846,* which Lincoln won handily. But in between, the two men—one rising, the other (at least politically) on his way down—contended for the hearts and minds of the people who lived in and around the triangle described by the towns of Springfield, New Salem, and Pleasant Plains.[15]

Old settlers' reminiscences sometimes speak of Cartwright and Lincoln encounters before 1834, including one as early as the summer of 1830, when Lincoln (not yet residing in New Salem) was breaking prairie on William Butler's farm in Island Grove Township and Cartwright happened by, electioneering for the state legislature: "Lincoln at once engaged in a discussion with him in the cornfield, in which the great Methodist was equally astonished at the close reasoning and the uncouth figure of Mr. Brown's hired hand."[16] This is the story that suggested to me the analogy of Jesus and the Elders, because such a distinction would nicely apply to the young Lincoln, just beyond his majority but authoritatively discoursing "civil religion" with Presiding Elder Cartwright, a tremendous cultural force in central Illinois during the 1820s and 1830s and a nonpareil as man of words. Those who know Cartwright's career will find it hard to imagine his being "astonished" by anyone or anything save the Holy Ghost. Still, Nicolay and Hay's myth-making aside, it is true that the preacher would soon feel the effect of Lincoln's "close reasoning" and the sting of his wit as well.

Lincoln could be death on what he saw as hypocrisy. But the indictment of hypocrites was one of Cartwright's favorite themes too. On August 30, 1834, Cartwright had published a long and rambling letter in the *Sangamo Journal* with the inflated title "The Valley of the Mississippi; or, The Moral Waste, No. 1." The author complained at length about eastern clerics and critics who misrepresented the culture of the "Valley" as irreligious and uncivilized while at the same time sending hordes of seminary-trained missionaries, who begged sustenance from the people only to turn around and slander them in newspapers and magazines published back home. In addition, Cartwright had a more local bone to pick with Ashford Smith, publisher of a Baptist paper called *Pioneer of the Valley of the Mississippi."*[17] Smith had seen a previous letter of Cartwright's in the "Missionary Intelligence" column of the *Christian Advocate and Journal,* the national Methodist weekly published in New York.[18] He evidently inferred from the letter that Cartwright was advocating Methodist teachers for the future common schools of Illinois and so sounded the sectarian alarm.

Addressing "Mr. Smith, or some other scribbler in that paper;' Cartwright flatly denied that he had said he wanted Methodist teachers in Illinois, although he equivocated on the issue of whether common school instruction should be Christian—that is to say, Protestant evangelical Christian—in form and content and taught by Christians.[19] And Cartwright signed off with the possibility that there might be a "Moral Waste, No. 2" should certain elements of the people needed rebuking again: "And if any Editor or individual thinks proper to reply to these hasty remarks, I wish it to be in tangible form, and with a proper name."

When Lincoln did choose to reply, Cartwright got more or less what he demanded:

the "tangible form" of a paid-for letter to the editor and a proper name, although not the *proper* proper name because he wrote in the guise of Samuel Hill. Neither Cartwright's letter nor Lincoln's reply was a campaign document (at least in the ordinary sense of the word) because the election that would send Lincoln to Vandalia as a freshman representative had taken place on August 4, 1834, and Cartwright had not been a candidate.[20] Rather, the debate was a larger cultural one. What should the Illinois common schools teach when they came to be founded? Who should be the teachers, and who determine the governing policy? The importance of the issue may explain why we find Lincoln, the "infidel" and future creator of the American civil religion, siding with the Baptists against Cartwright and his Methodist-Democratic political machine, known as "the militia;' a large bloc of votes that may have numbered as many as four hundred in the early 1830s.[21]

