Dimensions of Temporality in Lincoln's Second Inaugural

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Many of Lincoln's best remembered orations, including the House Divided Speech, the Cooper Union Address, and the Gettysburg Address, exhibit a clear pattern of temporal organization. The introductory remarks establish an orientation divided into past, present, and future, and then the three tenses reappear in the body of the speech, each marking out one of its major divisions. Close reading demonstrates that this progression is more than a device for separating the gross structural units of these discourses. Temporal movement, in fact, seems essential to their rhetorical economy: it frames the action of the various argumentative and stylistic elements, blends them into a unified field of textual action, and projects this field onto the public events that form the subject of the discourse (Leff and Mohrmann, 1984, Leff, 1983, Thurow, 1976, pp. 70-86, Warnick, 1987, pp. 236-239).

Nowhere is this pattern more evident or developed with greater skill than in the Second Inaugural. Yet, the temporal inflections that guide the text are not generally acknowledged in the existing critical literature. The reason, I believe, is that, despite its status as a masterpiece of eloquence, the speech has not often been studied as an artistic whole. Instead the critical focus has centered either on the historical context or on isolated sections that illustrate Lincoln's character or his excellence as a stylist.

Two recent studies attempt to remedy this defect. In a master's thesis devoted entirely to the text, Amy Slagell (1986) presents a careful and expert analysis of its rhetorical structure. And in his book, Abraham Lincoln and American Political Religion, Glen E. Thurow (1976) explicates Lincoln's political philosophy through a systematic reading of a number of his orations, including the Second Inaugural (pp. 88-108). Both studies demonstrate that the arrangement of temporal units directs the symbolic movement of the text and that no adequate interpretation can disregard this chronological pattern. My own analysis relies heavily on these earlier works, but I wish to extend and complicate their findings in two respects: first, I will argue that the speech builds to a creative equivocation in the middle of the third paragraph, an equivocation that blends the historical present into a conception of a sacred present; second, I hope to show that this conflation is central to the form of the speech and serves as the vehicle for sustaining its major themes. To establish these claims, I must review the text in the order of its presentation.

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The opening paragraph contains no striking ideas or stylistic flourishes; in fact, it has a somewhat awkward appearance. Yet, it seems carefully constructed to achieve Lincoln's purposes and to establish the framework and tone for the speech as a whole. Most obviously, Lincoln introduces the temporal markers that define his perspective. The first sentence contrasts the present occasion with his previous inaugural. The second sentence refers to the past, the third and fourth to the present, and the final sentence looks forward to the future. The same pattern resurfaces in the body of the address: the second paragraph and the first seven sentences of the third deal with the past; the remainder of that paragraph deals with the present, and the concluding paragraph offers advice for future conduct. (See Thurow, pp. 91-92, for a generally similar but more detailed account of the structure of the opening paragraph.)

On a more subtle level, the paragraph establishes a relentless tone of passivity and self-effacement. The first person pronoun occurs only twice (and never again appears anywhere in the speech). And the whole is constructed in what Slagell (p. 11) aptly calls the impersonal passive. The first sentence, for example, reads: “At this second appearing to take the oath of the presidential office, there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first” (Basler, 1953, p. 332; all quotations from the speech refer to this edition.) The wording here contrasts sharply with the more personal and direct language of the First Inaugural. And, of course, Lincoln could have made his point more simply by recasting the sentence in a form such as this: On this occasion, I have less need to make an extended address than I did four years ago. But to speak in this way would suggest an orator striving to take command of the situation. Instead, Lincoln creates the impression that the occasion commands him, that it renders him captive and passive. This passive tone recurs throughout the speech.

The second paragraph refers to the past, as Lincoln recounts the circumstances surrounding his earlier inaugural and the outbreak of the war. The prose now changes markedly; it becomes subject to the nuances of artistic control and glides forward through elegantly balanced clauses. Apparently, the orator has gained command of his material, but he has done so only to articulate the passive frame through which he would have us view the historic drama. His point achieves sublime expression as the paragraph rolls to its conclusion: “Both parties deprecated war, but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came.” The cadence of this passage instantiates its message. The final clause seems to follow of necessity from what precedes it, even as the war was an inevitable event, manifesting itself regardless of the intentions of the parties involved.

