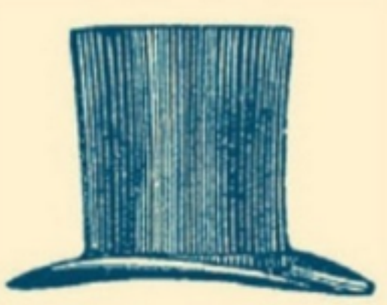
'Adam Gopnik has taken a coincidence and turned it into a theory of everything, or at least of everything important'
Andrew Marr

ADAM GOPNIK

A Short Book *about* Darwin, Lincoln *and* Modern Life



ANGELS AND AGES

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The middleweight champion [of the early twentieth century, Stanley Ketchel] was stunned by [Wilson] Mizner's recitation of the Langdon Smith classic that starts "When you were a tadpole and I was a fish, In the Palaeozoic time" and follows the romance of two lovers from one geological age to another, until they wind up in Delmonico's. Ketchel had a thousand questions about the tadpole and the fish, and Mizner, a pedagogue at heart, took immense pleasure in wedging the whole theory of Revolution into the fighter's untutored head. Ketchel became silent and thoughtful. He declined an invitation to see the town that night with Mizner and [Willus] Britt. When they rolled in at 5 a.m., Ketchel was sitting up with his eyes glued on a bowl of goldfish. "That Revolution is all the bunk!"he shouted angrily, "I've been watching those fish nine hours and they haven't changed a bit." Mizner had to talk fast; one thing Ketchel couldn't bear was to have anybody cross him.

—Alva Johnston, *The Legendary Mizners*

Americans seemed to fascinate Picasso. Once, in Paris, he invited the Murphys to his apartment, on

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the Rue de la Boëtie, for an *apéritif,* and, after showing them through the place, in every room of which were pictures in various stages of completion, he led Gerald rather ceremoniously to an alcove that contained a tall cardboard box. "It was full of illustrations, photographs, engravings, and reproductions clipped from newspapers. All of them dealt with a single person—Abraham Lincoln. 'I've been collecting them since I was a child,' Picasso said, 'I have thousands, thousands!' He held up one of Brady's photographs of Lincoln, and said with great feeling, 'There is the real American elegance!'"

—Calvin Tomkins, *Living Well Is the Best evenge*

We are all pebbles dropped in the sea of history, where the splash strikes one way and the big tides run another, and though what we *feel* is the splash, the splash takes place only within those tides. In almost every case, the incoming current drowns the splash; once in a while the drop of the pebble changes the way the ocean runs. On February 12, 1809, two baby boys were born within a few hours of each other on either side of the Atlantic. One entered life in a comfortable family home, nicely called the Mount, that still stands in the leafy English countryside of Shrewsbury, Shropshire; the other opened his eyes for the first time in a nameless long-lost log cabin in the Kentucky woods. Charles Darwin was the fifth of six children, born into comfort but to a family that was far

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from “safe,” with a long history of free-thinking and radical beliefs. He came into a world of learning and money—one grandfather, Josiah Wedgwood, had made a fortune in ceramic plates. Abraham Lincoln was the second of three, born to a dirt-poor farmer, Thomas Lincoln, who, when he wrote his name at all, wrote it (his son recalled) “bunglingly.”

Their narrow circles of immediate experience were held inside that bigger ocean of outlying beliefs and assumptions. In any era, there are truths that people take as obvious, stories that they think are weird or wrong, and dreams that they believe are distant or doomed. (We like stories about time travel and living robots, and even have some speculative thoughts about how they might be made to happen. But on the whole we believe that the time we’re living in, and the way we live in it, is just the natural way things are. We *like* strange stories but believe only a few.) The obvious truths of 1809, the kind that were taught in school, involved what could be called a “vertical” organization of life, one in which we imagine a hierarchy of species organized on earth, descending from man on down toward animals, and a judge appraising us up above in heaven. Man was stuck in the middle, looking warily up and loftily down. People mostly believed that the kinds of organisms they saw on earth had always been here and always would be, that life had been fixed in place since the beginning of a terrestrial time, which was thought to go back a few thousand years at most. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment had, of course, already deepened a faith in Reason among the elite, but it was not a popular movement. It had altered many

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ideas without changing most minds. (John Stuart Mill could say, as late as the 1850s, that he was still almost the only Englishman he knew who had not been brought up as a believer.) The Enlightenment ideal of Reason was in any case bound by taxonomies and hierarchies, absolute and extended right through earth and time. That the long history of life might be one driven by shifting coalitions of contingency, with chance having at least one hand on the reins, was still a mostly unthinkable idea. The forms of life were set, and had never varied. “Species have a real existence in nature, and a transition from one to another does not exist” was the way one magus put it, decisively.