Lincoln's tactics in the Beardstown letter are to quote Cartwright against himself (and out of context) in order to establish the preacher's hypocrisy, then proceed to fell the now-tottering giant with slings and arrows of invective. Admitting that he does not have the *Christian Advocate* letter at hand, Lincoln nonetheless is ready to quote from memory: Cartwright, he recalls, had called "this country"— meaning Sangamon County or perhaps all of central Illinois—"this land of moral desolation;' thus reducing Cartwright's subsequent complaints of eastern slander of the "Valley of the Mississippi" to contradictory cant.[22] The trouble with this is that Cartwright was not referring to central Illinois in his *Christian Advocate* communication, but to Methodist missions under his supervision in the northwestern part of the state—still mostly unsettled and uneasy in the aftermath of the Black Hawk War.[23] As presiding elder for the Quincy District, Cartwright was making a routine and required report to his church on the progress of a mission far away in a "land of moral desolation;' a conventional wording in letters to the "Missionary Intelligence" column. More than half of the document is a tedious recitation of statistics about conversions, and memberships, with the author's appeal for common school teachers occurring in the last third of the letter and as an afterthought on an unrelated topic. When Lincoln says, "I well recollect" that "the whole tenor of [Cartwright's] letter was in perfect unison" with the "moral desolation" phrase, it is simply false and either a deliberate misreading or a failure of memory on Lincoln's part.[24]

At the same time, however, Cartwright made himself vulnerable to Lincoln's attack through the posturing of the "Moral Waste, No. 1" letter. When "Uncle Peter" complains bitterly about eastern preachers mooching off westerners, Lincoln first expresses ironic agreement, employing an ungrammatical but forceful intransitive— "I believe the people in this country are in some degree priest ridden. I also believe. . . that Peter Cartwright bestrides, more than any four men in the northwestern part of the State"—and then moves to the offensive: "He has one of the largest and best improved farms in Sangamon County, with other property in proportion. And how has he got it? Only by contributions he has been able to levy upon and collect from a priest ridden church. It will not do to say he has earned it 'by the sweat of his brow;' for although he may sometimes labor, all know that he spends the greater part of his time in preaching and electioneering."[25]

The insinuation that Cartwright, like some popish prelate of old, had obtained his competency and more on the backs of the Methodist faithful is malicious; the implication that "preaching and electioneering" are not legitimate labor, sarcastic. And both are manifestly untrue. Cartwright's Richland Creek farm prospered, as Lincoln well would have known, from much midnight plowing by the preacher himself after long days on

horseback, and by his wife, sons, and daughters in his absence. And if the circuit preacher should not politic between sermons, why was it proper for the circuit lawyer to do so between cases? Yet Lincoln is implacable: Whatever his "personal" feelings toward the man, there is no doubt that he despises the idea of a preacher-politician. Here are his withering comments on the subject of Cartwright's "Methodist militia": "For a church or community to be priest ridden by a man who will take their money and treat them kindly in return is bad enough in all conscience; but to be ridden by one who is continually exposing them to ridicule by making a public boast of his power to hoodwink them, is insufferable."

Lincoln iterates the phrase "priest ridden" community three times, and he has developed the associated figure hyperbolically by giving readers the spectacle of Cartwright "marching and counter-marching" his militia at election time and caricaturing the leader, frontier- humor style, as bestriding the members, who form a kind of collective Methodist jackass, spurring them whichever way he wants: "Why, this is not only hard riding, but it is riding clear off the track, stumps, logs and black-jack brush, not withstanding."[26]

What should be the punishment for such an outrage? Not mere public rebuke, which Lincoln says has no effect on the likes of Cartwright, whose "superlative hardihood" (read effrontery) knows no bounds. Add the preacher's feeble denial in the "Moral Waste" letter that he ever asked for Methodist teachers in the common schools, and the offense against an outraged community is capital: "I will here venture a legal opinion: if asking for Methodist teachers were a crime of the magnitude of homicide, none of Cartwright's gentlemen of the bar, could be found able, intelligent and learned enough to save *his* neck from the halter—(no insinuations that the said neck ever deserved such a fate.)."[27]

The disclaimer within parentheses was possibly provided by a worried editor. So, deserving or no, Cartwright is, rhetorically, being hung in effigy. And Lincoln leaves him pitifully twisting in the wind: "Poor ghost of ambition! He must have two sets of opinions, one for his religious, and one for his political friends; and to plat them together smoothly, presents a task to which his feverish brain is incompetent.—Let the Advocate letter and the 'Moral Waste, No. 1' be presented to an intelligent stranger, and be told that they are the productions of the same man, and he will be much puzzled to decide whether the auther is greater fool or knave; although he may readily see that he has but few rivals in either capadty."[28]