The third paragraph lingers in the past, as Lincoln considers the causes and consequences of the war. Once again events have outrun conscious intentions: “Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less astounding.” With these words, Lincoln completes his history of frustrated political and
military efforts. The constraints are everywhere and apply to everyone. Just as Lincoln himself stands passive in the face of the occasion, so also the North and South were made to accept a war they sought to avoid and to suffer consequences they did not anticipate.

It is at this point, in the midst of the third paragraph, that Lincoln changes his temporal orientation. The shift occurs abruptly, and to appreciate it, we must return to the lines quoted immediately above and then attend to the next sentence in the text: "Neither [party] anticipated that the cause of the war might cease with, or even before, the conflict should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less astounding. Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other" (my emphasis). The italicized verbs indicate how Lincoln suddenly shifts from the past to the present tense, and without benefit of any perceptible transition, Lincoln moves from historic to present considerations. Equally important, Lincoln's perspective begins to change from the secular to the sacred. Up to this moment, the speaker has remained strictly within the confines of secular events, but from this first reference to the Bible through the end of the speech, he becomes sermonic; virtually every sentence quotes, paraphrases, or alludes to a passage in scripture.

Lincoln begins this section mindful of the divisions existing in the current historical situation. He stresses the competitive solicitation of divine aid by the warring parties, and in the ensuing sentence, he verges toward a partisan judgment: "It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces." The sentence paraphrases Genesis 3:19, where God, casting Adam from Eden, declares that "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread. . . ." Thus, the South seems the culpable party, for it has sinned by resisting the curse God placed upon all mankind. And at this stage, we might anticipate a call for retribution. But Lincoln quickly arrests the partisan direction of his argument. Paraphrasing Matthew 7:1, he says "let us judge not that we be not judged."

The reference to Matthew draws the text deeply within a religious context. Lincoln has stepped well outside the immediate historical situation, has departed from the political frame which previously governed his remarks. Yet, in an important sense, the text retains a certain logical and emotional consistency. The speaker has prepared us for this transformation. In the previous section, he had argued that the war followed a course of its own; it resisted the plans and purposes of those caught up in its sweep. This understanding of the past almost mandates a present attitude directed toward the supernatural. What men cannot control, they cannot fully comprehend, and the meaning of the war, therefore, must be gauged against something that transcends the tangible interests of the two sides. The prayers of neither, Lincoln observes, have "been fully answered. The Almighty his own purposes."

The war, then, represents a divine intervention in human history. It is evidence of a mystery that recurrently plays its way through human affairs. And as the orator considers this mystery, his prose remains fixed within the sacred order, his perspective located in a time beyond the flow
of historic events. Quoting Matthew 18:7, Lincoln argues that slavery was an offence which came in the providence of God and continued through His appointed time. And in language that recalls the passion of Christ, Lincoln characterizes the war as a "mighty scourge", an instrument of atonement applied equally to North and South. Thus, the nation has endured redemptive suffering as it has lived through the drama of sin and mortification. It has shared the offence and the punishment meted out in God's time; all have participated in this mysterious relationship between man and God, which renders men responsible for their acts but unable to control their results. The war, then, offers no occasion for human judgment which would encourage one party to inflict further retribution on the other; it is itself a judgment from a higher source, and a redemptive vehicle that, like Christ's passion, purifies and opens the path to unity through spiritual rebirth. The whole process transcends the narrow limits of human understanding, and in the end, we can only accept the fact that, "as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'"

In sum, Lincoln has shifted both from political to religious themes and from a perspective grounded in secular time to one grounded in sacred time. The thematic shift is obvious and relatively easy to explain. Given the magnitude of the events and Lincoln's immediate political goals, reference to divine purposes seems a logical, if not necessary, strategy. Moreover, as Ernest Bormann (1977) has demonstrated, a religious justification for secular disaster was a standard item in the repertoire of American political orators.

The temporal shift is much more subtle and demands special attention. In order to appreciate its significance, we must first consider the characteristic differences between secular and sacred time. As Eliade (1959) explains the matter, secular time proceeds in a single direction; it is homogeneous, continuous, and irreversible. Sacred time, on the other hand, calls us to a moment of origins; it is a "primordial mythical time made present," and this presence effects an immediate and total unification of the field of experience (pp. 68-69). It manifests itself recurrently as an interruption in our normal sense of temporality, and thus sacred time is cyclical and discontinuous; it is something always there that we occasionally recover.