People also believed, using what they called examples ancient and modern—and the example of the Terror in France, which had only very recently congealed into Napoleon’s empire, was a strong case—that societies without inherited order were intrinsically weak, unstable, and inclined to dissolve into anarchy or tyranny. Democracy in the sense we mean it now was a fringe ideal of a handful of radicals. Even in America the future of democracy was unclear, in part because of the persistence of slavery, which was still a feature of Western life. Democracy was hard to tell from mob rule and the tyranny of mob rule. Democracy existed, and was armed, but didn’t feel entirely liberal; the difference between reformist parliamentary government and true democracy seemed disturbingly large even to well-intentioned people. In the 1830s, Tocqueville, sympathetic to American democracy, was still skeptical about its chances, writing that “until men

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have changed their nature and been completely transformed, I shall refuse to believe in the duration of a government which is called upon to hold together forty different nations covering an area half that of Europe, to avoid all rivalry, ambition, and struggles between them, and to unite all their independent wills in the accomplishment of common designs." Throughout Europe and America many thoughtful, truth-seeking people also believed in divine judgment and an afterlife in more or less literal terms.

The thought of no time is monolithic, and the people of 1809 in England and America did not believe these things absolutely. The new science of geology was pressing back the history of the earth; old bones would start turning up that threatened old stories; the new textual studies of the Bible were pressing against an easy acceptance of their truth, too. And there were many Utopian radical democrats in both countries. We can find plenty of astonishing ideas in that day, just as we will find traces of the astonishing ideas of the next century somewhere on the fringes of our own time. But on the whole these ideas belonged to the world of what would have been called "fancy," not fact.

By the time Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin were dead—the American murdered by a pro-slavery terrorist in 1865, the Englishman after a long illness in 1882—the shape of history had changed, and the lives they had led and the things they had said had done a lot to change it. Two small splashes had helped to move the tide of time. Very different beliefs, ones that we now treat as natural and recognize as just

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part of the background hum of our time, were in place: the world was understood to be very, very old, and the animals and plants in it were known to have changed dramatically over the aeons—and though just how they had changed was still debated, the best guesses, then as now, involved slow alteration through a competition for resources over a very long time. People were convinced, on the whole, that democratic government, arrived at by reform or revolution, was a plausible and strong way to organize a modern nation—that republican regimes were fighters and survivors. (A giant statue, one of the largest since antiquity, of a goddess of Liberty was under construction in once-again republican France for a vindicated republican America, just to commemorate this belief.) Slavery in the Western world was, for the first time in thousands of years, finished (although racism wasn't). Liberal republicanism and universalist democracy had begun the steady merger that persists to this day, so that most of us no longer see the governing systems of Canada and the United States as decisively, rather than locally, different.

Most of all, people thought that, in one way or another, by some hand or another, the world had changed and would continue to change, that the hierarchies of nature and race and class that had governed the world, where power fell in a fixed chain on down, were false. Fixity was not reality. Life changed, and ways of living changed, too. Life was increasingly lived on what we can think of as a horizontal, with man looking behind only to see what had happened

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before, and forward to see what he could make next. On that horizontal plane, we are invested in our future as much as in our afterlife, and in our children more than in our ancestors. These beliefs, which we hold still, are part of what we call the modern condition—along with the reactive desire to erase the instability that change brings with it, to get us thinking up and down again, instead of merely back and forth.

