

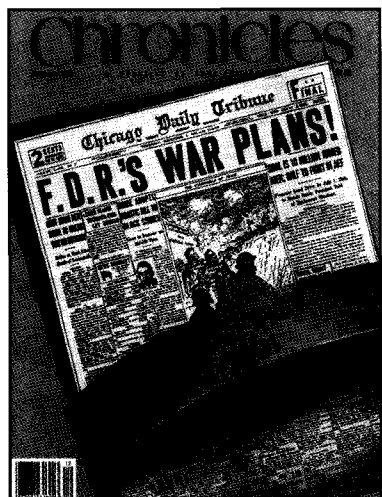
From the Family of the Lion

by M.E. Bradford

*"There is a kind of revolution of so general a character
that it changes the tastes as well as the fortunes of the world."*

—La Rochefoucauld

There is a popular myth of Abraham Lincoln, our 16th President, that is known to most Americans. According to the orthodox version of this highly sympathetic construct, Lincoln was a plain and honest fellow, called by other plain, uncalculating men to preserve the handiwork of the Fathers, the Old Republic, perfecting that inheritance in the process of keeping it together. This Lincoln is no illustration of frenzied ambition, but rather a simple soul who had stumbled first into the practice of law and then into Illinois politics. He hated war but was determined to honor a trust put into his hands, even if that commitment meant more killing than in all other American wars put together. A reluctant and gentle conqueror, he stood ready, once secession had ended, to welcome the South back into the national family: like the father in the parable, rejoicing at the return of foolish children. Such is the Lincoln who grew melancholy in thinking of what blacks endured and who "died to make them free." This Father Abraham, the sad man of Illinois, the prairie republican/Republican, in his spirit still hovers over this nation, giving direction and encouragement to successive generations of his countrymen. Of his early life we know that he identified with the poor, that he read by firelight, lost his sweetheart, deplored the Mexican War, and served a frontier community as a member of the state legislature and the U.S. Congress. As a spokesman for wholesome, local ways, he debated Stephen Douglas. And he truly suffered in presid-



Anna Mrycek-Wolcicki

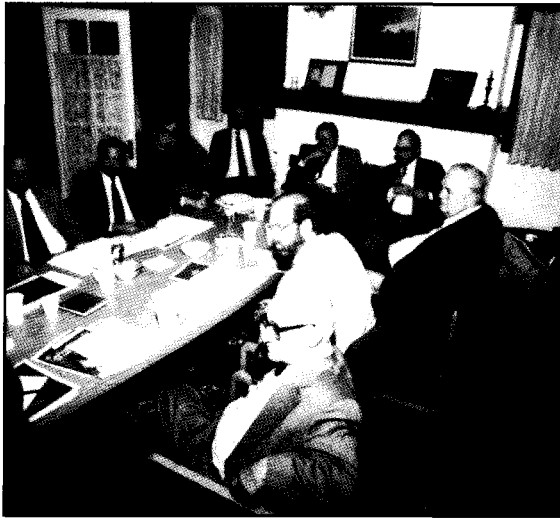
ing over his country at war, spending blood only with agonized reluctance—certainly with no idea of reshaping its social and political order so as to make of it a vehicle for his private dreams of what power in the state might accomplish. So goes the myth.

In making, over a period of two decades, a series of scholarly objections to the distortion and oversimplification embodied in this myth, I had the pleasure of being treated briefly as the object of national puzzlement and irritation. For about five weeks I was cast as the leading villain in a political melodrama of what a public servant is allowed to believe: anathema because of what I said about the American past. Obviously, what I thought of Lincoln was not the real issue behind this affected and rhetorical outrage at my political heresy. But to my surprise, it is now evident that in most fashionable academic neighborhoods my understanding of Lincoln as transforming agent (which is, in essence, Willmoore Kendall's view of the evidence) has come all the way around to seem not at all farfetched. Or at least that is true of the descriptive component of my analysis.

James M. McPherson's *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* summarizes the current trend in interpretive historiography on this subject. His Lincoln is a radical refounder of the "Old Republic of the Fathers," like the "lion" and "eagle" of which Lincoln had first spoken in his 1838 "Springfield Lyceum Speech"; an American Caesar who, in McPherson's phrase, through "his own superb leadership, strategy, and sense of timing . . . determined the pace of the revolution [of 1860] and ensured its success." Arguing more or less to the same effect, Carl N. Degler in the *New York Times* last February 12 maintained that Lincoln was the American Bismarck and that "What the [Civil] War represented, in the end, was the forceful incorporation of the South into a newly created nation." Which, in both cases, is what I have argued all the time.

