

# Lincoln and Whitman as Representative Americans

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A way of life like American democracy has no predestined shape, and when we call historical persons representative, because they helped to make us what we are, we generally mean that in their time they were exceptional. Abraham Lincoln, a lawyer, state legislator in Illinois, and one-term congressman who became president, and Walter Whitman, a journeyman printer, newspaper editor, and journalist who became a great poet, were extraordinary in what they achieved. They were extraordinary too, it may seem to us looking back, in the marks of personality that they left in their smallest gestures. Yet the thing about both men that strikes an unprejudiced eye on first acquaintance is their ordinariness. This is an impression that persists, and that colors our deeper knowledge of both. By being visibly part of a common world they inherited, even as they were movers of a change that world had only begun to imagine, they enlarged our idea of the discipline and the imagination of democracy. The accomplishment in all its intensity cannot be separated from a particular moment in our history. The great works of Lincoln and Whitman belong to the 1850s--Lincoln's emergence as a national figure comes in the speech of 1854 on the Kansas-Nebraska Act; Whitman's self-discovery comes in 1855 with the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. What was special about those years?

In the 1850s in America, the feelings of citizens were turned back with a shock again and again, to one terrible, magnetic, and central issue. This was the national argument--already in places a violent struggle--over the possibility of the spread of slavery. The future of slavery and freedom had been an issue in recent memory in the 1840s, when people asked how to dispose of the lands taken in the war with Mexico--a debate in which Lincoln participated as a congressman, strongly and eloquently dissenting from the war policy of President Polk. The same issue confronted the nation again and more starkly with the Kansas-Nebraska legislation of 1854 which repealed the Missouri Compromise and opened free territories to the owners of slaves. All through these years, the free citizens of the Union had felt the weight of the Fugitive Slave Law, which required law-abiding persons in the free states to return escaped slaves to their masters. The law raised a question for the accomplice as well as the master and the slave. Am I free in a country that uses the power of the state to compel me to assist in the capture of a human being who has risked his life for freedom? These things were sifted deeply in those years, and not by Lincoln and Whitman alone. There has not been another time when so searching an inquest drew so many ingenuous minds to discuss the basis in law and morality of the life we share.

Both Lincoln and Whitman were part of a radical current of opinion that started out in dissent. In reading about their lives, you sometimes sense a peculiar self-confidence, as of people who know they have company in their beliefs. You can feel it plainly when you read their writings, if you turn from the doctrine and listen to the pitch of the words. Though the thunder comes when they need it, they are both of them, by practice and almost by temperament, soft-spoken writers. But they know that they are not alone; they know that someone is listening. A text from Whitman: "Whoever degrades another degrades me." And from Lincoln: "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy." The two statements have morally the same meaning. American slavery, they say, is a concomitant of American democracy, and is its degradation and betrayal. The work of democracy in these years will be to resist that betrayal and save the constitutional system from destruction. In this contest the enemy is a selfishness so perfect that it would preserve a freedom to treat other persons as property. This then is the cause; but the motive of resistance is deeper. It comes from an idea of the self which--like the sense of property cherished by the slave power--could only have arisen in a democracy.

Both Lincoln and Whitman were familiar with an older and largely hostile tradition of response to the democratic character. Plato, who did not invent that tradition, gave it memorable formulation in book 8 of the *Republic* and elsewhere, and the echoes can be felt as late as Tocqueville's strictures on the propensity of Americans for bargaining and mutual adaptation. The typical dweller in a democracy is gregarious, good-natured, conciliatory, socialized, enormously apt in the use of language (perhaps in a

