

Historicizing Lincoln: Garry Wills and the Canonization of the "Gettysburg Address"



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## Historicizing Lincoln: Garry Wills and the Canonization of the "Gettysburg Address"

*To the narrative historians, the life of men is dominated . . . by the actions of those exceptional beings who occasionally emerge, and who often are the masters of their own fate and even more of ours.*

*Fernand Braudel*

*I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.*

*Abraham Lincoln*

The two opinions quoted above reflect both the complexity of historical events and the difficulty of representing them. The first, written by an eminent "socioscientific" historian, critiques another school of historical writing for falsely aggrandizing the power of individual historical subjects through its method of narrative dramatization.<sup>1</sup> The second, written by a well-known and well-beloved historical subject himself shortly after he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, also problematizes the nature of historical causality through a self-effacing and seemingly straightforward denial of personal agency.<sup>2</sup> Taken together, these quotations comment on the difficulty of "making" history—either as a political agent or as an historian—even as they raise difficult issues relating to causality and agency, explanation and interpretation, representation and figuration.

Such issues are at the heart of the current controversy over "the question of narrative" in historical writing, a controversy analyzed in some detail by Hayden White in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*.<sup>3</sup> There White traces the history of the contemporary debate over the function of narrative in historical discourse from those historians who are suspicious of the power of narrative to distort or fictionalize history (like Braudel and other members of the French *Annales* school) to thinkers like Frederic Jameson, who understands historical interpretation as an inherently figurative account that entails a sort of "willing backwards" on the part of the interpreter, to philosophers like Paul Ricoeur, who identifies narrative as the strength of historical writing and who interprets the "emplotting power" of historians as a "privileged instantiation" of the human ability to make meaning out of temporal existence.<sup>4</sup> To historians, rhetoricians, and American cultural

critics, the issues at stake in the various positions taken upon "the question of narrative" have become increasingly vital with the recent "textualization" of criticism: To what extent does one explain the historical subject, or construct one? Does the historian find a plot in history, or does she put one there? To what degree is meaning uncovered in historical writing, and to what degree is meaning, as White's title suggests, part of the "content of the form" of narrative itself?

Questions like these are especially pertinent to works of historical analysis that seek to explain the significance of rhetorical events that have earned over time a special, even hallowed, place in our collective saga of the nation's origins. Such a work is Garry Wills' recent book-length study, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (1992), which in 1993 received both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. The critical and popular success of Wills' book attests to his skills as a cultural interpreter (and these include his considerable talents as a prose stylist) and underscores the American public's recent and seemingly insatiable appetite for material on the people and places of the Civil War. Indeed, as the nation approaches the next century, it has shown a heightened interest in understanding the central historical event of the last: In the past decade, the American public has consumed an impressive number of popular books on the subject, feasted on Kenneth Burns' award-winning public television series, "The Civil War," and savored substantial film releases like "Glory" and a three-hour production on Gettysburg itself. And scholars continue to publish books and articles on the Civil War and on the speech that some believe to be the central rhetorical episode of that war, the Gettysburg Address.<sup>5</sup> As the work of one of the nation's few recognized "public intellectuals," Wills' book is an important addition to the current cultural dialogue about our nation's past.

But from the perspective of the debate over the place of narrative in historical writing, Wills' study itself can be seen to raise some interesting—even troubling—questions concerning the issues of agency, causality, and historical representation. In particular, I will argue here that Wills portrays Lincoln's actions at Gettysburg in terms of a "narrative of origins" that makes highly questionable claims about Lincoln's Address as the originary event that established the Declaration of Independence as the nation's "founding text." Further, I will argue that Wills' account implies a specific—and questionable—interpretation of the rhetorical relationship between Lincoln and his audience. Finally, by examining popular contexts for Lincoln's address left out of Wills' account—especially The Fourth-of-July-speech tradition and Lincoln's visit to the battlefield at Antietam in 1862—I hope to raise questions both about the adequacy of Wills' analysis of the rhetorical contexts of Lincoln's speech and about the notion of historical causality that Wills' figuration of Lincoln ultimately implies.

### Historicizing Lincoln: A Narrative of Origins

In the "Prologue" to his study, Wills sets the scene for the chapters that follow by taking his readers through the events immediately preceding and following the Gettysburg Address. Through an account that ranges freely from narrative to analysis and back again, the "Prologue" leads readers from Lee's disastrous defeat and the horrific battleground aftermath of tens of thousands dead, through the making of arrangements for the interment of the fallen Union soldiers, up to Lincoln's preparations to speak at Gettysburg in spite of the illness of his son and the subsequent concerns of his wife. Building to Lincoln's performance at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, the "Prologue" also builds to Wills' somewhat impassioned first presentation of his own interpretation of that event:

Lincoln is here [at his address] not only to sweeten the air of Gettysburg, but to clear the infected atmosphere of American history itself, tainted with official sins and inherited guilt. He would cleanse the Constitution—not, as William Lloyd Garrison had, by burning an instrument that countenanced slavery. He altered the document from within, by appeal from its letter to the spirit, subtly changing the recalcitrant stuff of that legal compromise, bringing it to its own indictment. By implicitly doing this, he performed one of the most daring acts of open-air sleight-of-hand ever witnessed by the unsuspecting. Everyone in that vast throng of thousands was having his or her intellectual pocket picked. The crowd departed with a new thing in its ideological luggage, that new constitution Lincoln had substituted for the one they brought there with them. They walked off, from those curving graves on the hillside, under a changed sky, into a different America. Lincoln had revolutionized the Revolution, giving people a new past to live with that would change their future indefinitely. (38)