It follows that our sense of present time is potentially ambiguous. On the secular level, it is an irreversible moment, of somewhat arbitrary duration, that divides past from future. On the sacred level, however, the present becomes recoverable as a return to origins, as an eternal now, a still moment when primal truths emerge in a changeless pattern. It is possible, in fact normal, to overcome this ambiguity by dividing the two into wholly separate categories. Thus, the sacred, because it has no progressivity, becomes atemporal, and it can serve as a fixed standard for judging the flux of local circumstance. Nevertheless, the experience of the sacred seems explicable only in terms of our experience of something that occurs in normal time—the attention to what is now before us as opposed to what has happened before or will happen later. Perhaps for just this reason, we define the sacred in terms of that which occurs now, in terms of a
radically present experience. Consequently, both semantically and conceptually, it is possible to weaken the conventional dichotomy between the temporal and atemporal and to effect at least a partial conflation between the historical present and the presentness of sacred insight.

This creative equivocation is, I believe, the mainspring of the “Second Inaugural.” Lincoln’s purpose in the speech is to develop a frame of passive acceptance, a perspective capable of accounting for the horrors of the war and of justifying a conciliatory post-war policy. These purposes almost demand a transcendental strategy, but they do not permit a simple rejection of worldly affairs. A mere imposition of the sacred on the secular would not suffice to encompass the situation. Thus, Lincoln does not juxtapose these contexts, but makes the sacred appear to evolve from the secular, preserving their distinction while leaving them in a state of organic connection. In fact, the whole economy of the speech seems designed to achieve this elision of temporal perspectives. The studiously awkward language of the opening section suggests a present occasion that commands rather than challenges the resources of the speaker. The narration of past events discloses a force at work that confounds human intentions and passes beyond political understanding. Then, in the crucial third paragraph, the past glides into the present as though through its own momentum, and in the historical present, we see the impact of a past that we cannot comprehend on its own terms—a nation divided into two rival factions suffering blindly and issuing unanswered prayers. We are thus forced to contemplate a presence that exceeds our normal temporal experience. Repeatedly and progressively, the text coaxes historical time to a point where it rises outside its own horizons. It imparts a character and movement to secular events that render them comprehensible only by reference to an enlarged and passive vision of divine purposes. The frame of acceptance, then, appears less a construction of the speaker than a residue of history; it is an atemporal insight forced upon us by an historical understanding of the limits of human history.

To put this point somewhat differently, Lincoln seems to merge secular time into sacred time through the use of still another dimension of temporality—the timing in the text itself. The text, that is, gathers its ideas, images, and rhythms in a sequence that prepares the auditor to regard the connection between the secular and the sacred as an inevitable process. The two temporal frames remain distinct; yet they seem to inform one another and to co-operate in imparting meaning to events. The mediation between these frames is effected by the rhetorical action of the text itself, which embodies the connection and, in doing so, induces us to accept its plausibility as an explanation of the moral significance of political events.

In the final paragraph, Lincoln turns to the future as he urges his listeners to “strive on to finish the work we are in.” The temporal order, then, is moved forward, but in a way that blurs different temporal perspectives. Lincoln does not enumerate specific policies; instead he recommends the elemental virtues of Christianity—the avoidance of malice, the exercise of charity, the binding of wounds, the protection of the unfortunate, and the search for a just and lasting peace (For the scriptural echoes in
this passage, see Slagell, pp. 51-54). Clearly, this is a future informed by
the orator's vision of the eternal present. The tone of meditation, of
spiritual revere, continues, and Lincoln's language has not fully re-entered
the directional flow of secular time. Yet, in the immediate political con-
text, this paragraph indirectly but powerfully articulates a policy; it justifies
a course of conciliation and repudiates the more vindicative and partisan
stance adopted by many in Lincoln's own party. Thus, the speech ends
with a secular prayer that blends the sacred frame of acceptance into the
fabric of local political action.

Lincoln did not live to implement his policy; his successor was im-
peached for attempting to do so, and in the course of time, policy came
to be formulated under the sign of the scape-goat rather than the cross.
Whatever the turn of events, however, the Second Inaugural retains the
power of its mode of articulation. The speech is a verbal act that embodies
the limitations of human action. In the perfection of its utterance, it yields
to the imperfections of the human condition, and by yielding, transcend
them. Lincoln well understood the limits of any single voice in influen-
cing the course of political history. That understanding permeates the
speech, drives its symbolic action forward, and leads its author to a mood
of reverence from which he only partially returns.

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