way that cheapens language by rendering it always negotiable), self-absorbed and yet precisely attuned to the pleasures and pains of others, full of seductiveness and a curious readiness to be seduced. This may be a partial portrait yet it is true enough to suggest a likeness in the personality of many Americans. Think of your own example; I am thinking of one. Whomever we call to mind, we may find on analysis that a part of us appreciates the very trait another part despises. This ambivalence is natural: people in a democratic culture aspire to something besides democracy, something even beyond the fulfillment of the democratic character. It is a paradox of manners that Whitman and Lincoln know well and confirm by their own observations. All of the people want to be respected as the people, yet each wants not to be known merely as one of the people. Huey Long, the governor of Louisiana during the great depression, and an instinctive and brilliant demagogue, captured the sentiment exuberantly in the campaign slogan "Every man a king." Do we in no way agree? And if you think that the phrase is sheer sloganeering, consider the satisfaction we take in the sort of democratic scene Whitman describes in his introduction to *Leaves of Grass*. Speaking of "the common people," he praises "the fierceness of their roused resentment--their curiosity and welcome of novelty--their self-esteem and wonderful sympathy--their susceptibility to a slight--the air they have of persons who never knew how it felt to stand in the presence of superiors." Then, for illustration, he mentions a democratic custom: "the President's taking off his hat to them [to the people that is] and not they to him." The people do not know what it is to stand in the presence of a superior, yet it seems to them a natural gesture when the president salutes them. They are the gracious equal to whom he owes an unquestioned deference.

It is an ideal scene, "the President's taking off his hat to them and not they to him"--none the less ideal for its origin in actual experience. But notice that it exhibits a practice of virtue (chivalric virtue) as much as it does a performance of equality in manners. Readers of *Democratic Vistas*--the prose work of social criticism that Whitman published in 1867 and 1868, in which on the whole he speaks as a friend of modernity--have sometimes wondered at the note of awe with which this modern author speaks of the Crusades. Maybe we have a clue in his appreciation of the President's taking off his hat to the people. The dignity, the generosity and sensitivity to points of honor, the sense of a grace of life that cannot be bought, all of which belong to chivalry, are to be transplanted into the New World as attributes of the people. The salute will not be exchanged between one exemplar and another of crusading valor, but between the representative of the people and the people themselves. The distance and deference and pride of station that went with the older virtues have all somehow been preserved. Whitman, who was a subtler psychologist than Huey Long, suggests that since kings are beneath us now, the ideal of democratic life may have become Every man a knight.

Two traits, says Whitman, essential to the practice of democracy are individuality and what he calls "adhesiveness." We might translate his terms as self-sufficiency and a comradely sympathy; and under those names they sound like modern qualities. But the pervading virtues that will always accompany them--again, if we can judge by Whitman's examples--are the older virtues of gentleness and courage. It is because our aspirations have been raised so high that we fear the conduct of the people may grow vicious and their judgments corrupt. For the ruin of the people brings a disgrace more terrible than the ruin of kings. Lincoln, in a letter of 1855, looked at the swelling constituency of the anti-immigrant party of his day and found his thoughts drifting to a gloomy speculation. "I am not a Know-Nothing," he begins.

That is certain. How could I be? How can any one who abhors the oppression of negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that "all men are created equal." We now practically read it "all men are created equal, except negroes." When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read "all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and catholics." When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty--to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy. So the old-world distrust of the tyranny of democratic opinion can be shared even by even so democratic a character as Abraham Lincoln. A democracy, he says, may be as slavish as a despotism, but it has the added evil of hypocrisy.

Much of Lincoln's writing and speaking between 1854 and 1859 will turn on the question whether the moral right and wrong of slavery can be decided by the will of a majority of voters. He was moved to an unusual show of anger, and the anger came close to denunciation, when he thought about Stephen Douglas's saying that the question of slavery should be simply settled by the rules of popular sovereignty.

Douglas liked to say, "I don't care if they vote slavery up or down," and as often as he said it, Lincoln would quote the words against him, with derision and a sense of baffled shame. Can the people do as they please in a matter of such interest to the conscience of human nature? Lincoln is compelled to admit that the majority can legally do so. But he thinks the constitutional founders were in principle opposed to slavery, and he finds his main evidence in the Declaration of Independence, in the words "all men are created equal." The will of the people at a given moment is not the standard of right and wrong. And Whitman shows the same readiness to criticize both practices and opinions to which the majority of the people may assent. He writes in *Democratic Vistas*: "Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us." And again: "The depravity of the business classes of our country is not less than has been supposed, but infinitely greater." And: "The magician's serpent in the fable ate up all the other serpents; and money-making is our magician's serpent, remaining to-day sole master of the field." Lincoln and Whitman respect the people too much to want to flatter them. They agree that democracy--to remedy evils it has itself brought into being--requires a self-respect more thoroughgoing than can be found in any other system of manners. The maintenance of democracy will be a task different in kind and harder than its founding.

