On the Papers

MR. LINCOLN'S MUSIC: THE THORNY AND MONUMENTAL THIRD PARAGRAPH OF THE SECOND INAUGURAL ADDRESS

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Lincoln faced a stymying rhetorical and political problem in fashioning his Second Inaugural Address. By its end, he had to handle a number of tasks that would together allow him to accomplish his overall goal—to make the restored Union able to begin the task of healing, reuniting, and resuming a common existence, both here and in relationship to the rest of the world. He separated the tasks into discrete paragraphs, the first two rather short, the third very long, and the fourth very short. In the Fall 2020 issue of LITIGATION, I took a close look first at the short fourth paragraph, his famous, hopeful peroration and prayer for healing. In the article previous to this one, I looked at the opening two paragraphs: The first quietly set the stage by looking backward four years and bringing us to the present, penultimate moment of the Civil War; and the second opposed North and South, laying blame on the latter for starting but not causing the war. It will be the job of the third paragraph—whose length is more than half that of the speech as a whole—to deal with what Lincoln now presents as the cause of the war—slavery.

He has to do this (a) by laying most but not all of the blame on the South, (b) by quietly accepting some of the blame for the North, and (c) by somehow explaining—indeed, justifying—the horror of it all. To produce a possible sense of evenhandedness, he relies on his rhetoric and his music. He has to make sure his prose rarely shouts. To explain the justification of the horror, he points to God and God's intentions: Lincoln quotes scripture on the one hand and manages to make his own prose sound scriptural on the other. Only if he can accomplish all of these tasks in one long paragraph will he be able to genuinely offer the fourth paragraph's prayer for healing in a way that could be taken seriously and profoundly.

He manages all this brilliantly in his third, longest paragraph. He divides it into three distinct subsections; but he keeps them all together as a single mega-paragraph because they cannot be separated from each other in terms either of causation or of results.

Subsection One

The first subsection comprises sentences 1–4 of the total 15.

Its first sentence dispassionately begins with a well-ordered, non-climactic, musical progression of beats in a 4-2-4-3 format:


Four beats followed by 2 beats; then 4 beats followed by 3 beats. Once again he is using the musical tempo control called *rubato*—where once a number of beats is established for a line (here 4), any line with fewer beats (here 2 and then 3) expands to fill the time and the weight of the 4-beat lines with which they are compared. He uses the term "slaves," but has not yet mentioned the more heated term "slavery." Slaves existed; but slavery was a contentious issue. He is not yet quite ready to contend.

The *rubato* by itself helps to emphasize the 2-beat and 3-beat lines; but he uses alliteration to connect "slaves" and "southern." Those are the only two *s* sounds in the whole sentence. Subtle, very subtle; but effective.

As can be observed in all of his greatest speeches, especially the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln reserves a 5-beat line for moments of importance, emphasis, and high seriousness. Suddenly, here, we have a short, whole second sentence of 5 beats:

What about this pronouncement is worthy of such rhythmic stature? It might well sound to us as a simple statement of fact. Nothing special at all. But Lincoln's audience would have heard the
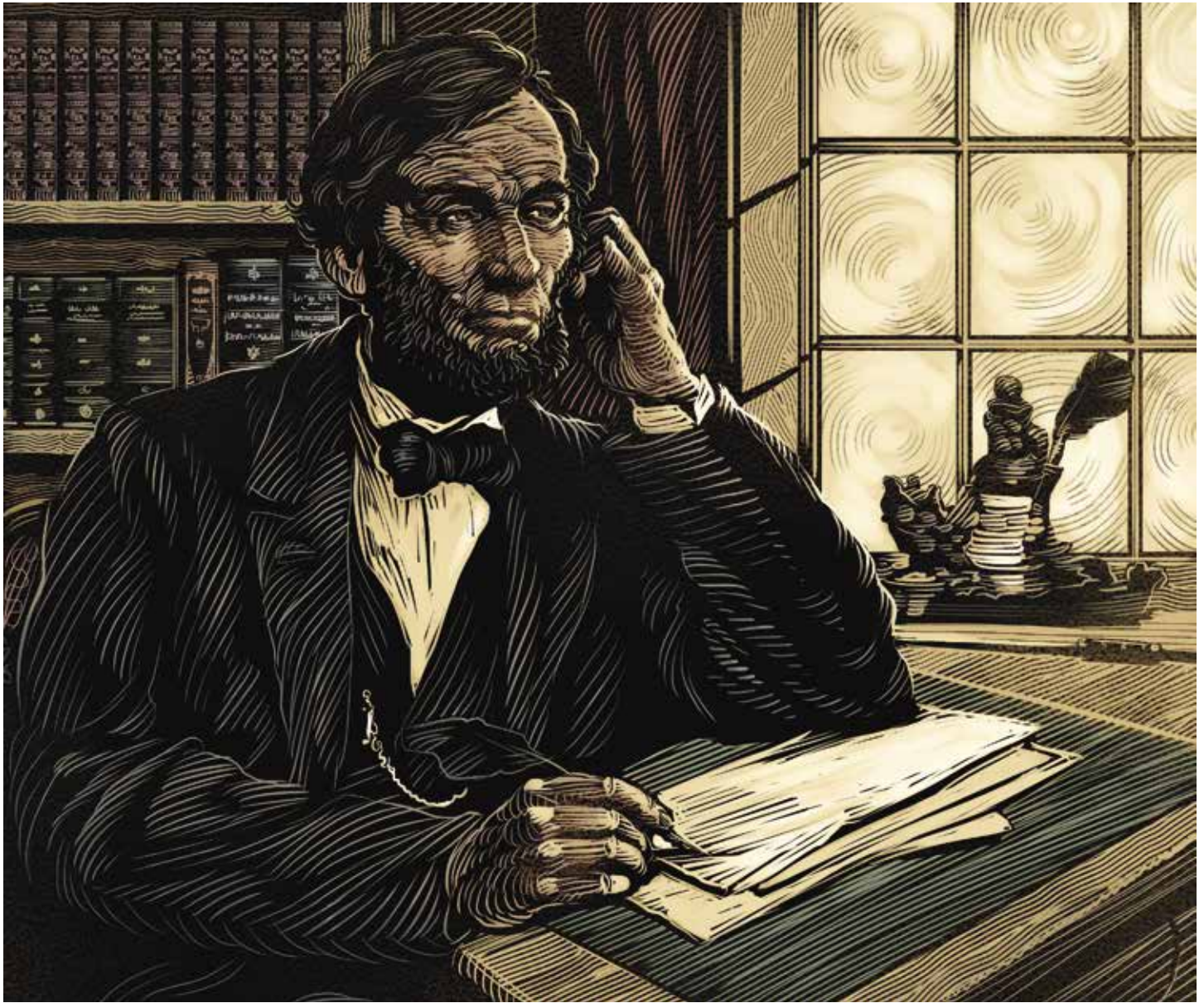
word "peculiar" with a very different set of vibrations than most of us would experience. The Confederacy referred to slavery euphemistically as its "peculiar institution." Thus, still without mentioning the word "slavery," Lincoln is able to highlight it by isolating this reference in a complete sentence, uttered in a single 5-beat line, which has in its stress position the word "interest." Coming only two words after "peculiar," "interest" would curiously suggest or even echo the word "institution." He has fashioned his own euphemism from theirs—"peculiar . . . interest" from "peculiar institution." In one

elevated, 5-beat motion, he both hides and highlights the concept of slavery.

In his third sentence, Lincoln proceeds to wipe away all other contributing causes to the conflict by announcing there was only a single cause. Once again he establishes 4 beats as the default value and increases the tension through *rubato*, with the 3-beat line that follows it:

3

All   knew   that this   interest was somehow   the cause   of the war.

In the last sentence of this preparatory subsection, we can see from my

colometric arrangement of the lines his musical techniques at work again:

4

To strengthen,   perpetuate,   and extend   this interest
was the object   for which   the insurgents   would rend   the Union
even   by war;
while the Government   claimed   no right   to do more
than to restrict   the territorial   enlargement of it.

The initial, default value line of 4 beats expands to the attention-getting, weightier 5-beat line, which then dramatically shrinks to a 2-beat line—*rubato* in the extreme!

That's how the Southern response is musically treated. Then order is restored

Illustration by Tim Foley

when we turn our attention to the North, by the return to a normal 4-beat line, followed by the extra weight and emphasis of a contrasting 3-beat line.

Subsection Two

The sentences of the middle subsection, sentences 5–10, speak to each other so intriguingly that we should begin by looking at the whole of it, in colometric form:

5

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    Neither      party       expected      for the war
the magnitude,  or the duration,  which it has already  attained.