To capture the achievement of the Gettysburg Address, Wills chooses to write in highly metaphoric prose, crafting a series of figurations of Lincoln that elide one into the next. By drawing upon the biblical distinction between the spirit and the letter of the law and by alluding to Lincoln's god-like ability to transform "recalcitrant stuff" into something finer, Wills first presents Lincoln as a spiritual healer with the power to cleanse the infected air at Gettysburg of disease and the tainted United States Constitution of the sin of slavery. This image of transformation leads to Wills' next figuration of Lincoln as an alchemist or magician who performs "one of the most daring acts of open-air sleight-of-hand ever witnessed" on his "unsuspecting" audience. From this act



of illusion, it is only a short step to one of outright skullduggery, as Lincoln is next presented as a presidential pickpocket who puts one over on the listening crowd, taking their old notion of the Constitution and leaving them with something "new" in its place. The paragraph ends with Wills' most highly charged prose, as Lincoln's audience walks off "under a changed sky, into a different America," and as Lincoln himself is fully apotheosized as the consummate rebel who has "revolutionized the Revolution" itself. Thus, within a single paragraph, Lincoln is represented as a spiritual healer, magician, revolutionary, and, in perhaps Wills' most incongruously original metaphor for our sixteenth president—a pickpocket.

But pickpockets don't usually leave something of greater value than what they take, and Wills' rhetorical shift from godly healer to ungodly rogue must be understood in terms of the underlying interpretation of the Gettysburg Address that his metaphors work to create, with what Ricoeur calls the text's "emplotment."<sup>6</sup> For in the vignette above, Wills presents Lincoln's achievement at Gettysburg in terms of a narrative of origins—a narrative in which Lincoln plays the role of founder/progenitor whose words alone are powerful enough to create a new nation (as is reflected in the subtitle to Wills' book, *The Words That Remade America*). Each of Wills' metaphors thus emphasizes Lincoln's power as an historical agent, while questioning the efficacy—or at least the acumen—of his audience, and by extension, of the larger American public. The story Wills tells is of a "bold" trickster-president who benevolently beguiles a passive, "unsuspecting" public into accepting his revolutionary views. The causal claim that underlies this narrative of origins is a large one. Wills suggests nothing less than that changes in American attitudes toward their founding documents—and especially toward the Constitution—can be traced squarely to an "intellectual revolution" begat by the Gettysburg Address. Lincoln's short speech at Gettysburg effects a change in Americans' understanding of their foundational documents, argues Wills, by moving them to reinterpret national texts and ideals from the perspective of the Declaration of Independence. Wills' argument here actually has three parts. First, Wills presents Lincoln's address at Gettysburg as an event of "originary" force at which Lincoln inaugurates a radically new understanding of nationhood. Indeed, Wills ascribes to the speech the status of a "mystery" that reveals a new truth to the American public (40). Second, Wills argues that the Gettysburg Address achieves this effect specifically by establishing the Declaration of Independence as the nation's "founding document," which in turn prompts citizens to read the Declaration's principle of equality into other texts. After Gettysburg, he suggests, the Declaration becomes the guiding national text through which other national ideals and documents—including and especially the Constitution—are to be interpreted. It is this "refounding" of the nation at Gettysburg that underlies Wills' description of Lincoln as a

pickpocket who gives his audience a new Constitution. Third, as we have seen above, Wills' metaphors suggest that it is the revolutionary agency of Lincoln himself that brings this mysterious refounding to pass.

### A Revolution, or Evolution, in Thought?

But was the Gettysburg Address, as Wills' narrative of origins suggests, a watershed event that established the Declaration as the nation's founding text, thereby providing a revolutionary new context through which national ideals and documents were to be interpreted? By casting his interpretation in terms of a narrative of origins, Wills exaggerates the originary force of Lincoln's Address at the expense of an appreciation for the cultural work of popular groups who were themselves involved in a reevaluation of national ideals through an appeal to the Declaration of Independence long before Gettysburg. Indeed, the record suggests that well before Lincoln presented his masterpiece, many Americans had already begun to rewrite the national text according to the guiding spirit of the Declaration of Independence, as seen in the efforts of numerous men and women in the intervening 87 years between the signing of the Declaration and the Gettysburg Address. A mere catalog of their efforts suggests an *evolutionary* change in American attitudes toward the Declaration, equality, and notions of nationhood that complicate the high drama of the event Wills narrates: For example, many of the citizens of the northern states who made slavery illegal under the early influence of the Spirit of '76 had already begun to rewrite that text.<sup>7</sup> Lydia Maria Child added to it as early as 1833 when she published her popular "Appeal in Favor of That Class Called Africans," which argued against the view that the term *men* in the Declaration guaranteed the rights of white males only. Many of the women and men working for abolition and women's suffrage in the early and middle nineteenth century aided in that revision, especially those who appealed repeatedly to the Declaration in arguing for constitutional rights (like the right to jury) for black Americans. Representatives to the National Negro Conventions played their part by pointing early and repeatedly to the Declaration as the nation's "first principle," arguing that document's foundational status as both chronologically and logically prior to the Constitution.<sup>8</sup> Other blacks and whites who produced hundreds of slave narratives in the mid nineteenth century contributed concretely to a rethinking of the importance of the Declaration to the nation's guiding principles—as did some of the reading public who purchased those narratives at such a rate that they became the most popular American genre of the 1850s. Without question Frederick Douglass—America's most famous fugitive slave at a time when the fugitive slave gained the status of a popular culture hero in the North and in England—contributed to those efforts. Purposely separating himself from the Garrisonians who wished to destroy the