Whitman traces a new democratic self-respect to "an image of completeness in separatism"; and he goes on, choosing his words awkwardly and vividly:

of individual personal dignity, of a single person, either male or female, characterized in the main, not from extrinsic acquirements or position, but in the pride of himself or herself alone; and, as an eventual conclusion and summing up, (or else the entire scheme of things is aimless, a cheat, a crash,) the simple idea that the last, best dependence is to be upon humanity itself, and its own inherent, normal, full-grown qualities, without any superstitious support whatever. If the equality of individuals is for Whitman the self-evident truth of democracy, it is a truth we all of us confirm every day by the link between body and soul. What does individual mean if not undividable? One body, one soul. "I believe in you my soul," Whitman writes in *Song of Myself*, "the other I am must not abase itself to you./ And you must not be abased to the other." The range of possible reference in these words is very wide. It may be the body speaking to the soul--the body must not be pressed by the soul to ascetic torments, even as its sensualism must not tamper with the soul's integrity. The words may also be those of a self speaking to any other self, or a world of spontaneous impulse addressing a necessary world of custom and habit.

In writing as he does about the integrity of body and soul, Whitman stands against a tendency that he calls realism. *Democratic Vistas*, in a surprising and memorable phrase, deplors "the growing excess and arrogance of realism." Evidently, Whitman has in mind the imperative to build a railroad and get rich fast, which has its correlatives in our own day. Realism is the voice that tells you to commodify yourself, to specialize your habits and feelings, to ride your personality in the current of things as they are, to do anything rather than stand still and think and look at the world for the sake of looking. By contrast the "unsophisticated conscience"--for it takes resolve to shed sophistication--is a result of prolonged and partly involuntary exposure to experience. Let me pause here to say a word for the kind of experience Whitman praises. It is the experience of a single person dwelling unseen among others--an experience, in fact, of anonymity. This condition ought to be a blessing in democracy, where it need not go with material deprivation, yet we are apt to regard it as a curse. Anonymity is a vital condition of individuality--perhaps the only such condition that requires the existence of a mass society. When, in section 42 of *Song of Myself*, Whitman hears "A call in the midst of the crowd" and feels that he is being summoned by name, and that he must deliver his message with "my own voice, orotund sweeping and final," it is a profoundly welcome moment because he is being called from an interval of non-recognition and his speaking now will derive power from the time when he was alone in the crowd. Such intervals are not a kind of novitiate. They are supposed by Whitman to recur in the lives of the renowned as well as the obscure, and their continual return is to him an assurance of sanity. The voice of *Song of Myself* rises from anonymity to the speech of "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos," but this is not to be conceived as an ascent from a humble to an exalted station. It is an emergence of individuality that could only happen to someone nursed in anonymity, and the occasion prompts his speech only because he is sure of passing back to anonymity. During the Civil War, Whitman did not fraternize with the great, did not seek to interview and write up the sage and serious opinions of statesmen, generals, ambassadors. He visited the sick and wounded at New-York Hospital, and served as a wound-dresser in the military hospitals in Washington, D.C. He eked out a living in the years of war by clerical work in the Army Paymaster's office

and clerkships in the Department of Interior and the Attorney General's office.

As it happened, he lived on the route that President Lincoln took to and from his summer lodgings, and in his book *Specimen Days* Whitman left a record of his impression of Lincoln. It stresses the commonness, almost anonymity, of the president as he passes by, but also his unsearchable depth.

The party makes no great show in uniform or horses. Mr. Lincoln on the saddle generally rides a good-sized, easy-going gray horse, is dress'd in plain black, somewhat rusty and dusty, wears a black stiff hat, and looks about as ordinary in attire, &c., as the commonest man....I see very plainly ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S dark brown face, with the deep-cut lines, the eyes, always to me with a deep latent sadness in the expression. We have got so that we exchange bows, and very cordial ones....Earlier in the summer I occasionally saw the President and his wife, toward the latter part of the afternoon, out in a barouche, on a pleasure ride through the city. Mrs. Lincoln was dress'd in complete black, with a long crape veil. The equipage is of the plainest kind, only two horses, and they nothing extra. They pass'd me once very close, and I saw the President in the face fully, as they were moving slowly, and his look, though abstracted, happen'd to be directed steadily in my eye. He bow'd and smiled, but far beneath his smile I noticed well the expression I have alluded to. None of the artists or pictures has caught the deep, though subtle and indirect expression of this man's face. There is something else there. The life that Whitman always went back to, even in the presence of great events and characters, was the life of an observer, an onlooker, with the patience to catch a subtle and indirect expression glimpsed by no one else.