         Neither         anticipated
    that the cause   of the conflict    might cease
    with,         or even           before,
    the conflict      itself         should cease.

    Each      looked     for an easier     triumph,
and a result   less funda-      mental      and astounding.

    Both read      the same         Bible,
    and pray      to the same        God;
and each   invokes    His aid     against     the other.

        It may      seem strange
        that any        men
should dare    to ask    a just    God's   assistance
in wringing   their bread  from the sweat  of other men's   faces;
        but let us      judge not,
        that we       be not judged.

The prayers   of both     could not    be answered;
    that    of neither  has been answered    fully.
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Whose story is being told here? Recall that in English, readers tend to read a sentence as the story of who or what shows up early on as the grammatical subject. Look at Lincoln pounding away at evenhandedness here by referring to North and South not severally but communally. His subjects of the first four sentences are "neither," "neither," "each," and "both." The longer, outlying, fifth sentence differs somewhat. There are four clauses here, each of which has its own subject: "It"; "any man"; "us"; and "we." No longer is this neither nor each nor both of the South and North; instead, we are all "any" men.

The last sentence of the middle subsection returns us to the "both" and the "neither"—in the reverse order that they appeared earlier on. Lincoln liked these chiastic reversals.

Lincoln asks a probing question that should be asked about all wars—and about all conflicts as comparatively small as football games. How can both sides of a conflict pray to the same God for victory? Can God possibly be simultaneously on the side of both North and South? (Or on the side of both the Eagles and the Lions?) This is a question Lincoln will try to answer before this paragraph has ended.

What did Lincoln do rhythmically to let this ironic question surface out of all four of these sentences as the question to keep in mind? He intensifies yet again by tightening his lines from his normal, default value 4 beats to the more tense 3 beats; and in doing so, he keeps the grammatical structure perfectly parallel:

6
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Both read   the same    Bible,
and pray   to the same    God;
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The left columns are the subjects and verbs (the second subject being understood without its being repeated). The central columns, the modifiers for the objects yet to come, are as "same" as they could be. The right columns are the holy objects. We are firmly grasped by the rhythm of 3 beats.

We might well expect a third 3-beat line. We might also expect a return to the original rhythm of a 4-beat line. But instead, we get a surprise—a 5-beat line, giving us a moment of heightened importance:

7
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and each   invokes   His aid    against   the other.
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There lies the question. Where is God in all of this death and disaster?

Then he says it: Slavery—without yet calling it by its name—is wrong; ah, but he calls it not "wrong" but instead "strange." Understatement at the moment of condemnation. Balance. No shouting. Perhaps some kind of crescendo that is heading toward a shout? How does he manage that? He starts with two 2-beat lines ("It may seem strange // that any men . . ."), naturally intense from their shortness; then he slams us with two 5-beat lines. It builds with the first 5 beats; and it intensifies with the second 5 beats. And then? An explosion? No. A dramatic defusing by returning to a pair of 2-beat lines, with lowered voice, that suggest what we should *not* do in the active voice ("but let us judge not"), to be followed and grammatically resolved with its passive counterpart ("that we be not judged").

This pair of 2-beat lines he borrows from scripture—from Matthew 7:1. He had to look higher than to his own prose to restore evenhandedness, after his interrupted crescendo, which may seem to have pointed more to the South than the North. But he doesn't mention the South. All knew that slavery could not have happened without the collusion of Northerners who ran and profited greatly from the business of transporting and selling slaves. There were even practitioners in the North.

Subsection Three

It is left to the last subsection of this long paragraph (a) to explain why all this has happened, (b) finally to name the evil, and (c) to encompass an emotional climax.

It begins with a flat statement, not completely disengaged from its predecessors. We had heard from Matthew; and then about the unsatisfactory results (for each side) of all those prayers. It is time for the purveyor of the horror to appear.

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The Almighty   has   His own   purposes.
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Simple, straightforward prose. No chiasmus. No rhythmic surprise: It is clothed in the 4 beats that we have come to expect will begin rational discussions.

If the Almighty is now present, why not let Him (I use Lincoln's pronoun) speak in his own words—in this case from Matthew 18:7?

The colometric of this biblical quote is entirely Lincolnesque; or perhaps we should now recognize that Lincoln's writing throughout is essentially scripturesque:

"Woe   unto the world   because of   offenses!
for it must   needs be   that offenses   come;
but woe   to that man   by whom   the offense   cometh."