Constitution and begin again, Douglass argued that the Constitution itself, properly interpreted from the perspective of rights embodied in the Declaration, provided for the elimination of slavery, and he argued that point in speeches all across America (his appearances well covered by the popular press).<sup>9</sup> Finally, Harriet Beecher Stowe galvanized the nation's attention on the originary force of the phrase "all men are created equal" in the most popular book of nineteenth-century America, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which would see *five million* copies sold before the outbreak of the Civil War and the tragic need for a Gettysburg Address.

In his attempt "to penetrate the mystery" of Lincoln's "refounding act" (40), Wills tends to minimize the influence of such other Americans on the evolution of popular American thought, while making a very large claim indeed for Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg. For although Wills himself points to a tradition before Lincoln that interpreted the Constitution in light of the Declaration, he tends to present that tradition from the standpoint of high culture, as being the creation of leading philosophers and legal thinkers—or as "theory" needing Lincoln to translate it for the American public. Thus in writing about the relationship of abolition to Lincoln's thought and to the public's understanding of the Declaration and Constitution in chapter three, Wills discusses that influence primarily in terms of Transcendental philosophy and the leading figure of Theodore Parker, rather than considering the influence of black Americans, slave narratives, novels, the popular press, and so forth. Wills in chapter four does the same in tracing the "revolution in thought" behind Lincoln's Address to forefathers like Webster and Clay. The result is that Wills' cultural criticism tends to focus on high-culture influences, and to draw its lines of causality downward by presenting changing cultural ideals as philosophy or legal theory that Lincoln must translate for the American public.<sup>10</sup> Thus the pattern of historical development that Wills suggests is that certain cultural influences shaped Lincoln's views—the cemetery movement, Greek funeral oratory, Transcendental philosophy, legal theory—and then Lincoln's Address revolutionized the views of the rest of America. But Wills may oversimplify in both parts of this argument. First, in tracing the influences upon Lincoln, he minimizes the cultural work of those mentioned above, especially work carried on in popular forums, as I will show below. He then tends to attribute subsequent views sympathetic to Lincoln's directly to the influence of the Gettysburg Address (as though the rest of America had been immune to the cultural influences that had shaped Lincoln himself). Thus "Lincoln" at "Gettysburg" corners the market, as it were, on evolving American attitudes toward the Declaration and Constitution.

Juxtaposed to the passive audience of Wills' narrative account, Lincoln's words at Gettysburg seem clearly revolutionary. But seen against the background of the American public's long debate over issues of equality and

Choices of  
context

the intentions of the founding fathers in the nineteenth century, they appear less so. Indeed, early in the century, abolitionists organized petition drives in an attempt to turn Congress itself, as Levine documents, "into a vast Anti-Slavery Debating Society, with the whole country as an audience" (154). The popularity of these efforts is reflected in the gag rule instituted in May 1836 to stop Congress from being buried in a rising mountain of antislavery appeals—petitions that often referred to the Declaration in arguing their claims. Given the well-known filio piety of the period, it is not surprising that the position of the founding fathers and the Constitution upon the issue of slavery was of intense interest, or that, as Martin Duberman asserts, "one of the standing debates of the antebellum generation was whether the Constitution had been meant by them [the founders] to be a pro- or antislavery document" (399). Many argued specifically that the "framer's intent" should be understood in the context of the Northwest Ordinance drafted in 1787, which outlawed slavery in that territory. Indeed, as a whole nation "debated" slavery and its relationship to the nation's leading principles, the very meaning of the word *equality* came under scrutiny, with black rhetors playing a central role in developing distinctively American definitions of that term.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, debate over these issues was not limited to philosophy or legal theory but was part of a much wider cultural conversation being carried out in a variety of popular forums made possible by the incredible explosion of periodical literature in the mid nineteenth century and being fueled by a heightened interest in the issue of slavery with the country's rapid expansion to the west. Publications by tract societies, newspapers, and small presses, speeches by politicians, abolitionists, and preachers, representations in paintings, political cartoons, and lithographs, and even the music of traveling folk singers—all reflected the nation's interest in the question of equality and the nature of its relationship to the country's guiding documents. Given the currency of these issues in the years immediately preceding the Gettysburg Address, it would seem that a close examination of popular opinion concerning the status of the Declaration to understandings of nation is crucial to Wills' causal argument and, finally, to judging just how revolutionary was Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg.