If Cartwright saw the Beardstown letter—and it is hard to imagine that he did not—I have found no evidence that he replied in print, or that he knew Lincoln to be the ghostwriter behind the name of Samuel Hill. Cartwright did publicly scald Hill in New Salem more than once, and while sitting in front of Hill's New Salem grocery too. As Thomas Gaines Onstot remembered it, Cartwright "would come and sit for hours and laugh and talk about Hill, while Hill stayed indoors. He was describing one day how he viewed Hill's soul. He said he had some doubts whether he had a soul till one day he put a quarter of a dollar on Hill's lips, when his soul came guggling up to get the piece of silver."[29]

The story fits Cartwright's audacity, for he would certainly have retaliated against Hill, given the chance. But without even an approximate date or year Onstot's anecdote cannot be conclusively judged a response to the Hill-Lincoln letter, although John McNamar, another of Herndon's informants on the matter, remembered the incident that way: "Mr. Hill rather innocently I should think, signed the article with his own name and published it and consequently Received the Skinning that old Peter administered in a public speech at Salem shortly after, I think Lincoln must have enjoyed the joke rather Hugely."[30]

Thus, Cartwright became either the butt of one of Lincoln's verbal practical jokes or the first in a line of politically ambitious straw men that he propped up in order to knock down in the name of preserving the republic—or at any rate the local republic of Sangamon County. Although hardly the super-tyrant that Lincoln would soon foresee arising to threaten America's freedom in the Lyceum Address *(that* bugbear was probably a demonized Stephen A. Douglas),[31] Cartwright was a genuinely powerful man of words and political action, about the biggest game around when Lincoln made his home in New Salem late in 1831. To the coming politician of the 1830s, out to improve his aim, Peter Cartwright proved useful for target practice, a lumbering bear to shoot at until he could kill his lion.

During his first two terms as a representative, Lincoln no doubt had numerous chances to speak, but the address to the Illinois house on the state bank (January 11, 1837) was the first of his speeches to be published verbatim. It is notable both for a persistent personal attack on Usher F. Linder (a Democrat from Coles County Linder had introduced resolutions calling for a select house committee to investigate the troubled state bank) and for the sophistical logic and rhetoric Lincoln used to extend his ad hominem and dismantle the opposition's arguments. The two men had traveled curiously parallel paths leading to the house debating floor that winter day in Vandalia. Linder was born on March 20, 1809, in Hardin County, Kentucky, a little more than a month after Lincoln and scarcely ten miles from the Lincoln homestead. He came to Illinois in 1835, settling in Coles County, whither the Lincolns had removed (from Indiana) five years earlier. Linder, also a lawyer, first met Lincoln in Charleston in the fall of 1835 when the latter was "on a visit to his relations in Coles."[32] Linder was unimpressed by what he saw—"at that time a very modest and retiring man, dressed in a plain suit of mixed jeans. . . . If Lincoln at this time felt the divine afflatus of greatness stir within him I have never heard of it."[33] What Lincoln thought of Linder, then and later, is perhaps best inferred from the speech. Here is Lincoln's sardonic opening:

> It is not without a considerable degree of apprehension that I venture to cross the track of the gentleman from Coles. Indeed, I do not believe I could muster a sufficiency of courage to come in contact with that gentleman, were it not for the fact, that he, some days since, most graciously condescended to assure us that he would never be found wasting ammunition on *small game.* On the same fortunate occasion, he further gave us to understand, that he regarded *himself* as being decidedly *superior* to our common friend from Randolph (Mr. Shields); and feeling, as I really do, that I, to say the most of myself, am nothing more than the peer of our friend from Randolph, I shall regard the gentleman from Coles as decidedly my superior also, and consequently, in the course of what I shall have to say, whenever I shall have occasion to allude to that gentleman, I shall endeavor to adopt that kind of court language which I understand to be due to *decided superiority.* In one faculty, at least, there can be no dispute of the gentleman's superiority over me, and most other men; and that is, the faculty of entangling a subject, so that neither himself, nor any other man, can find head or tail to it.[34]

If the italics mean anything, they indicate a mincing performance that thrice mocks the *"decided superiority"* of "that gentleman" (with the irony that history adds of Lincoln's deigning himself the "peer" of James Shields, with whom he would nearly fight a duel—brought on by another sort of ad hominem lampooning, dialect satire—in September of 1842). Once again, Lincoln sets up the "big man-little man" contrast, although this time he must have known he was facing a proud and headstrong opponent. Linder in