His manner of looking at others has everything to do with his attitude toward himself. "Trippers and askers surround me," he says in section 4 of *Song of Myself*, "People I meet....the effect upon me of my early life...of the ward and city I live in....of the nation"; and he says of all these environing facts and circumstances, "They come to me days and nights and go from me again,/ But they are not the Me myself." There follows an unusual self-portrait:

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,  
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,  
Looks down, is erect, bends its arm on a certain impalpable rest,  
Looks with its sidecurved head curious what will come next,  
Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it.

It is a self portrait; but a portrait of what kind of self? Whitman has said that "the other I am" must not abase itself. But the person who lives as the crowd lives will always abase "what I am," which Whitman also calls "the Me myself," the self that stands apart from the trippers and askers, the pulling and hauling. Whitman's self therefore in this portrait stands apart from the work of pleasing others. He is, to repeat, a simple separate entity: what I am. The features of the portrait, which correspond to a pencil sketch that continues to appear in many editions of *Leaves of Grass*, have an expression of almost conscious aloofness. On the other hand, his clothes are plain, and the tilt of his head is inquisitive rather than rakish. He is wondering about himself as much as he is about those who are in the game full-time--the game of having things to do, titles to be known by, roles to be identified with--but he is in and out of it and often is able to stand and rest and watch.

Whitman has, and he encourages us to find in ourselves, the irony of the person who is not one thing--who, even to his own understanding, is composed of unseen parts--who can imagine that an event or experience may possibly alter what he is. The sequence of adjectives describing "what I am" is fascinating: "amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary." Amused, at what if not himself and at the likelihood, as he puts it elsewhere in the poem, that even now he discovers himself "on a verge of the usual mistake." But still, complacent, sufficiently pleased with his situation, not wanting to change it for another, and at this moment without ambition as a true observer must be. The game he is in and out of is filled with other people, their pleasures and pains: he is compassionating as one made what he is partly by susceptibility to them. And idle--a great theme of Whitman's--for to act in the world and seek an effect would be to blunt his finer sense of mobility and alertness. By the way that all these words round off the portrait, they explain the choice of the climactic word unitary. The poet has a special endowment--which yet he shares potentially with any democratic citizen-- and that is to be known by himself. One body, one soul.

His great book was called *Leaves of Grass* through all its editions. The title comes from a question early in *Song of Myself* about the meaning of life.

A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;

How could I answer the child?...I do not know what it is any more than he. As you know if you have ever watched children, the question is really (pointing to the grass) "This must mean something. (But what?)" The child assumes something that grown-ups also assume in their different ways. Because he plucked the grass, he is its owner; and an owner may create meaning; and the more meanings the better. And yet--we never stop being children--all of the meanings had better be specific. Whitman would like to cooperate and so he gives the child, gives us, a series of conjectures, which by their sheer variety confess that the truths they indicate will be partial. "I guess," Whitman says of the grass, "it must be the flag of my disposition"--whatever I feel is what I now I make it be. Or the grass is itself a child, "the produced babe of the vegetation." Or it is an image and shadow of divine things, to be read as a message from the Lord. Or an emblem of democracy: "Growing among black folks as among white,/ Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same." This is a catechism strangely appropriate to the questionings of a child, who, when he asks what, always also wants to know why things are? For example, if they come to be, can they cease to be? Are some more important than others? And will this die, now that I have picked it?

Whitman begins to answer the last question with a haunting line, "And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves." He continues in one of the greatest stretches of imaginative writing in our literature:

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,  
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,  
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.  
O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues!  
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.  
I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,  
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.  
What do you think has become of the young and old men?  
And what do you think has become of the women and children?  
They are alive and well somewhere;  
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,  
And if there ever was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,  
And ceased the moment life appeared.  
All goes onward and outward....and nothing collapses,  
And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.