#### **Popular Contexts: The Fourth-of-July-Speech Tradition and the Gettysburg Address**

One tradition Wills leaves out of his study is especially important to any attempt to assess popular attitudes toward the Declaration and national ideals before and after Gettysburg—the Fourth-of-July-speech tradition. These popular yearly addresses commonly paid tribute to the Declaration on the supposed anniversary of its signing, thereby linking that document directly to the birth of America's nationhood and annually ritualizing that association

through public ceremony and spectacle. Typically, readings of the Declaration preceded the Fourth-of-July addresses, providing an immediate context for the speech or speeches that followed.<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, many speakers used the occasion of the Fourth to point to the Declaration as the nation's true founding text and original guarantor of rights. For example, in his 1843 Fourth-of-July speech at Sylvania, Lewis Ryckman argued that Fourierism would enable the working class to obtain "the liberties promised by the Declaration of Independence."<sup>13</sup> Also not surprisingly, as antislavery sentiment grew during the mid nineteenth century, Fourth-of-July celebrations came to be seen as the perfect opportunity for those opposed to slavery to identify the Declaration's claim that "all men are created equal" as the true founding principle of the country, as black Americans, especially, had been arguing in their Fourth-of-July (or, sometimes, in protest, Fifth-of-July) speeches for decades before Gettysburg.<sup>14</sup> Frederick Douglass delivered what may be his best-known speech, "What to the Slave is the Fourth-of-July?," in Rochester, New York, on July 5, 1852. In this address Douglass points to the Declaration as the "ring-bolt" to the "nation's destiny," praises its "saving principles," and urges his audience to "Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost" (2:363-64). Later in the same speech, Douglass speaks specifically about the relationship of the Constitution to those principles and argues that "interpreted as it *ought* to be interpreted, the Constitution is a Glorious Liberty Document" (emphasis in the original, 2:385). Ten years later Douglass would still be promulgating the principles of the Declaration at Fourth-of-July celebrations, declaring on July 4, 1862, "There are principles in the Declaration of Independence which would release every slave in the world . . ." (3:529). Fourth-of-July oratory thus reflects African-Americans' ongoing regard for the Declaration—a regard apparent as early as 1791 when Benjamin Banneker pointed to the contradiction between the stated principles of the Declaration and slave-holding in his famous letter to Thomas Jefferson, and still apparent in 1861 when Frederick Douglass urged Lincoln and his administration to frame its war efforts in terms of the "immutable truths" of the Declaration in order to win support for its cause.<sup>15</sup> The Fourth-of-July-speech tradition thus documents the longstanding efforts of black Americans to construct their constitutional rights in terms of the Declaration, while providing a chronological record of the larger American public's *evolving* veneration for that document as the nation's original founding text. Given this tradition alone, it is unlikely that Lincoln's linking of national purpose to the Declaration at Gettysburg provided a radically new context for the American public's interpretation of national ideals and documents.

Moreover, the Fourth-of-July-speech tradition is a popular context especially pertinent to Wills' study because it is likely that this tradition directly influenced the composition of the Gettysburg Address itself. For earlier in

1863, Lincoln had in fact delivered a speech in Washington that bears a strong similarity in ideas to his address at Gettysburg. Delivered on July 7, 1863, this earlier speech is clearly in the Fourth-of-July tradition, even though its presentation was probably delayed while Lincoln waited for battlefield reports from Generals Meade and Grant.<sup>16</sup> (Although Lincoln had received some word from Meade at Gettysburg by the Fourth, news of Pemberton's surrender to Grant at Vicksburg was not available until couriers reached Cairo, Illinois, on July 7) In his July speech, Lincoln speaks of the Fourth as "America's birthday" (in language not unusual for Fourth-of-July addresses) and goes on to state that "Eighty-odd years since, on the Fourth-of-July, for the first time in the history of the world, a nation, by its representatives assembled, declared as a self-evident truth that all men are created equal" (6:319). Although he would later translate the casual "Eighty-odd years since" into the more precise—and more powerful—biblical phrasing of "Fourscore and seven years ago," Lincoln's dating back to the first Fourth of July and his linking of national purpose to the Declaration both anticipate the Gettysburg Address—and, significantly, both are squarely in the Fourth-of-July-speech tradition. For example, one year earlier Douglass began his 1862 Fourth-of-July speech in a similar fashion by proclaiming, "Eighty-six years ago the Fourth-of-July was consecrated and distinguished among all the days of the year as the birthday of American liberty and Independence" (3:521). Furthermore, Lincoln's July speech also anticipates his use of the Declaration at Gettysburg to reinforce ideological battle lines between the North and South, for in that earlier speech, Lincoln had already defined the Confederate "rebellion" as an "effort to overthrow the principle that all men were created equal" (6:320). The Union's support of that same principle through its sacrifice at Gettysburg, Lincoln goes on to add, "is a glorious theme, and the occasion for a speech, but I am not prepared to make one worthy of the occasion" (6:320). Lincoln would be prepared, however, by the time of his Gettysburg Address. In its dating, its identification of the birth of American nationhood with the "self-evident truth" of the Declaration, and in its definition of war aims, then, Lincoln's somewhat diffuse July speech serves as an important precursor to the concise and more finely crafted Gettysburg Address he would later deliver. And while the relationship between these two texts is not so close as that of rough draft to finished copy, it is nonetheless clear that conceptually Lincoln had with this earlier speech, as William E. Barton puts it, "already . . . begun to prepare his Gettysburg Address" (28). Thus, if the Gettysburg Address owes something of its form and tenor to the high culture tradition of Greek funeral orations, as Wills argues, it also owes a large portion of its spirit and formulation to the popular American tradition of Fourth-of-July speechifying. Indeed, Lincoln's address might be best understood as wedding these two great traditions—one of

them, as we have seen, with a long history of *popular* veneration for the Declaration as America's original "founding" text.