1837 had a reputation as an outstanding orator of the rabble-rousing western type. (Linder says that Governor Richard Yates called him "the greatest orator of this State," and Linder apparently unblushingly agreed with the valuation.)[35] It was just this sort of pomposity and self-preening that gave Lincoln the opening he needed. He expresses mock-apprehension at the prospect of hunting and being hunted by *his* opponent, who had declared he would never go after *"small* game"—which Lincoln with a mock "aw shucks" admitted he was. Then he deflates "that gentleman's" *"decided superiority"* by conceding at the close of the passage that Linder indeed has no equal in the legislature—in muddle-headedness.

Then, turning to an analysis of the bank resolutions proper, Lincoln accuses his opponent of committing the ad populum fallacy: "There are several insinuations in the resolution, which are too silly to require any sort of notice, were it not for the fact, that they conclude by saying, *'to the great injury of the people at large.'* In answer to this I would say, that it is strange enough, that the people are suffering these 'great injuries,' and yet are not sensible of it! Singular indeed that the people should be writhing under oppression and injury, and yet not one of them to be found, to raise the voice of complaint." Lincoln then turns the same ploy to his advantage: "The people know their rights; and they are never slow to assert and maintain them, when they are invaded. Let them call for an investigation, and I shall ever stand ready to respond to the call." No, Lincoln continues in an immortal remark about his profession, "This movement is exclusively the work of politicians; a set of men who have interests aside from the interests of the people, and who. . . are, taken as a mass, at least one long step removed from honest men. I say this with the greater freedom because, being a politician myself, none can regard it as personal ."[36] But of course it *is* personal. Lincoln's disarming inclusion of himself in the class forestalls the opposition's cry of "you're another," even as it effectively places the speaker above the tribe's miserable venality and hypocrisy.

That Linder perceived Lincoln's attack as personal is confirmed by an exchange between them later in the speech. Lincoln has been busy employing two of his favorite sophistries, dilemma and slippery deduction, with Linder the man instead of his views on the bank question very much in sight as the target of both.

First the dilemma: "Does the gentleman from Coles know, that there is a statute standing in full force, making it highly penal, for an individual to loan money at a higher rate of interest than twelve percent? If he does not he is too ignorant to be placed at the head of the committee which his resolution proposes; and if he does, his neglect to mention it, shows him to be too uncandid to merit the respect or confidence of any one." Thus, Linder is either "too ignorant" or "too uncandid" —and damned whichever way as belonging to a "set of men who have interests aside from the interests of the people." Now follows almost immediately the deductive chain:

> [Premise:] It is universally understood and acknowledged that all men will ever act correctly, unless they have a motive to do otherwise.
>
> [Affirmation:] If this be true, we can only suppose that the commissioners [of the bank] acted corruptly,
>
> [Conclusion:] by also supposing that they were bribed to do so.
>
> [Ad hominem application:] Taking this view of the subject, I would ask if the Bank is likely to find it more difficult to bribe the committee of seven, which we are about to appoint, than it may have found it to bribe the commissioners?[37]

The best that can be said of this argument- hapless or shameless, depending upon whether Lincoln knew what he was doing—is that it is valid but unsound. It is an instance of the logical fallacy of "affirming the antecedent" (modus ponens). Consider only its prem-

ise, "Men will ever act correctly, unless they have a motive to do otherwise." Now this is hardly "universally acknowledged,' Lincoln's grand assertion notwithstanding, and even if it were so acknowledged, this would not make it a true view of human nature; and even if human nature were thus, the truth of the claim would be trivial: We act right except when we do not. Lincoln here and elsewhere shows himself a deductive thinker, even when the habit hides behind the trappings of inductive reasoning "from experience."[38]