He says it is lucky to die and means it is lucky to live--to know that one has lived, without scheme or plan, restrained but not cautious, unobtrusive, uninhibited. The good of death, not that it happens to us, but that it happens and we are part of a world of things that happen, comes then only to this, that one sort of life makes room for another while life itself persists. All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses.

This is Whitman's ethic of "inception" or beginnings: "Urge and urge and urge,/ Always the procreant urge of the world./ Out of the dimness opposite equals advance....Always substance and increase,/ Always a knit of identity...always distinction....always a breed of life." We would rather be part of something vital than part of something inert. In this light his creed seems one of entire and omnivorous acceptance. That is what it is, a free acceptance both ideal and physical among free persons, and Whitman connects it with a knowledge of identity that never can be fixed. He makes us feel all this in his address to the ocean:

You sea! I resign myself to you also....I guess what you mean,  
I behold from the beach your crooked inviting fingers,  
I believe you refuse to go back without feeling of me;  
We must have a turn together....I undress....hurry me out of sight of the land,  
Cushion me soft....rock me with billowy drowse,  
Dash me with amorous wet....I can repay you.  
Sea of stretched ground-swells!

Sea of breathing broad and convulsive breaths!  
Sea of the brine of life! Sea of unshovelled and always-ready graves!  
Howler and scooper of storms! Capricious and dainty sea!  
I am integral with you....I too am of one phase and of all phases.

A similar current of ecstatic power belongs to many parts of Song of Myself. The parts are almost self-contained, yet the whole is different and is greater than the parts. How often Whitman's ecstasy, his standing outside himself, becomes a standing in some other kind of being, or an inhabiting of a man or woman apparently far from him in society. His originality is to insist that such changes of feeling do not point to the inconsequence of a mind adrift. They offer occasions for a sympathetic imagining that is identical with self-invention.

Nobody would want to call Whitman a nationalist, in any but the most loose-fitting sense, but in Song of Myself he commemorates some heroic and singular deeds from American history. He does it unforgettably in the sections of the poem devoted to the Alamo and a frigate-fight of the revolutionary era; and again but more familiarly in domestic scenes like the one that shows him giving comfort to a runaway slave. These narrative or historical parts of the poem turn out to have a feature in common, namely that they are about self-sacrifice, and their nameless heroes are individuals who know how much they are giving up. They know that nothing is better than life. There is accordingly no bombast, no triteness of assurance. Whitman sums up the losses in the sea-battle, its deaths and amputations, in words of a simple finality: "These so....these irretrievable." He admires great actions and thinks that physical courage is to be prized, but seems to feel that in the presence of readers who know the full worth of life, the words of an elegy ought to be calm and unarousing. A life of independence and self-respect--that is the good to be sacrificed for, and not the honor of a glorious death. By the manner his words about death in battle, Whitman finds a way of persuading us that this is so. It is a grace he shares with Lincoln--something I hardly need to say.

Often in the course of Song of Myself, the poet seems in contact with the reader. A friend of mine said once and I think she was right: "You feel that he is in the room with you." The alternation of his whispers and prayers and enticements, with the strenuous catalogues and shorter glimpses of rural and urban life, seen close-up or in a medium shot or montage, "The blab of the pave....the tires of the cars and sluff of bootsoles and talk of the promenaders,/ The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the clank of the shod horses on the granite floor"--these blendings of energy give the poem its sweep and poise and its miraculous air of inclusiveness. Then come the closing sections and we seem suddenly to have entered a different climate. Every reader has felt this. The poet turns and talks to us now in a daily voice, as a person might stop to exchange a few words with a passerby. He has said a moment earlier, "I concentrate toward them that are nigh" (meaning us)--"I wait on the door-slab"--and by the way what an amazing and evocative word that is, "door-slab": the passage into a new home, or into the grave. Both meanings fit Whitman's conception that every life is the leavings of many deaths. But now, in the last verses of the poem, it is as if his death and our life were different names for the same occurrence. He says a gigantic farewell with no more ceremony than nature itself; he speaks to us as air, as breath:

I depart as air....I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,  
I effuse my flesh in eddies and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,  
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,  
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,  
I stop some where waiting for you.