### Popular Contexts: Rising Abolitionism and Rumors of Impropriety at Antietam

The rapid transformation of public opinion in the years immediately preceding the Gettysburg Address gives us other reasons to suspect that Lincoln's audience would not be taken unawares by his linking of national purpose to the Declaration and its principle of equality at Gettysburg. For after 1861 popular American sentiment regarding abolition, equality, and the meaning of the Declaration and Constitution evolved quickly under the pressures of the war. Indeed, in the period immediately before Gettysburg, as Levine reminds us, the "very nature and meaning of the Constitution, the Union, and the laws had themselves become highly controversial" (217). Fehrenbacher further complicates any attempt to assign the cause of evolving public attitudes to any particular influence by pointing out that it seems to have been the complex exigencies of war that brought "many to the side of abolition" and that even emancipation is best understood as a "revolutionary consequence" of the war itself (125). James McPherson captures a similar notion of historical causality when he suggests that the war "snowballed into huge and unanticipated dimensions and took on a life and purpose of its own far beyond the causes that had started it."<sup>17</sup> The increasing popularity of abolitionism in the period immediately preceding Lincoln's Address is well documented: Abolitionists were changing in the popular eye from extremists to patriots who tried to warn the country of the crises to come; new petition drives were gaining momentum; and Washington itself was becoming a hotbed of abolitionist activity, both political and social, that included a series of extremely popular abolitionist lectures at the Smithsonian—many of them attended by Lincoln.<sup>18</sup> Even closer to home, Mary Lincoln entertained leading antislavery speakers at the White House, and in July 1863 Frederick Douglass himself met with Lincoln.<sup>19</sup> Given rapidly changing popular sentiment, heightened abolitionist pressure, Lincoln's domestic culture, and, most of all, the unfolding exigencies of war, Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863 and his remarks at Gettysburg less than one year later in November 1863 seem not ahead of but in step with his times, and certainly in step with his fellow Republicans, "most" of whom after 1861, McPherson claims, "wanted to turn [the] limited war to restore the Old Union into a revolutionary war to create a new nation purged of slavery" (*Abraham* 32). A specific example of how public opinion may have shaped Lincoln's actions at Gettysburg is provided by another contemporary context for the Gettysburg Address that is missing from Wills' account. In analyzing Lincoln's reasons for

going to Gettysburg, Wills first discusses the upcoming presidential election and the opportunity offered by Gettysburg for Lincoln to breach rifts between important Pennsylvania politicians. He then focuses his analysis of Lincoln's reasons for speaking upon the President's plans to do some "important business" there—namely, to use the "power of his rhetoric" to reshape war aims (26, 25). Wills' analysis of Lincoln's intentions thus completes the model of revolutionary agency suggested by the metaphors of his narrative of origins: Lincoln not only gives a watershed speech at Gettysburg, but also he *intended* to do precisely that in the first place. But Lincoln's trip to Antietam in the fall of 1862 provides another context for his decision to go to Gettysburg that complicates the picture of revolutionary agency that Wills presents. For in the time period immediately preceding the Gettysburg Address, rumors had been circulating that Lincoln acted badly when he visited the battlefield at Antietam by asking his aide to sing humorous songs as they walked among the suffering soldiers on the battlefield.<sup>20</sup> Fueled by opponents' perception of Lincoln as coarse and unfit for the presidency, these rumors circulated widely between his visit to Antietam in the fall of 1862 and his trip to Gettysburg in the fall of 1863. Appearing first in press reports, the rumors were later illustrated in political lithographs. Several commentators have noted that the accusations surrounding Lincoln's visit to Antietam wounded him deeply. Did Lincoln go to Gettysburg partly in reaction to these rumors, to restore his tarnished public image? A connection between the two events was noted by at least one contemporary reviewer, who believed that Lincoln's behavior at Gettysburg belied the rumors of improper behavior at Antietam. In *Macmillan's Magazine* for February 1865, Goldwin Smith posed the question, "Is it easy to believe that the man who had the native good taste to produce this address would be capable of committing gross indecencies, that he would call for comic songs to be sung over soldiers' graves?"<sup>21</sup> Certainly Lincoln's dignified performance at Gettysburg answered the rumors of impropriety better than any written refutation. And although being motivated by one's public image is something critics may feel more comfortable attributing to current politicians than to beloved figures of the past, it is not unlikely that a desire to clear his name contributed to Lincoln's decision to speak at Gettysburg. In any case, the widespread rumors about Lincoln's behavior at Antietam comprise another contemporary context for his speech at Gettysburg—one that complicates the confident figure Wills presents by hinting at the complexity of human motivation and the mutual lines of influence between Lincoln and his public.