However, there is one big difference between McPherson's Lincoln and what the record should lead us to conclude. For McPherson believes that all of this refounding by policy, construction, demagoguery, and force of arms was wonderful to behold, pointing toward a "more perfect Union" than even James Madison could have imagined. In other words, he likes what the United States, as a political construct, has become better than he likes what it was. Those who do not, on balance, share in his enthusiasm for the present configuration of our political system in omniscient government obviously will not agree with McPherson's evaluation of Lincoln's handiwork; those who differ with him about a "new birth of freedom" brought about by violation of contract will see a rejection of the terms of that contract in the accomplishments at Gettysburg, at Atlanta, and at Appo-

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*From left:
David Gordon,
Paul Gottfried,
Samuel Francis,
Michael Warder,
Allan Carlson,
George Resch,
Mel Bradford,
Lew Rockwell,
and Murray Rothbard.*

mattox Court House. McPherson's Lincoln "as he seems to us now" is a summary figure in one of the great American political traditions, that heritage which affirms the growing power of Leviathan to achieve ends and purposes it thinks proper, to apply its rhetoric and its energy to reshape the recalcitrant material of the body politic. In this system what seems fit according to some extrinsic philosophical or moral standard is also lawful, regardless of what Constitution and statute leave to the irregular operations of free choice among constituent members. McPherson clearly belongs to that tradition. Those who measure the history of American politics against the paradigm of the old Constitution, or who affirm in public life no more regulation than what that document, as amended, permits will not, however, be at ease with McPherson on Lincoln's version of liberty, of unconditional surrender, implied powers, and revolutionary transformation cum preservation of the Union. Such Americans as are put off by this intrusive paradigm will not have so sanguine a view of Mr. Lincoln. For they come out of another American political tradition, the one which gave us our original Constitution and Bill of Rights. For them the Emancipator will always seem to be a crafty manipulator of men's emotions, a great incendiary, and almost a tyrant. Nothing in McPherson's evidence dislodges me from membership in this second company.

McPherson's arguments for Lincoln as a second Founder is based on an analysis of the "scope and meaning of revolutionary transformations in both substance and process wrought by the Civil War" and "Lincoln's leadership in

accomplishing these changes." McPherson doesn't dwell on the formal characteristics of the original Republic, what defined it before Mr. Lincoln came along. But he is serious about the word "revolution." Of what happened when the South was defeated and how Lincoln shaped that victory, he writes, "Abraham Lincoln was not Maximilien de Robespierre. No Confederate leaders went to the guillotine. Yet the Civil War changed the United States as thoroughly as the French Revolution changed that country." Lincoln accomplished this legerdemain by making liberty a gift of government—and by assigning to the federal power a general responsibility for the well-being of American citizens. This much it accomplished by freeing the slaves and preserving the Union by military means—not by persuasion and politics—thus putting the civil bond which makes a nation on a new basis. Of the origin of the Old Republic in resistance to a power remote, unresponsive, and potentially hostile McPherson has little to say.

He praises Abraham Lincoln for his use of metaphor (Lincoln was the greatest master of the language among all our Presidents) and for his ability to stick to one large objective. He treats the modern theory of total war leading to unconditional surrender as if it could conceivably enjoy moral standing. And he invents a doctrine of liberty with which most men might be enslaved, "for their own good." But these exercises are merely conventional and adjunctive. For McPherson is really about his business only in discoursing on his favorite American revolution and its objectives: to free the slaves; to end Southern domination of national politics; to change, internally,

the social order of the South; and to commit the entire nation to a new politics, derivative of the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence, not the Constitution. After 1865, almost everyone in the South was poor. But McPherson is simplistic with reference to the essentially familial order of life in the region: Politicization of private things did not come until after 1918. And for the meliorist, the progressive, destruction of slavery by war was a far more complicated business than this book or McPherson's earlier studies of abolitionists would allow. Concerning Southern domination of national politics, he hits the mark. In retrospect, that shift in control was clearly the central meaning of this conflict. But as Charles Fairman, Phillip Paludan, and Earl M. Maltz have taught us, the United States Supreme Court in the Reconstruction era, with assistance from Congress and various Northern states, prevented the remaking of the Constitution: prevented even a radical reading of the Reconstruction amendments. Therefore, we have to conclude that McPherson's "revolution" is a product of the imagination; and his Lincoln less the practical politician (who at one point supported the original 13th Amendment that would have protected slavery forever) and more the American demigod of the Lincoln Memorial.

Thus I cannot rejoice at the extent to which Professor McPherson would seem to agree with me. For McPherson on Lincoln the revolutionary constitutes a study in inversion of terms and ingenuity in argument—an abuse of the evidence—and is less impressive than Herndon in his narrative of the strong country lad who could wrestle and pin his enemy, who learned to play his cards as they came, and who could summon eloquence when he needed it—especially when he imitated the country preachers and the language of the Authorized Version.

* * *

In early August, I turned in this review to the literary editor of *National Review*, who had commissioned it. Although he indicated in a telephone conversation that he liked it well enough, later he informed me that the editors of *National Review* had decided not to run the piece because it might be taken as an expression of the magazine's editorial philosophy. As a result, I sent a letter to the editor-in-chief, terminating my association of 25 years with that publication.