More than twenty years later, Lincoln, at the Galesburg debate, would cast Stephen Douglas's argument for the constitutionality of the "right of property in a slave" deductively (as a faulty syllogism), then subject it to a surgical analysis that showed the argument to be precisely what Lincoln's is above: valid but unsound, correct in form but with false premises.[39] As Masters observed of Lincoln's narrow scrutiny of Douglas's stand on the Dred Scott decision during their debates, "His mind worked better when he was exposing what he considered a fallacy than when he was constructing an original thesis. His faculty for sophistry was most active in forensics of this character."[40] Perhaps in the Illinois house in 1837 Lincoln had not yet perfected the ability to analyze arguments, including his own, or perhaps he knew that Linder would not himself be able to find fault with words quickly uttered and no text before him as a check. But in either case it is faulty reasoning like this that led Masters, who hated pettifogging as only an apostate lawyer could, to judge Lincoln ultimately "a village logician [who] loved to mock [opponents] with syllogisms framed out of an amateur's delight. "[41]

What his opponent *did* do, however, is interrupt at this point to ask that the chair rule Lincoln out of order—wasn't he being called a thief? When the chair refused, Linder, clearly nettled, first appealed to the whole house for support but then decided to let Lincoln go on in hopes that "he would break his own neck." Still sarcastic, Lincoln thanked Linder for "another *gracious condescension"* and proceeded to offer a patently insincere "clarification" of his remarks concerning Linder's propensity to be bribed: "I was not saying that the gentleman from Coles could not be bribed, nor, on the other hand, will I say that he could. In that particular, I leave him where I found him."[42] Which is, Lincoln insinuates, holding the bag.

One year later, amid the magniloquence of the Lyceum Address (titled "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions" and delivered to the Springfield Young Men's Lyceum on January 27, 1838), Lincoln imagined a new generation of "men of ambition and talents" arising in America to supersede the passing Revolutionary Fathers. Such men, when they came, would not be content with "a seat in Congress, a gubernatorial or a presidential chair;' belonging as they would to *"the family of the lion or the tribe of the eagle."*[43] And one among them would ineluctably be the king of the lions—and an antidemocratic tyrant, "distinction his paramount object;' whose advent might mean the end of the American experiment. Whether Lincoln had himself in mind, consciously or otherwise, for this awesome status (as so many interpreters from Edmund Wilson onward have believed) or was giving an early warning of Stephen A. Douglas's vaulting and unprincipled ambition (as Michael Burlingame argues), there is no denying that he was fascinated with the image of the lowly dog that, in his fantasies, hounded the lion, bearded it, wore it down, and fed on its carrion.

Jumping ahead a decade, to 1848, we find Lincoln, near the middle of his long speech to the U.S. House on "The Presidential Question" (July 27, 1848), chiding the Democrats for criticizing the Whig candidate for president, General Zachary Taylor, hero of the late Mexican War, on whose "military coat-tails" they hoped to ride to victory in the approaching election. Yes, Lincoln's party had nominated a general and was running on his coattails. But had not the Democratic party done the same and worse with General

Andrew Jackson for six consecutive campaigns?

> Like a horde of hungry ticks you have stuck to the tail of the Hermitage lion to the end of his life; and you are still sticking to it, and drawing a loathsome sustenance from it, after he is dead. A fellow once advertised that he had made a discovery by which he could make a new man out of an old one, and have enough of the stuff left to make a little yellow dog. Just such a discovery has Gen. Jackson's popularity been to you. You not only twice made President of him out of it, but you have had enough of the stuff left, to make Presidents of several comparatively small men since.

The metaphors are mixed but striking. The lion and the "little yellow dog" emerge as associated in Lincoln's mind. He knows, he tells the House, the shock value of such indecorous "figures of speech;' and he would not have stooped to inject them had not the opposition in the person of the "gentleman from Georgia" (Alfred Iverson) fired the first kindred shot: "I repeat, I would not introduce this mode of discussion here; but I wish gentlemen on the other side to understand, that the use of degrading figures is a game at which they may not find themselves able to take all the winnings' When one of the Democrats cries, "We give it up," Lincoln responds, "Aye, you give it up, and well you may. . . . The point—the power to hurt—of all figures, consists in the *truthfulness* of their application; and, understanding this, you may well give it up. They are weapons which hit you, but miss us."[44]

Lincoln had long had this "power to hurt" at his command, and by the time of the 1858 debates with Douglas few (if any) politicians could manage "figures"—in the largest rhetorical sense of the term— to better persuasive effect. The rude satire and invective of the "Chronicles of Reuben" ¯"social ventilators," Herndon called the pieces—were by now but the distant and primitive ancestors of an accomplished forensic art. Yet in the beginning, and for many years more, this had been an art often at the service not of the people or democracy but of personal pain and resentment. Within the democratic logos of antebellum western America, the paradox of satire is that it both levels and distinguishes individuals. In the name of the people demagogues must be "taken down;' yet "the people" demand that only the best, the most accomplished logicians, speak in their name. Lincoln before the presidency and the Civil War desperately wanted to be the people's lion but recognized himself, socially and politically, as its dog. But he had learned that words were the most potent equalizer. If he could change from dog to lion, words would be the agent.