The two boys born on the same day to such different lives had become, as they remain, improbable public figures of that alteration of minds—they had become what are now called in cliché "icons," secular saints. They hadn't made the change, but they had helped to midwife the birth. With the usual compression of popular history their reputations have been reduced to single words, mottoes to put beneath a profile on a commemorative coin or medal—"Revolution!" for one and "Emancipation!" for the other. With the usual irony of history, the mottoes betray the men. Lincoln came late—in the eyes of Frederick Douglass, maddeningly late—and reluctantly to emancipation, while perhaps the *least* original thing in Darwin's amazingly original work was the idea of Revolution. (He figured out *how* it ran; he took a poetic figure familiar to his grandfathers and put an engine and a fan belt in it.) We're not wrong to work these beautiful words onto their coins, though: the two were the engineers of the alterations. They found a way to make those words live.

Darwin and Lincoln did not make the modern world. But they helped to make our moral modernity. The two little stories at the head of this chapter suggest just how widely

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their images and ideas had already spread within a half century of their deaths: in the first decade of the last century the concept of Revolution troubled and fascinated and intrigued even a middleweight boxer, whose indignation at *not actually seeing it happen* anticipates that of many just-as-two-fisted skeptics today, while Lincoln's face would haunt the imagination of an artist remaking art. For more than a century they've been part of the climate of modern life, systems in the weather of the modern world.

The shared date of their birth is, obviously, "merely" a coincidence, what historians like to call an "intriguing coincidence."But coincidence is the vernacular of history, the slang of memory—the first strong pattern where we begin to search for more subtle ones. Like the simultaneous deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams on July 4, 1826, the accidental patterns of birth and death point to other patterns of coincidence in bigger things. (Jefferson and Adams, born at about the same time, were likely to die at about the same time; that they willed themselves to live long enough to see in the holiday says something about the urgency of the new rituals of the Republic.)

As long ago as the early twentieth century, the shared birthday of Darwin and Lincoln seemed central enough to an idea of liberal democratic civilization to have inspired a proposal for a binational, transatlantic holiday: the birthday of the two, "Lincoln, the embodiment of Anglo-Saxon devotion to Justice, and Darwin, the incarnation of Anglo-Saxon devotion to Truth," should be declared an international holiday, a

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Massachusetts writer named William Thayer insisted in 1908, making the rational and good point that Lincoln was exceptional in being without malice, Darwin, in welcoming criticism and argument—though Thayer rather weakens his point, to our minds, by all those "Anglo-Saxon" attitudes. (Useful reminders, really, that similar assumptions, which will seem just as onerous or absurd to our great-grandchildren, linger in the corners of our minds, too.)

My own head has been filled with images and ideas of the two men since I was small. My father introduced me first to Lincoln, pressing on me a picture book called *Meet Mr. Lincoln,* a handsome oversize thing connected to a television special of 1959, filled with black-and-white Brady photographs—and the gravity, the melancholy, the destiny of that face touched me as it has touched so many others. (Readers will recall that Alexander Port-noy, too, was turned on to a lifetime of commitment to human rights, among other human activities, simply by the soulfulness of the statue of Lincoln in downtown Newark, outside the Essex County Court House.) Darwin was my mother's hero, though it would be years before, one summer on a beach, I actually read *On the Origin of Species.* Then I discovered, as have generations of readers since that fateful day in 1859 when the entire first print run sold out in a day, that it is not just a Great Book but a great book, an absorbing, wonderful adventure in argument, a beach read in which your view of the world is changed by the end even if your view of the world was agreeable to it at the beginning. It's a Victorian hallucinogen, where the whole world suddenly

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comes alive and begins moving, so that the likeness between seagulls and sandpipers on the beach where you are reading suddenly becomes spookily animated, part of a single restless whole, with the birds' giant lizard ancestors looming like ghosts above them. What looks like the fixed, unchanging solitude of the beach and ocean suddenly becomes alive to, vulnerable to, an endless chain of change and movement. It's a book that makes the whole world vibrate.

As I grew older and read more, I began to understand Lincoln and Darwin as symbols of the two pillars of the society we live in: one representing liberal democracy, the other the human sciences—one a faith in armed republicanism and government of the people, the other a belief that objective knowledge about human history and the human condition, who we are and how we got here, exists. This makes them, plausibly, "heroes."