Onan Agonistes

by J.O. Tate

I've been trying to figure out what somebody could do with the thirty bucks (plus tax) that they're asking for Harold Brodkey's word-processing product. My copy was no bargain for free. You could buy two pizzas and two six-packs and have quite a party for that sum. You could wire your sweetie pie a nice bouquet by FTD. If movies were worth seeing, you could buy five tickets. There are all kinds of things you could do with the money, but the big loss is in time and energy—time that might have been spent on subgingival curettage or root canal work or study of feminist theory or whatever. Perhaps a mercifully brief description of *The Runaway Soul* will show just why its perusal would seem fitting for few others besides Harold Bloom, Gordon Lish, Keith Mano, and those who have puffed Harold Brodkey's "genius." There are two elements of the novel that I can bring myself to comment on. The first is substance; the second, style.

The Runaway Soul is a highly subjective *Künstlerroman* freighted with an elaborate psychological apparatus, a Freudian family romance, and a concentration of the hero-narrator's "growth," "genius," consciousness, and masturbatory sex life. The orphan Wiley Silenowicz, whose adoptive name suggests both wiliness and Silenus, relates somehow the tangled bafflements (he does not or cannot "tell a story") concerning his second family: his father, S.L.; his mother, Lila; and his older sister, Nonie. These characters each have their moments, their presences in Wiley's life and consciousness; of the three, one inspired in me a flicker of interest—Nonie, who seems to be pathologically wicked and hates Wiley, and who appears to have killed two other siblings. My own hope—that she would terminate Wiley's interminable "narrative" by stabbing him to death with a sharp instrument, by killing him with a revolver or with a sporting rifle or shotgun or semiautomatic or fully automatic weapon, by setting him on fire with gasoline, or by squashing him to death with a laundromat—was not fulfilled. Other characters in the novel include a lover of Wiley's later years, Ora

(a.k.a. Orra), whom I took to be female even though at least one of Wiley's sexual encounters with her/him seemed to end—if that is the right word—in yet another of his physical and literary masturbations. Anyway, Wiley's homosexual episodes with Remsen and Daniel and others are entirely suited to his character, being either literally or essentially masturbatory in those same senses of that word by now extremely familiar to both the reader and the explicator of *The Runaway Soul*.

Reading between the lines that are themselves unreadable, we may discern the elements of a novel that somehow escaped the master's grasp. There are even brief glimpses of daylight and of the out-of-doors, as well as of social life, which in other hands would have constituted a narrative; though even here, we would have had to admit that touches like Ora's father, the literary scene as embodied in New York cocktail parties, and a few others, constitute material that has already been treated adequately by Norman Mailer.

Even granting the genius his *donnée*, there may yet be some slight reservation about a prose style that would gag a buzzard. The trouble with Wiley-as-narrator is that he writes like Harold Brodkey on a good day. He seems to have an ungift, an ineptitude with language that he inflicts unsparingly on his audience: He goes for the off-putting word—even the wrong sound, not to mention the unwelcome thought—unerringly. As Wiley lovingly says, "But, for me, isn't it self-love that starts the progress towards orgasm?" He knows himself: "I sort of gawp—inwardly." Ain't it the truth.

The following lines, chosen by a *sortes Brodeyanae*, represent the ineffable style of the revered master: "I don't know of what elements my heterosexuality consists. Or my androgyny." And this paragraph:

It wasn't that I was so grand sexually. I am acceptable sexually (which is actually quite a lot), but I make a point of it, of being that, and that doubles the acceptability for some people, that it is something known, and that one tries to be it. Often, then, I am a little bored sexually—that redoubles it . . . Only a little

bored . . . "You are the handsomest man in the world"—she says that; it is a metaphor of a kind. She was collecting herself, finding herself, in an inconsecutive way, among the consecutions of our invention of our sexual tone back and forth, and in the faith that in the sequence of moments something might happen and all the moments (all our moments) were unbetrayed so far and would be unbetrayed still at the end, sort of.

The combination of substance (masturbation and genius) conveyed by style (noisome droning—the Brodkey touch) is one that leaves something, anything, and everything to be desired. Reflection suggests that *The Runaway Soul*, besides not having any soul, didn't run away far enough, and that if there had been any *Kunst*, then there might have also been some *Roman*. As it is, this thing ranks not only with the worst novels I have read in the last 35 years but with the most unpleasant experiences I have ever endured. To listen to Wiley Silenowicz relate the uncanny growth of his narcissistic mind, only to wind up with yet another tenderly rendered masturbation scene after some 700 pages, is enough to confirm thoughts about the New York literary scene that I have long entertained.

Considering with how much breathless expectancy this book was anticipated (for 27 years), we may well wonder about the competence of those who touted the author for a generation. And when we consider the price that is asked not so much in money as in exasperation and degradation, we may also wonder about the state of culture in a nation with such an inverted sense of art.

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