Lincoln used a second biblical figure in the "House Divided" speech, one obscured by the great eclipsing light of the titular metaphor. Ecclesiastes (9:4), in accord with Lincoln's dictum about figures, is forceful because, appropriately applied, it not only embodies the long, psychopolitical Lincoln-Douglas rivalry but also emphasizes the invidious distinction Lincoln always felt between them. In the end, it tells the truth on both men:

> There are those who denounce us *openly* to their *own* friends, *and yet whisper us softly,* that *Senator Douglas* is the *aptest* instrument there is, with which to effect that object [bringing down the Buchanan administration]. *They* do *not* tell us, nor has *he* told us, that he *wishes any* such object to be effected. They wish us to *infer* all, from the facts, that he now has a little quarrel with the present head of the dynasty; and that he has regularly voted with us on a single point, upon which, he and we, have never differed.
>
> They remind us that *he* is a very *great man,* and that the *largest of* us *are very small ones. Let this be granted. But "a* living dog *is better than a* dead lion."[45]

During the late 1850s Abraham Lincoln was winning the political war of words. He was far along in perfecting the logos descended from the juvenilia of the "Chronicles of Reuben" and the more powerful hurts of his "skinnings" of the 1830s and 1840s (which includes the Beardstown *Chronicle* letter's flaying of Peter Cartwright). The "little yellow dog" was about to have his day with the "toothless" and moribund lion that was Stephen A. Douglas and the "loathsome" carcass of the Democratic party. And soon enough he would awaken in the lion's tragic place—and begin himself to be hounded unto death.

Notes

1. Most Lincoln biographers, lacking information, fall back on what might be called the "just grew" theory, as in this sketch from the opening pages of James C. Randall's *Lincoln the President: Springfield to Gettysburg*, 2 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1945): "He would pose a question, then try to answer it, using processes of thought and speech to solve a thing, turn it around, see it whole, apply it to his times. In this manner as a boy, in early back woods days, he had laid his own foundations in study. Self-education was his way; it had made him familiar with a few serviceable classics; what is more, it carried over into his adult life. This was his liberal education" (1:3).

2. Edgar Lee Masters, *Lincoln: The Man* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1931), 305.

3. John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 10 vols. (New York: Century Co., 1890), 1:38.

4. William H. Herndon and Jesse Weik, *Herndon's Life of Lincoln*, ed. Paul Angle (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1949), 44.

5. Herndon and Weik, *Herndon's Life of Lincoln*, 48.

6. Ibid., 44, 48.

7. Ibid., 159.

8. Ibid., 137.

9. Ibid., 138

10. "These little big men on both sides. . . are apt to feel the most thorough hatred for each other; their malice often supplying the place of principle and patriotism. They think they are devoted to a cause when they only hate an opponent; and the more thoroughly they hate the more thoroughly they are partisans." Thomas Ford, *A History of Illinois: From Its Commencement as a State in 1818 to 1847*, ed. Rodney 0. Davis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

11. In *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), Michael Burlingame, citing the Herndon-Weik Papers in the Library of Congress, first notes the likelihood that Lincoln had written such a letter (150), but it was Douglas Wilson who found the copy of the Beardstown Chronicle that contained the text. I am deeply obliged to Michael Burlingame, and also to Douglas Wilson for providing me with a transcript of the letter and allowing me to quote from it here. For Wilson's text of the Beardstown letter, with accompanying commentary, see his "A Most Abandoned Hypocrite," *American Heritage*, Feb.-March 1994, 3649.