But they are also amazing men, something more than heroes, and the more you read about their lives, the more you're moved by their private struggles as much as by their public acts. Both men are our contemporaries still because they were among the first big men in history who belonged to what is sometimes called "the bourgeois ascendancy." They were both family men. They loved their wives uxoriously, lived for their children, and were proud of their houses. Darwin was born to money, and though he kept some gentry tastes and snobberies, like the royal family of Albert and Victoria, whose reign superintended most of his life, he chose to live his life not in imitation of the old aristocracy but in the

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manner of the new bourgeoisie—involving his children in every element of his life, having them help with his experiments, writing his autobiography for them, and very nearly sacrificing his chance at history for the love of his religious wife. Lincoln's place in history was won by his rise to the presidency, but his first and perhaps even harder rise was to the big middle-class house and expensive wife he adored. What we wonder at is that a simple Springfield lawyer could become president; from his point of view, probably what was really amazing was that a cabin-born bumpkin had become a Springfield lawyer. Both men were shaped in crucial ways by the worst of nineteenth-century woes, the death of children at the height of their charm and wisdom. The nineteenth century was cruel in that it gave children a chance at a long life and often took it from them—the full force of exceptional grief set against the background of increasing hope for long life. (This is why the saddest scenes in literature, wrongly called sentimental, come to us from that time.)

Both men even had what one might call the symptomatic diseases of middle-class modernity, the kind that our age picks out among the great roll call of human ills to name and obsess over. Lincoln was a depressive; Darwin, subject to anxiety attacks so severe that he wrote down one of the most formidable definitions of a panic attack that exists. Though the source of these ailments—in nature or genes, bugs or traumas—remains mysterious, their presence is part of the two men's familiarity. They had the same domestic pleasures, and the same domestic demons, as we have.

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And they are both near-perfect national types: the ugly, direct, plainspoken American, shrewder than he looks and more eloquent than he pretends, a type that every generation since has tried to mimic in its politicians and movie stars, from Harry Truman through Jimmy Stewart and Tom Hanks. That *is* the real American elegance. The Englishman is just as English as the American is American: inward turning, possessed by a family and class loyalty so absolute that it is hardly conscious, genuinely humble but still possessed by a conviction beyond all argument that his nation and class are the chosen people. Fastidious to the point of neurosis, quietly eloquent, fearful of fuss and show, hating showy ideas, people, and art, but with an eccentric corner saved for a particular kind of breathless and innocent love of flamboyance, for the sexual displays of birds and bugs—he is a type reproduced in every British war film, the quiet man who takes the hill without blowing his own bugle, or waiting for another's.

We must be realistic about what they were like: not saints nor heroes nor gods but people. Darwin and Lincoln are admirable and, in their ways, even lovable men. But Lincoln, we have always to remember, was a war commander, who had men shot and boy-deserters hanged after sitting on their coffins in the sun. We would, I think, be taken aback at a meeting. Lincoln summed up in one word was *shrewd,* a backwoods lawyer with a keen sense of human weakness and a knack for clever argument, colder than we would think, and more of a pol and even more of a wise guy than we would like him to be. Winning is the probity of politics, and a good pol is

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more concerned with winning—elections, cases, and arguments—than with looking noble. Lincoln was smart, shrewd, and ambitious before he was, as he became, wise, farseeing, and self-sacrificing. If we had been around to watch him walk across a room, instead of stride through history, what we would have seen were the normal feet that left the noble prints. Sure of himself even at the worst of the Civil War, he paced the floor, crying out not "What have I done?" but "What will the country say?"

Darwin we would likely find far more frumpy and tedious than we like our heroes to be—one of those naturalists who run on and on narrowly about their pet subjects. He would frown and furrow his brow and make helpless embarrassed harrumphs if any of his fervent admirers arrived today and asked him what he thought of man's innate tendencies to relish Tchaikovsky. One can easily imagine him brought back to earth and forced onto a television-studio platform with eager admirers (like this one) pressing him for his views on sexual equality or the origins of the love of melody in the ancient savanna and becoming more and more unhappy and inarticulate—in his day it was German naturalists; now it would be American journalists, though he had those, too—until at last swallowed up in a vast, sad, melancholy, embarrassed English moan.