### Conclusion: Historicizing Lincoln—and His Public

By presenting the Gettysburg Address in terms of a narrative of origins, Wills suggests a particular interpretation of the rhetorical relationship between



Lincoln and his audience that casts an active President in bold relief against a passive audience. With full confidence in the power of oratory and the efficacy of the individual historical agent, Wills writes confidently of the revolution created by the Gettysburg Address, the words that "remade America." But the contexts examined above suggest that the relationship between Lincoln and his public was more complex than Wills' narrative of origins suggests. Elsewhere, in analyzing Lincoln's wartime influence, James McPherson writes that the President's speeches "marked" America's transition from a "loose union" to a nation (*Abraham* viii). McPherson's word choice suggests a more moderated claim for Lincoln's influence that pays tribute to the importance of Lincoln's addresses as indicators of evolving national sentiment, even as it hints at the difficulty of untangling the intricate lines of influence through which texts both shape—and are shaped by—their contexts. Others have represented Lincoln's relationship to his public in still different terms. In analyzing the Lincoln-Douglas debates, David Zarefsky describes Lincoln's "high opinion" of his audience and his expectations that they could follow "nuances of law and political philosophy" (*Lincoln* 234). He envisions the relationship between Lincoln and his audience less in terms of a speaker or magician exercising power over an audience and more in terms of a dialectical interaction between speaker and audience that creates a "public realm of common concern" (237). Still elsewhere, in discussing Lincoln's pose as a "homespun storyteller," P. M. Zall discusses Lincoln's frequent borrowings from popular folk tales, newspapers, and magazines, and summarizes Lincoln's relationship with his audience in a single word—*symbiotic* (13). Revealing different interpretations of Lincoln's relationship with the American public, these opinions also imply different understandings of how history is made—and how it is best represented.

In *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Peter Burke suggests that in the narration of political events, "it is difficult to avoid emphasizing the deeds and decisions of the leaders, which furnish a clear story line, at the expense of the factors which escaped their control" (235). In the analysis above, I have indicated how factors other than Lincoln's deeds at Gettysburg contributed to the evolution of the nation's attitudes toward the Declaration and to its status in relation to other national texts and ideals. First, I have shown that Wills' narrative of origins figures a certain interpretation of the rhetorical relationship between Lincoln and his audience that tends to underestimate both the sophistication of Lincoln's public and the complexity of public opinion concerning the status of the Declaration and its relation to understandings of nation. Second, I have suggested that Wills' narrative tends to emphasize high culture influences at the expense of the cultural work done by others, as, for example, when Wills places Lincoln's Address in the tradition of classical Greek funeral orations without considering the more immediate context of

American Fourth-of-July speeches. Indeed, by ultimately funneling the lines of causality from Lincoln downward to his public, Wills creates a tension in his analysis between the intent to set Lincoln's Address in its cultural frame and the presentation of a rather traditional, "Great Men/Great Events" form of historical narrative reflected in the two nouns comprising the title to his book—"Lincoln" at "Gettysburg." But the implication of my analysis for the role of narrative in historical writing is not to suggest that one must make a choice between a Great Men/Great Events conception of historical agency or one of complete relativism. Nor is it to imply that one must abandon the category of historical causality altogether. Rather, my analysis of Wills' figuration of Lincoln serves to illustrate how certain narratives can marginalize sources that would complicate their representation of historical causality.

My account also suggests two opposing explanations for the "canonization" of Lincoln's address. The first, suggested by Wills' emplotment of Gettysburg in terms of a narrative of origins, makes a strong claim for the revolutionary nature of that address. According to this account, Lincoln delivers at Gettysburg a speech that changes the American public's attitudes toward the Declaration and the Constitution by offering both its contemporary audience and later generations of Americans a revolutionary new vision of the nation. The canonization of Lincoln's address comes about, then, as the public catches up with Lincoln, adopts his understanding of the Declaration as the nation's founding document, and uses that document as the context through which to read other national texts and ideals. This version of the canonization of Lincoln's address suggests that as the revolutionary stature of Lincoln's speech is fully appreciated, the Address assumes its rightful place in the nation's canon of leading texts. The second explanation for the canonization of Lincoln's speech makes only a weak claim for the revolutionary status of the Gettysburg Address. In fact, this version questions the revolutionary status of Lincoln's speech in relation to its contemporary contexts, especially in relation to the ongoing national conversation about the nation's founding principles in general and the longstanding popular veneration for the Declaration in particular. At Gettysburg, according to this interpretation, Lincoln presents an exceedingly well-crafted address that in the words of one contemporary reviewer, powerfully captures "the very spirit of the day."<sup>22</sup> Lincoln's speech afterwards comes to stand out in ever sharper relief for succeeding generations of Americans as the contemporary contexts of that address fade from public memory. Gradually Lincoln's speech becomes identified more and more as the source—or origin—of the attitudes it embodies. As the words of other, less-famous Americans are forgotten, Lincoln's come to be seen as more and more "revolutionary," and indeed, as the very words that "remade America." Over time, then, and for a whole variety of reasons, only some of which were controlled by Lincoln himself, Lincoln's address becomes part of the nation's canon of leading texts

and thereby to provide an interpretive framework for generations that follow. If by "revolutionary" Wills meant to limit his claim to this second sense of "coming to provide over time an interpretative framework for understanding nationhood," then his claim for the revolutionary status of the Gettysburg Address would seem plausible, although not, finally, all that revolutionary. But because Wills' narrative of origins figures a stronger sense of revolutionary causality in its casting of the speech as a "giant (if benign) swindle" (38), his claims for the revolutionary status of the Address are highly exaggerated.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, only a full-fledged reception study of the Gettysburg Address could hope to explain the complex social process through which Lincoln's short speech at Gettysburg—summarized in some contemporary reports merely as the President's "few remarks"—was to become canonized as the "Gettysburg Address."<sup>24</sup> Certainly the power of Lincoln's language and the influence of his position played important roles in that process. But just as certainly, so did other factors such as the outcome of the war and the president's assassination, which would help to transform Lincoln from one of the most unpopular American presidents to perhaps its most popular. The popular contexts for the Gettysburg Address examined here suggest that in emphasizing Lincoln's achievement, one should be careful not to underestimate his audience or to lose sight of that long line of Americans—escaped slaves, women's-rights activists, working men and women, novelists—who appealed to the Declaration in arguing their rights to justice and equality long before Gettysburg and who therefore had their own parts to play in rewriting our national text. Indeed, to appreciate Lincoln as one of many nineteenth-century Americans caught up in a literal—and figurative—battle over America's founding principles is not to denigrate Lincoln's achievement. But it does problematize arguments that tend to reduce developmental change to mysterious, watershed moments or to single acts of "sleight of hand."

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fernand Braudel, 11. White characterizes the *Annales* school as "socio-scientifically oriented" in discussing the group's criticism of narrative history, 31. Incidentally, for their useful advice on earlier drafts of this essay, I am grateful to *RR* referees Keith Miller, Ed Schiappa, and Kirt Wilson.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Lincoln, 4 April 1864 letter to Albert G. Hodges, *Collected Works*, 7:282.

<sup>3</sup> White's history of this debate covers, of course, more positions than those mentioned in this essay. In his project to "characterize the discussions of narrative in historical theory that have taken place over the last two or three decades" (30-31), White offers an original classification of the approaches taken by theorists to narrative in historical discourse and identifies five "principal strains" associated with Anglo-American analytical philosophers, socioscientific historians, semiologically oriented literary theorists, hermeneutically oriented philosophers, and practicing historians who speak not theoretically but from the "doxa of the profession" (31). White's classification of positions should be supplemented by Peter Burke's recent collection of essays on the "revival of narrative" in historical writing. Burke's collection provides critical overviews of several subfields in the New History and demonstrates Burke's thesis that the earlier "abandonment" of narrative has led to a search "for new forms of narrative which will be appropriate to the new stories historians would like to tell" (Peter Burke, "History of Events and the Revival of Narrative," in *New Perspectives On Historical Writing*,

245). For an account of how historians of rhetoric have responded to the question of how to write history, see *Writing Histories of Rhetoric*, ed. Victor Vitanza, and the special forum on historiography that was chaired by James J. Murphy and subsequently published in *Rhetoric Review* in 1988.

<sup>4</sup> See White's discussion of the concepts of "willing backwards" (150) and of "emplotment" (172-73).

<sup>5</sup> David Zarefsky, for example, reviews five books published since 1990 that offer what he calls "Rhetorical Interpretations of the American Civil War." For articles on the rhetoric of the Gettysburg Address itself, see especially Barbara Warnick, "A Ricoeurian Approach to Rhetorical Criticism," and Edwin Black, "Gettysburg and Silence." My own approach to Wills' study is indebted to Warnick, who applies Ricoeurian hermeneutics to Lincoln's Address, and is in agreement with Zarefsky, who states that "it is questionable whether Lincoln invented a completely new conception of America" (118). However, my reading of the Address as part of a larger cultural conversation opposes Black's contention that the Address "grows from silence. It imposes its own order without reference to any other text" (31).

<sup>6</sup> Ricoeur's interest is not primarily with grammatical features of narrative, but with the "plot" or *figurative* interpretation that is "grasped" together by the writer. For Ricoeur's discussion of emplotment as a "grasping together" of events through symbolic mediation, see *Time and Narrative*, 1:41-42.

<sup>7</sup> See *Anti-Racism in U.S. History: The First Two Hundred Years*, in which Herbert Aptheker argues that antiracist thought among white Americans has a long history in America that is sometimes minimized by historians. In his effort to recover the record of white antiracist thought, Aptheker documents the Declaration's important early role in providing a foundation for egalitarian belief and action.

<sup>8</sup> For example, in "To the American People" from the "Minutes of the Fifth Annual Convention of 1835," representatives express their conception of the Declaration as the founding principle upon which the nation was formed and from which it had moved: "We plead for the extension of those principles on which our government was formed, that it in turn may become purified from those iniquitous inconsistencies into which she has fallen by her aberration from first principles; that the laws of our country may cease to conflict with the spirit of that sacred instrument, the Declaration of American Independence," Bell, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864* (June 5, 1855).