12. Wilson, "Most Abandoned Hypocrite," 36. On the evidence of Caleb Carman, one of Herndon's informants, it is reasonable to infer that Lincoln-Hill first submitted the letter to Simeon Francis, editor of the *Sangamo Journal*, who apparently did not print it (Burlingame, *Inner World*, 150n30; Wilson, "Most Abandoned Hypocrite," 44). Those interested in the question of Lincoln's authorship of the letter should see Wilson's "Most Abandoned Hypocrite," 47-48. Both external evidence from two of Herndon's informants and internal evidence of voice, style, and structure make the attribution likely.

13. For a review of the Cartwright-Lincoln acquaintance, see Robert Bray, "The Cartwright-Lincoln Acquaintance;' *Old Northwest 13* (Summer 1987): 111-30.

14. Theodore C. Pease, ed., *Illinois Election Returns, 1818-1848*, Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1923), 18:262. This was the only time, Lincoln said in the Scripps autobiography, that he was defeated "on a direct vote of the people:' And he noted: "Peter Cartwright and three others were elected, of whom I was not one:' Roy P. Basler, ed., Marion Dolores Pratt and Lloyd A. Dunlap, asst. eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955), 4:64, 109 (hereafter cited as *Collected Works*). The information on Cartwright comes from a letter Lincoln wrote in reply to John Coulter of Niles, Mich., on Sept. 4, 1860. Although Coulter's letter to Lincoln has not been found, Lincoln's answer implies that his correspondent wanted to know about political contests between Cartwright and Lincoln (why he wanted to know this cannot be inferred from the letter). But Lincoln's enjoinder at the end, "Please do not make this public;' may indicate that he regarded the subject as sensitive.

15. Bray, "Cartwright-Lincoln Acquaintance;' 114.

16. Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln*, 1:101-2. The basis for this story is Nicolay's interview with William Butler in Springfield on June 13, 1875, John Hay Papers, Brown University (again, my sincere thanks to Michael Burlingame, who discovered these documents and provided me with a transcript). According to Butler, who watched the encounter, Lincoln was shambling and shabbily dressed, Cartwright "dressed as became his station" as a presiding elder in the Methodist church. "Cartwright laid down his doctrines in a way which undoubtedly seemed to Lincoln a little too dogmatical. A discussion soon arose between him and Cartwright, and my first special attention was attracted to Lincoln by the way in which he met the great preacher in his arguments and the extensive acquaintance he showed with the politics of the state—in fact he quite beat him in the argument."

17. Peter Cartwright, "The Valley of the Mississippi; or, The Moral Waste, No. 1," *Sangamo Journal* (Springfield), Aug. 30, 1834, 3. The Pioneer was first published in Rock Spring, St. Clair County, then later in Alton under a different name. John Mason Peck was editor for a time, although whether during the controversy with Cartwright is not known; nor are any issues of the *Pioneer* known to have survived. Franklin W. Scott, *Newspapers and Magazines of Illinois, 1814-1879*, Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1910), 6:305.

18. Peter Cartwright, "Missionary Intelligence," *Christian Advocate and Journal*, May 30, 1834, 158. I have to assume that the text of this letter, part of Cartwright's routine administrative duties as a presiding elder, is the same as that which Lincoln- Hill say "was published in handbill form, and circulated in great numbers throughout Sangamon County, was posted up on the doors of stores and groceries, and even read in public companies of which he formed a part" (Wilson, "Most Abandoned Hypocrite," 37). Yet it is hard to understand how such a dull report could cause an uproar in Sangamon County. Perhaps the handbill expanded Cartwright's plea for "Methodist teachers," or perhaps the community was already stirred up by the common school controversy. In any event, what follows is the full text of the pertinent paragraphs:

"And now let me ask, through the medium of the Christian Advocate and Journal, could we not, we who live in this 'far off west; obtain some pious young men and young women, from the older states and conferences, under the influence of our own Church, with good literary qualifications, to teach common schools in this state [Illinois]. There is a vast opening here for school teachers. We greatly need them. I am confident that I could give employment to more than 100 immediately, in my district, and perhaps 500 in the state. It would afford the presiding elders and circuit preachers great pleasure, everywhere, to lend their aid in getting up schools for such teachers, if they could be prevailed upon to come.

"We expect our conference to form itself into a *common school education society*. All we lack is the right sort of teachers. These teachers would greatly aid our missionary efforts, train the rising generation, and do a good part for themselves in a pecuniary point of view."

19. Cartwright, "Valley of the Mississippi," 3.

20. Pease, ed., *Illinois Election Returns*, 275. *Lincoln Day-by-Day*, citing the *Sangamo Journal*, lists Cartwright as a candidate in its April 5, 1834, entry, but either he later withdrew or the listing was in error. See Earl Schenck Miers, ed., *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology*, 1809-1865, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.:

Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission, 1960), 1:37. Lincoln himself recalled in the Coulter letter that Cartwright initially was a candidate but "declined before the election" (*Collected Works*, 4:109).

21. Theodore L. Agnew, "Peter Cartwright and His Times: The First Fifty Years;' Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1953, 319.

22. Wilson, "Most Abandoned Hypocrite' 37.

23. Reading the entire opening paragraph makes this clear: "This second report of the present conference year of the Fort Edwards, Henderson River, and Rock Island missions, under my superintendence, is made with gratitude to God for the success that crowns our little efforts in these regions of moral desolation" (Cartwright, "Missionary Intelligence' 158).

24. Wilson, "Most Abandoned Hypocrite," 44-45.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 46.

28. Ibid., 47.

29. Thomas Gaines Onstot, *Pioneers of Menard and Mason Counties* (Forest City: T C. Onstot, 1902), 114.

30. Wilson, "Most Abandoned Hypocrite," 37.

31. Burlingame persuasively argues that Douglas was the person Lincoln had in mind (*Inner World*, 254).

32. Usher F. Linder, *Reminiscences of the Early Bench and Bar of Illinois* (Chicago: Legal News Company, 1879), 21. Miers does not show Lincoln as visiting Coles County in the fall of 1835, but there is a gap in entries between Sept. 24 and Nov. 3, so Linder's memory of their first meeting could be correct (*Lincoln Day by Day*, 1:50-51).

33. Linder, *Reminiscences*, 21, 37. Although Linder admired Lincoln's reply to Lee D. Ewing during debate on the question of removing the capital to Springfield ("He retorted upon Ewing with great seventy . . . paying back with usury all that 'he' had said," 62-63), he does not mention the Jan. 11 set-to with Lincoln on the bank issue or, for that matter, any other face-to-face debating or court encounters with Lincoln.

34. *Collected Works*, 1:61-62.

35. Linder, *Reminiscences*, 228. Pease maintain that Linder's public presence in Alton during Elijah Lovejoy's last defense of his abolitionist newspaper (the first week of Nov. 1837) contributed to Lovejoy's death: "Lovejoy stood out for his right to be heard. He delivered an eloquent and impressive but uncompromising defense of his course. It might have had its effect had not Linder's insane desire to exhibit oratory of a type more pleasing to western audiences caused him to take the floor after Lovejoy and destroy the effect of the latter's words:' As I interpret Pease, the implication is that Under was in it for the game, not for principle. Pease, *The Frontier State, 1818-1848* (Springfield: Illinois Centennial Commission, 1918), 367.

36. *Collected Works*, 1:65.

37. Ibid., 1:66.

38. A good example of this masking occurs in Lincoln's speech on the "Sub- Treasury" (Dec. 26, 1839), in which he argues that a sub-treasury would be worse than a national bank because money would be less secure. How do we know money would be less secure? From experience, Lincoln says: "How is it that we know anything—that any event will occur, that any combination of circumstances will produce a certain result—except by the analogies of past experience? What has once happened will invariably happen again, when the same circumstances which combined to produce it, shall again combine in the same way"

(*Collected Works*, 1:165). That *sounds* empirical and scientific but is in fact merely analytically true. At such a level of generality, Lincoln's argument from experience is irrelevant to the particular experiences out of which an inductive argument is formed.

39. Ibid., 3:230-31.

40. Masters, *Lincoln*, 297.

41. Ibid., 95. Masters's implacable hatred of Lincoln by 1931 (when *Lincoln* appeared) should not keep us from taking his poet-lawyer's analysis of another poet- lawyer's rhetoric and logic seriously. Lincoln *did* chop logic, and he *was* capable of pettifogging. Until, to use Emily Dickinson's line, "the play proved piercing earnest," as it did in the late 1850s, Lincoln liked to win and was willing to do whatever that took.

42. *Collected Works*, 1:66-67.

43. Ibid., 1:113-14.

45. Ibid., 2:467.