Not that Lincoln didn't care about morality, but he cared more about winning, wars and arguments, than about appearing to be a paragon. Not that Darwin wasn't interested in speculative consequences of his theory—he was—but the

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habit of pontification was completely alien to him, unless it was reassuringly tied with a bow of inductive observation. We are here to treat them philosophically, with the strong understanding that neither man was a philosopher, or tried to be.

The framing image, and the title, of this book comes from a dispute over the famous epitaph offered at Lincoln's deathbed by his secretary of war, Edwin Stanton: did Stanton say, "Now he belongs to the ages," or "Now he belongs to the angels"? This small historical mystery is one that I set out to solve, but its meaning—its echo—lies in what the ongoing dispute says about the two or more sides of Lincoln's placement in the history of faith. Was it natural, inevitable, for someone at Lincoln's deathbed, surrounded by his circle, to refer overtly to the mechanism of heaven, as generations had done in respect to the not particularly devout Washington's death, showing his bed lifted to paradise by cherubs? Or would that overt religiosity have been inflected by a reference to time, to fate, to destiny, to history—to the ages?

This dispute dovetailed neatly with the other great dispute of the time, which enmeshed Darwin and reached its most memorable form in T. H. Huxley's debate with Bishop Wilberforce, which was distilled by the great Disraeli into a neat epigraph: "Is man an ape or an angel?" ("I am on the side of the angels," Disraeli then added with more mischief and irony—coming as the statement did from a famously "diabolical" figure—than we always remember.) Apes or

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can't in its nature help much to resolve: what were they *like*? (I met someone once who had known Einstein. What he was like was all I wanted to know, and the hardest thing for him to tell me.) And deeper questions, too: How do we reconcile the Lincoln who we know was a powerfully good man with the hard commander who knowingly sent thousands of young men to their certain deaths, and kept sending them off after he knew how horribly many of them would die? How was he able to see them as mere arithmetic? And what consolation for life did Darwin find in his own long view of a blind and slow-footed Nature?

In this sense, what makes the two men worth looking at together is that they *aren't* particularly remarkable. The things that intrigued and worried them and made them stay up nights were the same things that most other intelligent people in their day worried about, the same kinds of things that keep us up nights, too. An entire mountain range of minds rises between them and around them, most of the rest submerged by history. But they are high peaks within it, and they look out toward each other. And from on top of one you can see the other. They are still above water because what they made of those worries was something big, a permanent mountain of meaningful anxiety

. . .

Lives lived in one time have similar shapes, and the common shape is itself a subject. I wanted to write about both men because I loved their characters and revered their

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accomplishments, but also for the most honest of writer's reasons: contemplating them gave me a chance to think at length about other things that matter a lot to me. Yet anyone writing an extended study of two very different men must always be haunted by Fluellen's persuasive comparison, in Shakespeare's *Henry V,* of Henry V and Alexander the Great: "There is a river in Macedon; and there is also moreover a river at Monmouth—it is called Wye at Monmouth, but it is out of my prains what is the name of the other river; but 'tis all one, 'tis alike as my fingers is to my fingers, and there is salmons in both."

There is salmons in both—unearned or, anyway, unpersuasive parallels exist between all lives lived in a time. The positive connections between Darwin and Lincoln are in a way the least interesting thing about pairing them. Which isn't to say that there are *no* neat ties to join them. Though neither had come from slave-owning families, they both, as they grew up, saw enough of slavery to become absolutely opposed to it, a level of revulsion that was unusual even among those who despised the institution. They shared a mutual appreciation of one hugely important, flawed, and mostly forgotten nineteenth century book, the anonymously published *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation,* which first appeared in 1844 and gave a theory of Revolution, though one without a mechanism or even much biology. (It turned out to have been written by a Scottish writer and publisher named Robert Chambers.) William Herndon, Lincoln's closest friend and one of his first biographers, tells us that the then-freethinking (that

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is, more or less openly atheist) Lincoln liked this Revolutionary idea because of its *causality,* its insistence that everything happened for a discernible reason, from natural, not miraculous, causes. Around the same time, Darwin wrote to Thomas Huxley to compliment his bulldog on his review of *The Vestiges:* "I have just been reading your Review of the Vestiges, & the way you handle a great Professor is really exquisite & inimitable . . . but I cannot think but that you are rather hard on the poor author. I must think that such a book, if it does no other good, spreads the taste for natural science. —But I am perhaps no fair judge for I am almost as unorthodox about species as the Vestiges itself, though I hope not *quite* so unphilosophical."