This stop is not really an ending. A pause, rather, that awaits resumption in another voice akin to his. The poem remains as an incitement, in our own lives, ever to be rebegun. There could hardly be a finer or more intuitive way to tell us this. Whitman is telling us also that the author of Song of Myself was never the Walter Whitman who took out the copyright, who has renamed himself Walt and appeared just once, by that half-assumed name, in the middle of the poem. He has not said and did not mean to say "This is me." The author becomes any of a multitude of people who learn what he means by asking, without external help or support, "What is the grass?"; fetching it to ask that question, as now we must fetch him from the knit of identity in which we know that we too have been woven. Different readers of a poem as long as this will choose different lines as their favorites, but my candidate for now is line 577, which says in other words what Whitman's closing words have said: "Happiness, which whoever hears me let him or her set out in search of this day." The leaves of grass that are Walt Whitman, the flag of his disposition, out of green stuff woven, are, he says, to be discovered under our feet and in our lives, indeed they were there if only we thought to look. So the poem keeps its modest and extraordinary promise: "what I assume you shall assume." The signers of the Declaration of Independence, who were also interested in what they called happiness, really meant less no than that when they subscribed the mutual pledge of their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.

The rules or observances that cement society are largely implicit in a democracy, far more so than they are in any more hierarchical way of life, and so the tacit need for shared assumptions becomes correspondingly sharp. Lincoln, more conspicuously than Whitman, turned for moral guidance to the Declaration of Independence. He thought one could see the highest idealism of American democracy articulated in the words "all men are created equal." Throughout his early political career, he faced, in arguments by the slaveholders and their apologists in Congress, the counter-assertion that the founders meant by those words "all white men are created equal." As Stephen Douglas put it--a centrist by the standard of that time and by no means an abject apologist for slavery--the nation was "established by white men for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever." Now Lincoln is often and I think mistakenly described as a centrist or a moderate or a skillful pragmatist. Bear those words by Stephen Douglas in mind as you listen to Lincoln in 1857, in his Speech on the Dred Scott Decision, offering his own interpretation of the well-known phrase. The signers of the Declaration of Independence, he says,

defined with tolerable distinctness in what respects they did consider all men created equal--equal in "certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." This they said, and this they meant....They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere....They knew the proneness of prosperity to breed tyrants, and they meant when such should re-appear in this fair land and commence their vocation they should find left for them at least one hard nut to crack. The politician like the poet is a worker in words, though it seems fair to say they aim at widely different effects, the one to imagine the other to persuade. Still, let us not exaggerate the difference. The imaginative work that persuasion implied for a man with Lincoln's aims was immense, and it required him to help his listeners discover what it was that created the value of life for them. Most of us probably now agree with him on the meaning of the words in the Declaration. Few of those whom he spoke to could have been sure that they agreed. Those who were sure they disagreed felt no compunction in calling his interpretation perverse and heaping abuse on Lincoln for having even dared to venture it.

A hatred of violence and a love of liberty are the clues to Lincoln's political character. He believed that the history of slavery, in fact, was a history of violence under one name or another; that the only dangerous divisions in the United States ever since its founding had come from the contest over slavery; that the forced return of Dred Scott to his master and the sanctioning of it by the Supreme Court were only a logical and coercive extension of that constant violence. Nevertheless, he was for avoiding a war, the worst kind of violence because the most organized, a war whose result in any case could not be foreseen, so long as assurance was given that slavery would not expand and would be allowed to die a natural death. Until the firing on Fort Sumter by the guns of the confederacy, he reiterated his purpose of standing firm without surrendering persuasion to violence. "Where the conduct of men is designed to be influenced," he said in an early speech to a temperance society, "persuasion, kind, unassuming persuasion, should ever be adopted." But Lincoln's opposition to slavery was founded on something

deeper than his reading of the constitutional framers; it came from a settled belief about the constitution of human nature: "I hold if the Almighty had ever made a set of men that should do all the eating and none of the work, he would have made them with mouths only and no hands, and if he had ever made another class that he intended should do all the work and none of the eating, he would have made them without mouths and with all hands." Persuasion, however, as Lincoln knew well, does not operate just through fable or example or the counting of short and long-term benefits. It requires that we place ourselves in the situation of the people whom we would persuade--however disagreeable that may be when it obliges us to admit the irrational influence of custom and training. "I have no prejudice against the Southern people," says Lincoln in his Speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act. "They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist amongst them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up." When Lincoln speaks like this, he is engaged in a disagreeable and necessary act of sympathy. He is seeking to conciliate, and he is also telling the truth as he sees it.