<sup>9</sup> Douglass, of course, broke from his earlier alliance with Garrison. John Blassingame points out that Douglass announced his changed view of the Constitution on May 9, 1851, at a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in Syracuse, New York (2:350, n. 17). The status of the Constitution as an antislavery document becomes thereafter an important theme in Douglass's addresses, as he attempts to distance himself from Garrisonians and to make his own position unmistakable. See especially his 19 March 1855 speech in Rochester, New York, in which he defines the various "sects" of antislavery and condemns the Garrisonians for "confirming the opinion, that the U. S. Constitution is, and was, intended to be a slave-holding instrument," while confirming his own view that the "Constitution is, according to its reading, an Anti-Slavery document" (3:43).

<sup>10</sup> In discussing Wills' tendency to draw his lines of causality downward, I exclude chapter two, where Wills provides a description of the nineteenth century's "culture of death" as a context for Lincoln's speech.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed analysis of the important role black rhetors played in promoting the status of the Declaration and in shaping American egalitarian discourse, see chapter four of Condit and Lucaites' *Crafting Equality: America's Anglo-African Word*.

<sup>12</sup> For a history and description of Fourth-of-July celebrations, see *The Glorious Fourth: An American Holiday, An American History* by Diana Karter Applebaum.

<sup>13</sup> "Fourth-of-July at Sylvania," *Tribune*, July 8, 1843; cited by Anne Rose, 155-56.

<sup>14</sup> The relationship of the Fourth to abolitionism and to African-Americans is complex. It seems that whatever one's attitudes were toward the nation's founding documents, the Fourth of July provided a forum for their expression. (And in fact Garrison will burn the Constitution at a Fourth-of-July celebration.) It should be noted that while many African-Americans appealed to the primacy of the Declaration in their Fourth speeches, many also revealed a "double-consciousness" in regard to the Fourth itself. See Bernard Bell's "The African-American Jeremiad and Frederick Douglass' Fourth-of-July 1852 Speech," which discusses both Douglass's affirmation of the Declaration and the "great

principles it contains" and his awareness that because those principles were not applied equally to all, the Fourth was not equally significant to all.

<sup>15</sup> Douglass is quoted from *The Douglass Monthly*, 1861, by Quarles, who details the part played by antebellum blacks "to make sure the Declaration of Independence would be one aspect of the American past that would remain an inescapable commitment, a mandate not forgotten" (24). Quarles notes African-Americans' repeated appeals to the Declaration to argue their rights, including the right to vote, the right to publish a weekly, the right to serve in the militia, the right to attend public schools, and the right to use public transportation, among others.

<sup>16</sup> See William E. Barton for a detailed description of the events surrounding Lincoln's July 7 speech, 27-30. See also Diana Karter Applebaum for a description of the Fourth of July in 1863, 93-95.

<sup>17</sup> McPherson, *Abraham*, 42. While analyzing the various ways in which the Civil War can be spoken of as the "Second American Revolution" and the important roles Lincoln played in this revolution, McPherson emphasizes that "It was *the war itself*, not the ideological blueprints of Lincoln or any other leader, that generated the radical momentum that made it a second American revolution" (42-43).

<sup>18</sup> *The Struggle for Equality*, 81. My discussion of the "signs of the time" immediately preceding Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is indebted to this study, which includes a chapter on "Emancipation and Public Opinion, 1861-1862."

<sup>19</sup> Roy P. Basler, 43. Douglass visited Lincoln in July 1863; and again the next year on August 19, 1864 (Basler 50).

<sup>20</sup> The currency of this rumor is discussed by Barton, who thinks Lincoln "wanted to go to Gettysburg under conditions that would make another such report impossible" (53), and by Holzer, Boritt, and Neely, Jr. (73). Barton describes Lincoln as "cut to the heart" by the rumors (53), while Holzer, Boritt, and Neely, Jr., describe the President as "deeply hurt"—and disturbed enough to compose a lengthy refutation of the news accounts (63).

<sup>21</sup> Cited by Barton, 117.

<sup>22</sup> This comment appeared on Monday, November 23, 1863, in the *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*. Cited by Barton, 119.

<sup>23</sup> The contemporary reaction to Lincoln's speech was mixed and strongly influenced by that period's highly partisan press. Barton notes that while the *Providence Journal* called it an "admirable speech" (118), the *Patriot and Union* of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, summarized it as "the silly remarks of the President" (115). To a surprising degree, Lincoln's speech went unremarked or was referred to only briefly, especially in comparison to the extended coverage that Everett's almost two-hour address received. Overseas, the *London Times* judged that "anything more dull and commonplace . . . wouldn't be easy to produce" (116). While other commentators looked more favorably on Lincoln's speech and especially upon its literary qualities, it is clear that Lincoln's remarks at Gettysburg did not seem to the majority of contemporary reviewers "revolutionary" in content.

<sup>24</sup> What is needed is a reception study of the Gettysburg Address along the lines of Merrill D. Peterson's recent study, *Lincoln in American Memory*.

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