We have seen this before: two 4-beat lines, expanding to that special status 5-beat line for added grandeur and emphasis. Throw in a little sound repetition—the *w*'s of "woe" and "world," and the *ee* sound of "needs" and "be." And we even have a touch of *chiasmus*, with the two "offense" words being flanked by the *k* sounds in "because" and "cometh." Lincoln learned these things from the Bible and from Shakespeare, his two favorite sources.

In the fashion of a good preacher, having quoted the appropriate biblical text for the occasion, Lincoln then applies it to the present situation. That would be difficult to accomplish in several pages; but Lincoln takes care of it in one sentence—the longest and most syntactically complex sentence of the speech as a whole. We finally hear the word "slavery." And, for the first time, he's preaching. But he is preaching at both South and North.

Up to this point in this whole third paragraph, we have encountered only 230 words, in 12 sentences—an average of 19 words per sentence; now we encounter a single monster of a sentence that contains 79 words. I haven't the space to arrange it all in a visual colometric; but here it is in regular prose with slash marks to indicate where the colometric lines would end:

If we shall suppose // that American slavery is one of those offenses // which, in the providence of God, must needs come, // but which having continued through His appointed time, // He now wills to remove, // and that He gives to both North and South // this terrible war as the woe due // to those by whom the offense came, // shall we discern therein //any departure from those divine attributes // which the believers in a Living God // always ascribe to Him? //

Slavery is the offense created by we, us, and both. God is angry for what we have done, or omitted to do, or allowed to happen.

The number of beats in each line combines to forward the movement of the syntax. With a 2-beat introduction, we get a segment of 4-4-4-3, where the 3 ends a logical subsection; and then we get, again, a 4-4-4-3, with the same shape and result; and we end with a 4-3-3, where the resolving power of 3 beats is experienced twice in a row. It is thorny syntax because the causation and results involved are not easy to articulate or to digest. It is thorny thought.

After that long, complex, difficult sentence, the contrasting moment of prayer that follows is both a mental and emotional relief. It is short (18 words, compared with its 79-word predecessor and with the 69-word sentence that will follow it), simply balanced, and as straightforward as it could be. It is filled with rhetorical techniques that allow its simplicity to sing out. First, it is rhythmically simple—a pair of 2-beat lines expanded to a pair of 3-beat lines:

Fondly   do we hope,
fervently   do we pray,
that this mighty   scourge   of war
may speedily   pass   away.

In the left vertical column, we see alliteration of *f*, *m*, and four multisyllabic modifiers that all sound like each other. And the parallelism of "do we hope" and "do we pray" helps Lincoln to create a rhyme out of "pray" and "away"—a rhyme that functions, as rhymes often do, to unite two lines and effect both a rhythmic and sonic closure.

The intermission is over. The healing and the praying have been taken care of. The 79-word lion has been followed by the 18-word lamb. What then could be left in this monumental paragraph? Having come to the personal conclusion that God had

visited the elongated horror of this war on both sides, Lincoln resolves this difficult paragraph by ceding to divine will. And finally, at this last moment, he shouts. He finally shouts:

[Yet,]
if God   wills   that it   continue
until all   the wealth
piled   by the bondsman's
two hundred   and fifty   years
of un-   requited   toil
shall be   sunk,   and until
every   drop of blood   drawn   with the lash
shall be paid   by another   drawn   with the sword,
as was said   three thousand   years   ago,
so   still   it must be   said
"the judgments   of the Lord   are true
and righteous   al-   together."

All the fire and brimstone is contained not in the main clause but in the subordinate "if" clause. It starts, as we might expect, with a 4-beat line. It quickly intensifies to a duo of 2-beat lines; and then it grows to a trio of 3-beat lines, which then grows to a climactic quartet of 4-beat lines. The parallelism of the drops of "blood" being "drawn" sets us up for the real shouting: For every drop of blood drawn by the slave owner's lash, it will be paid for by another drawn with the sword. This is the vengeance not of people but of God. It is not only the slave owner's blood that is being drawn: Everyone has had to pay the bill for this offense. And the Bible has the last word, in 3-beat line closures, as we have so often seen.

No listener to this speech—or even any reader of it—is necessarily aware of these musical forces being at work; but still, they work. These effects are readily available in the language today. You can learn to use them—at least for particularly important moments. Do it well, and the readers of your documents will never know what hit them.

In the next issue of Litigation, we move on to John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address. ∎