And here we come to an uneasy fact--uneasy for people who like to divide the political world between saints and sinners--namely that Abraham Lincoln was a politician. By which I mean that he was a man of strong beliefs trying to change the thinking of people who began with very different strong beliefs. He aimed practically to pull them to his side without a hope of converting them to all of his views. The intensity of his dedication to this task at the peak of his powers was astonishing. In 1857 and 1858, even before the famous series of debates, he tramped up and down the state of Illinois in the footsteps of Stephen Douglas, arriving in a town sometimes a few hours and sometimes a few days after Douglas spoke. He would set the people right whose judgment Douglas was trying to bribe. For he believed that by obtaining the passage of the Nebraska act, Douglas had sold out the constitutional principle that slavery is the enemy of freedom. Yet Lincoln knew that many who agreed about this would disagree with the abolitionists that slavery was so intolerable an evil that it ought to be abolished at once. And they would disagree with him and among themselves about the appropriate policy to adopt toward the slaves once freed. I want now to quote some well-known words in their full context, to show what persuasion in politics means. As citizens, we should be interested in the dialogue these words imply between our present or ideal views and the existing opinions of people whose starting point is quite unlike our own. Here then is Lincoln, in the Speech on the Kansas Nebraska Act, asking what will be the relation between black and white races once slavery has been abolished. He has begun by rejecting colonization for the time being as impracticable, and, as he goes on, we can hear him thinking aloud, a practice in which he excelled every politician who ever lived. "What next?" he asks in this speech of 1854.

Free them, and make them politically and socially, our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not. Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment, is not the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill founded, cannot be safely disregarded. So he leaves himself and his audience with a perplexity that is to be worked on. A profound central truth of democracy is that slavery is wrong--Lincoln once wrote that "if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong"--but when pressed to say what will follow once slavery is abolished, he confesses that he does not know.

His hope, before the war changed everything, was to put slavery "in course of ultimate extinction"--a phrase he repeated again and again with little variation. It took the coming of the war, on terms that made the president appear a constitutional leader and not a fanatic, and it took the visible contribution on the Union side of Negro soldiers against the slave power, to move what he had called a "universal feeling" against racial equality a long way toward the acceptance of former slaves as fellow citizens. The record of the extent of that change is eloquent in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments to the Constitution. But it would not be right to conclude that the war and its necessities alone changed the shape of the nation's self-understanding. When we look closely at Lincoln's speeches and writings of the 1850s, what we see is the persuasive conduct of a leader, whether or not he occupies a national office. He is already preparing the minds of his fellow citizens for a momentous change. And he contrives to do so even while serving as a publicist of the principles of his party. He uses, for example, the occasion of a festival in Boston honoring the birthday of Thomas Jefferson, which he cannot attend, to compose a public letter in praise of Jefferson. He asserts in this letter of 1859 that the Republican party of his day has become the true successor of the Democratic party of earlier years; since the Democrats now hold the liberty of one man to be "nothing, when in conflict with another man's right of property. Republicans, on the contrary, are for both the man and the dollar; but in cases of conflict, the man before the dollar." It is a

catch-phrase and a good one, but it conceals a radicalism stronger than we may recognize at first. Really to put the man before the dollar would be to admit the wickedness not just of slavery but of the factory system and the ethic of money-making whose effects we have heard Whitman testify to a few years after the war.

But there came a time before the war itself when Lincoln felt it necessary to speak of slavery from the point of view of the slave. He is at his firmest again in the Speech on the Dred Scott Decision, where, for the first time, he asks his white listeners to imagine the slave not as an other, but as another self--a "Me myself" or "what I am," to borrow Whitman's language--subject to a degradation without end, trapped in wheel within wheel of legal mystification and political compromise, a soul forever cut off from a body's experience of freedom.