The real common stuff, and the really significant subject, though, lies at a deeper level—in the kinds of words both men used, and in a new kind of liberal language that they helped to invent. They matter most because they wrote so well. Lincoln's eloquence was public and central: he got to be president mostly because he made a couple of terrific speeches in famous halls, and we revere him above all because he gave a few more as president. Darwin was a writer among scientists and a scientist among writers; though he didn't think he was a natural writer, he published his big ideas in popular books. A commercial publishing house published *On the Origin of Species* along with novels and memoirs, and *The Origin* remains probably the only book that changed science that an amateur reader can still sit down and read right through for pleasure while being told mostly true things. (Galileo's *Dialogue*

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Concerning the Two Chief World Systems is still fun to read, but his polemic is more dated; he is arguing with Aristotle, not an archbishop.) Above all, *The Origin* is a long argument meant for amateur readers, an effort at popular persuasion. It's so well written that we don't think of it as well written, just as Lincoln's speeches are so well made that they seem to us as natural as pebbles on the beach. (We don't think, "Well said!" We just think, "That's right!")

Writing well isn't just a question of winsome expression, but of having found something big and true to say and having found the right words to say it in, of having seen something large and having found the right words to say it small, small enough to enter an individual mind so that the strong ideas of what the words are saying sound like sweet reason. Good writing is mostly good seeing and good thinking, too. It involves a whole view of life, and making that view sound so plausible that the reader adheres to it as obvious before he knows that it's radical. (Their great contemporary Karl Marx had none of it; his views strike us as radical before we accept them as obvious. It is no accident—as a Marxist would say—that he criticized *both* Darwin and Lincoln for being too mundane and banal as stylists.)

The language they helped invent is still a rhetoric that we respond to—a new style, of persuasion and argument, that belongs to liberalism. (I mean liberalism here, and throughout this book, not in the American sense of well-meaning and wishy-washy, or the French sense of savagely devoted to the free market, but in the British sense, John Stuart Mill's sense,

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in which an individual is committed, at the same time, to constitutional rule *and* individual freedom, to the power of the many *and* the free play of the mind—the sense that takes in a "conservative" in our politics just as well as a "liberal," if not in a way more.)

One of the great tides of the time they lived in was the one that made the Western world, willy-nilly, more and more democratic, in the simple sense that more and more people knew how to read and reason, and expected to be persuaded to new convictions rather than just policed into them. Lincoln grew up in a society that, though by European standards was in some ways primitive, was richly rhetorical. In backwoods Ohio, in the 1840s, William Dean Howells, Lincoln's campaign biographer, recalled, "The village wits . . . liked to stand with their backs to our stove and challenge opinion concerning Holmes and Poe, Irving and Macaulay, Pope and Byron, Dickens and Shakespeare." Later, the inventions of the telegraph and modern mass journalism would give political words an immediacy that they had never had before. People knew about Lincoln because they knew he had debated Stephen Douglas, and they knew the kinds of arguments he had made and the tone and style he had used to make them.

Darwin, in turn, might have made his ideas public through the narrow channels of professional publication and specialist lectures. But he didn't. He chose to write books that anyone could read, and that almost everyone did read. And though he wasn't a platform man himself, he saw to it that he had good friends who were, and that his big idea got known through

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easy ways. When Darwin said he wanted to be more philosophical than Chambers, he meant nearly the opposite of what we would mean now: not more abstract and general and elevated, but more specific and exact and argumentative. The often mysterious poetry of their words—"disenthrall ourselves," "the better angels of our nature," "the mystic chords," "this view of life"—haunts us because it is set against a background of willfully unpoetic and even anti-poetic speech. They built their inspiration from induction; their phrases still ring because they were struck on bells cast of solid bronze, not on chimes blowing in the breeze. The replacement of the romantic love of imagination and honor with the romance of observation and argument—that was the heart of who they were, and what they gave to us.

In the long run, it is not what they have in common with each other that matters; it is what they have in common with *us*. We live in a society based on two foundations, scientific reasoning and democratic politics, and their offspring, technology and prosperity. (We know technology to be the offspring of science, and we believe, at least, that widespread abundance is the result of liberty doing its work in markets and minds alike.) Lincoln showed, to a degree that we no longer understand, that democratic politics were compatible with long-term survival—or, to put it bluntly, with military victory, winning armies. (The French army had begun to win big only after it lost its republican character.) Darwin showed that scientific reasoning could explain not only the life of

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matter but the matter of life; it could come up with a plausible theory of the history of life on this planet, which until then had seemed as mysterious as the birth of time seems to us now. The immediate gain of science is machines; the immediate gain of democracy is money. Ours is a society whose two pillars—science and democracy, an idea of objective knowledge arrived at by skepticism and of liberty available to all—have given us the A-bomb, the H-bomb, mass alienation: the most peaceful and prosperous and tolerant societies that the world has ever seen, which balance on the brink of total global annihilation every day.

This is a study in a new kind of eloquence, and a new kind of life the new eloquence spoke to. The subject is liberal civilization and its language—the way we live now and the way we talk at home and in public. These are essays without an agenda, but this is not a book without a thesis. The thesis is that literary eloquence is essential to liberal civilization; our heroes should be men and women possessed by the urgency of utterance, obsessed by the need to see for themselves and to speak for us all. Authoritarian societies can rely on an educated elite; mere mass society, on shared dumb show. Liberal cities can't. A commitment to persuasion is in itself a central liberal principle. New ways of thinking demand new kinds of eloquence. Our world rests on science and democracy, on seeing *and* saying; it rests on thinking new thoughts and getting them heard by a lot of people. Oratory, as Pericles knew, was what mattered crucially to the first democracy, in fifth-century B.C. Athens, but that was a small affair of few

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citizens (and many slaves) compared with our own, which needs words of all kinds, written and spoken and shouted, coming at you from all directions.

The point is not that writing well is a proof of thinking clearly. Orwell was wrong about that, sadly. The truth is that plenty of men who have written very well have thought horrible thoughts, and the thoughts have been made to seem less horrible by being well written. No, the point is that when we do come across those who write well *and* see clearly, we're right to make them heroes.

Or even more. These two princes—call them prophets, why not?—of liberal civilization, of a world without a present God but with providential purposes, of justifying ages more than ministering angels, may shine light on the kind of place we've made, and the way we can make it better. By disputing with the angels, they helped to begin our age—but by the judgment of the ages, were they really on the side of the angels all along?

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Begin, then, with the angels, and the ages, and the argument. On the morning of April 15, 1865, Abraham Lincoln, president and victor, lay dying from a bullet that had lodged in his skull just behind his right eye. At 7:22 a.m., as Lincoln drew his last breath, all the worthies who had crowded into a little back bedroom in a boardinghouse across the street from Ford's Theatre turned to Edwin Stanton, Lincoln's formidable secretary of war, for a final word.

Stanton is the one with the long comic beard and the spinster's spectacles, who in the photographs looks a bit like Mr. Pickwick but was actually the iron man in the cabinet and who, after a difficult beginning, had come to revere Lincoln as a man and a writer and a politician—had even played something like watchful Horatio to his tragic Hamlet. Stanton stood still, sobbing, and then—according to every biography of Lincoln from Nicolay and Hay's to Doris Kearns Goodwin's—said, simply, "Now he belongs to the ages."

It's probably the most famous epitaph in American biography, and still perhaps the best. The words seem perfectly chosen in their bare and stoic evocation of a Lincoln who belongs to history alone, their invocation not of an assumption to an afterlife but of a long reign in the corridors of time, of a man now part of eternity.

Yet in recent years, it has become possible to find an entirely different version of that sentence. In Jay Winik's *April 1865* and in James L. Swanson's *Manhunt,* for instance, the reader once again comes to the deathbed scene, the vigil, the gathering. Swanson writes that the Reverend Dr. Gurley, the

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