All the powers of earth seem rapidly combining against him. Mammon is after him; ambition follows, and philosophy follows, and the Theology of the day is fast joining the cry. They have left him in his prison-house; they have searched his person, and left no prying instrument with him. One after another they have closed the heavy iron doors upon him, and now they have him, as it were, bolted in with a lock of a hundred keys, which can never be unlocked without the concurrence of every key; the keys in the hands of a hundred different men, and they scattered to a hundred different and distant places. In listening to these words, the free man or woman is asked to feel with the slave by virtue of nothing but a common humanity.

Look far ahead now to the middle year of the war--six years is not a long a time as we normally reckon, but in 1863 the world had been turned upside-down--and hear Lincoln as he utters the other half of the same appeal. The occasion is an open letter to a group of anti-war Democrats, whose real objection is not to the war but the Emancipation Proclamation. The abolitionist cause has now become an almost self-evident argument against white people who cannot admit a common humanity with the slave. "Peace," writes Lincoln in his letter to James C. Conkling, on August 26, 1863,

Peace does not appear so distant as it did. I hope it will come soon, and come to stay; and so come as to be worth the keeping in all future time....And then, there will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue, and clinched teeth, and steady eye, and well-poised bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation; while, I fear, there will be some white ones, unable to forget that, with malignant heart, and deceitful speech, they have strove to hinder it. Lincoln describes the value of individuality and solidarity by showing what they are not.

Yet the anti-slavery principle is not the central element of Lincoln's thought. More primary and radical is the principle that was called in his time free labor--the name of a political movement and also of a common-sense demand, that every man and woman should be accorded the power of obtaining adequate pay for work of any kind. The end in view is a society where one moves from working for someone else to working for oneself and to employing others in turn. This is the promise of democratic activity--we might say of democratic energy--and Lincoln goes out of his way to associate it with education. A speech of 1859 about the ethics of labor directs itself against the so-called "mud-sill" theory of the inevitability of a degraded work force. Lincoln rejects the assumption that labor is not compatible with education. He was largely self-educated and knew as he exemplified the value of genuine learning; he had worked his way from the humblest trades to achieve the highest office in the land. The subject understandably provokes him to rewrite his fable of the body. With the slave and the master it was the hands and the mouth. Now, with labor and education, it is the hands and the head: "Free labor argues that, as the Author of man makes every individual with one head and one pair of hands, it was probably intended that heads and hands should cooperate as friends; and that that particular head, should direct and control that particular pair of hands." The result of cultivating thought in the worker will be what Lincoln calls "thorough work." Every man and woman will become a virtuoso whose virtue is a particular kind of job well done. Word for word perhaps, Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address is as great a work in writing as democracy has to show, but no piece of it is more characteristic than the phrase "let us strive on to finish the work we are in." War, we know, presents a field of exercise that by a forced collaboration may bring out the best in the energies of men. Peace offers a scene of labor more naturally suited to equal division. Command and performance now have the time to be a thorough product of consultation and free discussion.

Lincoln--it comes as a constant surprise in so melancholy a man--was a great believer in human progress.

But he asks us to beware of our inventions and our inventiveness. As he noticed once in a speech on discoveries, slavery too was a human invention, a saver of time and maker of leisure for some, but not for that reason worth all the evil it brought. In every epoch we need distinctive moral helps to fortify us in the battle against the evils of that epoch. The mere belief in progress is not enough. "History," observes Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*, "is long, long, long. Shift and turn the combinations as we may, the problem of the future of America is in certain respects as dark as it is vast." This seems not less true when we read it today as a sentence about ourselves. I share the sentiment indeed so fully that I hope I have not allowed the ultimate optimism of Lincoln and Whitman to color an account of the dark time in which they lived. But as heroes go, persons distinctive to an age yet reaching beyond it, they seem to me as admirable as any we are likely to get. As for the prejudice now among educated people against the very idea of heroes, it seems to me fundamentally mistaken. The unmasking of great men and women, true as a tactic, is false as a discipline. By proving you contingently superior to the most admirable examples from the past, it deprives you of a weapon of criticism and a wellspring of hope. It fosters not the love of perfection but moral snobbery and self-satisfaction, and only adds to the growing excess and arrogance of realism. Can we express the morality of true democracy better than Whitman and Lincoln did? "Whoever degrades another degrades me." "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy."